

# LOCAL & STATE

KNOW YOUR MADISONIAN | MARY MURPHY



JOHN HART PHOTOS, STATE JOURNAL

Speed skater Mary Murphy works out at the Oregon Ice Arena. The national champion skater is trying to recruit and retain more girls to a sport that has a long and storied history in the Madison area.

## She grows her sport while chasing a dream

Speed skater hopes her coaching will help build US talent pool

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Mary Murphy's dream is the Olympics, but she's also hoping her coaching skills here in Madison can help jump-start a U.S. speed skating scene in which few women stick with the sport long enough to qualify for the Olympics, much less make an impact on the international circuit.

Murphy, 32, has only been speed skating since 2018, yet she has won three national titles



**Murphy**

in her age group and in 2021 was named Volunteer Coach of the Year by the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee. As a member of the Madison Speed Skating Club, she's ramping up Girl Force, a program aimed at not only getting more girls into the sport but also creating a culture in which they want to continue skating when they become teenagers, a time when many leave the sport.

Murphy, who came to Madison



Mary Murphy ties her long blades as she prepares for a workout.

to pursue a graduate degree at UW-Madison, also has years of experience as a counselor at Girl Scout and other girls summer camps in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Virginia.

"With all my background in working with the Girl Scouts and working with youth, I wanted to create a program to help recruit, retain and train girls to stay to that level in order to skate and have the ability to qualify for the (U.S. Olympic) team," Murphy said before a skating session at Oregon Ice Arena.

"I'm still kind of developing a program, but I've been inspired

by Girls on the Run. I've been looking at that model and trying to figure out what core values do I want to teach and also how do you build that community among the girls both in a club level and on a national level to keep them in the sport."

It has been 43 years since Shorewood Hills native Beth Heiden won a bronze medal in the 3,000 meters at the Olympic Games in Lake Placid, New York. Only two other U.S. women have won Olympic medals in events of 1,500 meters or more since then, Christine Witty in 1998 and Jennifer Rodriguez in 2002.

Both won bronze in the 1,500. No U.S. woman has won an Olympic medal in the 5,000-meter race since it was established in 1988.

There were just 15 women at last year's Fall World Cup Team Qualifier Short Track. The 2023 U.S. Championships & Junior Championships Short Track drew 14 women. Both are qualifying events for the USA National Team, its members eligible to skate world competitions and the Olympics.

The Madison Speed Skating Club was established in 1936 when it trained on the Vilas Park Lagoon and is one of the oldest clubs in the country. Members range in age from 5 to 75, with short-track practices at ice arenas in Oregon and McFarland and long-track practices at the Pettit National Ice Center in West Allis.

Murphy joined the club in 2018 but came from a hockey background. She grew up in Neenah, where her feet were regularly equipped with in-line roller skates, but allergies forced her to choose an indoor sport. She chose hockey and began playing on club teams when she was in middle school. Neenah High School had no girls team, so she played goalie on the boys team.

Please see **MURPHY**, Page A4

## Murphy

From A3

A graduate of UW-Oshkosh, Murphy came to Madison in 2015 to pursue a master's degree in library and information science and now works at UW-Madison as a research cyberinfrastructure specialist, which involves working with researchers on their computing and data needs.

### How did your hockey experience translate to speed skating and coaching?

I remember when I first started, the boys would do slapshots to my head, so my glove side got really good. As a goalie your whole job was to fall and get back up again. You fall, you block the puck, you reset, you go. And that's how my life runs. If I fall, I get back up and I keep going, and over the years I've actually had to keep myself from getting back up and going too quickly. If you run into an obstacle, you actually have to pause, think about it, re-adjust and then go.

### How does being an active competitor in skating influence your coaching?

I coach with the people on the ice, and I'll skate behind someone and talk to them. And I credit that



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Mary Murphy gears up at the Oregon Ice Arena.

to Dan (Sarge) Greene, who I kind of mentored under when I joined. That's what his coach taught him and he taught me. The fact that I skate and compete, I have a different sense of coaching than from someone who just stands on the sidelines.

**You did roller derby for a couple of years. What**

### did you learn?

To be yourself. It's amazing the people I met at roller derby. I didn't quite like the social aspect. I just don't do that. I never really competed. I just practiced roller derby, and when I'd go to the bouts I actually did photography of it and would join the after party

and I'd actually have a curfew of midnight for myself. I didn't drink alcohol or anything, but I was just part of the group. I got the bruises to show it but no tattoos. But after being a goalie and playing roller derby, my knees could not handle any more impact.

**What was it like to**

### learn to speed skate?

I was so out of shape. I showed up in my baggy basketball shorts from hockey, and this is so much different attire. I could barely do the dry land exercises, but I just kept showing up week after week, and then I'd go on the ice once a week. I knew how to skate but not

correctly, so they would do their thing and then I'd do my own thing. I skated like a hockey player.

### What do you like about coaching?

I always love giving back to a community and being part of community. With so many years with kids, I just love working with them. It takes different types of coaching to work with kids versus adults, so it's kind of a fun challenge. I like having that challenge and having that opportunity to work with others and teach. I'm a librarian of sorts, and so I think there's always this teaching aspect in me.

### Are you still learning?

Yeah. There's a couple of things I love about speed skating. One is the community, the people that you meet, both here in Madison and at other competitions. But also, the sport is as technical as you want it to be. You could just go out and skate on long blades and feel like you're going fast. But you could also think about where is my hip placement, where's my shoulders, where's my chest. And as you continue to think more technically about it, I think the faster (you go) the easier it becomes. No matter what level you want to put into it, you can still enjoy the wind though your face out there.