

Synchronized skating competition iced at Mennen Arena

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Matt Rainey/The Star-Ledger

Skaters from Maine to Florida will converge on the Mennen Sports Arena in Morris Township in January for a major regional figure skating championship event, it was announced today.

The United States Figure Skating Association awarded the hosting of the 2009 Eastern Synchronized Skating Sectional Championships to the Skating Club of Morris, which expects about 2,000 skaters, coaches and family members to converge on the Morris County owned arena from Jan. 29 through Jan. 31.

"This is phenomenal. It will be a real boost to all of our local skaters," said Mark Schussel, a spokesman for the Skating Club of Morris. "We were in negotiations for a while to try and get this. It's just great."

In addition to the sporting prominence of hosting the event, there also should be an economic benefit to the Morristown area, with some hotels already fully booked on the dates of the event and restaurants and local retailers expected to benefit, said Schussel and David Helmer, executive director of the Morris County Park Commission, which owns Mennen Arena.

The Eastern sectional is one of three regional championships held nationwide. The top four finishers within select divisions will qualify to challenge teams from the central and western regions in March at the U.S. Synchronized Team Skating Championships in Portland, Maine. The winners will compete in the 2010 World Synchronized Championships in Colorado.

"This is a pretty big deal," said Helmer. "In early days of the arena we hosted many major competitions. But as bigger arenas were built around the country, many events moved elsewhere."

Synchronized skating is a growing sport governed by the U.S. Figure Skating Association. Approximately 525 synchronized teams are registered with the Colorado Springs, Colo.-based association. Last season, more than 4,500 athletes on 288 synchronized teams competed at the sectional championships, with 92 teams advancing to the U.S. championships.

The hope is that synchronized skating will become an Olympic sport, said Schussel.

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