



Precisely Right

by Stacey DuFord



Coach John Towill

John Towill, head coach of the Precisely Right Synchronized Skating program, says “The harder we practice, the luckier we get.” That luck includes a trip to Nationals for the intermediate team last year with a strong 7th place finish. The team is trying their luck again this year as they switch divisions to compete junior.

The Precisely Right program skates out of the William G. Mennen sports arena in Morris, New Jersey. It was founded in 1991 by Pat Lynch. The team grew and developed into a junior team; Pat stopped coaching to become a U.S. Figure Skating judge and many of the skaters graduated and moved away to college. Starting over in 2000, Precisely Right has used excitement to grow their program from nine skaters competing in the youth-intro division to a roster of 64 skaters competing in four divisions in 2008-2009. Towill says the key is perseverance. For years the teams finished in last place. “We supported every other team,” Towill says. He also says that while it’s nice to be successful, success doesn’t keep kids in the program. He credits keeping it fun, hard work, and not listening when someone tells him something can’t be done.

After coaching a nationally and internationally competitive team in England, Towill came to the United States in 1994 thinking he was done with synchro. He observed the Precisely Right teams for years and after Lynch’s retirement he came on board – and has never looked back. Though he does admit that the club has had its share of struggles.

“We’d lose skaters because we weren’t winning,” he recalls. “But they’d end up coming back when they weren’t happy with the new teams.”

Towill works without a contract. “If I’m happy and the families are happy, I stay. If either of us is unhappy, I’ll go. It’s worked out so far.” He’s also not afraid to make unpopular choices. The teams work hard and only the skaters who create the best mix on the line skate at a competition. But he notes that the girls who don’t skate at nationals always come back the next year, and they work even harder. He also credits his assistant coach, Lynn Alberi. “She deals with me really well; apparently I’m not always that easy to deal with,” he laughs. He is not afraid of changing divisions or making demanding music choices. In 2005 he moved the intermediate team back into the open juvenile division and told the

skaters “We have to go to Easterns, and we have to win. That’s how you’ll be ready to take intermediate next year.” He sent the music to his choreographer, Nancy Rossi, who called and asked, “Are you sure you want to do this?” Towill says he knew the skaters could pull it off and they did, winning the gold that year at Easterns and setting them up for a successful return to intermediate the following year.

The program has changed in other ways as it has grown throughout the years. Yvonne Kiely, general manager, says they work hard to create a close-knit club. This year’s preliminary team retains only one skater from last year’s team, with the rest being new. All of the teams practice on Thursday night and the preliminary team practice was purposely sandwiched in the middle so skaters and their families could get to know the rest of the club members. All of the families are required to participate in fundraising, which creates closeness as well as contributing to the costs of running the program. The skaters go “canning,” where they stand in front of a store wearing their team gear with cans for donations. The club hosts an annual holiday party in December and an end-of-the-season party in April. “We used to have team dinners before every competition,” Kiely says. “But with 64 skaters and their families that’s like throwing a small wedding reception.” The teams reserve blocks of hotel rooms when traveling and all teams are required to cheer for other division

teams when they compete. “There are a few siblings on different teams,” Keily says. “It seems like it doesn’t take long for all the girls to get to know each other.” She says that the younger girls look up to the older girls; something that Towill constantly reminds the older skaters. “You are their role models,” he says.

The role models have definitely earned that designation. In 2001 the club expanded from nine to 20 skaters and two divisions, preliminary and intermediate, with six girls cross-skating between the teams. In 2002 all 20 girls skated on the intermediate team and took home three medals during the season. In 2003 they were up to 27 skaters and again skated two divisions, preliminary and intermediate, with the preliminary team comprised of eight young skaters who were all



The intermediate team places 7th at the 2008 National Championships

new to synchro. The hard work of these preliminary skaters really paid off in 2004 when their team grew to 15 skaters and took home the silver medal from the Cape Cod Classic and the bronze from Lake Placid. The intermediate team continued to strengthen and earned three medals that year.

In 2005, when the intermediate team moved into the open juvenile division, the club also added a pre-juvenile division team and the club took home 10 medals for the season, including four gold. The pre-juvenile team returned in 2006 and won the gold at the U.S. Eastern Sectional Championship while the intermediate team earned a trip to Nationals. In 2007 it was the preliminary team's turn to take home the gold from the U.S. Eastern Sectional, with the intermediate and open juvenile teams also having solid seasons.

This year the club will skate the new preliminary team, the returning open juvenile team, while last year's preliminary team moves up to the juvenile division, and the intermediate team moves up to junior for the first time since 1999. Alexandra Kiely, 18, is one of the three original skaters remaining from the 2000 youth intro team and decided to skate one more year while attending her freshman year at Drew University when the Junior team was announced. "It's something new and a little more challenging," Kiely says, "And we're excited in a way that we haven't ever been before." The junior team has added another practice session on Tuesday nights as well as a weekend boot camp. "It's a lot more work," Kiely says. "But it's really fun to get to create two routines."

Kiely describes the team as "very close. The first practice always feels more like going back than going back to school does." She enjoys skating for Towill who she describes as "very British, he has his own special terminology. He's very strict on the surface but accommodating when you need it."

Douglas Alber, 14, echoes Kiely's sentiments about the coaches. He started skating synchro three years ago as a way to take his skating in a new direction for a year, but has remained with the club because of the coaching.

"They will always help you and listen, and they are always there," Alber says of Towill, Alberi, and Suzanne Laki who joined the program last year. "They're at the rink from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., and they are always together." Ober, who is skating on the open juvenile team for the second year, says the team was excited to come back and see what more they are capable of. "We're held to very high standards," he says. "The coaches push us to work hard but they know what we're capable of." He appreciates that Towill communicates well and is willing to help anyone who is struggling.

The 2008-2009 teams practice at the William G. Mennen sports arena in Morris, New Jersey



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Towill gives all the credit to his skaters and their families. Precisely Right boasts a strong core of parents and a group of skaters who have practically grown up together. The club is family-oriented and school is emphasized. New skaters are welcomed with open arms and new parents are educated early on. Towill's love of synchro filters down to the youngest skaters. "What I really love about synchro is that if you're struggling you can ask questions and people will always help you," Towill says. Alber describes Towill's coaching in exactly the same way. "You can ask him anything, and he will always take the time to show you how to do something."

Towill is incredibly proud of his skaters. "I know they think I'm tough, but I tear up when I watch them," he admits. "They always amaze me; they skate better than they should be able to." He keeps his skaters humble, though. Gloating is not allowed. He even stopped a podium photo one year when skaters were making the #1 sign with their fingers. "You act the same when you're winning as you did when you were losing," he says.

