Urban Diary: Skating under the stars, cares of city melt away

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First in an occasional series of on-line essays capturing city scenes.

By James Sullivan, Globe Correspondent

Sure, the sound system squawks with hip hop beats and outdated new wave hits, and when a skater tumbles, a cellphone usually skitters across the ice. Besides the obvious modern touches, however, skating at Frog Pond still feels like a trip back in time to an old New England winter.

Here in the basin of the Boston Common, down the slope from the ridge of Beacon Street, the city sounds are muffled. Couples talk softly. Other than the music, which dissipates into the cold night air, the dominant sound is the rasp of blades on the ice.

On a clear night, the floodlights make the rink glow. A steady stream of red tail lights travel along the near horizon toward the State House. Soft blue Christmas lights line the roofs of

Globe staff photo/essdras M Suarez

On The Beat

Reporter Peter Schworm talked with residents of Patrick Kennedy’s Rhode Island district. Read more

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Features

Inside Scoop

Parents come with young children, some of whom cling to the boards with legs like spaghetti. Former hockey players weave through the crowd, imagining a breakaway; a few would-be figure skaters solemnly practice their form as they make the rounds.

Mostly, though, skating is a means to a social end: spending quality time with a friend, a family member, a partner, or a crush.

On a recent weekday evening, a hundred or more skaters from all corners of the city (and some from far beyond) waited patiently for the Zamboni to chug off the ice. They clustered in pairs and groups on the benches in front of the snack bar.

A female voice wafted over the loudspeaker, offering instructions:

“You’ll be going to the left, to the left, like Beyonce says.”

Solo and in pairs, they filed out onto the glistening ice. One couple soon started giggling as they pulled each other around the rink, fancying themselves in a skating competition. She wore leggings and denim shorts; his glasses had hip white frames.

Another young couple, somewhat less skilled, shuffled around the ice deep in conversation, oblivious to the other skaters -- he in a leather coat and a scally cap, she in a Little Red Riding Hood jacket.

A group of 20 or so students sat by the rental window, joking as they made repeated trips to the counter to request better-fitting skates. They were from a private high school in Houston, they said, in town for the Model United Nations weekend sponsored by Harvard University at the Sheraton Boston.

Each year, participants from the senior class at Awty International School, many of them the sons and daughters of diplomats and oil industry executives, come to Boston for the Model UN conference. It’s tradition, said 18-year-old Marcella Lunn, bundled in an emerald green wool coat, for the group to come to the Frog Pond to skate on their first night in Boston.

“You’re going to skate, no matter how bad you are,” her classmate, Thomas Grandjouan, said with a laugh.

Over at the snack bar, Fenway resident Vito DiGregorio bought a bottled water and sat down on a bench for a breather. In a red hoodie, a BU hockey jersey, and a pair of clear goggles, he’d been skating to break a sweat.

He has been to the rink for a workout several times this winter, said the 50-year-old schoolteacher and part-time attorney. “I got sick of running,” he explained.

As closing time approached, one couple clambered off the rink grinning broadly. He’d just taken a good spill, slapping down hard on the ice.

Still laughing, they returned their skates and walked toward the exit gate. Asked whether they were boyfriend and girlfriend, the young man, Kayel Tran, his dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, said, “No, just friends.”

What brought them out to the Frog Pond? “It’s just something new,” said Kaisha Ramirez, who recently graduated from beauty school. “Something different for a first date, instead of spaghetti. Former hockey players weave through the crowd, imagining a breakaway; a few would-be figure skaters solemnly practice their form as they make the rounds.

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against the chubby bronze figure, and Tran snapped her picture with his cellphone.