



## From Pre-Alpha to Freestyle: Figure Skating Through the Lens of Filipino Figure Skaters

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**Abstract:** Figure skating has been around since 1772 when an Englishman by the name of Robert Jones gave a whole new meaning to the concept of skating on ice, and since then, it has been a sport loved by many around the world. However, despite its long history, many researchers have stated that there is still a paucity of information regarding figure skating. In the Philippines, the dance sport was only introduced in the 1990s; hence, it is a relatively new concept that most researchers have yet to touch on. This study, therefore, aims to analyze figure skating in the Philippines through the lens of Filipino figure skaters. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews (SSI) with figure skaters and Philippine Skating Union (PHSU) coaches and officials. It was found that the practices which Filipino figure skaters do are the same ones being practiced abroad because as a country new to figure skating, the dance sport does not have much popularity yet which limits the chances of having practices that are uniquely Filipino. Despite this, there are still attempts to adapt foreign concepts to better fit the local skaters. The Filipino identity in figure skating also seems blurred as the respondents have varying perspectives on whether or not their fellow skaters instill a sense of Filipino identity into their routines. It was concluded that the dance sport is still far too young to be able to have an established perspective.

**Key Words:** figure skating; figure skaters; Filipino identity; dance sport

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of skating on ice is believed to date as far back as 3000 B.C in Scandinavia (Mayer, 2018). While this remained as a concept for so long, it was finally materialized as a real sport in 1772 when a British artilleryman named Robert Jones coined the term “figure skating”. Later on, he created the first known instructional book, “A Treatise on Skating,” which included tips for beginners and instructions on how to perform certain moves (Hamilton, 2019). Formerly a dance sport with rigid movements, Jackson Haines reimagined its style and incorporated ballet concepts into it in order to transform the dance sport to what it is known for now—graceful and flowing (“Jackson Haines”, 2021).

Despite figure skating having an extensive history, it still comes as a surprise that there are barely any studies regarding the dance sport around the world. According to Grau in 2010, “dance scholars with a few exceptions rarely write about figure skating.” This statement has been backed up by many other researchers who share the same sentiments that there is indeed a “lack of systematic research” in the field of figure skating (Niinimaa, 2017). Taking things to a more local context, the dance sport of figure

skating is still very new in the Philippines. It only started in the country during the 1990s when the first ice skating rink in the Philippines was built in SM Megamall (Philippine Skating Union, n.d). This is likely due to the fact that winter sports are not as popular in tropical countries as it is in winter countries. In addition, the sport slowly started gaining attention from the masses during the early 2000s. Since then, the sport has been rather successful in producing high-level skaters including Michael Martinez who was the first-ever skater to represent South East Asia in the Olympics. However, this is no comparison to countries with decades of experience and the appropriate climate for this sport. Thus, it is no wonder that there are almost no known studies about figure skating made in the Philippines, much less the Filipino perspective of figure skating.

Therefore, this study will look into figure skating through the lens of Filipino figure skaters and coaches. It will specifically aim to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the practices of Filipino figure skaters that make them uniquely Filipino?
2. How does the Philippines adapt figure skating into its own context?



opportunities that they cannot find in the country. However, Skater D believes that all figure skaters will eventually seek foreign coaches and opportunities abroad as they advance in the sport. She points out that even Yuzuru Hanyu, a very successful Japanese figure skater, still trains abroad in order to widen his perspective and experience. She sums everything up by saying, “I think the training environment means a lot to your training.”

Conversely, other figure skaters train abroad solely as a result of the lack of opportunities in the Philippines. Skater E introduces the idea that coaches in the Philippines are not as advanced compared to other countries. If one wishes to advance their training, they will need to go abroad because the expertise of the local coaches is limited up to a certain level only due to lack of exposure and training for them. She admits that though these coaches are good, she does not believe that they will be able to offer quality training for higher-level techniques as they are not equipped with the required knowledge and expertise to do so.

Ultimately, figure skating in the Philippines is currently in the early stages of its development, and thus, there still are several challenges that need to be addressed and prioritized. While there are attempts to adapt figure skating into a more local context, it is not easy to achieve due to the various issues discussed above.

### *3.2 The Filipino Identity in Figure Skating*

It is difficult to instill the Filipino identity into the skating routines of Filipino figure skating students when the local sports management limits the use of Filipino music. Coach C mentioned that SM not only discourages skaters from using Filipino songs for their programs, but also discourages that these songs be played during public hours in the rink. For this reason, figure skaters who want to incorporate Filipino themes into their programs cannot do so, while some disregard the idea entirely because of the difficulties in gaining permission to use Filipino songs. Coach C also declared, “Our generation [in the '90s] used to skate to Filipino songs but it is not practiced now, or it is frowned upon because it does not follow the brand of SM Lifestyle as a mall,” further stating how Filipino figure skaters have much potential in exploring their creativity should they be allowed to skate to that type of music.

Moreover, when asked if incorporating Filipino dance movements into figure skating was possible, the informants had varying opinions. Some agreed and explained how versatile Filipino movements are, noting it was entirely possible to incorporate them into figure skating. It was also stated that using Filipino music would likewise

greatly contribute to introducing the Filipino culture to the international community as well. Coach B says, “One thing I love about figure skating is you can be whatever you want to be.” Figure skaters agreed to this statement by explaining how the innate grace and artistry Filipinos have would translate well if Filipino movements were incorporated into figure skating routines.

In contrast, other informants disagreed with the possibility of incorporating Filipino movements and themes into figure skating because they labeled it as a risk. When competing, it is important that the judges are familiar with the music to allow them to focus more on scoring the performance. Coach D mentioned that using Filipino themes introduce a very unknown concept to the judges, making them focus more on getting acquainted with the theme rather than paying attention to the performance itself. Skater D supported this by narrating how judges want to see a skater’s personal touch to the music. Using Filipino themes will result in the judges focusing more on understanding the chosen theme instead of connecting with the skater. Coach A countered this argument, though, by arguing that judges are already proficient in understanding music; thus the use of Filipino themes should not be seen as a risk to prevent its use.

Finally, many figure skaters agreed to incorporate a sense of Filipino identity into their craft. They elucidated how their identity is present when competing abroad and how they carry themselves before an international audience. Skater C states, “when Filipinos compete abroad, you can really tell by their personality and how they carry themselves that they are Filipino.” Not all share this view, though; Skater D, in particular, commented, “*Parang hindi naman, kasi* even other skaters, they don’t really have their natural identity into their programs.” He ends by saying how there is no national identity in figure skating and that it is hard to incorporate it into the sport.

In retrospect, the presence of Filipino identity in figure skating is still blurred, as seen in the varying opinions stated above. In addition, Philippine figure skating is still largely based on international standards and practices. Many of the competitions that skaters compete in are also done abroad which is why there is a tendency to follow more international standards and themes.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In summary, figure skating in the Philippines is far too young for it to have an established Filipino perspective. The community does not have practices that can be identified as uniquely Filipino since Filipino skaters seem to adopt international practices rather than localizing the



same. More so, evolving uniquely local concepts proves to be a big challenge because, while there are small steps taken to somehow adapt foreign concepts, the notion of using Filipino themes in international competitions is still labeled as a risk. Notably, the Filipino identity in figure skating seems blurred as the informants have differing perspectives on whether or not skaters incorporate it into their routines. Ultimately, only when all challenges have been addressed can the Filipino perspective in figure skating be fully realized.

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