

Performing a lunge are Georgina Dwyer, Orlaith McCarthy, Aisha Ghorl and Emily Trindle, members of the Cork Figure Skating Association, at Cork On Ice, Mahon Point.

Pictures by Jim Coughlan



Liane Seiler, Sabrina Vassia and Kelle Dwyer, coaches with the Figure Skating Association.



Performing a Y Spiral is Laila Ghori.

Cork kids get their skates on

IT'S no surprise to us Irish that figure skating isn't a primary sport on this isle, but when Italian-born Sabrina Vassia moved to Cork a number of years back, it was a shock.

"No ice rink? I couldn't believe it!" explained the hugely enthusiastic Sabrina — the co-founding member of the Cork Figure Skating Association. "When I was growing up in northern Italy near the mountains I competed recreationally, but I really wanted my children to learn the sport in Cork so I did a bit of research." That research led to the meeting with German-born and former professional skater Liane Seiler and the pair started coaching a small group of youngsters in 2009 along with Canadian Kelle Dwyer, before officially establishing the club in February 2011. "Well we can only train two months of the year when Cork on Ice is on in Mahon, but every other month we train two days a week in Little Island and use inline skates which are very like the blades on a skates, but on wheels. "They allow you to do all the

Italian-born Sabrina Vassia tells **Mary White** why she set up the Cork Figure Skating Club



same moves and jumps as you would if you were on skates," said Sabrina. The interest in the sport has rocketed since the club launched and the it is in fact the only inline figure skating club in Ireland. There are however two or three solely figure skating clubs in Dublin, and a few more in Belfast. With almost 60 members signed up in the first year, Sabrina, Liane and Kelle are all hugely proud of the club's growth. "We are very proud of what we've done," says Sabrina. "The majority of members are children and teenagers, but we have a number of adults enjoying now, and it's all very rewarding. "At Easter this year we actually competed in Dublin and a few of our skaters took gold and silver medals against a lot of skaters who have more access to

training on ice up there, so that was a huge achievement. "We're hoping now that next year we can maybe go to Germany for another competition." The German connection runs strong in Irish figure skating, with Ireland's first skater to compete at an International Skating Union (ISU) competition the German-born Clara Peters. However, we can claim her given that she only spent the first 18 months of her life in Essien given that her parents were working there at the time. Peters began skating in Dublin around the age of seven. After her local rink closed in 2000, she would travel two-and-a-half hours to a Belfast rink, before moving in 2006 to Florida to be coached by Kerry Leitch. In 2008 she moved to Delaware to train with Ronald Ludington and his wife Karen.

She began competing internationally for Ireland beginning in the 2008-2009 season, when Ireland became a provisional member of the ISU, and she was placed 38th at the 2009 European Championships, 52nd at the 2009 World Championships, and 47th at the 2010 World Championships. She improved to 27th at last year's Europeans, but did not advance beyond the preliminary round at the 2011 World Championships. This year she finished 28th at her fourth Europeans and improved significantly upon her past results by coming in 29th at the Worlds. She's the idol now for Cork's rising figure skaters, but Vassia, Liane and Kelle, have instilled in all of them a huge work ethic. It's the only way to succeed in the sport. "It's hard, and it takes a lot of practice. A lot," explains Sabrina. "Dedication and commitment is really the only way you can do well. "It's like a combination of gymnastics and ballet, but on ice, but our members work very hard and it seems to be going well.

"It's a beautiful sport, and all the tricks you can do makes it a beautiful sport to watch too. The spins and the jumps make it very exciting and doing up the programmes for the routines takes a lot of work too by a lot of people, but we're lucky that we have a very dedicated bunch of volunteers." Vassia states 2010 Olympic champion Kim Yu-Na of South Korea and Carolina Kester of Italy — who won gold at this year's World Championships — as two of her favourite skaters — and although she's unlikely to see an Irish Olympic champion in her time, she's enjoying every minute of sharing the sport with others. Training takes place on Sunday mornings in Mahon between 8-10am when the Cork on Ice rink is in place, while on Saturday's between 2-4pm there's inline skating training, and on Friday nights at 6.30pm in Little Island Sports Complex. The skates are expensive enough, however the club purchased a number of them which they imported from Rhode Island in the United States, which newcomers can borrow whilst they get to grips. "It's about €200 for a pair of inline skates then," said



Tresska Abdullah, Emily Trindle, Aisha Ghorl, Orlaith McCarthy, Alanna McCarthy, Catherine Considine, Georgina Dwyer, Chloe Kearney, Telan Abdullah, Laila Ghori and Rachel Cummins.

Sabrina, "but you can get ice skates for less. "But you really do need to have good skates to do it properly. "We try to keep our fees to a minimum as we're trying to get the club to grow but the classes are relatively inexpensive, so there's nothing really stopping people from trying it out at least," she added. ● For more on how to join the Cork club, log onto www.corkfigureskating.com.



Performing a full Spirall are Telan Abdullah, Laila Ghori and Rachel Cummins.

FACTS AND FIGURES ABOUT SKATING IN IRELAND

FIGURE skating and winter sports in general have a relatively short history in Ireland given the lack of snow and ice during the coldest months of the year.

● While ice shows had come to Ireland intermittently, there had never been a permanent ice rink built. That changed in 1980 when the Dublin Ice Rink opened in a converted cinema in Dolphin's Barn

the Republic were left without an ice rink for the first time in 20 years. ● A seasonal ice rink was opened by Dublin City Council in Smithfield Square in 2002 and in subsequent years similar ventures like Cork on Ice sprung up. ● In December 2006, the Dundalk Icedome became the first Olympic-sized ice rink in the Republic. ● In 2008, the Ice Skating Association Ireland (ISAI) was accepted as a member of the International Skating Union (ISU).



It was a mere third the size of an Olympic rink. ● Two years later, a second rink

opened in the capital — the Silver Skate Ice Rink in Phibsborough.

● Irish figure skating began at last to organise in 1989 with the formation of the Figure and Free Ice Skating Club at the Dolphin's Barn rink. Margaret and Ann Marie O'Neill, two sisters from Belfast, were employed as coaches. There were initially 10 members which had expanded to 25 by 1991 when the first annual club competition took place. ● The Dublin Ice Skating Club was formed at the Silver Skate Ice Rink in 1994.

● One week after Irish Nationals in May 2010 however, technical issues with the ice-making equipment resulted in the Dundalk Icedome temporarily closing down. Despite assurances that it would reopen within a matter of weeks, it never did. ● The ISAI believes it is imperative that a solution is found to the lack of permanent ice and, in co-operation with the Irish ice hockey and curling associations, is presently addressing the issue.