

A few months ago, I wrote of my concerns about declining facilities for ice skating in Scotland; the closures of Aberdeen and Paisley, the imminent closure of the Magnum, the restricted availability of skating ice at many Scottish rinks due to competition for ice time with hockey and curling. The newly opened Stirling ice rink is also not entirely suited to skating, playing second fiddle as it were, to curling. Now other rinks in the UK appear threatened.

Investment in ice facilities specifically for ice skating, however, will never improve without a return to commercial popularity, and my purpose in writing this article is to look at some of the opportunities that could be addressed both by rink managements and by the sport's governing body. My thoughts are less concerned with the "elite" end of the sport, rather on the grass roots, ways to increase the recreational base of the pyramid - and how to retain them in the sport!



Can freestyle and street dance provide an extreme solution for ice rink woes?

There can be no doubt that the ITV reality show *Dancing on Ice* has proved very popular with audiences, both on TV and on the tour. Now in its fourth year, and apparently commissioned until 2011, the show has greatly boosted interest and attendances at ice rinks throughout the country and many facilities have had to create waiting lists for 'would be' skaters wanting to sign up for lessons. Inevitably though, rinks usually report a drop-off shortly after the end of each series, and attendances retreat back to 'normal' levels. But why should this be, and what could be done differently?

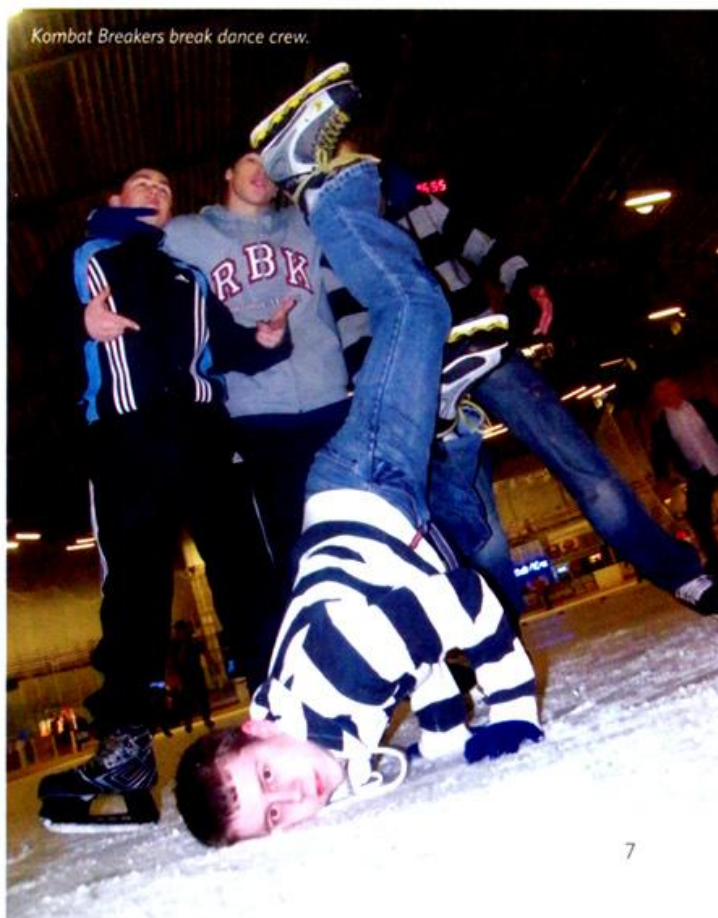
In the UK, with few exceptions, rinks have largely failed to retain the annual influx of customers inspired by Torvill and Dean and the *Dancing on Ice* celebrities. In marketing, customer retention is fundamental to the long-term success of any product, and ice skating is no exception. Unfortunately, many ice rinks have a poor record in this respect, and observers over the years have lamented the lack of investment, poor customer care and slowness to innovate and adapt to changing customer demands, in a market place where so many well-presented leisure opportunities are competing for our business.

While many rinks have turned to multi use - concerts, sporting events, boxing matches etc - to boost commercial revenues, this approach to innovation really does not help ice skating directly; it is simply a diversification which helps cross-subsidise the sport at the expense of ice time.

Having said this, quite a few facilities have clearly tried to address these issues, and with some considerable success it must be said, and of course we do have some superb arenas, but equally too many others remain shabby, in some disrepair, freezing cold, offer poor quality ice, have blunt hire skates, have little or no information

available - the list goes on. As a place of entertainment - as it surely is - too many managements simply think of their rink as a ticket office, an ice surface and let you get on with it! Contrast this with the cinema industry; it has succeeded in turning around its tawdry image to create a genuinely welcoming leisure experience, increasing and most importantly retaining its audiences. Swimming too has been transformed - you just need to look at the growing number of facilities with slides, flumes and wave machines, and even football is a completely new spectator experience, with comfortable, covered seats replacing wet and windswept terraces.

Looking at other sports, cricket, for example, has addressed its problems of declining interest by shifting emphasis from the yawn-inducing three-day format to the immensely popular Twenty20 contests, where big hitting, fast tempo and colourful kit have transformed the sport into a media and spectator friendly leisure experience.



Kombat Breakers break dance crew.

Xtreme Skating

Several examples of customer retention and innovation - so what could be achieved in our sport, ice skating?

Let's look at customer retention first. Clearly addressing the issues of lack of investment, disrepair etc, would be a longer-term challenge, however failing to adapt to the needs of customers is something much easier to address. Each year with *Dancing on Ice* comes a huge boost in attendances at rinks and learn to skate classes. Many rink managements however seem unable or unwilling to adapt their ice schedules to accommodate this increase in demand, consigning far too many would-be customers to a "waiting list", which as everyone knows is effectively a lost customer to the sport.

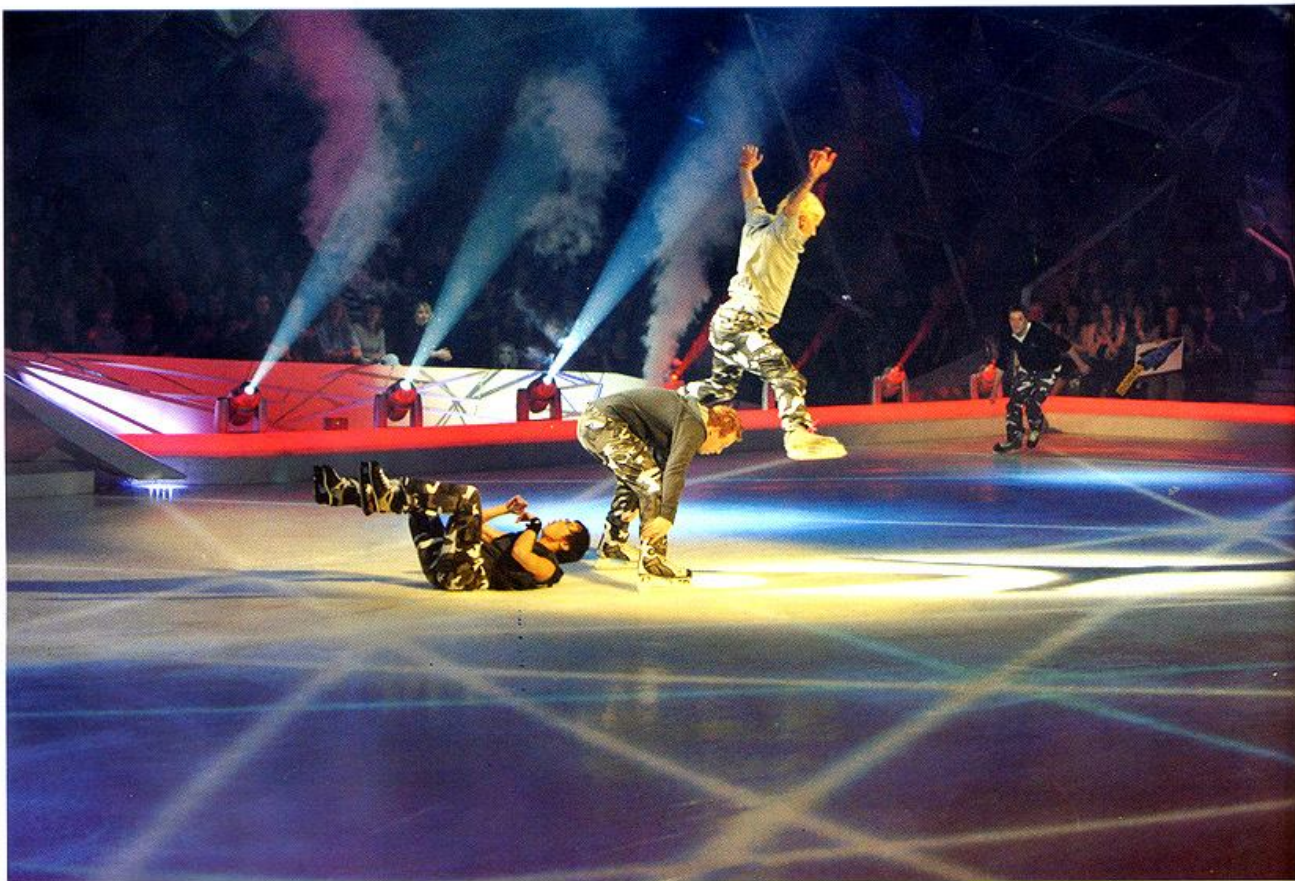
Many of the annual *Dancing on Ice* influx tends to be adults, and here again there is little effort made to retain them in the sport after the first flushes of enthusiasm have begun to wane. While the national association's learn to skate programme, Skate UK, represents an excellent introduction to skating, I believe that for adults especially, blindly following the programme actually leads to beginner adults giving up. Adults are more cautious on ice, understandably cannot risk injury and their careers, and too quickly reach a point where they cannot progress, cannot overcome their fears, and become weary of repeating the same boring manoeuvres week after week. Result, they give up, not having even heard of the possibility of doing what brought them to the rink in the first place - dancing on ice. Retention is all about offering opportunity, channelling customers into areas where they can meet new and achievable challenges, less scary perhaps than jumping or spinning.

There is no reason whatsoever why these beginners should not try out dancing - there are plenty of simple forward-only dances to learn - or even synchro moves. Rinks and coaches need to create these channels and opportunities if they want to retain their customers. And make sure they are properly marketed!

Innovation and adaptation is another important aspect of sport development, and here it is not just the rinks, but the sport's governing body, which could take the initiative.

Resistance to change and innovation has long been a shortcoming of our sport, and here I include rinks, coaches, clubs and association. More than 15 years ago, I watched as the Southern Ice Dance League slowly died, and with it came a decline in popularity of many of the ice dance clubs. Remembering the great fun of the impromptu drawn partners competitions at Deeside for example, gave me an idea to completely revitalise recreational ice dancing, and the Recreational Ice Dance League (RIDL) was born. Despite considerable resistance from the then NISA dance committee, the RIDL proved to be extremely popular, leagues spread throughout England and Wales, and are still enthusiastically supported to this day.

Why was the association at the time so resistant to the idea? Principally because it wasn't "the way we do things", not in the ISU rulebook. But why should we be so constrained in this way? The ISU rulebook doesn't preclude member federations from being innovative within their own jurisdictions (as long as it doesn't breach eligibility). I recall reading about an interesting competition format held in the USA a few years ago where iceskating and



The Oxford Freestylers appearing on *Dancing on Ice*.

Photo: Ken McKay / Rex Features



Ryan Stillwell of Kombat Breakers

gymnastics shared the surface simultaneously (before you ask, a section of the rink was boarded for the gymnasts!) Returning to the subject of *Dancing on Ice*, I was particularly impressed, not by the celebrities but by the winners of the *Ice Star* offshoot, the streetdance skaters from Oxford - the Oxford Freestylers. I have often watched really talented skaters on rink disco or hockey skate sessions and thought that it shouldn't be beyond us to channel these skaters into an entirely new discipline, 'Xtreme Skating'. In fact about three or four years ago, I suggested this idea to the association, which at the time was working with a major PR agency to explore new opportunities. I was later told that of all the ideas, it was this idea that really gelled with the agency. Sadly nothing further came of it.

That is until Jayne and Chris spotted the Oxford Freestylers. Undoubtedly they captured the imagination of the moment, with streetdance ever growing in popularity and most recently reinforced by Diversity, winners of the ITV show *Britain's Got Talent*. In fact Oxford Ice Rink is to be congratulated for its foresight in supporting this new and exciting on-ice version of streetdance.

Searching the internet, it seems that Xtreme Skating has already been developed in New York, USA, by skating coach, Dan Perceval, and his website (www.xtremeiceskating.com) is a veritable treasure trove of information and videos. Xtreme Skating would undoubtedly appeal to aspiring hockey and recreational skaters who prefer not to "figure" skate. This form of skating is akin to Xtreme boarding /blading /BMX but performed on ice. As such it

should appeal to street kids culture. Xtreme Skating consists of a whole series of "tricks" with names such as "insanity", "The Cobra" and "Drunken Sailor". In broad terms, these tricks are often just based on figure skating moves such as mohawks, choctaws and split jumps, and really shouldn't be beyond the capability of many of our existing coaches. I also recall that a couple of years ago, Yuri Bureiko, through his International School of Skating, promoted an Extreme Skating experience at the Cannock rink with Toke'n, a streetdancer, as special guest, while the Kombat Breakers streetdance group has guested at other skating events. What is needed is for the association, in collaboration with willing rinks and coaches, to grasp this idea, involve good role model disco skaters, and get a trial programme up and running. With a lot of the groundwork already in place, there is certainly no need to re-invent the wheel. Xtreme skating could really open up new and exciting opportunities, attract a whole new generation of skater to our rinks, and encourage rollerbladers, BMX and boarders to switch to ice for added thrills. Rinks could offer learn to xtreme skate courses, special xtreme skating sessions, perhaps as intervals at public disco sessions, and even develop xtreme skating competitions. Another possibility could be the emergence of other skating teams like the Oxford Freestylers, adding perhaps another dimension to dancing on ice!

Who knows, from these new generation skaters, perhaps we could even channel some of them into our other more traditional disciplines, or speed skating and hockey.



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