



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Staff writer Kathleen Griffin gets a lesson in speed from Elizabeth Dier at Newmarket's Ray Twinney Complex.

Blades very different than traditional skates

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Once on the ice, I learned why.

These things have no ankle support, there's no boot.

Thighs, calves and ankles do all the work, with none of the gliding rests you can take (and learn to count on) wearing regular skates.

By the end of a few laps, my legs and ankles hummed with strain.

Blades on speed skates are up to 18 inches long, with a several of those inches sticking out from the toe.

While that meant I didn't pitch forward, I couldn't help but trip over them as I wound my way cautiously around the course.

But the most challenging difference was the fact the blades don't have sharp edges, they're flat, like goalie skates.

That took some getting used to. I couldn't dig the blade in for a tighter corner; when I tried, I just slid sideways, out of control. Ditto for a sharp, two-footed stop.

I found out the hard way the cool, ice-spray stop was impossible, even dangerous, on speed skates. A snow plow stop, at least for beginners, is more effective.

Cross-overs on turns are also very tough. With the weight of the skates and those lengthy blades, the manoeuvre looks comically

quickly it has to be, otherwise you run the danger of taking a chunk out of your calf with an errant blade.

I didn't wipe out (though it was close a few times) and by the end of the hour I was getting the hang of it. While the skates took some getting used to, it wasn't long before I felt their potential. It doesn't take much to reach invigorating high speeds and more than once I had to slow down before I lost it and smashed head-first into the boards. With a little more practice and control, that speed would be a thrill.

Sticking with the children's group, I glanced enviously at the lightning speed of many of the skaters on the ice, including 16-year-old Elizabeth Dier, ranked 11th in Canada. She's competing at the Canadian and North American championships in the Maritimes next month. Remember the name, her goal is the 2006 Olympics.

While my goals aren't as lofty, I think I'll go back and try again. The skaters were friendly, they made me feel welcome and nobody laughed. It was a great workout and a challenge.

"It's the most underexposed, funnest sport there is," Mr. Ego said.

He could be right.

Been There, Done That is a regular column where staff try to keep up with experts in a wide variety of recreational activities.



Kathleen Griffin

Been There, Done That

Sometimes skating is not just skating

I figured I had this one down pat.

I've been skating since age two. Many of my childhood winters were spent on my family's back yard rink in Montreal or playing shinny in the outdoor rinks around the neighbourhood.

I remember changing from figure skates to boys skates when I was about 10, at my father's insistence. With five girls (no boys) in the family, I guess he thought it was one way he could really get involved. Our ballet, Irish dancing and horseback riding lessons didn't do much to feed his love of hockey, nor his considerable skill at playing the game and teaching it to us.

Now, just a tad older, I thought the switch to speed skates wouldn't be that hard. Over time, especially during Winter Olympic years featuring exciting Canadian success stories, I've often thought speed skating was something I could do reasonably well. Skating is skating, right?

"Drop in anytime," invited both Don Ego of Newmarket and Gary Witney of Markham, respective heads of York Region's sister speed skating clubs.

Members total about 50, including children and seniors, and they skate once or twice a week, Wednesday nights at Newmarket's Ray Twinney Complex and Friday evenings at Markham's Mount Joy arena.

Both clubs have racks of speed skates in all sizes for borrowing. They encourage people to give the sport a try. Coaches give instruction, but the atmosphere is relaxed, the focus on fun and improving individual skills. Some members compete, some skate for exercise, others come for the social aspect.

With friendly smiles, members welcomed me on a recent Wednesday night in Newmarket. Mr. Ego helped me choose skates, which should fit like a glove, he advised.