



THE OLYMPIC SPIRIT

Famous ice dance duo trains in Placid

By ANDY FLYNN
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To say the Protopopovs are unique is an understatement.

At 65 and 62 years of age, respectively, Oleg and Ludmila Protopopov continue to train, coach, and perform with no retirement plans, and they ice dance with the agility of skaters half their age.

Lake Placid residents and visitors watched the Protopopovs skate in the Aug. 23 "Miracles of Gold" ice show at the Olympic Center. They may also catch a glimpse of the two-time Olympic gold medalists as they train in Lake Placid this fall.

Every October, the Protopopovs skate in a cancer research benefit show in Boston. In previous years, they trained in Boston for the show, but this year, they've decided to stay in Lake Placid until the Oct. 24-26 event.

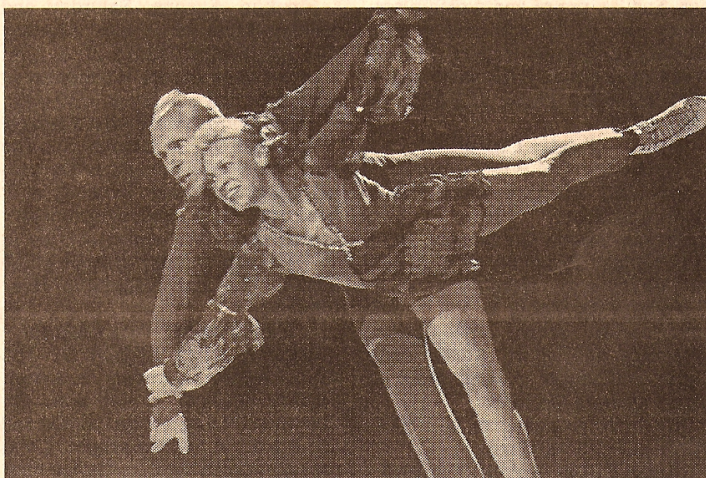
"When we skated there it was too overloaded," Oleg said, adding that the crowd on the Boston ice rink ranged from 28 to 38 people. That made it difficult to skate and impossible to practice lifting his wife in the air during dance routines.

"I have to be sure 100 percent that nobody is behind me," Oleg said.

Lake Placid, on the other hand, has excellent facilities and plenty of room to maneuver. "It gives you the opportunity for the great creative work," Oleg said.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Protopopovs traveled throughout the United States skating in the Ice Capades. "And these are the best facilities in America," Ludmila said of the Lake Placid arena.

The Protopopovs' decision to remain in Lake Placid was prompted by their never-ending quest for



The Protopopovs practicing the sport they love.

excellence. "We decided it was never too late to learn something," Oleg said. They will be consulting with Cecily Morrow, a former student of legendary skating coach Gustave Lussi, and Karen Courtland Kelly, director of the Lake Placid Summer Ice program. Kelly skated with the Protopopovs a few years ago in the Boston benefit show. They first met while skating in Delaware.

"We were very surprised to see her here, very glad," Oleg said.

In 1979, the Protopopovs defected to Switzerland from the former Soviet Union, and they became Swiss citizens two years ago.

Ironically, when the Protopopovs first began skating as a pair in 1954, they were informed by Soviet Union skating officials that they were too old. He was 23 years old and she was 20, older than most skaters start and past their prime, so they were told. In order to become world

champions, they would have to learn skating on their own.

The couple met accidentally at a skating seminar in Moscow, where Ludmila was living at the time. Oleg was still in the Russian Navy, based in Leningrad, and was helping out at the convention. With no experience, they were thrown into a small skating rink to perform ice dancing moves. Although they needed to be told how to make every move, they were apparently graceful enough for someone to suggest that they start pair skating.

"Something here," Oleg said, pointing to his head, "something made it click." And the decision was made.

The Navy refused to transfer Oleg to Moscow, and so Ludmila moved to Leningrad, where they learned to ice dance on their own on outside rinks. Many times, the temperature dipped to 25 degrees below zero (centigrade). They had to clear

the snow off the ice before skating, easily spending one and a half hours shoveling before an ice dance workout. And there was no lifting Ludmila with gloves. It was all done bare handed.

"So we were tempered before outside," Oleg said.

Oleg and Ludmila married each other in December 1957, and they keep on skating because it's their passion.

"In our time, it was more romantic. Not for money or fame. We skated for the soul," Oleg said, stressing their love for interpreting classical music. "This power moves us forward more than any technical things. We live in the world of music, the world of dance on ice."

The Protopopovs spread their skating magic throughout Europe before hitting the world circuit. Representing their native Soviet Union, they won pair skating gold medals in the 1964 Olympic Winter Games in Innsbruck, Austria and the 1968 Olympic Winter Games in Grenoble, France. They were also four-time world champions, from 1965 to 1968.

Skating is a priority for the Protopopovs, and they have several ways of staying young. They both have sports medicine degrees and use this knowledge to tone their bodies and keep themselves healthy.

"We are doctors of medicine experimenting on our own bodies," Oleg said. "We are gathering information and trying to understand our nature."

In addition to alternative forms of therapy pioneered by a former Russian weightlifter, the Protopopovs remain energetic by eating right, exercising, and skating around young people.