

FINDING A NEW EDGE

ROYAL OAK • MICHIGAN
NEW EDGE
FIGURE SKATING CLUB

CLUBS MERGED TO FORGE A STRONGER FUTURE

BY SUSAN RICHARDSON

After skating for 10 years, individuals will likely feel a sense of accomplishment but also want to achieve even more. Similarly, the New Edge Figure Skating Club of Royal Oak, Michigan, looks with pride on its 10th season but is still looking ahead.

Ten seasons aren't a lot of time in the life of a figure skating club, but for two older clubs that have merged, they represent quite an achievement. The Berkley Royal Blades Figure Skating Club was established in 1987 at the City of Berkley's arena. The North Suburban Figure Skating Club had been based at the John Lindell Ice Arena in neighboring Royal Oak since 1986.

In 2010 members of the Berkley Royal Blades FSC began to worry about the club's future because of the city's steep increases in ice fees and the reduction in membership due to the economy and attrition. Lisa Bonello, who was the president of the club, recalled that an additional concern was the city's threat to shut the rink down.

As Claudia Saliba, who had been the secretary of the Berkley Royal Blades FSC and now serves as the president of New Edge, stressed, "It was either merge or fold."

While the North Suburban FSC was blessed with a well-established arena, it too was experiencing membership shrinkage because of economic factors.

Coaches also were concerned. Lisa Bradley, who had coached at Berkley for 19 years, had worried about the rink's status because the city was closing it earlier every year — the season ended in March in 2010. Oksana Senitskaya who had coached at Berkley for six years before leaving in 2001 to coach more students in Royal Oak, witnessed the startling decline in membership at the North Suburban FSC.

"Everyone was panicking," she said. "I thought that the merger was an opportunity to get new skaters."

While a merger may have seemed like a practical solution, the prospect was not without its concerns. Some Berkley Royal Blades FSC families were apprehensive about the move.

"We could sense some hesitance," Bonello said. "We feared that if not all would be going, North Suburban would back out of the merger."

Berkley members also worried about how their skaters would be received by the North Suburban FSC. Bonello added that some of the North Suburban FSC board members opposed the merger, but those with younger skaters were eager because they were looking toward the future.

Representatives of the two clubs began meeting in the spring of 2010. They decided to have an initial board of seven members — three from Berkley Royal Blades FSC and four from North Suburban FSC. This founding board decided that the new club's president should be

from the Berkley Royal Blades FSC to signal the welcoming of its members, and Bonello was selected.

The hardest part, according to Saliba, was writing the bylaws, because they had to meld those of two clubs. They spent the entire summer ironing that out. Nevertheless, Saliba recalled with relief that this arduous process convinced her that the new club could work.

"That's when we got a good sense of being a team; it was a good working relationship," Saliba said.

Then there was the matter of a name. The consensus of the board was that a new club signaled the need for a new name and chose South Oakland Skating Association, but skaters soon voiced their objections. As a result, the club held a contest, and members voted for the top four suggestions submitted. The winner: the New Edge Figure Skating Club. Members also voted for purple, black and white as club colors. Then the logo was designed by a graphic artist who had been in the Berkley Royal Blades FSC.

Despite the potential for disagreement, Bonello and Saliba maintained that the negotiations went smoothly because all participants were eager to make it work.

"Both sides were anxious to have a good environment for our skaters," Saliba said.

In the fall of 2010, the New Edge FSC became a reality. That first year there were 75 members: 27 from the Berkley Royal Blades FSC, 40 from North Suburban FSC and eight new members.

Saliba admitted that at first all were nervous, but any fears quickly dissipated.

"The board worked well together, and there was a closeness between those from the different clubs," Saliba said.

She believed that feeling quickly transferred to other members. She admitted, though, "We got lucky."

Saliba recalled one former North Suburban FSC member confessing at the end-of-year banquet that she had been apprehensive about the merger and anticipated turmoil, but was gratified to see the positive outcome.

Gail Gillhooley, whose family had been members of North Suburban FSC for about four years, also expressed satisfaction.

"Everyone was easy to work with," Gillhooley said. "They were all trying to do the best for all the kids."

Bonello noted that the merger process was aided by the fact that Berkley Royal Blades FSC members were already familiar with the Royal Oak rink and North Suburban members because they had used the facility in the summer when the City of Berkley rink had no ice.

"It was comfortable going to Royal Oak because we were already part of the family," Bradley said.





New Edge FSC members participate in the city of Royal Oak's 2017 ice show.

"We were not strangers," Senitskaya added. Sandy Lyons, who had coached at the City of Berkley rink for eight years, commented on an unexpected benefit of the merger.

"There was a better mix of skaters and parents and more socioeconomic diversity," Lyons said. "The presence of different cultural backgrounds was good for both sides."

The club currently has 136 members. For the 2018–19 season, New Edge earned U.S. Figure Skating honors as a Plus 10 club for registering at least 10 introductory members, and Plus 10 Encore for retaining at least 75 percent of those members. In two previous seasons the club had earned the Plus 10 ranking.

The club is proud of its efforts to engage skaters of all ages. New Edge FSC partnered with the city of Royal Oak's Learn to Skate USA program to create a bridge program, which fosters younger skaters' development by allowing them on club ice while accompanied by a coach. The club's junior board provides leadership opportunities for middle and high school skaters, who host a Halloween skate and a holiday show in December.

The club also has a thriving adult program. Many adults are club members, and some have competed at national levels. The club recently introduced an adult coffee club, offering coffee and donuts and a free lesson by a club coach.

In addition, the club's annual competition includes events for adults and this season will be part of the U.S. Figure Skating Adult Competition Series.

The future looks bright for the New Edge FSC, but of course there are challenges, primarily membership growth and retention. The club offers on- and off-ice programs to encourage members to remain active and become more involved in the club.

"We have to listen to our families, listen to our skaters, and do the best to provide them what they're looking for," Bonello said.

"You can never get too comfortable," Saliba added.

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