



# Synchro Makes a Skater

by Stacey DuFord

Alicia skating on Evolution open juvenile at the 2008 Midwestern Championships.

I peeked into the rink where my 12-year-old daughter stood on the ice wearing a black and silver sparkly dress, her brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. She looked beautiful and confident. Next to her stood a man with his arm around her; my stomach did a small flip. They started skating in unison as the judges evaluated her performance on her preliminary dance moves.

"How did we get here?" I wondered. But I knew the answer: synchro.

Alicia started skating when she was six years old at the Birmingham Ice Rink in Michigan. Alicia is – and always has been – a cautious athlete. Her first gymnastics teacher put it best when she said, "Alicia sits back and watches, makes sure nobody dies, then joins in." As a parent I was somewhat pleased by this; she wasn't going to be the kid trying anything dangerous, but that tendency did get in the way sometimes. Her skating start was slow. I remember walking into the rink with her tiny hand in mine while tall, beautiful girls walked in around us wearing short skating skirts and pulling big rolling bags. I wondered who these girls were, how they got to be so confident. I would lace up Alicia's skates and send her into the small rink for lessons then gaze into the bigger rink to watch those girls jump and spin. I just couldn't see that in my tentative skater's future. Alicia participated in the Birmingham Ice Show in the spring, performing tentative jerky movements in a Minnie Mouse-style costume, and that whet her appetite for more skating in the fall.

As the mother of a toddler I didn't have time to do any skating research, I simply signed Alicia up for whichever class I was told was next. Alicia continued to take lessons and perform in the Ice Show. She got frustrated one year when a friend from school joined her lessons. This girl was a natural athlete and an uninhibited skater. They were in an Ice Show routine together and it drove Alicia crazy that Jennifer could do everything in the routine better than she could, but didn't bother to learn it correctly. Jennifer didn't have to work, so she didn't, but she could do things Alicia was afraid to try.

Alicia started skating lessons as usual the fall she was ten, but I added another class as I would use her lesson time to run errands and the half hour class didn't leave me much time to get things done, especially with a toddler in tow. I found something before her regularly scheduled class called a "Club Class" and called to ask about it.

"It's the Figure Skating Club class," the skating director told me. "It's on the big ice and they learn a few more things." I signed her up. Her skating had improved a little over the years, but she was still intimidated by the big ice during open skate sessions and

skated somewhat tentatively. I thought the class might help her confidence.

Apparently I was correct; a few weeks into the lessons one of the coaches said, "Alicia could think about joining the Blades, they're looking for skaters."

"What are Blades?" I asked.

"Birmingham Blazing Blades. They're the synchronized skating team."

"What's synchronized skating?"

She gave me a brief description, which sounded to me like the groups Alicia skated in for the Ice Show. "They practice on Thursday at 7:15 pm. If you want, show up and Alicia can check them out and they can check her out. No commitment."

I asked Alicia on the drive home if she wanted to go. She was cautious, as usual, but I said we should at least check it out. We showed up on Thursday and the coach took Alicia out onto the ice with the team and introduced me to one of the mothers who patiently answered all of my questions as I watched Alicia out on the ice. She joined in at the end, arm in arm with the other skaters.

"What do you think?" I asked on the drive home.

"They go really fast," she said. "It's very intimidating."

I'm not proud of this (or maybe I am now), but at this point I pushed her. I knew she wouldn't do it on her own. I admit that part of me wanted her to challenge herself, and part of me wanted her to do something that her natural-athlete-friend-turned-skating-nemesis wasn't doing.

I called the coach the next day and told her Alicia was in.

When we showed up for the practice the next Thursday we were both in for some surprises. Alicia walked into the conference room for the off-ice practice to find a huge banner that read "Welcome Alicia!" That's probably the only thing that got her through that first practice. I sat down with the coach and a stack of paperwork: team contract, clothing order forms (she had joined at the last possible minute to order a competition dress). She had to join the Birmingham Figure Skating Club and take lessons with a coach to be eligible to be on the Blades so there was that paperwork as well. I wrote check after check and briefly wondered what I had gotten us into.

Alicia nearly cried on the drive home. "Mom, they go too fast. I can't do it."

"Yes, you can," I said encouragingly.

"I'll never be able to do it," she whined.

Each practice got a little better and I slowly noticed a change in Alicia. She had a copy of the team music and played it constantly in her room. I would walk into the basement and find her practicing the routine (on her carpet skates – one of the best inventions). She

was still a little intimidated by the speed and the footwork but she loved her teammates.

The first competition was the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Synchronized Skating Kick Off Classic in Kalamazoo, Michigan. As the team took the ice, Alicia's face was deathly pale. The music started. She watched her feet a lot but didn't fall, and the expression on her face at the end told me everything I needed to know. She was hooked.

I had never seen her work so hard at anything in her life. She came home from her team practices thrilled and exhausted and from her individual coaching sessions with tales of new moves she was attempting. She watched the tapes of the competitions over and over. By the end of the season she was no longer the weakest skater on the team. She made the team for the next year then skated all summer, gladly giving up pool time to work on her skills.

She had developed so much confidence through synchro that in the fall of 2006 she decided that she wanted to audition for a part in the spring Ice Show. So far she had participated in group numbers through her Basic Skills classes but was now eligible to be placed in a smaller (i.e. more elite) group if she auditioned well. Her coach found her a partner and they put together a routine, found costumes, and spent an afternoon painting a life-sized cardboard Ken for their "I'm A Barbie Girl" routine. At the audition I was amazed at Alicia's composure and improvisation when one of Ken's arms broke. When the results went up hours later, she and Isabel had been chosen as a duet for two of the four performances of the Ice Show.

Alicia then decided that she wanted to try an individual competition. One of her best friends, Emily (from the Blades, of course), had been competing individually for years. I was stunned. Just over a year ago she had been barely out of Basic Skills classes and would never have dreamed of doing this. Alicia and her coach put together a Showcase routine for the Great Oaks Invitational in Royal Oak, Michigan. Alicia was devastated when she came in last. She was even more devastated when she watched her performance later on DVD.

"I looked so stiff and boring," she sobbed.

"You're out there alone on that big ice," I said. "You need to make yourself bigger. Play it up like you do in synchro."

Again, she worked hard and when she performed the routine again at the Ann Arbor Basic Skills competition in June she didn't look like the same skater – and took first place.

That spring we encountered a synchro problem, most of the girls on the team were too advanced to stay in the pre-juvenile division, but not enough to move the whole team up to a higher division. Alicia and two of the other skaters went to audition for the newly formed Evolution program at the Detroit Skating Club where she earned a spot on the open juvenile team.

Besides a new synchro team, in fall of 2007 Alicia took on even more skating challenges. She added a freestyle routine to her individual competitions. She also competed in jumps, interpretive, and showcase. She auditioned for the ice show again; her partner didn't work out and she had to audition alone. After skating a duet last year, she didn't want to be put in a bigger group but knew it was really her only option. She planned to audition with her new Showcase routine. I watched as girls skated, beautifully and capably, then pulled Alicia aside.

"This is an Ice SHOW," I said. "You might not be able to do all the moves these girls can, but you know you can put on a show. Get out there and perform like there are thousands of screaming people."

I find it hard to believe that it's been less than three years since she started skating synchro. The difference in her skating is nothing less than amazing, and a few hours later, when the results were posted, she was shocked and thrilled when she was given a solo for two of the four shows.

This past spring brought yet another synchro problem. Because she started later, Alicia is not skating on the same teams as the other girls her age. She desperately wants to "catch up." She is ready to test her pre-juvenile moves in the field which makes her eligible for an intermediate team. She auditioned



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for one and made the roster. She also auditioned for two open juvenile teams. Then she auditioned for the new Team Allegro novice team. She will have to pass another test, juvenile moves in the field, by December 1 to even be placed on the roster. The coach told her that until she passes the test she can be a trainer with the team, and that she will have to work harder than the other girls but it is possible to work her way into the line. She evaluated her four synchro possibilities and chose the most difficult. She is a hard-working trainer on the novice Team Allegro!

I have always told my kids that you can achieve anything you want and nothing has proved this better than Alicia's experience with synchro. She has learned that she can do anything she applies herself to, just like she did that first season. She's relearning that lesson again, skating on a team where once again she's the least experienced skater, and already making progress. I had made myself believe that Alicia wanted to join the Blades back in 2005, but she says that I forced her. And every once in a while she gives me a hug and thanks me for doing that.

