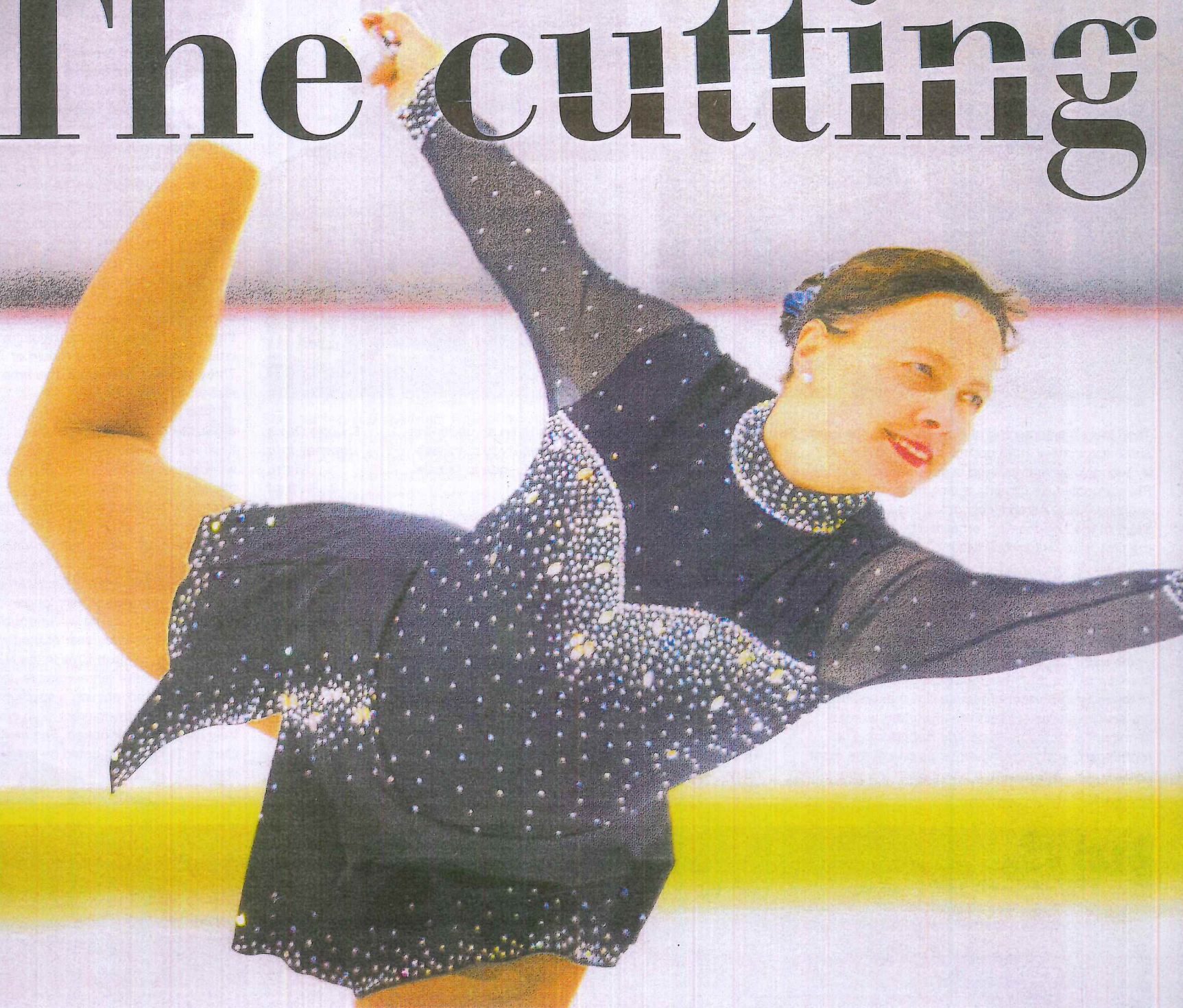


The cutting



Age is no barrier in the ice rink, writes **Juliette Sivertsen**

The air is biting cold and a faint mist lingers above the ice. The Perspex barriers around the edge of the rink are foggy, bar a single line from where I ran my finger across the surface.

Soon the body heat of the skaters will transform the fog to condensation and water droplets will sit atop the railing for the rest of the day.

With a huff of my misty breath, I push open the gates of the ice rink, the sound of the clunky metal lever reverberating through the arena. There's always a moment — maybe only half a second — just as you step foot on to the ice where your balance is tested as you transition from a resistant surface to one that is designed for gliding, sliding, flying and, ultimately, freedom.

During the following hour, I'm joined by half a dozen other skaters, ranging in age from mid-20s to mid-80s. You'd be forgiven for thinking we'd been doing this since we were ankle-biters but the truth is, we're part of a movement of figure skaters who discovered the sport as adults.

Olga Levien is one of my comrades. She recently competed at her first ever international competition, the World Adult Figure Skating Championships in Oberstdorf, Germany.

At 38, competing internationally in figure skating is something a young Levien only dreamed of achieving. As a youngster in her native Russia, she longed to be one of the children spinning across the ice in sparkly dresses but her parents had other ideas, planting her in front of bishops, knights and pawns.

"I never had an opportunity to skate because my parents decided that chess was the best thing

Ice figure skater Olga Levien.

for a girl," she explains. "I did seven years of chess in school because they thought it would develop my brain and mathematical skills. So I really developed my brain but not my body."

Aged 25, when Levien discovered adult learn-to-skate lessons, she wasted no time signing up. When I met her, back in 2011, Levien was five months pregnant. I was just a newbie skater at the time and madly impressed by the woman with this protruding tummy who could spin far better and faster than I, with the co-ordination and grace of someone who'd been dancing since childhood.

Back then, she'd only been skating for a couple of years. She had a break while having children but returned to the ice once the kids were at school to win a gold medal at the 2018 National Figure Skating Championships. Germany was her first international competition but her main goal was to be inspired and meet other like-minded people.

That's the beauty of taking up this sport as an adult: the comradeship and companionship forged between skaters who juggle different life, work and family responsibilities are more powerful than any medal.

In Auckland, adult-only lessons are on Wednesday evenings. No dance or skating experience is necessary. Then there are the more relaxed Tuesday morning "Coffee Group" lessons. They include a free caffeine hit afterwards, offering an environment to share the trials and tribulations of learning to skate when the body doesn't quite work the same way as the spritely teenagers or fearless children.





edge

One of the challenges learning to skate as an adult is that we all come in different shapes, sizes and levels of co-ordination — and ages.

Alan Graham, 82, is a former Navy sailor, maths teacher, ski instructor and a passionate skating fan — both as a participant and viewer. Graham skates twice a week, wearing bulky black knee pads over his jeans and a blue crash helmet. The helmet was a recent addition following a nasty fall while skating.

“I just fell over backwards on to the ice and left a big bloody patch behind.”

Graham’s had a couple more nasty falls on the ice in the last 12 months but he always returns, even when his confidence has been shaken. His resilience is either impressive or mad; his friends think he’s crazy and while he’s been warned of the dangers, his GP hasn’t banned him outright from participating in the hobby he loves.

Asked if he’s worried about what might happen if he falls again, he replies: “You’re going to go one way or another.”

At 82, Graham is an inspiration to other skaters, regularly quizzed by the newcomers, but he insists he’s the one in a constant state of awe.

“I get inspired by the fact that the human body can actually be trained to do those things in artistic ways that are quite stunning.”

He learnt to skate in his 20s but had to stop when he joined the Navy. It would be five

decades before he returned to the ice. He moves slowly but he’s convinced it helps him with balance, fitness and confidence.

“I always put on my socks by balancing on one foot, knowing that it’s part of what I’m doing here [at the ice rink],” he says. “My friends saw me try to put on my shoes on one occasion standing on one foot, so they gave me a long shoehorn. Every morning when I put my walking shoes on it reminds me of them.”

While skaters like Graham participate recreationally, some of us are mad enough to don a sparkly Lycra dress or glittery shirt and perform a routine in front of judges. Fortunately for us oldies, there are specific competition categories for anyone over the age of 18. In New Zealand, age groups are split into three divisions: 18-34 years, 35-54 and 55+.

Judging tends to be a little more lenient, acknowledging the challenges older frames have. Not to mention the higher level of fear that generally comes with age.

Some skaters prefer to find safety in numbers, through the synchronised skating team. Just as its name suggests, but with fewer nose pegs and foot flicks than what most associate with a synchronised sport, a team of at least eight skaters work in unison across the ice. Their footwork is in sync, arms are linked, before breaking off into blocks, lines or circles to create impressive formations and gain considerable speed. ➔

the instructions and just focus. Things outside the rink such as jobs or life or families or any other worry you might have can just fly away for a while.”

Momentum members span from mid-20s to late-50s. The group has a long, friendly rivalry with the only other adult synchronised team in New Zealand, Spectrum, from Christchurch. At last year’s Nationals, Momentum beat Spectrum for the first time in nearly a decade, much to the shock and delight of the Auckland skaters.

But with no bad blood, everyone celebrated with hot chips and wine in the function room post-awards ceremony. The teams even gift each other chocolates when they meet at Nationals each year. It’s this camaraderie that helps define and foster a strong community, strengthened by the knowledge of the dedication required by adults to get to the rink to train. Adult skaters don’t have a parental chauffeur and after-school training sessions rarely complement working hours.

Momentum skater Mary Darlow knows just how much work life gets in the way of pursuing her passion on the ice. She learnt to skate nine years ago. The 42-year-old procurement manager negotiates her working hours purely so she’s able to get to the rink.

She learnt to skate with her younger sister for fun but it quickly turned into something bigger. As a child, Darlow looked up to champion ice dancers Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean but never dreamed she would one day end up on an ice rink in a bling-covered dress in her 40s.

“It’s a great conversation starter because they look at me and go, ‘What?!’ But it proves to people you can accomplish something when you’re older.” She loves the mental break skating offers. “It helps me escape for that little moment. This is me, this is a part of me, this is who I am.”

Maureen Forrester, 57, always encourages post-skate competition tipples to give friendships a chance to blossom outside



Olga Levien enjoys the freedom to enjoy her childhood skating dream.

of training. Forrester may be nearing 60 but she can move and groove with the best of them, slinking down the ice with a wide smile, wiggling her hips and winking at the judges during competitions. A whole new personality seems to be revealed at competition time — or perhaps it’s just her true self being given an opportunity to shine.

“Skating gets in your blood. Once you start, you get hooked and you just constantly want to

improve. Then you get a little better and want to improve a bit more. The goal is always moving.”

Forrester admits she loves the bling of her outfits. Her motto as she gets older is “move it or lose it” and she says skating keeps her fitter than any gym membership. If anything, the outfits alone are enough to make her turn up to training. “The Lycra at times can make you want to keep thin, that’s for sure. It’s motivational.”



I get inspired by the fact that the human body can actually be trained to do those things in artistic ways that are quite stunning.

**Alan Graham,
gliding on, at
Avondale's
Paradise Ice
Skating rink.**

It's that sense of speed and power that Laura Thompson adores when she's on the ice, both as an individual competitor and as part of Auckland's only adult synchronised team, Momentum.

"It's the closest thing you can get to flying," she says, her eyes lighting up when she tries to describe the glorious feeling of the blade skimming across the ice. "It's faster than if you just go walking or running. The blade on the ice allows you to generate a certain power and speed that you would need some kind of appliance to do off the ice. You either need wheels or an engine."

Thompson started skating in her early 20s and more than 10 years on, she credits skating for helping her get through her post-graduate studies and eventually her PhD, thanks to the mental and physical freedom it provides.

In many ways, figure skating is escapism at its finest. With so much to focus on just to stay upright, let alone the concentration required for fancy footwork, skaters must leave all other worries, responsibilities or stresses at the door. If you bring in outside thoughts to the ice, the consequences can be nasty in the form of falls, failed jumps and mucky footwork — a total downer when the ice rink is meant to provide a sacred emotional space.

As well as the friendships between adults, a special bond often develops between a skater and their coach. The role of coach tends to merge between personal trainer, confidante, friend and even therapist. Through my years of working under different coaches, I've cried on their shoulders, laughed until my belly ached and been given confidence boosts (or a kick up the butt) exactly when needed.

Sometimes, adulting is hard. Thompson acknowledges that on those days, it's a relief having someone else in charge.

"It's really quite good if you're having a lesson just being told what to do for a little while. You don't have to be in control of it, you can follow

Forrester says skating is not only about athleticism but also creativity, artistry, grace, flexibility and beauty. She echoes what others have said — skating is a chance to escape from life's other responsibilities and is as much a mental challenge as it is physical.

But blissful escapes don't come risk-free. Forrester's nursing a broken wrist, the second break within 12 months as a result of fall during training. She says at her age, breaking bones can have more serious consequences than if she was a young child, as it affects her work and family life.

It's forcing her to contemplate whether she can keep up the same level of training in future but, when questioned about how it would feel to give it all up, her face falls and her shoulders sink. The thought seems too much to bear.

"Your training just becomes part of your daily living. We plan our lives around when we can skate." Forrester says there's no greater feeling in the world than skating. "I'd be a horrible person at home if I didn't skate."

Injuries aside, the world of adult figure skating only seems to be growing both in New Zealand and abroad. In Oberstdorf, Levien placed 10th in her artistic programme and 14th out of 29 in her freeskate — a better result than she expected. The experience injected a new enthusiasm for competing and her Facebook friend list has

received a nice boost since the competition.

One of her highlights was watching an all-male synchronised skating team, the River Bulls of Finland. The team is made up of dads who decided, after watching their daughters skate, to create their own synchronised figure skating team. Better than beginners but by no means expert skaters, they placed last at Oberstdorf but brought the house down as they skated to Kenny Loggins' *Footloose*, wearing jeans and plaid shirts.

It seems anyone can find a place on the ice rink regardless of age, gender or fitness — and if you think you're too old to ice skate, take heed of Graham's words.

"If you do it and it makes you feel good, don't give up because it may be the last feel-good movement you have."

And, with a glint in his eye and a wry smile, Graham returns to the ice to scoot around for a few more laps. ●

● **Auckland's Paradise skating rinks are in Botany and Avondale, while the Aotea Square rink is open until Sunday, July 28.**

● **The Auckland Ice Figure Skating Championships are at Paradise Botany on Saturday, July 20, 7.30am-11.45am and Sunday, July 21 8am-11.45am.**

