



In sync, psyched up

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By Doug Vanderlaan

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GRAND RAPIDS -- Even if they were younger and single, Tanner Allis and Bryan Warner say they wouldn't be having as much fun as they are now as the only men on an all-female figure skating team.

"The locker room situations can be fun," chuckles Allis, 53, after Friday's Master's Division performance during the National Synchronized Team Skating Championships at Van Andel Arena in front of a crowd of 8,416, "because at many of these events the men don't get separate facilities."

Allis and Warner, 43, are members of the 17-skater Midland-based team The Turning Points and, in a sport dominated by females, their ice presence dominated during Friday's final-round competition. The team finished eighth in an 11-team field topped by the Gems on Ice of Plymouth.

The championships will end today with final-round skating in adult, collegiate, and senior divisions. The top two senior division teams will advance to the sport's world championships to be held March 30-April 2 in

Prague, Czechoslovakia. Final-round action will begin at noon and will conclude with the championships' premier senior division beginning at 6 p.m.

"I don't think in figure skating that you find a wealth of male skaters," says The Turning Points coach Cindy Baran, 23, herself a former skater with the Fraser Figure Skating Club near Detroit. "This division of the sport is set up for adults who learned how to skate as adults and we're fortunate to have these two guys."

In Allis' case, fortune came in the form of his wife, Hedi, who shares coaching duties with Baran and with whom Allis concedes some influence with "because I sleep with the coach."

But there is no doubt that the male presence is an important one for The Turning Points team.

"They're much stronger skaters and it's also nice to showcase them in our routines," says teammate Tracy Perry, 44. "And they're so nice to have on the team because of their good, positive attitudes. They want us to do well, plus they're so good with putting up with all of us."

In a division that requires a minimum age of 25, The Turning Points has defied many odds. In nine of the past 10 years, the team has qualified for the national finals and finished with the silver medal in 2000.

And in competition with teams from Cleveland, Seattle, Kansas City, and San Diego, finding the depth of skating talent in Midland is no small feat.

Which may also explain the unique presence of Allis and Warner in this fast-growing sport.

"I started skating on a pond half a mile up the road as a kid," says Warner, now in his sixth season as a synchronized team skater, "but I never had any formal lessons. When I started with the lessons, I found I

improved my skating dramatically and that, over time, is what makes you enjoy this sport more.

"It's addictive -- once you get hooked, you're hooked for life."

Which is what team member Dave Bakke was struggling with while watching the team perform Friday. Bakke, 52, is nursing his way back from a non-skating related rotator cuff injury and couldn't believe that he had to pay a spectator's admission for the first time in his eight years in the sport.

"It was terrible," said Bakke of watching from the stands. "I skate every noon for the exercise and do two skates per week with the team. I don't think I'll ever stop."

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