

# Synchro turns 50!

1956-57 to 2006-07

by Jean MacLeod



Fifty years after its inception at an ice rink in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the sport of synchronized skating is priming itself for the big leagues. Already a national and international player, synchro has been lately re-defining itself as a possible future Olympic force. The new, International Judging System (IJS) has raised the performance bar for all teams, and demanded high moves in the field and freestyle skill levels from all competitive team-skaters. Coaches must be both creative artists, and analytical element technicians. Clubs fielding a high level team must provide off-ice training and up to 10-12 hours of synchro on-ice time on a weekly basis—up dramatically from the original one hour per week used by the USA's first 'precision' team! Although the intense synchro experience of practice, competition and friendship remains the same, much has changed since the first 1956-57 season...

**Mary Reilly, former Hockette team manager; Dr. Richard Porter Synchronized Classic co-chair for 11 years (with co-chair Larry Ward):** Dr. Richard Porter was a University of Michigan professor, a prominent USFSA skating judge, and an Ann Arbor Figure Skating Club coach. He knew that statistically, the odds were against his own daughters continuing to skate once they were in high school, and he was determined to keep them, and his other older students, actively skating. Dr. Porter designed a synchronized 'chorus line' of skaters to perform at ice shows and during half-time at U of M hockey games. The team called themselves the "Hockettes" and eventually received invitations to perform at ice shows, hockey games and exhibitions all over the country.

**Peggy MacDonald, original Hockette 1956-1961; former head coach of Fraser Eclipse synchronized skating teams:** In 1956, skating on a drill, or precision team, as synchro was known back then, was definitely a social thing. In that era, a girl could basically participate in two sports: ballet or ice skating. Since the chances of a girl becoming a competitive singles skater were

slim to none, recreational skating was very popular and participating in the club ice show was THE thing to do.

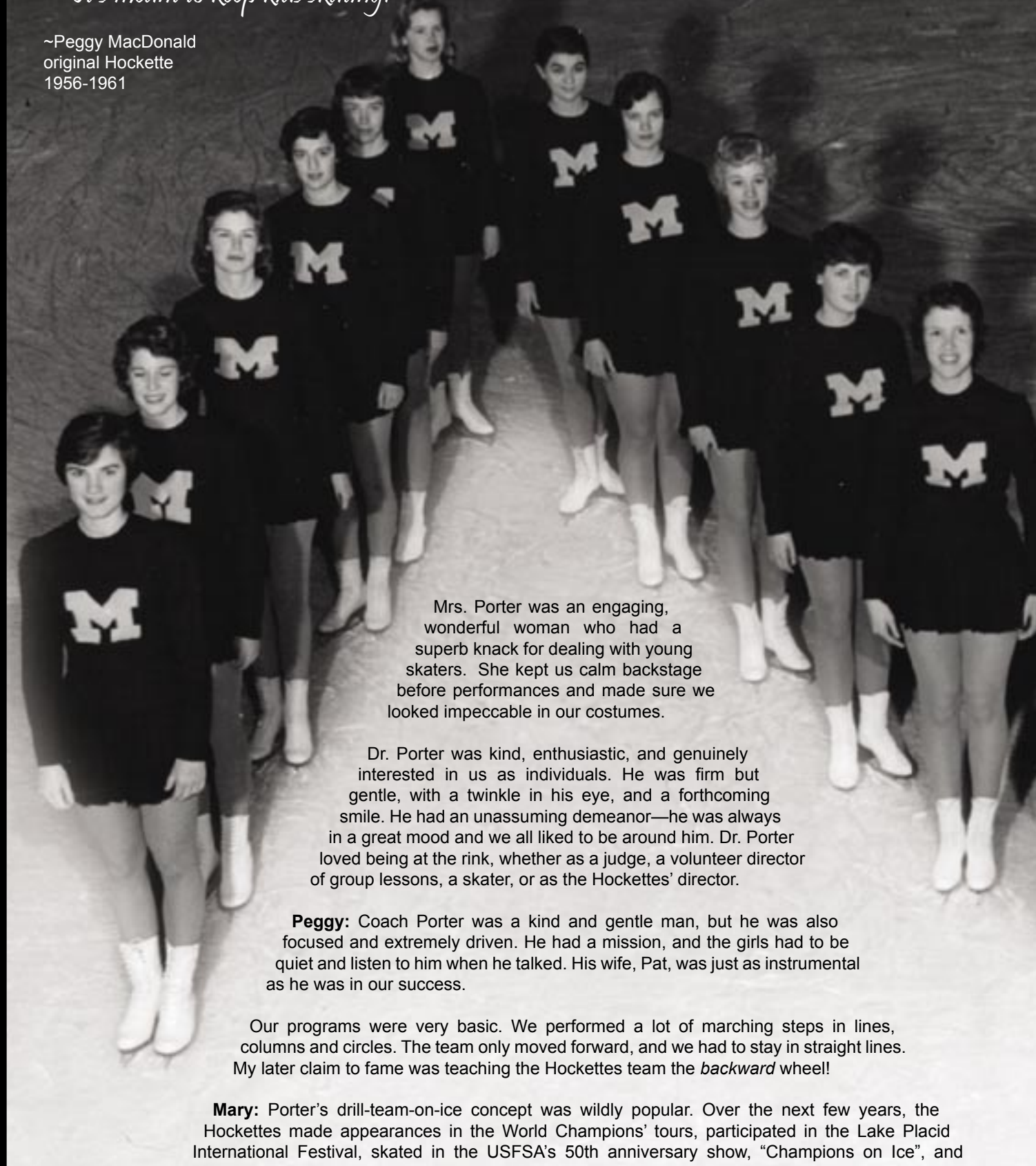
Moves in the field and freestyle levels were not required to be on the team. You had to at least be in high school, but there was a core group of girls who stayed with the team for years so we eventually had a few college students involved, too.

Skating dresses for synchro were unheard of...the mainstay of our team-wear was a navy blue wool dress with a big "M" [for Michigan] on the front. Sometimes we would wear a yoke that snapped around our neck.

**Kippy Pritula, Hockette team-member 1963-1973; Coach at Ann Arbor Figure Skating Club:** Mrs. Porter, along with Kathy Wurster, sewed all of our skating dresses. The Porter's were very special people. They had six children of their own, and the Hockettes simply became an extended family scene. I fondly remember working on choreography regularly in the Porter living room on Saturday nights with Carol Porter and Linda Lawrence. ▶▶▶

"Synchro is meant to be for the masses.  
It's meant to keep kids skating!"

~Peggy MacDonald  
original Hockette  
1956-1961



Mrs. Porter was an engaging, wonderful woman who had a superb knack for dealing with young skaters. She kept us calm backstage before performances and made sure we looked impeccable in our costumes.

Dr. Porter was kind, enthusiastic, and genuinely interested in us as individuals. He was firm but gentle, with a twinkle in his eye, and a forthcoming smile. He had an unassuming demeanor—he was always in a great mood and we all liked to be around him. Dr. Porter loved being at the rink, whether as a judge, a volunteer director of group lessons, a skater, or as the Hockettes' director.

**Peggy:** Coach Porter was a kind and gentle man, but he was also focused and extremely driven. He had a mission, and the girls had to be quiet and listen to him when he talked. His wife, Pat, was just as instrumental as he was in our success.

Our programs were very basic. We performed a lot of marching steps in lines, columns and circles. The team only moved forward, and we had to stay in straight lines. My later claim to fame was teaching the Hockettes team the *backward* wheel!

**Mary:** Porter's drill-team-on-ice concept was wildly popular. Over the next few years, the Hockettes made appearances in the World Champions' tours, participated in the Lake Placid International Festival, skated in the USFSA's 50th anniversary show, "Champions on Ice", and performed on-ice in the center ring of the Shrine Circus at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

*"I remember performing at US Nationals in the Spectrum in Philadelphia to help introduce synchronized skating to the rest of the skating world. That was such a proud moment for Dr. P. We all knew we were at the forefront of an exciting "new" sport, but none of us knew the road ahead would yield what it has for so many people."*

~Kippy Pritula  
former Hockette  
1963-1973

**Kippy:** Yes, I have special memories of the fabulous Lake Placid trip where we skated at the Ice Carnival, and then had the distinct privilege of going down the Olympic bobsled run as an extra special and scary treat. I remember skating at the Shrine Circus too, with the pigeons flying over our heads!

I also remember performing at US Nationals in the Spectrum in Philadelphia to help introduce synchronized skating to the rest of the skating world. That was such a proud moment for Dr. P. We all knew we were at the forefront of an exciting "new" sport, but none of us knew the road ahead would yield what it has for so many people.

**Peggy:** My own memories of being a Hockette absolutely influenced what I chose to do later in life. When I became skating director at Fraser in the mid-seventies, I remembered how much I had enjoyed my own career in team skating. I knew I had enough high school girls to start a team, so I formed the "Fraserettes". This team later evolved into the multi-level Fraser Eclipse Synchronized Skating Teams, which included an internationally competitive junior team until 2005.

**Mary:** Originally, there were only synchro exhibitions. A few competitions were organized in the Midwest in the early sixties, and in 1976, Michigan, Indiana and Ohio initiated the first international competition by inviting Canadian Precision Teams to the Tri-State Competition held in Ann Arbor. ▶▶▶

Photograph: Original Hockettes Team 1956-1957, coached by Dr. Richard Porter

In December, 1996, Dr. Porter got a standing ovation at the first Porter Synchronized Classic competition. It was a very touching thing—he was dumbfounded by the level of skating; he couldn't believe the speed and the skill of the skaters, and he was absolutely amazed by what the sport had become. He attended the second annual Porter competition again in 1997, just before he died at age 84. From hockey game intermissions, to the first sixteen-team international competition at Tri-States, to the spectacular ISU World Synchronized Skating Championships today...the growth of this sport has been phenomenal.

**Peggy:** Synchro *has* had a tremendous growth. I am a little concerned about the new competitiveness, and sincerely hope it won't take away grass-roots opportunities for kids who would benefit from participation. It is a sport that builds so much that is positive for young skaters, and it would be too bad if the cost of training limited the numbers of kids who should be in it. Synchro is meant to be for the masses. It's meant to keep kids skating!

*"Precision teams' great popularity has developed because it gives skaters of all ages and skills the chance to participate... Clubs are finding unexpected values in the team programs -- the ways they unite friends in support of a rewarding activity. Most important of all are the team members, who are so demanding of themselves and others, because of their fierce devotion to the group." ✨*

~ Dr. Richard Porter



Hockettes Junior  
2006-2007

Special thanks to Mary Reilly and Larry Ward for their assistance with this article, and for sharing information and photos from the Ann Arbor Figure Skating Club archives. 2006 Hockettes team photo is by Lori Nemeth/N-Focus Photography.