



JUSTIN MERRIMAN/TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Maddie Watton (left), 16, of Murrysville; John Henry Krueger (center), 13; and his brother, Cole Krueger, 16, of McMurray skate Monday at the Warrendale Bladerunners. All three are nationally ranked.

Speedskating group glides to success

The Pittsburgh club aims to send its members to the Olympics.

BY DAN STEFANO
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

The Penguins can't be ignored, but a local group wants Pittsburgh to be known as "the city of ice" for different reasons.

The Pittsburgh Speedskating Club has grown in size and success over the past 17 years, and it hopes to make the city a national hub for short-track speedskating.

Three members have been selected as Junior Category 1 speedskaters by U.S. Speedskating for the 2008-09 season. Ice Club DeMorra in California was the only club in the U.S. with an equal number.

Murrysville's Maddie Watton, 16, is ranked ninth among junior women. Brothers Cole, 16, and John-Henry Krueger, 13, of Peters Township are ranked No. 12 and No. 13 among junior men, respectively.

The status brings along the advantages and responsibilities of official U.S. speedskaters. The trio will receive official U.S. speedskating suits, free clothes and nutritional supplements. They will also be subjected to random drug-testing.

The young skaters received the distinction after finishing high in major meets this past season.

Watton, the highest-ranked female junior in the state, was second in her age division in the National Short Track Championships in March. She set a national record there in the 1,000-meter with a time of 1 minute, 42.9 seconds. Later in

the month, the former figure skater was third at the North American Championships, winning the 777-meter distance.

"When you win that race at nationals, it makes you realize it was all worth it," said Watton, who is a junior at Franklin Regional High School. "It really is a rush."

Cole, who finished fourth among juniors at the North American meet, enjoys the adrenaline boost as much as Watton does.

"I love the challenge of speedskating," he said. "Some sports don't require as much skill as short track. It requires a lot of patience and dedication."

John-Henry, competing in the juvenile division, was second at the North American meet.

All of that success requires a good deal of time. That's why Watton is only half-kidding when she tells her friends she lives at the ice rink.

At least three times a week, the skaters train at one of six rinks. They will practice on the rink for about 90 minutes, followed by a dry-land session.

Before Cole practiced exclusively with the PSC, he traveled to Washington two to three times a week to meet with a coach who is now with the U.S. Olympic team.

The club had modest beginnings in 1991, when Barbara Mays and Shoshana Halden met in a grocery store parking lot. Mays had a pair of special needs children who wanted to speedskate in the Special Olympics. Halden's husband happened to be a speedskating coach.

From that chance meeting, the PSC was born. In its early days, the club welcomed many children with disabilities,

which it continues to do. However, the focus has largely shifted to developing all young skaters.

The addition of a new coach, Kwang-Jae Lee, has helped the club's members reach new heights. Since his arrival two years ago, nine members have attended the national championships and may one day see the pinnacle of amateur competition — the Olympics.

"If everything goes according to plan, my boys and Maddie Watton should have the times to attend the Olympic Trials in 2009," said club president Heidi Krueger, mother of Cole and John-Henry.

Lee was born in South Korea, where short-track speedskating is extremely popular and taken very seriously. He brought that mindset to Western Pennsylvania.

"He has made an incredible improvement to our club," Watton said. "He made our club more organized. We're more like a team now."

The PSC has sights on expansion and turning Western Pennsylvania into a speedskating hotbed such as Wisconsin and Utah, where some of the country's top training centers are located.

Through a program called Serious Skating for Serious Students, the club is working with local universities to bring in some of the country's top skaters who are looking to train at a high level.

The club also plans to build a practice facility in collaboration with Robert Morris University. It would include a state-of-the-art indoor track and indoor soccer fields.

"That is definitely the dream," Heidi Krueger said. "And it's not a difficult dream."