

Competitive adult figure skaters break the ice at the rink

Beth Spotswood Feb. 27, 2018



There is a giant ice rink in the middle of downtown Oakland. Actually, there are two rinks inside the Oakland Ice Center, which is home to, among other things, the St. Moritz Ice Skating Club. Every weekday morning, before the rinks are opened to the general public and the snack shop serves up its first cup of hot chocolate, adults pay seasoned coaches premium rates for competitive figure skating training. This is where I met Libby and Scott on Monday morning.

I first encountered Libby Palomeque and Scott Davis at an Olympic figure skating viewing party hosted by Olympic gold medal-winner Brian Boitano. The event was a fundraiser to help offset the cost of trips to the 2018 Winter Olympics for the families of athletes.

Palomeque and Davis, both chatty and funny, quickly adopted me and explained the complexities of figure skating. Naturally, I asked how they knew each other.

“Oh, we re competitive adult figure skaters,” Palomeque said. “We have the same coach.”

Davis promptly pulled out his smartphone and showed me a video of the pair skating together as Sonny and Cher to the song “I Got You Babe.”

Most serious gure skaters start as young children. Palomeque, 47, and Davis, 58, began seriously skating four years ago. Palomeque, who works in nance, was intrigued after a skating session with her daughter, and Davis, who is retired, felt the same after skating at the Union Square winter ice rink with his husband s nieces. Both quickly signed up for the “Learn to Skate” class in Oakland and got hooked.

These days, Palomeque meets her coach first thing in the morning every weekday. Davis follows at about 10:30. Each devotes eight or nine hours a week to practicing on the ice, and that time doesn't include lugging huge bags of gear to and from the ice center. Plus, there are so many accoutrements to take on and off, like padding and wrist guards and lots of boot laces.

"I know plenty of adults who take up a second job just to pay for their skating," said Davis as he laced his \$800 semi-custom boots on Monday morning.

"This," said Palomeque, undoing her laces and drying off her skates, "is a giant hole of an activity that you throw money into."

The rewards, however, can be great. Skaters challenge themselves with athletic and artistic goals, and develop friendships like the fabulous one shared by Palomeque and Davis. Adult competitive skating is significantly more laid-back than the high-stakes world of young Olympic hopefuls. There are certainly serious adult skaters, but competitions include a "light entertainment" showcase program that allows for cheeky or clever routines.

Palomeque is now working on a number inspired by Violet Beauregarde, from "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." In it, Palomeque's self-made blueberry costume in-ates on the ice, just as Violet's did when Willy Wonka turned her into a berry. Davis is agonizing over getting his "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" costume just right.

Plus, sometimes they win! Palomeque scored a gold medal at the 2015 International Skating Union Adult Ice Skating Championships in Germany for her freestyle program as King George from the musical "Hamilton." In addition to the gold medal, she was featured in Alameda's Fourth of July parade.

"There were signs on the side of the convertible and everything," Davis gushed.

This year Palomeque will join Davis at the Gay Games in Paris to revive their Sonny and Cher routine.

In addition to the gold-medal wins and dream-fulfilling trips to Paris, both Palomeque and Davis saw measurable positive changes in their health and happiness since starting to skate. "My self-confidence is through the roof," Davis said. "For the first time in my life, I feel like a real athlete."

“You are a real athlete,” said Palomeque, offering up snacks from her endless array of skating luggage. Every once in a while, a skater would clomp across the frigid cement viewing room in glamorous shiny skates to greet Palomeque and Davis. The St. Moritz Ice Skating Club community is a tight one.

Out on the ice, Davis practiced his catch-foot spiral while skaters of all levels twirled and occasionally fell around him. Palomeque sat with me for a bit in the stands before going to work.

Since skating, Palomeque explained, “I’m getting healthier, my body is getting healthier, my chronic back pain is gone.” She smiled. “I’m getting stronger, fitter and happier every year.”

Beth Spotswood’s column appears Thursdays in Datebook. Email: datebook@sfchronicle.com