



EDUCATION

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Levelling the Playing Field: The Benefits of Test Track

BY CLAUDIA BROWN

Jessica Hart loved to skate and compete. But with only one or two practice sessions a week, it became impossible to stay competitive once she advanced from basic skills to preliminary free skate. Additional skating sessions were not an option due to other demands in her life. In a previous era, Jessica would have focused entirely on testing or quit the sport completely. But now she—and many skaters like her—have the option of Test Track.

Unlike Well-Balanced events where skaters perform elements far beyond the required test elements for their level, Test Track events line up with the test structure requirement. Judged under the 6.0 system, Test Track events limit the difficulty of the skating elements to create a “fair playing field to continue competing and testing according to their abilities,” according to U.S. Figure Skating.

For Jessica, Test Track provided motivation. She took four skating tests in one year in order to move “up” from pre-preliminary Well-Balanced Free Skate to Test Track juvenile, the first Test Track level where Axels are allowed. She went on to place 1st, not only in her initial Test Track competition, but also in a field of 15 skaters at the State Games of America.

Now 20 and a junior at University of Illinois majoring in aerospace engineering, she speaks highly of her skating experiences. “Test Track levels the playing field and makes it a more even competition between skaters, which in turn makes it more fun in my opinion,” says Jessica.

Kathy Hart adds, “As a parent I feel that following the Test Track program was beneficial to my daughter. It allowed her to be more competitive with those on her level. It boosted her confidence! I will always be grateful to her coach for knowing her skaters’ abilities and helping them to learn and love figure skating!”

Test Track events evolved from a task force developed “to look at the needs of all members and to create more opportunities for beginners, youth, teenagers and collegiate skaters. The philosophy was to create a two-track structure for nonqualifying events at all U.S. Figure Skating sanctioned competitions, encouraging both recreational and competitive skaters to participate,” according

to a Skating Magazine article by Susi Wehrli, Carolyn Clausius, and Emily Feltes.

Test Track was piloted in 2006, and many competitions now offer test track events; however, it remains unfamiliar in some coaching circles where landing a clean Axel is equated to pre-preliminary free skate.

Test Track may be recommended to skaters for a variety of reasons: reduced practice/lesson time, goals in line with testing, and even dwindling success in Well-Balanced events.

Another benefit of the Test Track is that it provides a clear stepping-stone of progression, from basic skills badge levels into the testing structure. Wehrli, Clausius and Feltes share this example: “In the competitive test track the first level Limited Beginner only allows half revolution jumps and upright spins, there are four levels with only single jumps allowed, an Axel in the juvenile test level and stair steps to a double Lutz at the senior test level. Spin requirements match the test requirements, with a step sequence and connecting steps in each level for a well-rounded program.”

“Skaters may ‘bounce’ tracks from competition to competition during the season based upon test level and skill mastery,” adds U.S. Figure Skating, “Skaters may choose to participate in either the Test Track or the Well-Balanced Free Skate program events as described in the rulebook, but not both during the same nonqualifying competition.”

Test Track events also provide competitive skaters with opportunities early in the skating development. Heather Piepenburg, a skating coach at Ice World in Abingdon, Maryland, says test track has been beneficial for many of her skaters. “I have been using Beginner and High Beginner levels for a long time. I have used the Test Track levels often for my young skaters who aren’t quite ready for No Test,” says Piepenburg.

“Low level Test Track events are a great introduction to competitions for newer skaters who are curious about competitive skating,” she adds. “High level Test Track events provide an opportunity to continue competing while also working on higher level tests.”

Adding a Test Track event to a nonqualifying competition



Jessica Hart, shown here with her 1st place medal from the State Games of America, found success and enjoyment as a Test Track competitor.

is as simple as cutting and pasting the paperwork from the U.S. Figure Skating web site. Including Test Track events benefits clubs by increasing enrollment in competitions and retaining membership. "Competitions that host these events will be offering more opportunities to keep skaters motivated along the pipeline and keep them enthusiastic about their abilities in hopes of retaining skaters who may be discouraged by the high level of technical elements at all levels," states U.S. Figure Skating.

Test Track also keeps skaters motivated to reach their testing goals while providing an opportunity to perform their test program in a competitive environment.

Since its development, the program has continued to evolve. Most recently, a change was made to the Intermediate Free Skate requirements. On February 1, an additional 10 seconds was added to match the new program length for Intermediate Free Skate Test and Intermediate Well-Balanced Free Skate—making the length 2:40 +/- 10 seconds.

Additional modifications may be forthcoming or may have been published since the time of printing. While there is no timeline set, Elise Preston, Chair of the U.S. Figure Skating Program Development Committee, confirms that modifications are under discussion. Continue to check the U.S. Figure Skating web site for updates and encourage your skaters to give Test Track a try. ❖

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