

GLIDE THROUGH WINTER BREAK ... WITHOUT BREAKING ANYTHING

Helpful tips for the novice ice skater

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It's winter, there's even a little snow, and you're in a city that has three ice rinks and even more in the 'burbs.

But you've never skated.

Most beginners want to be able to start, skate forward, and stop. Then they'll want to try skating backward and stopping, and learning some simple spins, jumps, or spirals (like ballet's arabesque).

I grew up in a cold northern climate, but I had never skated until age 35. Faced with political unemployment come one Jan. 21, I seized the opportunity to learn to skate and accomplish *something* while looking for work. I took twice-weekly private lessons and began skating — a lot. I knew my moment had come when, after a long, full spiral, I was asked, "weren't you scared?"

Nah.



Observer photo by TRINAY BLAKE

Skaters at the National Gallery of Art Sculpture Garden ice-skating rink.

The National Archives building is in the background.

Here are some tips that will help you out on your first few tries.

Getting Started

There are no weak ankles, just badly fitting skates!

They should be snug, just like your regular shoes. Assuming that you are renting skates, you'll have to try out sizes, which can differ according to brand. (My skates are two sizes smaller than my shoe size.) You should be able to feel the ice while you're skating.

If the rink has unisex skates, you should assume they are men's sizes; women will need at least two sizes smaller if this is the case.

That brings us to socks. Do not wear thick, ragg-type socks or more than one pair of conventional socks. I've heard the help at chain, mass-market, sporting-goods stores often tell shoppers something along the lines of, "oh, it's fine that they're a little big, because you'll wear thick socks." No, no, no!

You



Observer photo by TRINAY BLAKE

The outdoor rink is surrounded by a collection of modern sculptures.

cannot maintain circulation if you do, and you'll just get colder, not warmer. Many hard-core skaters wear no socks at all, but I don't recommend that. I wear silk sock liners that are very thin. Thin is key. Skip cotton, since it won't wick moisture that will make your feet so very cold.

Layers of protection

Wear layers that allow freedom of movement. A hat is a must!

Fingerless glove/mitten combinations are nice because you can lace more securely than with awkward gloves. Trailing scarves are picturesque, but keep them under control so that they don't drag on the ice and drag you down with it. People don't want to fall on you.

I really recommend inline-skate knee pads, especially if you are serious about pursuing this. One fall-filled day, during an ice-resurfacing break, a little boy no more than 10 years old came over to me and said, "you might want to try knee pads. They've really helped me a lot." I was so impressed

with his confident, matter-of-fact maturity, that I did purchase some. Little girls love my bright purple knee pads!

The skates

OK, put the skates on and lace comfortably snug, not loosely, around your foot. Then lace tightly at the ankle, as tight as you can without cutting off the circulation. Finally, lace them above the ankle as around the foot.

Tie a good double knot, but not so tight that you can't untie it when it's wet and you are wiped out.

Now stand up! Don't teeter all over the place like you're the first person ever on two blades, just stand and walk over to the gate, hold the rail and enter the rink.

"How do I start?"

Well, once you're actually on the ice, hold the rail, put your feet into a v-shape, and push off with your right foot. It's really like walking; it's just that you've probably never thought about how you really walk.

You keep your balance by holding your arms out a bit — not flailing — so that your hands are at about hip level. This is not a stiff posture.

Don't look down unless you want to go in that direction. Look forward, and trust your arm positioning to keep your balance.

Then you just stroke with the blades, pushing from the arch of the foot.

Toe picks on figure skates are used only by advanced skaters for spinning and jumping. You? Not so much.

"But what if I fall?"

Yes, you'll fall. Everyone falls. Even experienced skaters and competitive veterans have really bad falls. (I've had four different orthopedists in my life.)

Falling on ice is actually safer than on ground, because you slide on ice.

If you start to fall, get your balance back by holding your arms out in front of your hips, and bend your knees. Usually you can regain control and straighten up once again.

When you do fall, roll on your side, and get up again. Don't stay sprawled out all over the ice.

"How do I stop?"

The safest stop for a beginner is the "snowplow." Glide on both feet, forming a v-shape, while leaning the feet slightly in towards each other.

As the toes come together, put the balance on the left leg, and push out with the right foot. You'll have to practice to get the timing right.

You'll see hockey stops also; but you're on your own there.

Don't even think of trying the classic figure skater's "T-stop" until you're much, much more experienced. It's too dangerous, even more-so than it looks.

Backward, forward ... whatever direction you find yourself going, I hope you look forward to ice skating. Here are some additional tips to help make your

skating



Observer photo by TRINAY BLAKE

*Visitors to the National Gallery of Art Sculpture Garden
ice-skating rink in Washington, D.C.*

experience much more enjoyable.

Do:

- Buy skates if you are serious about skating. Skater's Paradise in Mount Vernon serves pond skaters through professionals. Suburban rinks may have pro shops that can help you. Used skates should not have boots that flop over; they should fit, and you'll have to get them sharpened — professionally.
- Keep your skates sharpened. Take them to a pro shop for this.
- A helmet is not a bad idea, especially for children.

Don't:

- Chew gum or eat. If you fall, you could choke to death. Questions?
- Yank on someone when you start to fall.
- Try to use the toe picks for anything. Forget that they are there. Toe picks are ONLY used for spinning and jumping. Enough said.
- Let your laces drag on the ice. This is a huge safety hazard. Besides, when it's time to lace or unlace, they will be wet and gross.
- Skate across the middle. Avoid the middle. And, oh, thank you in advance! Middle ice is traditionally where more experienced skaters work out.
- Don't get too close to the boards; the ice is mushy there, and you don't want to hang on forever.
- Yap on your cellphone.
- Walk on ground with skates, unless there are blade guards on them.

What to wear

- Wool, fleece, silk and high-tech sports fabrics are best.
- No handbags! Rent a locker, and keep what little you need on the ice in

a zipped pocket or a fanny pack. Yes, I said fanny pack.

- As you grow more proficient, you'll be moving around the ice more quickly and generate more body heat, so keep that in mind.
- If you wear glasses, consider an elastic holder to keep them on. No, really. Trust me.
- Wear bright colors!

What else to bring

- Water and sunscreen.
- Your health insurance card and ID — on the ice with you.
- Lip balm.
- An old sock or something to wipe the skate blades with. Protect that (possibly huge) investment!
- If you buy skates, the staff will most likely recommend “soakers,” which are sort of a terry-cloth “blade cozy” to keep the blades from nicking each other or cutting up your skate bag. Blade guards, on the other hand, are worn on the blade when you are walking on ground.

Where to go

[Sculpture Garden Ice Rink](#)

[Pershing Park Skating Rink](#) (Currently closed for renovations, but check the site periodically)

[Fort Dupont Ice Rink](#)