

CLEVELAND, SCOTTSDALE SHARE THEIR RECIPE FOR A SUCCESSFUL NATIONAL SKATING MONTH

by DAVE LEMIEUX

How big is National Skating Month?

"It's big, it's very big," Cleveland Edges Skating Club Program Director and Head Coach Jeff Marshall said. "We time it very early — the first Saturday in January — so that the free lessons we offer bring people in to sign up for our winter sessions."

It's an all-hands-on-deck effort that helps keep the ice at the North Olmsted Recreation Complex's rink outside Cleveland busy year-round.

The one-day blitz at the North Olmsted rink puts everyone who's anyone in the Cleveland area on the ice, including mascots Snowplow Sam and the AHL Lake Erie Monsters' Sully the Seagull.

There's a lot going on during a day that begins with everyone skating on the main rink and ends more than four hours later with a sled hockey tournament game.

It's the free lessons that take place about every half hour, though, that contribute most to the event's success, Marshall said.

"We offer free 20-minute introductory skating lessons on our studio rink. There are 20 in a class and four classes."

Exhibitions on the main rink demonstrate just how far skating can take you, but it's the magic that happens in those four introduction classes that keeps the sport vibrant in Cleveland.

"It's up to our staff to bring people in and they've been pretty successful," Marshall said. "A good majority of the people in the classes join the program. We get between 300 and 315 every year and our highest was two years ago when we got 525 to attend. We draw a pretty good crowd."

Drawing a crowd is one thing, keeping it is another. Marshall does it as rink master for a two-rink circus. There's something new on ice every 10 minutes from the time the event begins with an "All Skate" session.

While newcomers work on mastering the basics on the studio

Skaters at the Ice Den in Scottsdale, Ariz., enjoy a man-made winter wonderland during NSM.



A sled hockey tournament is a big hit for the Cleveland Edges Skating Club during NSM.

rink, graduates of those intro classes are on the main rink demonstrating free skating, synchronized skating and hockey. Everything skate-related gets its moment in the sun (there's even time set aside for a Zamboni demonstration).

Boys only, girls only and couples only skates follow the skating exhibitions, and a prize raffle adds a little spice to the proceedings.

Marshall gives little chance for anyone's attention to wander away from skating when

they're off ice either.

"We've got tables and information booths on classes, our summer skating camp, U.S. Figure Skating and ice show tryouts," he said.

It's not over even when National Skating Day is over in North Olmsted.

"The last couple of years we've put this back-to-back with a sled hockey tournament," he said. "It's all free and a lot of people go."

At the Ice Den in sunny Scottsdale, Ariz., organizers block out a solid week to celebrate National Skating Month, Dawn Piepenbrink-McCosh, director of the facility's learn-to-skate program, said. "We have it slotted the week of nationals and are planning a big celebration on the night of Jan. 23."

Piepenbrink-McCosh has her rink's club skaters on ice at all times to assist new skaters.

A big pile of snow generated by the Zamboni is one of the signature highlights of National Skating Month at Ice Den.

"Since it's Arizona, there's not much snow here and it's lots of fun for the kids. It is a huge hit," Piepenbrink-McCosh said.

She plans to kick it up a notch this year with neon glow sticks, in addition to taking full advantage of the rink's sound system and light show.

Piepenbrink-McCosh also has a full slate of exhibitions and free skates scheduled in addition to off-ice activities that include getting tattoos, face-painting and watching TVs tuned to nationals all week.

To learn more about National Skating Month, go to www.usfigureskating.org and click on "Programs" and "National Skating Month."

