

A Brief History of Ice Dancing

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The ice dancing that you see on television today is much different from its ballroom roots. The set pattern ice dances, which originated from skaters trying to replicate ballroom dances on the ice, still form the foundation of the sport, yet were eliminated from all International Skating Union (ISU) competitions after the 2010 season. The 2010 World Figure Skating Championships was the last event to include a compulsory (pattern) dance – the Golden Waltz.

People first experimented with dancing on ice in the mid-1800s. Skaters tried to follow the steps of ballroom dancing – thus *both* feet were on the ice most of the time. Jackson Haines, an American ballet dancer and figure skater, used his ballet training to create graceful programs and introduced the concept of skating to accompanying music. For these and other reasons, he is commonly referred to as ‘the father of modern figure skating.’

Haines danced on ice at an exhibition in Vienna in 1865, and a waltz bearing his name became popular in the 1880s. The Jackson Haines Waltz was originally a four-step repeating pattern of two steps forward and two steps backward in which the skater kept both feet on the ice throughout.

In the late nineteenth century, Vienna was the dancing capital of Europe, and waltzing was the rage, both on and off the ice. A three-step waltz skated in Paris in the 1890s might be the direct predecessor of modern ice dancing, featuring the speed and flowing edges that we see today. This three-step waltz, also known as the English Waltz, became the standard for waltz skating competitions, which had become popular.

Inexperienced skaters could do this simple dance, and eventually variations such as three turns and mohawks were introduced by more skilled skaters. Two-footed movements, as in the Jackson Haines Waltz, became prohibited.

The European Waltz, included in the U.S. Figure Skating pre-silver dance test today, was skated before the turn of the twentieth century. Its inventor is unknown. The

Ten-Step, the precursor of the Fourteenstep we do today, was also introduced during this time. These two are the oldest dances still skated today.

By the early 1900s, skaters throughout the world were dancing on ice. It was primarily recreational, but dance contests were common at local clubs. It wasn't until the mid-1930s that national organizations began overseeing dance competitions – in Britain in 1934, Canada in 1935, the United States in 1936, and Austria in 1937. Competitions eventually included one or more compulsory dances (CD) – (now referred to as 'pattern' dances) – plus original dance (OD) and free dance (FD) segments, which allowed for more creativity in a dance.

Ice dance has a strong tradition in the United Kingdom. Many of the pattern ice dances we use today were developed by British dancers in the 1930s. Ice dancers did not compete internationally until much later, at the World Championships in 1952 and the European Championships in 1954. Twelve of the first sixteen World champions in ice dance were British teams. Ice dancing became an Olympic Games sport in 1976.

The British style of ice dance originally emphasized upright carriage and strong edges achieved by deep knee bend. By the 1960s, Eastern European ice dancers started a trend to skate in more open positions, which allowed for greater speed over the ice, and more projection toward the audience.

In the 1970s the Soviet Union began to dominate ice dancing. The Russian style of dance emphasized speed and power over precision of skating technique, and brought a colorful and exciting element to the sport. Russian ice dancers are known for their theatrics, exaggerated facial expressions, and sometimes bizarre costuming. This niche that they carved out for themselves remains a viable force in ice dancing to this day.

After a period of Russian domination, Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean briefly returned ice dancing's highest honors to Britain, famously winning the Olympic gold medal in 1984 in Sarajevo. Many feel that their beautiful, moving, and technically flawless free dance to Ravel's *Bolero* has yet to be surpassed. It earned them unanimous perfect scores of 6.0 for presentation – a feat which was never equaled before the 6.0 judging system was retired in 2004.

By the early 1990s, all the top dance teams were performing routines in a theatrical, rather than ballroom style. The ISU attempted to return ice dancing to its

ballroom roots by adding restrictions on music and dance holds. Later, these restrictions were removed amid complaints that ice dancing had become too boring and predictable. Instead, specific required technical elements were added to the OD and FD, and judging was to be based more on technique and athleticism than dramatics.

In the 2010-11 season, the ISU voted to discontinue the time-consuming and less television-friendly CD and OD with the newly-introduced 'short dance' (SD), which combines elements of each.

Though the sport of ice dancing continues to evolve, ballroom dance remains its heritage and a key component of competitions nearly 150 years after Jackson Haines's first waltz on ice in Vienna.