

# It Beats Freezing to Death

## America gets its first indoor speed-skating rink

**M**ilwaukee is celebrating this New Year's Eve with champagne on ice. What distinguishes its party from every other is the amount of ice—almost 100,000 square feet of it. The occasion is the opening of the Pettit National Ice Center, which boasts America's first indoor 400-meter racing oval, one of just five in the

skating and alpine skiing combined. And it was an American, Eric Heiden, who gave the greatest performance in speed-skating history, capturing five golds as he swept every race in the 1980 Olympics at Lake Placid, N.Y.

But Heiden's incredible performance was quickly obscured by that other "mir-

there are no other serious medal contenders. "We keep waiting for that next class to come along," says Callahan.

The sport's boosters envision the Pettit Center as a \$13.3 million solution, on the "if you build it, they will come" theory. At the very least, they know the U.S. Olympic Trials arrive next December and the World Sprint championships in 1995. The oval, which surrounds two hockey rinks, is modeled on Calgary's Olympic ice track, where six of the 10 current world records have been set. It replaces an antiquated outdoor facility where the only records, given frequent snow, high winds and bitter cold, were for endurance. "People like to skate in the winter, but nobody likes to freeze," says Jansen, a Milwaukee native.

"The new rink will do wonders for our sport two or three Olympics down the road."

**Far from town:** So will two new outdoor facilities planned in Minneapolis and Salt Lake City. (Salt Lake City plans to add a roof if it is awarded the 2002 Winter Olympics.) Currently the only two ovals outside Milwaukee are far from population centers—in Lake Placid and Butte, Mont. "It's strictly a numbers game," says U.S. speed-skating coach Peter Mueller, who won Olympic gold back in 1976. "The more people you get to try the sport the better your chances of finding a Heiden, a Blair or a Jansen."

The new popularity of short-track speed skating should also help increase the pool of racers. As opposed to traditional speed-skating events, in which competitors race the clock, short track features head-to-head sprints. "It's blue-collar, shoot-the-gun, first-across-the-finish-line—a real dogfight," says Jack Mortell, the U.S. short-track coach. "It's got 'American' written all over it." Short track made its Olympic debut in Albertville and was a big hit with the spectators and, far more important, network television. It will return with additional events in Lillehammer.

The new Heidens or Blairs out there somewhere will take years to cultivate. But in the meantime, the mild climate inside the Pettit Center might just preserve today's stars into the 21st century. "I keep thinking I'm dreaming and that I'm really in some other country," says Blair, who last week, along with Jansen, took the honorary first skate. "After all this time, it's really wonderful."

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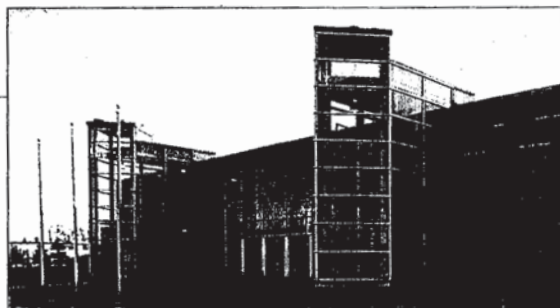


PHOTOS BY TOM LYNN

**If you build it, they will come:** Blair and Jansen in the Pettit National Ice Center

world. Director Sean Callahan predicts the track "will prove to be the savior of our sport in this country."

The sport is speed skating, which, at least in the United States, has always played the poor cousin to the glamour sport of figure skating. After all, the original speed skater, Hans Brinker, inhabited a 19th-century fable and could never compete on television with the real-life fairy tales of Peggy Fleming, Dorothy Hamill and Kristi Yamaguchi. Yet oddly enough, speed skating has been this nation's most successful winter Olympic sport. American speed skaters have won more gold medals than their counterparts in figure



skating on ice." If kids raced off to don skates after Lake Placid, it was far more likely to be hockey skates. While America post-Heiden has still produced some world-class competitors, most notably Dan Jansen and three-time gold-medal winner Bonnie Blair, speed skating here is slipping badly. The 1994 Winter Games in Lillehammer, Norway, will mark the fourth successive Olympics in which Blair, 28, and Jansen, 27, will lead the U.S. team—and