

Realizing Figure Skating's Potential: Proposal for a New Competition Structure and Format

Despite being an Olympic year, participant numbers in figure skating are down; audience ratings are down; revenues (media and sponsorship) are down. In the few steps below we fix these problems, broaden the field of figure skating, and prepare for its future.

Quickly examine some astute comments, illuminating the problems, on the figure skating events at the 2014 Olympic Games: 1) "The Team Event seemed as if it were nothing more than an event created for television to gain viewers and revenue — it didn't do anything to broaden the sport or make it more interesting." 2) "How do you know what the jumps are and how they are judged?" 3) "Why do many of the skaters swing their arms around now? Does it add more points?" 4) "It's so frantic; I can't relate to the skaters the way I used to." 5) "It looks like they threw in some of that new 'flex dance' or 'Cirque du Soleil' on ice". And 6) "I thought the new judging system was created so that there would be no more judging controversies."

To sum up the problems and changes needed (for the sake of simplicity we'll focus on singles events, but this proposal is intended to address all disciplines, singles, pairs, dance): 1) The audience and skaters want something different in figure skating, similar to the way skiing has evolved into a multitude of different events. 2) The audience wants to be educated, to know exactly: which jump (throw, lift, etc.) is which; what makes a better jump and therefore gets a higher grade; what to look for in the execution of a jump; what the spins are (or pair spins, mohawks, twizzles, etc.) and how they are performed and judged. We need individual element events, using the International Judging System (IJS), or similar counting system, to judge them; these media-darling events would highlight the elements, educate the audience, allow more skaters to earn medals for their specialties, and make skating look like a more fun, encouraging sport, more accessible to potential participants. 3) In the short and long programs, skaters are packing their programs with potential point-gathering arm and leg motions and simply adding more rotations to jumps, thus nearing maximum levels of delivering engaging and technically proficient performances of IJS programs. And, the audience, skaters, and coaches have reached the maximum level of tolerance of that program content and delivery under the International Judging System confines (i.e. If all a skater

needs to do to win the Olympics is add one more rotation or element into a program than another skater, then she does not really have to worry much about how she looks while doing the jumps.) Acknowledging that skating is a sport combined with music and some level of performance art like classical ballet, modern dance, and post-modern dance, including everything from jazz to hip-hop and flex, we must adjust the long program event to align with this idea. We are lucky that figure skating encompasses all of these styles but, unless we develop broader competition events that reward all of these styles, eventually new skating events will develop outside of the “figure skating” umbrella. For instance, you would not expect someone to enter a classical ballet competition dancing a jazz or hip-hop piece, but that is what we are currently doing in our figure skating events. We need three categories for our long program — classical, modern, and post-modern to provide new fields for the future of figure skating. 4) In the short and long programs, the audience wants the skaters to engage them intellectually and emotionally, perform meaningfully for them. A skater needs time to develop fully each move, growing and building in emotion and spectacle until the end of the program, reaching the final crescendo, or nuanced moment with the music. This means providing an event allowing for skaters to be on one foot for longer periods if desired. Racking up points with many, little, frequent, two-footed, bent-legged and pin-wheeling arm crescendos throughout a program, witnessed many times in the current, all-encompassing, long program event, leaves the audience unfulfilled and frustrated unless, of course, it can be delivered in a post-modern category. 5) Requiring the anatomy-defying spins, triple and quad jumps for the short and long programs is discouraging for lower level participants and potential participants, as those elements represent a world that not all people think they can enter and succeed. The individual elements events would provide outlets for those who wish to perform those more extreme elements. 6) The current International Judging System, combined with the short and long programs (originally designed for the 6.0 system), results in an athlete frantically performing a check list of what can look like not quite fully developed moves. Using a more understandable and transparent system for the short and long programs provides skaters and the audience with a more fulfilling and rewarding participatory experience, encouraging participation.

How do we do this? Consider — with the advent of the quad and the Biellman, before anyone had even perfected delayed-rotation triples (which

have since faded and should be brought back), thirty years ago legendary coach, Gustave Lussi, said that figure skating was “going into a world which does not exist”, meaning that few will be able to, or want to, perform the now *expected* anatomy-defying spins and quadruple rotation jumps within the short or long program format. We saw it in the men’s event at Sochi — many failed quads marred otherwise stellar programs. As a result this attempt of setting an IJS goal for figure skating within the old short and long program format is shrinking numbers of participants and audience participation, rather than expanding it.

There is no doubt that figure skating is a sport; it takes a tremendous amount of training and athleticism to jump, spin, or even stroke for four minutes. And, despite the point by point IJS, figure skating remains a sport primarily concerned with presentation and the artistic (read emotional) impression a performance leaves upon the individual viewer and the larger audience. Highly-skilled technical execution of elements like jumps is actually the foundation of artistic quality in a program, embodied in how the skater prepares for a jump, lands a jump, and flows into the next move.

In addition, we say a performer has “presence”; so, too, a figure skater must not only seamlessly weave jumps, spins, and technical elements, but must also create an aura of command over an audience, compelling them to “be moved” (to their feet, to tears, to applaud) by a performance.

Considering the above and the results of the 2014 Olympic Games, figure skating must expand as delineated below to thrive.

First, recoup past successes. Figure skating needs to preserve its original events, reconfigure them to match the desires of the participants, media, and audience, then expand into many other medal events. To understand and orchestrate how, look briefly at the current explosion in **skiing**, a sport with similar financial, insurance, physical facility, and media challenges, a sport which has, nonetheless, exploded into a variety and multitude of events while preserving its original Alpine, ski jumping, and cross-country events. Skiing has expanded and broken out into: slalom, giant slalom, downhill, moguls, moguls with jumps, aerial jumping, slope style, freestyle, boarders, half-pipe boarders, half-pipe skiers, Nordic combined, biathlon, team skiing (remember fours in figure skating?) etc., with many different elements performed and judging systems employed. Within those categories mentioned above, there exist numerous medal events.

Figure skating, as well, has exploded into a multitude of variants — acrobatic quad jumps, anatomy-defying spins, gravity-defying delayed-rotation jumps, combination spins on all four edges, fast-forward skating, long, dramatic, full-rink-gliding spirals and spread eagles (not to exclude back flips and hydro-blading), all delivered in balletic, modern, jazzy, or any number of post-modern hip-hop, step, slide, or flex dance styles — the only difference being that the one remaining format, essentially the short and long program, and one judging system, IJS, is trying to encapsulate it all, with the result that figure skating is not growing and thriving as it could be.

The sport of skiing mostly judges apples to apples, aerialists to aerialists, for instance, while figure skating is judging apples to oranges, forcing judges to compare long gliding, graceful, elegant, seamlessly fluid, effortless, perfectionist jumpers and crowd-pleasing spinners like Korean skater, Yuna Kim, to the skipping, flashy, bent-legged, prancing, pumping-it-out, acrobatic jumpers and anatomy-defying spinners like Russian skater, Adelina Sotnikova, with the result of confused audiences repeatedly calling into question the judging formats, frustrated skating populations, and officials scrambling to explain the medal results to an increasingly alienated and discouraged participant base and audience.

This leaves stars like Yuna Kim, who inspired a mass of young girls to start skating, saying “I’m just glad it’s over”, and the many aspiring Yuna Kims ultimately disappointed in and quitting the sport, as well as many young Polinas, and Julia Lipnitskaias, whose bodies might not last another four years of daily pretzeling, perhaps never realizing *their* dreams of medals for their world class performances.

The answer? More scheduled competitions? No. We must schedule new, and more interesting, media-darling events at the existing competitions, the Olympic, international/world level competitions, employing different methods of media coverage already used in skiing.

I propose a new competition structure be instituted immediately on all levels from the highest ranks to the lowest levels of figure skating. For the sake of simplicity and explanation, we will begin at the top, describing a new configuration of the World and Olympic competition events.

For the IJS to work optimally, it must govern events that evaluate the elements in isolation so that the audience as well as the judges can see things up-close like take-offs and landings. The IJS is well-suited to judge a myriad of up-close, single element events. The jump events would be: Axel, Salchow, Toe Loop, Loop, Flip, and Lutz, and Alternative Jumps.

Skaters could perform a regular or a truly delayed-rotation, double, triple, or quad of the individual jump. There would be a general warm-up for 10 skaters in all jump events. Then the skaters would clear the ice except the first five who would be circling in an area on the end, briefly waiting to take their jump. The event will run very quickly. The first skater's name is called; he has 15 seconds to *complete* his jump. As soon as his name is called he has to present himself, take the Axel (double, triple), then get off on the other end (or glide down along the barrier to an alternate exit than the entering skaters).

The jump is replayed from an overhead camera angle in slow motion on all of the monitors (giant screen and judges monitors and for television audiences) starting at and showing the take-off edge, distance travelled, and landing edge. It is then replayed slo-mo by the side camera at the point of take-off showing the air position of the body, and the height of the jump measured at the apex of the jump.

Freeze-frame can be employed for any part of any jump. Meanwhile the judges are giving the marks using the IJS, aided by the computer calculations. The same value would be given for a spectacular, delayed-rotation jump as for that jump with an extra rotation because they are equal in difficulty. (i.e. a spectacular, delayed-rotation double Axel would equal a triple Axel if it travelled the same distance and height, etc.) Judges can evaluate overall presentation, control of edges, speed, and air positions, then the computer can factor in the distance and height for the total mark.

As soon as the first skater leaves the ice and the two 5-10 second replays are done, the second skater takes his Axel as another skater is allowed onto the warm-up area. Each jump event with approximately 30 skaters would take approximately a half-hour to 45 minutes, including warm-ups, performance, reviewing, judging.

There could be a further, Alternative Jumps event or events, which allow a skater to experiment with new jumps, such as back flip, Russian split-flip, etc.

The male skater who wins the most jump events gets an overall jump award. Same for the women's events. Television commentators would be educating the audience as to the very specific technicalities of each jump, citing all of the factors which make an Axel recognizable and different — forward take-off, off the toe or skid, delayed-rotation or immediate rotation, bent free-leg, straight free-leg, crossed-leg rotation position, side-by-side leg rotation position, arms pulled in, arms overhead, etc. Each skater

repeating the jump, along with the slo-mo camera repetitions will educate the audience; they will begin to recognize the different jumps.

The spin competition would work the same way except more skaters could warm up at one time. The spin events would be: Upright, Sit, Camel, Flying Camel, Flying Sit, Layback (or another variation of spin for men), Alternative Spins, and, finally, Combinations. The spin events would be scheduled before the jump events so as to provide a more thorough warm-up for the jumps.

Those skaters interested in, and more adept at, quads and other jumps would win those events while presumably others would shine at spin events. This way, if you have a strong female jumper, she would not be forced to fit another person's definition of graceful; she would be polished, but allowed to shine as an athletic, aggressive jumper rather than trying to make her look graceful by putting a flower in her hair and giving her classical arm movements and facial expressions.

Pairs would have their elements events and dancers would compete in their element events such as twizzles and lifts. We need to make skating more accessible and give the opportunity to more skaters to display their skills; thus, a skater representing the United States, for instance, could just compete in the Salchow and Flip because she won or placed second in the Nationals in Salchow and Flip. The numbers of participants would explode; audiences would be less frustrated and more informed, and the media would be scrambling to televise these popular, easily televised events.

Each competitor representing his or her country, like speed skaters, can choose to wear a variation of an athletic-looking team outfit more suitable for elements events. If necessary, these fitted suits could have a tiny chip or register of some kind on the side of the leg at boot height that would record the number of rotations in a spin or the height of the jump. Let all skaters be rewarded for their extraordinary, individual talents rather than trying to train and package each skater to be like all who came before, yet with one more rotation.

We should reestablish a slightly modified 6.0 (or 10) judging system for the short and long programs, as when figure skating was immensely popular. Within the long program event, at least, there could be three different categories representing all forms of figure skating; for instance, classical, modern, and post-modern so that a classical performance like Yuna Kim's 2014 presentation would not be compared against a modern performance like Adelina Sotnikova's 2014 presentation. The classical

category would allow for long-held spirals, spread eagles, single edge and one position blur spins, for instance. Let those skaters refine their triple (or double) jumps into huge, flying, delayed-rotation triples, and blur spins, all within a musically lyrical long program. In the classical category of the long program event, allow no quads, limit combination jumps; allow no anatomy-defying, contortionist, or overly combined spins within those classical category programs. Then, the modern and post-modern categories would be the place for the extreme jumps like quads and extremely contortionist, combination and edge-changing spins. The goal throughout is to skate a seamless, perfect performance.

If it turns out that the short program is discontinued then we could introduce another, completely different event which emphasizes athleticism and artistry with **whatever** the skater wants to include under the “new” 6.0 system. This event would, essentially, replace the exhibition but would also have three event categories, classical, modern, and post-modern. (Not theatre — no props or overly elaborate costumes.) Again, the goal is to skate a seamless, perfect performance.

Save time to spend on these new medal events by spending much less time showing all the skaters standing with their coaches before they skate and all taking their bows after their programs are finished; spend much less time with the camera held on the skater and coaches in “kiss and cry” endlessly waiting for the marks and watching them all blow kisses to people at home. And, if necessary, save time by eliminating the team competition which is a rebroadcast of the same skaters skating the same programs.

Also, consider this: if people will watch curling, and putting in golf, then they will watch a limited figures event if presented properly. Not everyone who watches skating or the Olympics is young and on fast-forward. We should reinstate figures to provide outlets for the many talented figure skaters, those young athletes who, like Trixie Shuba, Priscilla Hill, Diane Goldstein, teens and college athletes new to the sport, still want to compete in figures, those highly skilled, technical, figure skating participants who may never master a double Axel or Biellman. Feature close ups of the feet turning and tracing loops; the TV commentators can draw lines on the ice, the way they do in football, to show the line-ups of the turns and circles they are skating so that if the skater’s line-up is off, the audience can see while the figure is being skated.

There would be an overall medal for that skater who wins the most events or accrues the most medals or the most points.

We have excellently trained, talented skaters who have so much creativity and experience to offer. Our systems and events need to promote expansion of their creative work, allow for the audience to engage with the skaters, and provide the athleticism for which the media and sponsors are hungering.