



Stressed, Stretched and Skating on Thin Ice

Some Say Female Figure Skating Is More Stressful Than Any Other Sport

By SHEILA MARIKAR

March 24, 2007 — - In Japan on Saturday, millions watched Kimmie Meissner spin, twirl and jump through the World Figure Skating Championships, oohing, ahing and gasping on cue.

But no one saw the weight of the world resting on the 17-year-old's shoulders.

While Meissner is all smiles in the spotlight, she's part of a sport that is fraught with stress, especially for women. Female figure skaters can flit across the ice as if weightless, but some say they face more pressures than any other class of athlete.

Christine Brennan, a USA Today sports columnist who has covered professional figure skating for years and wrote "Inside Edge," a 1997 book about the hidden side of skating, believes that the nature of the sport sets young women up for stress. Pounding the ice day after day, for hours at a time, takes a toll on athletes' petite frames.

"Take Tara Lipinski. We love the visual of Tara winning the Olympic gold medal in 1998, she was 15, leaping for joy," Brennan said. "We don't want to know that before she turned 20 she had the hip surgery of a 75-year-old woman and can no longer skate."

Striving to hang onto lithe pre-pubescent bodies is also no small feat.

"Puberty tends to be the enemy in women's figure skating," Brennan said. "When the hips and thighs come, the triple jumps go."

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Caroline Silby once dreamt of Olympic glory. But the pressure of the sport, combined with her failure to make the Olympic team in 1984, forced her to curb her career.

"Adjusting to doing jumps when you have hips and breasts is a whole different kind of adjustment than male athletes have. Not to mention the whole hormonal changes that go along with that," she said. "It was like, enough already. And many athletes, as certainly I did, get to a point where you just don't want to do it anymore."

Silby went on to become a sports psychologist, a specialist essential for figure skaters who want to excel on the ice while staying sane. She's had parents ask her to work with athletes as young as seven-years-old.

"They focus on a lot of things, what their parents are thinking, what their coaches are thinking, who they're going to compete against, what their score is going to be -- all these external things that aren't under their control," she said about her figure skating clients, some of whom have made it to the Olympics. "You have to

say, we can't make those things disappear but there are certain qualities of yourself that you can control."

Silby pointed out that teenage figure skaters are tasked with the ability to handle slip ups and setbacks with smiles and spirit -- qualities most adults can't master.

"These kids on a pretty regular basis have to learn how to manage their frustration," she said. "They have to become very resilient people at very young ages."

Shelling Out for Sequins and Skates

There's also the financial burden of figure skating. Coaches, rink time and skimpy sequined dresses don't come cheap. Many families relocate or take up two residences to ensure their budding Olympian gets the best training.

"If you're growing up in an Iowa cornfield, you can play basketball. You can play for your high school," Brennan said. "But figure skating, the odds are your family's going to be moving."

For those trying to go pro, costs can add up to \$75,000 a year. Families of some of the world's most famous skaters struggled before their daughters rose through the ranks.

"The expense was so great that one year Danny Kwan, Michelle Kwan's father, said he couldn't get a Christmas tree for the family," Brennan said. "The Yamaguchis took out mortgages on their home."

Figure skating isn't the only sport running up a tab that makes college tuition look like chump change. Many solo sports come with a heaping of stress and a hefty price tag. On the tennis circuit, youngsters decamp to Florida and shell out thousands to make their backhand unbeatable.

"Individual sports usually have more pressure than team sports because you're out there all alone, there's no place to hide," said Dan Gould, sports psychologist and the director of the University of Illinois' Institute for the Study of Youth Sports.

But Brennan said the overwhelming sense of urgency to make it big and make it fast puts figure skating on another level.

"Tara Lipinski was a superstar at 15. Sara Hughes was on the cover of Sports Illustrated at 16. Your average athlete doesn't make it that fast," she said. "The pressure is no where near as intense [with other sports] because it's not that minute. The Olympics is once every four years. Tennis, you get a tournament every week."

Tune Out the Noise or Fall Victim to It

And sometimes, the stress makes the skater come crashing down.

No one can forget Tonya Harding's straight-out-of-a-soap-opera attack on Nancy Kerrigan, in which she allegedly conspired to hire a hit man to strike her rival's knee before the 1994 U.S. Figure Skating Championships. After scoring the gold medal in the '94 Olympics, Oksana Baiul hit the bottle and won herself a DUI arrest.

But Brennan said the skating world harbors few tabloid queens. What runs rampant is the reality of not winning a title that has been a lifetime in the making, and it can haunt young women on the ice.

Though Meissner has a slew of national and international wins under her belt, because she was too young in

2006 and will likely be too old in 2010, she'll probably never cinch the world cup of figure skating -- an Olympic gold medal.

"Will Kimmie Meissner make it in 2010? The odds are probably not," Brennan said. "Most get one chance, and this is a sport for young girls."

Silby said Meissner's best chance of rising to the top in any competition is to tune out the chatter of critics and focus on what she knows best -- skating.

"Once you've reached the top level of your sport, there's nothing harder to do than to have to repeat. There are just all these people talking," she said. "You have to become very skilled at reacting to what you've been taught and what you instinctually know ... and not to respond to the noise, because the better and better you get, the more noise there is."

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