

Achieving Ice Command: Isolation and Integration

by Cecily A. Morrow

"Oh, oh...too bad. A bit of a problem there on the landing..." The skater, exposed to TV viewing millions, scrambles up, hoping to salvage what's left of a marred performance. As you're no doubt aware, the "problem" began during takeoff or, more likely, in the approach to the jump, even...in lack of proper body alignment and control in crossovers at the other end of the ice surface.

Another scene: an entry-level skater attempting consecutive forward outside and inside edges. The coach demonstrates and explains. The student pushes off, with

high hopes, and then everything whirls around-shoulders, hips, arms-and there's that look of bewilderment. What happened?

The experienced instructor knows that, with time, commitment and lots of lessons, these difficulties will gradually be somewhat resolved. Well informed coaches will prescribe ballet training. An ingrained, unconscious "feel" throughout the student's body will make possible further achievements. But without central, unifying ideas concerning how to command one's body while gliding on that slim knife edge, unfortunate occurrences will haunt the aspiring skater.

Isolation of certain body parts with simultaneous integration of others is an essential concept implicit in the teaching methods of several great coaches with whom I've been privileged to work. Three examples follow, all associated with attaining maximum control and unimpeded flow during turns.

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1) Carlo Fassi; the bracket. My initial feeling of great personal loss at hearing of his death was followed by a sense of profound regret that his technical knowledge is now only indirectly accessible to us. He and I had tentative plans for an instructional video illustrating his theory of turns and "short" pushes. Despite the official purge of school figures, the value of training in these fundamentals remains. Carlo's recommendations for clean, deep-cusped turns are especially applicable to the demands of today's fast-paced, higher level freestyle performances.

He taught us to keep the torso still and square, while our legs did the work ("standa straighta..." with nostalgic sadness I hear the Italian-flavored English in his admonitions). Entering turns, we were to avoid twisting the body; this was a big help in executing paragraph double threes, wherein speed must be maintained and actually augmented during the frequently occurring turns and edge changes, and any subcurves, loss of appropriate edge, would fatally retard the blade's progress.

Similarly, in skating brackets, the skaters torso is to be held parallel to the line of travel during the turn, arms extended sideways, unified with back and shoulders. With the body from the hips up thus held still, suspended, the skating leg is liberated to lift along the two edges counter to the circle and so effect the quick turning action.

Specifically, to do a left forward outside bracket, the skater brings the skating side (i.e. the firmly unified left hip and shoulder) forward along the edge curve until the torso is nearly parallel with that arc, facing toward the outside of the circle. The free leg, bent, is behind, free foot overtracing, "drawing" the figure. "Standa in..." Carlo thereby urged us to maintain sufficient, well-supported lean into the circle to hold an edge (crucial in instances such as this, which dispose to a subtle collapse outward against the edge, with resultant loss of flow and balance). The turn, to left back inside, proceeds

smoothly, cusp outside the circle, so that approach and exit edges form part of the continuing arc. At the instant of rotation, the free foot moves back along the entry tracing, assisting in balance over the rapidly advancing skating blade, then moves quickly (proximal to skating foot) to its position in front, directly over the tracing. Throughout the maneuver, the skater's torso remains essentially in the same position with regard to the ice surface, sailing along nicely controlled, while the legs function independently.

I recall Carlo's students of my era, many still in glitzy TV spotlight today, entertaining themselves at the end of patch sessions, Zamboni warming up, by attempting the biggest, fastest, deepest turns (i.e. counters, rockers, etc.). We freestyled the standard figures, invented, showed off, having fun with our knowledge and control.

Under pressure of the current figure-downsized trend, we who instruct may lose sight of the importance of strong edges, quick, light turns, deft edge-changes, all skills dependent upon firm unification of the skating torso and consequent isolation of other body motions. But, for inspiration, we can rewind and "slo-mo" video footage of "great ones" in exciting footwork sequences, noting how they command the ice and our attention, by using the power of the body center to remain controlled while flying along exuberantly, as legs and arms (and head) gyrate in entertaining fashion.

Judges won't be inspecting on-ice for the single tracing in and out, the little "x" of the cleanly executed bracket, the tiny hole between edges of threes, but educated eyes will notice any braking action caused by unintended flats or skids and skaters will feel insecure when balance over the blade isn't "right".

2) Gustave Lussi; the flip. Mr. Lussi, renowned figure skating innovator, inventor of many moves basic to current freestyle presentations, emphasized one essential principle in training his students for jumping. "Delay," he called it; he

advised skaters to jump up and out, then turn rapidly in the air at the apex of the jump trajectory. His instruction, therefore, most often dealt with means to prevent pre-rotation, that is any turning before the jump lift-off.

"I train the spins for the jumps." The back scratch spin position in the air, well aligned over the intended landing foot, was the basis for dependable technique in all multi-rotational jumps. Any turning of the body, especially torso twisting, especially while the skater is still on the ground, can cause rotation around the free side during a jump landing, with consequent loss of balance. To assure that the skater becomes accustomed to being truly airborne before turning, Mr. Lussi recommended that all single jumps (through the Lutz) be practiced with arms outstretched, held firmly out to the sides (slightly forward of body center), not brought in during the jump.

Most importantly, he urged students to jump "against rotation." The skater was, for example, to take off for the Axel in a direction toward the outside of the arc of the entry edge (e.g. in a counterclockwise Axel, the body lifts off strongly to the right). He devised methods to achieve aerial suspension before rotation in all the jumps.

For the flip, the emphasis is upon an entry pattern along a straight line, not curled in the rotational direction. Paul Wylie's triple flip, at its best, exemplifies this principle; his coaches, Mary and Evy Scotvold both studied with Mr. Lussi.

From back crossovers (forming an inverted "J" pattern when rotation is counterclockwise), the step to forward is a lightning-quick choctaw, RBI to LFO, torso still unified. Then, the preparatory turn to backwards (Mr. Lussi called it a rocker) requires the skater to use just the skating leg and foot for the well lifted turn. To avoid any lateral collapse or twisting of the body center, or looseness in the free hip such as to cause "toe bashing" into the ice, the torso and free leg are integrated, acting as a single unit, as the legs scissor together and the skater rises lightly over the turn. The straight free leg passes rapidly to a position behind, directly along the line of travel, as the skating leg bends and makes possible the quick, light take-off.

This technique, mechanically unifying the skater's torso and free leg during the approach, produces a dramatically high-

flying jump, and it is possible by pulling through strongly at the moment of toepick impact, to delay rotation significantly and thereby intensify the effect and the fun. John Misha Petkevich's book, published by Sports Illustrated, shows it (he studied with Mr. Lussi).

3) Natalia Dubova; the rocker. Natalia, trainer of ice dancers consistently prominent on the international skating scene, emphasizes concepts of control quite similar to the examples above. That is, an integration of certain parts of skaters' bodies which permits independent motion of other parts, so as to effect smooth, undisturbed performances. Her skaters appear to float, bodies very still, suspended mysteriously above the ice surface, progressing very rapidly, while their legs execute strong, deep edges and complex turn mechanisms.

Among her challenging drills for students, to be skated on large, rink-filling lobes, are those including rockers. She advocates practice in both directions; here, we focus on the right forward outside rocker.

In the exercise, three strongly progressing forward pushes lead into the turn (RFO, LFI, RFO). Hips and shoulders are to advance squarely forward along the line of travel. Abdomen and spine must draw together during these introductory steps to establish torso integrity so that the skater is balanced precisely over the muscularly supporting skating leg. "...Bring very strong stomach and back together to your free leg..." she instructed.

On the right forward outside, the skater scissors the free leg to the skating side, using the inner thigh muscles, lifts over the turn, sits immediately in the knee and ankle, free leg extending low over the ice (either forward or backward), drawing to the line of travel. A lifted turn, as opposed to a merely rotated turn, succeeds only if the torso controls the free leg. This liberates the skating leg momentarily; it can thus turn independently of the rest of the body which is thereby rendered almost weightless. In this way, flow is maintained. "...Try to turn just with your foot...shoulders very square and parallel with your hips..."

For maximum speed and control, the turn is done in one breath, one continuous movement, rising and sitting. The skating blade actually accelerates, just as we experienced by properly executing turns and edge changes in "compulsory"

figures.

But what have these examples to do with our everyday work, much of which concerns "the base of the pyramid," the larger skating population, those struggling to achieve balance in the most elementary moves? Introducing basic concepts, such as moving one body part while holding another still, right away, as soon as the skater, of any age, is moving across the ice, will render all subsequent skating experiences easier.

How to help? My mother has a quirky solution. She asks, "Can you do this?" showing the student her four fingers held straight together, then moved apart, sideways one at a time, in one direction then the other. "Oh, sure," is usually the answer; then, "Uh, oh...er...that's hard..." She then says, "That's your skating homework."

In whatever way we can devise, early development of body awareness and specific control is especially important in our service to the many beginners who enter the rink with a love of our sport and money in their pockets.

The example: in forward stroking, a major teaching challenge is the tendency of skaters' hips to rotate, move backward generally, while pushing. This difficulty can be overcome by emphasizing isolation of the legs from the torso during the pushing action. The push is effected downward, into the ice, not backward, not sideways, by the pushing leg acting independently of the rest of the body.

For us, this may seem simple, but, amazingly, individuals of superior intelligence, highly skilled in other endeavors ("smart" children, adult Ph.D.'s), have a real problem with such control and are often oblivious to their bodies' errant behavior. There are diverse aspects of human intelligence, not just IQ, musical, spatial, kinesthetic. Possibly our greatest service to the skating public as coaches should consist of developing our clients' otherwise neglected mental abilities. Skating gives us a unique opportunity to enlarge the minds of those who join us, so they can "think with the whole body", right out to each fingertip and toe.

By emphasizing essential concepts of body motion, we can do that daily, cumulatively, to facilitate enjoyment of our lifetime sport.■