

ON TUESDAY NIGHTS, ROLLER SKATING ISN'T KID STUFF

BY STEVE UHLER

It's 6:50 on a typically sticky, sultry summer evening in the parking lot at Playland Skate Center. The last group of kids and students are leaving, their skates slung nonchalantly over their shoulders, while a small but growing crowd of grown-ups is milling just outside the entrance, ready for the weekly "Adults Only" night.

No, not that kind of "Adults Only" skating — though the image does conjure some intriguing possibilities. Every Tuesday from 7 till 10 p.m., the rink is off-limits to the under-18 contingency and becomes the sole province of adults. "I started doing the 'Adults Only' about six years ago," says Playland owner David Dodson. "There are regulars here who haven't missed a night."

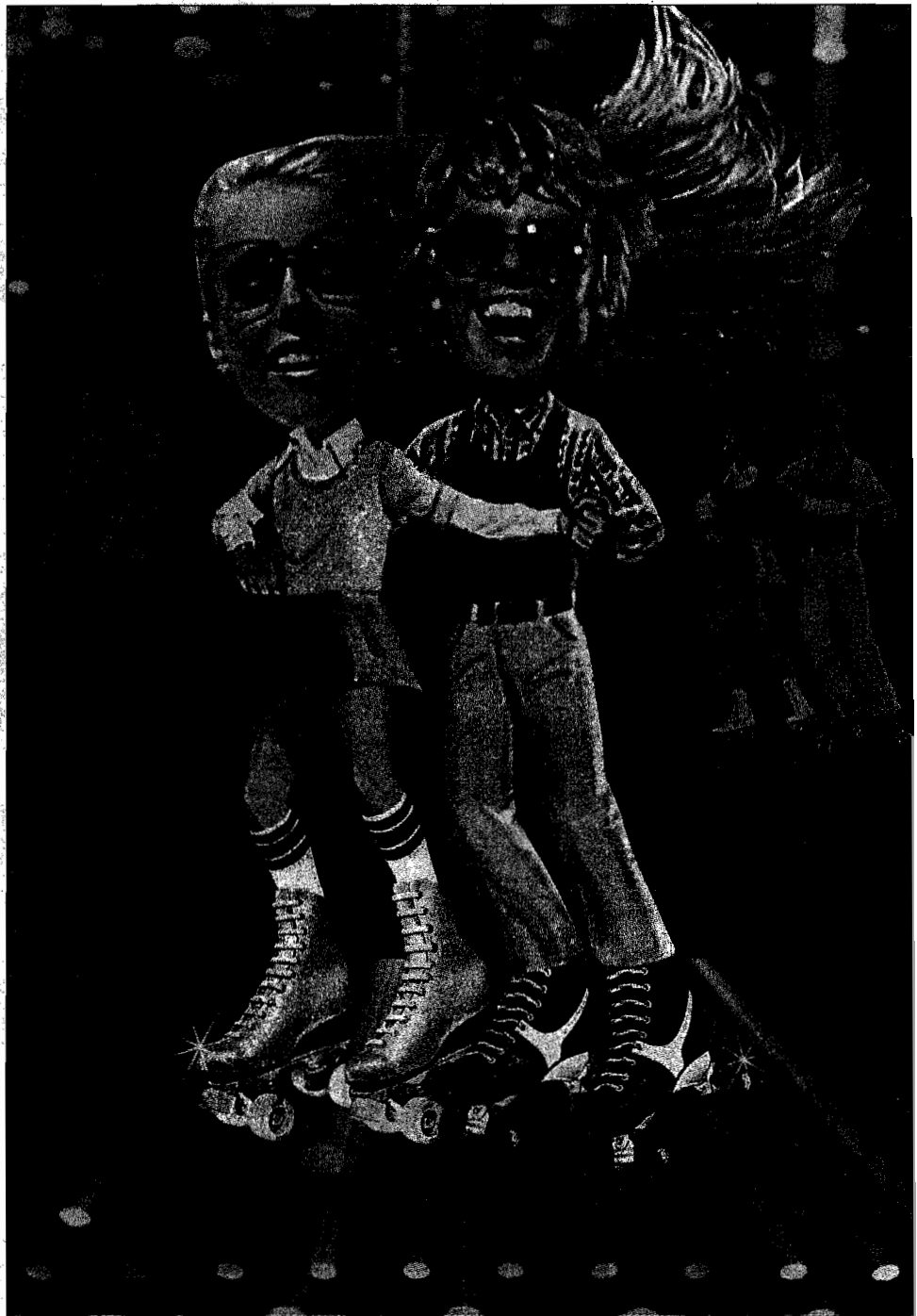
At 6:59, manager Nathan Dieringer takes his place behind the cash register, making sure he has plenty of \$1 bills. The doors open and the crowd saunters in, scattering around the rink's perimeter, doffing their work shoes, boots and sandals. The skate surface (100 feet by 200 feet, one of the largest in Texas) is pristine and gleaming. The air conditioning is cranked up, the huge box fans surrounding the rink are turned on and the sound system starts pumping Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive," followed by the Village People's inevitable "Macho Man." It may be 2002, but you'd never know it from the music inside.

The night is off, and rolling.

The first skater on the floor is a twentysomething young man in cut-off jeans and a workout shirt. For about two minutes, he has the whole rink to himself. He's soon joined by three fetching University of Texas girls. Next, a young couple takes to the surface, skating in graceful tandem. "We've had four or five couples who met here and ended up getting married," says Dodson. "I even met my wife here. We have a couple of little bambinos now, and they're both skaters, too."

At 8:30, a short, heavyset woman with cropped blond hair near the arcade section is cajoling her hesitant date — obviously a skating novice — onto the rink. He stands taller than 6 feet — or he would if he were standing upright, which at the moment he's not. He's hunched over like Quasimodo on wheels, which keep sliding off in random directions. "Relax," she says encouragingly. "Remember — find your center of gravity and just ease into it." He smiles wanly.

A young female speed skater whizzes by on a shiny pair of in-line skates, complete with blinking lights, her long red hair trailing behind her, simultaneous-



Melissa Grimes FOR AMERICAN-STATESMAN

ly impressing and spooking the other skaters. "The in-lines are good for speed skaters, but you have better control with the Quads," says Dodson. "You can't stop on a dime with in-lines. Quads are better for the fancy, artistic moves."

Quads? "Yeah, that's what they started calling the old four-wheel skates after in-line skates caught on. They're really just the old four-wheel, regular roller skates."

Off to the side, Don Doring, impressively fit at 68, laces up. He drives here each week from Killeen and has been coming for years. Until recently, he skated in the Dance and Figure competition. "Then about three years ago I fell down a flight of stairs in Maryland. Messed up my back real bad," he says. "I hope to start back in competition next year. We'll see." He stands and joins the

traffic, disappearing into the widening sea of skaters.

The sound system blares on, heavy on thumping bass and insistent drums, with no mids. Many of the skaters match their moves to the rhythm, spinning, skating backward, shoulders bobbing, hips shaking, arms pumping the air. "That's one thing that I kind of tune out, the music," says one disgruntled skater over the din. "It's all disco stuff. I mean, would it kill them to play Pat Green every once in a while?" His partner winces.

By 9, about 100 skaters are circling the rink, but come 9:55, it's "Last Skate," and the crowd has thinned out.

Outside, there's a nice breeze, and a few skaters are circling the parking lot on their way to their other four-wheel vehicles.

Sorry, "Quads."

Adult Skate Night

When: Tuesdays, 7-10 p.m.

Where: Playland Skate Center, 8822 McCann Drive

Info: 452-1901

How much: \$6 (includes skate rentals, or bring your own)