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How a Ladakh lover from US, coach Natalie Falsgraf giving back to local community through her figure skating expertise

- *Natalie praises Khelo India's move to introduce figure skating in Winter Games*
- *Natalie came to Ladakh for the first time in 2018 out of curiosity and has since been a regular visitor*
- *She had been a senior-level figure skater in the United States, and teaches the local kids in Ladakh pure out of the goodness of her heart*

Leh (Ladakh), Jan. 23: Figure skating coach Natalie Falsgraf is a romantic to all intents and purposes. An American citizen, she first visited Leh-Ladakh in 2018 and instantly fell in love with the mountainous place. She has since taken on multiple coaching roles, teaching kids all over the Union Territory sheer out of the goodness of her heart.

Presently the first leg of Khelo India Winter Games 2026 (KIWG) is underway in Leh and for the first time in the Games' history, figure skating made its debut which has well and truly brought Natalie to the centre of attention -- no exaggeration.

"I have been a figure skater for most of my life, and when I first heard about figure skating in India, and ice skating in India happening in Ladakh, about the natural rinks they have here, people playing hockey here, and building ice rinks, so I was really interested, and I wanted to visit. I wanted to skate on natural ice, and see this community that was built around ice skating in general," Natalie told SAI Media.

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DT17ErTAVdA/?igsh=ZDgzNjluMG9qNGZu>

"And when I came here, I really fell in love with the place. I fell in love with the skating culture, fell in love with how supportive people were, and how interested and just passionate people were about learning how to ice skate. If you go into, you know, the smallest village in Ladakh, you will see frozen, frozen ponds and people trying on ice skates in the winter, and wanting to learn, and so that passion was really inspiring for me and has brought me back to Ladakh time and time again," said Natalie.

Natalie, now a key member of the Ladakh Women Ice Hockey Foundation, has been senior-level figure skater in the United States. She has coached extensively in her own country. Here what sets her apart is that she is not doing her figure skating work in Leh-Ladakh for any money or personal gains. Teaching kids figure skating is kind of her



love language. For the layman, she breaks down the nuances of the two categories of figure skating in Khelo India Winter Games 2026 – novice and advanced.

“It's [figure skating] really artistic throughout, but one thing that really changes from novice to advanced is the level of jumps required. So, when you're watching a novice, you might see more single and double jumps, and you might see spins that are using basic positions. But by the time you get to advanced, you're seeing double triple jumps. If you're watching internationally, you might even see some quadruple jumps, and then you'll also see spins with lots of variations of position, and even harder footwork,” Natalie explained.

Natalie thinks figure skating now under the Khelo India banner is good news for the sport. In the previous five KIWGs, figure skating was not part of the schedule. “This is a great opportunity, both to raise awareness of figure skating throughout the country. And also to help our current figure skaters see a path forward in the sport. We don't see that as many kids are interested in that as, you know, they might be in cricket or football,” she said. Two of her trainees Stanzin Khando and Tenzin Kunzin from Zaskar region finished among the medals in the novice category of the Khelo India Winter Games 2026.

“And so this is a really great opportunity to share this Olympic sport with the country and to get more people who are interested, involved, and for our current skaters to get more development opportunities so that they can continue to train and improve and represent India on an international level,” she said.

When asked how she rates the current talent pool in India from whatever she has seen in the country so far, Natalie singles out Tara Prasad. “She is representing India this week at the Four Continents Championship in Beijing. She has represented India on an international level many times, and she's a great role model for all of the up-and-coming figure skaters,” Natalie said.

The artificial ice surface at the Nawang Dorjay Stobdan Stadium (NDS) – primarily used for ice hockey matches -- is only the second in the country. The other one is in Dehradun. Natalie thinks it's great for ice sports that the infrastructure is being improved all over the country.



“It's really exciting to hear about the indoor rinks that are coming up in India. There's one planned for Delhi, and to see this indoor rink coming up here [Leh]... artificial ice is really important in order to be able to practice year round, like the rest of their competitors. And so that's a great step forward for India in terms of building a figure skating community and a figure skating prominence within Asia and within the world,” she concluded.

For more on KIWG 2026: please click www.Winter.kheloindia.gov.in

ABOUT KHELO INDIA WINTER GAMES

Under the Khelo India Scheme, the Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports (MYAS) organizes National-level competitions, i.e., Khelo India Youth Games, Khelo India University Games, Khelo India Para Games and Khelo India Winter Games to provide a platform for talented athletes to showcase their sporting and competitive skills. Starting in 2020, five editions of Khelo India Winter Games have been successfully conducted. While the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir have hosted all editions of KIWG, UT Ladakh started hosting the ice sports from 2024. This will be the third time UT Ladakh will be hosting the ice Games. Gulmarg in J&K will host the snow events. Apart from tapping talent, Khelo India Winter Games also showcase a region's art, culture, heritage, and promotes tourism through sports.

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