

OLYMPICS

# Winter Olympics: Ice House in Hackensack sending 11 skaters to Games in Pyeongchang

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The storied history of the Ice House in Hackensack is written on its walls.

Signed posters of Olympic figure skating champions Tara Lipinski and Oksana Baiul hang in the lobby. Framed newspaper clippings of Olympic gold medalist Sarah Hughes adorn the administrative offices. Inside one rink, banners bearing the famous names of those who once trained here look down on the skaters practicing on the ice below.

The four-rink complex has sent more than 35 figure skaters to the Olympic Games since opening 20 years ago. Next month, it will send 11 more.

"We built and built and built," said Craig Maurizi, director of the Ice House's figure skating program for most of its existence. "There's no official record but we've got to have the biggest program in the country."

And one of the most diverse.

The 11 athletes heading to Pyeongchang will represent five countries — Israel, Switzerland, Slovakia, Canada and Australia — in the ladies' singles, men's singles, pairs and ice dance competitions.

Almost the entire Israeli figure skating team trains at the Hackensack facility, lured by coach and former ice dancing Olympian Galit Chait, a nearby house for skaters owned by the Israeli Ice Skating Federation and plenty of ice time.

"I get more ice time on one day at the Ice House than what I would get in a week in Israel," said Evgeni Krasnopolski, a pair skater who left Israel for the U.S. nine years ago.

Krasnopolski and his partner, Paige Connors, spend six days a week at the ice rink and the facility's in-house fitness center, training up to eight hours per day. The teenage Connors takes high school classes online, as does Alexia Paganini of Switzerland, to focus full-time on the sport.

Long practice hours are hard to come by in the ice skating world, Maurizi said.

"You don't make money if you're giving ice," he said, referring to the time elite skaters need to practice versus more lucrative programs like high school hockey games. "But for us, that was part of my business plan."

*Story continues below video.*

## **Starting from scratch**

Maurizi arrived in Hackensack in November 1999 with the goal of fashioning the Ice House into his own Detroit Skating Club, a figure skating powerhouse where he spent years coaching Lipinski and other world champions.

He had to start virtually from scratch in New Jersey: the Ice House had just one rink at the time and apart from prominent Russian coach Tamara Moskvina and her students, one or two skaters on the ice.

But what it did have was location. The rink's proximity to New York City and major airports soon attracted more top international coaches and with them, skaters.

"Once you get one or two people, then you get more and more and it feeds on itself," Maurizi said.

Today, the Ice House is home to world-renowned coaches like Chait, coach to five Olympians this year, and Nikolai Morozov, who coached Japanese skater Shizuka Arakawa to the 2006 Olympic gold medal and is working with four 2018 Olympians.

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Hughes and her coach made the facility their pre-Olympics training ground for years before her 2002 win, regularly commuting from Long Island to Hackensack.

Between the elite skaters and one of the largest learn-to-skate programs in the country, the ice is now maxed out, Maurizi said.

"We actually can't grow anymore," he said. "I did my job."

The program, once in the single-digits, is now 1,500 skaters strong.

## **20th Anniversary**

On Saturday, it will throw a bash for its past, present and future, celebrating the Ice House's 20th year, the latest team of Olympians and a crop of young athletes looking to follow in their footsteps.

The event will give the Olympians a rare chance to unwind in the weeks leading up to Pyeongchang.

"They're here all day, they're here on Saturday morning at 7 a.m. They're skating, they're training and they're perfecting themselves every day," said Chait, describing her job as part-coach, part-psychologist and part-mentor. "It's not easy. They get tired and they push through it, they don't give up even when their body's saying, 'No.'"

*Story continues below*

Canadian ice dancer Kaitlyn Weaver braced for the pain on a recent Friday morning, wrapping red ribbon around a gel pad on her right foot. The pad was a simple remedy for "lace bite," tendinitis caused by repeated pressure from a skate tongue.

"Between the two of us, you name it, we've had it," she said, speaking of her partner of 12 years, Andrew Poje. "It's a graceful sport but it can take its toll."

The pair, considered the Ice House's best hope for an Olympic medal in Pyeongchang, spent hours fine-tuning the twizzle sequence in their rumba dance days after competing in Canada's figure skating championships in early January. They settled in Fort Lee a year ago to be closer to Morozov, their coach.

It's the latest stop in a 12-year journey that began in Toronto, moved to Detroit for seven years, catapulted Weaver and Poje to the 2014 Olympics in Sochi and brought the pair to the Ice House.

"We're chasing a dream," Weaver said.

Weaver never doubted it would someday come true, not from the moment she first stepped onto the ice as a child. Her family had to drag her off, wet from falling so many times, and wring out her skirt.

Practice sessions at 5:30 a.m. quickly followed. She taught herself Russian to be able to speak the language of her figure skating idols and made the rink her second home.

"I knew I wanted to succeed and the Olympics were the ultimate so why not try for the ultimate?" Weaver said.

Poje caught her eye as a teenager and when he was left partner-less ("I promise it wasn't a Tonya Harding move," she said), Weaver asked her coach to set up a tryout. The two clicked instantly, their goals, pacing and stride in sync.

"She was determined to be the best in the world and I was happy to be along for the ride," Poje said.

The two say their speed and performance quality — the ability to rope in an audience no matter the style of dance — set them apart from their peers.

They will buck ice-dancing tradition in Pyeongchang by skating their long program to Lara Fabian's "Je suis malade," a moody song about heartbreak.

"Usually everyone has a happy ending and ours is dramatic and more angsty," Weaver said. "What I like about it is that it's real, it's human. Everyone goes through that type of feeling so it's fun for us to be able to use that to communicate a universal feeling to the audience."

Off the ice, Weaver and Poje are happy and calm. The frenzied excitement of their first Olympics, so intense that Weaver said she felt like fire was running through her veins, has simmered down to a quiet focus.

"We know what to expect and it will be business as usual when it's time to compete," Weaver said. "We have a job to do and we don't need to experience all the fanfare and wonderfulness until our job is done."

For the first-timers, the focus is more on soaking up the atmosphere than beating the competition.

"I'm just going to enjoy it, take in every moment because you never know when you're going to have an opportunity like this," Connors said. "You have to take in every second."

Paganini said it took weeks for the shock of qualifying for the Games to wear off. Now that it has, she just wants to have fun and introduce herself to the world.

"Because I'm so young, I just want to get my name out there and get a good reputation so in the next four years I can start to be competitive," she said.

The Ice House is not the only North Jersey ice skating facility sending figure skaters to the Olympics this year.

The Floyd Hall Arena in Little Falls will be hosting a sendoff on Sunday for Brazilian skater Isadora Williams, who has trained at the complex for the past year while attending Montclair State University.

She became the first figure skater to represent Brazil at the Olympics four years ago.

As she prepared for her second Games, Williams thought of the falls, injuries and setbacks that got her there.

The sport of figure skating, so graceful and glamorous on TV, is tougher behind the scenes than people think, she said.

"I get questions from kids all the time asking if I ever fall. I fall every single day," Williams said. "It takes hours and hours and hours of work every single day just to be able to look effortless and match the music and nail the jumps and the spins without getting totally exhausted. But when it pays off, it's the most amazing feeling in the world."

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