

Coaches Training

Susan Davies, Committee Chair

Committee Members:

Don Jackson
Debi Leeming
Cecily A. Morrow

Sally-Anne Reid
Jim Sladky

Carri Reid
Paula Wagener

Bob Ogilvie
Gale Tanger



BEST SKATERS COMMAND SELVES, ICE, AUDIENCE

by
Cecily
A.
Morrow

"Always these questions," chuckled Paul Wylie during an on-ice lesson, considering another of Gustave Lussi's persistent questions.

One of Mr. Lussi's teaching tools was questions. During a lesson, he'd query students, often in the form of a puzzle, to get

Continued on page 16

them to think things through for themselves. He was always trying to push people forward.

When I was working with Mr. Lussi, each day he'd ask the same question, "Where do we go from here?" meaning "How can we do it better?"

During the period that I taught, quit teaching and returned to college, I was asking myself the same question. Observing televised skating with my colleagues, the ideas that emerged had little to do with number of rotations in the air or new rules concerning testing and competition. What I was looking for was what constitutes great skating at any level, in any format—competition shows, practice—and in any discipline—dance, freestyle, pairs. What is it, exactly, that the great ones have and how can we encourage more of that quality in our skating?

I was fortunate enough to have been on the ice with many of those great ones, caught up in the whirlwind as we zoomed past each other like cars on high-speed freeways—Robin Cousins, Dorothy Hamill, John Curry, John Misha Petkevich and those Russian dancers. I tried to delineate the quality that made them stand out—it wasn't just landing jumps or executing incredible footwork. I had the luck to also associate with great coaches such as Joan and Bob Ogilvie, Carlo Fassi, Mary Scotvold, Rob McBrien, Natalia Dubova, to mention a few. I considered what special qualities distinguished their work.

One day, my mother and I were watching a TV presentation with two of our favorite skaters, Brian Boltano and Paul Wylie. Discussing what characterized their performances, we came up with "ice command." We analyzed what it is about such performers that moves the sport forward. In my attempt to pin it down, three aspects of this quality have taken form.

1) The best skaters completely command their whole bodies, they command their skates, they command the ice surface beneath them. Mr. Lussi would say, "Don't ask for them...**command** your jumps!"

2) Outstanding skaters command the entire space within which they move. The ice area appears to be filled by their presence at any moment. My mother, an artist, suggests the similarity to a fine Chinese or Japanese painting in which

one tree, portrayed off in a corner of the rectangular surface, fills, mysteriously, the whole composition though there may be nothing other than a vague mistiness covering the rest of the surface.

3) The great performers command the audience's attention (even in practice). They invite the observer to participate in their experience, inspiring and being inspired by audience appreciation. Again, these skaters seem to fill the environment in which they move, right into and beyond the stands.

How do they do this? Sensational moves? A winning smile? Might help. Costume? Lower cut? Higher cut? More sparkles? Please. Music? Get the audience to clap? Better connecting moves?

The best skating, of course, does not consist of skate, skate, skate, then trick. The institution of the USFSA Moves in the Field for free skaters is to counteract such tendencies and provides a great intellectual and physical connection between school figure exercises and freestyle. There's more to effective skating than

'What I was looking for was what constitutes great skating at any level, in any format...'

skillful jumping or good overall use of the ice.

There are physical things skaters can do to gain command of themselves, the ice surface and the audience:

1) **The center of the body controls** - One's power generates from the torso, unifying the skater's muscles. Classical ballet training is extremely helpful—strengthening without bulking up the muscles. Many people may be unaware that it is the deepest interior muscles of the torso (lower, in particular) that should initiate every move, muscles that can't be reached through "grunt work," but must be studiously trained for coordination.

Movement in the thighs, upper arms and head cannot work to its strongest capacity—necessary for multi-revolution jumps; centered spins; fast, powerful moves; footwork; lifts or dance steps—unless the movement is supported and connected to the central, interior muscle mass. These muscles are buried underneath and not readily accessible to con-

scious control. Time and intelligent training are necessary to liberate the central body power (particularly for women because, in general, their hip structures are wider than a man's and more difficult to control).

2) **Skate like the men** - The best of today's male skaters use their torsos for control. None of their motions are unrelated to the rest of the body; arm, heads, free leg, express the energy emanating from the center of the body. There are no superfluous arm gestures.

3) **Seamless, fluid transitions** - These form the basis of an effective presentation. There is no disconnected footwork. The jump in the best freestyle programs is just part of an edge move. The freestyle ideal: edge, edge, oh! (jump), edge, edge, extremely tight edge! (spin).

4) **The supple, flexing ankle** - The legs need to be pliable, not stagnant. The audience, ideally, sees (and feels) a wave-like motion associated with the skater's ankle position—meaning not just a down-up-down, but a continuously adjusting, flexing, singing movement. Ankle flexion is not independent, but part of the entire presentation and experience. The result has a sense of gradation with nothing abrupt or too obvious.

I think we should not fail to include skaters at lower levels. The same principles apply and not just as preparation for a future career. Many skaters do not even aspire to reach top competitive or test levels—finances, other interests, physical traits and inherent lack of competitive urge limit their participation. They can, however, become fine skaters at their level; they can possess that ephemeral but distinctly physical quality I've dubbed ice command.

I present these ideas with reverence for those who have gone before, interest in what's happening now and the question. "Where do we go from here?"

Cecily A. Morrow is a former coach and is currently producing instructional videos volume I and II of Systematic Figure Skating the Spin and Jump Technique of Gustave Lussi are now on the market. Videos for beginner through advanced skaters and videos presenting methods of other renowned coaches will be available soon.

.....