

Tension proves too much for some

Sports psychologist Caroline Silby helps youngsters calm jittery nerves

By CAROLYN THORNTON

Journal-Bulletin Sports Writer

The Providence Journal-Bulletin

The competitors rush to the bulletin board where the final standings will soon be posted. The tension is high as they wait to learn if their hours and hours of practice have paid off. Minutes later, an official tacks a paper to the wall.

Cries of joy and sorrow rise from the huddle. Those four who finish at the top hug each other, elated over their success.

But there are many less fortunate skaters who will not be receiving a medal. They cling to their parents and their coaches, sobbing.

Emotionally-charged moments are not an uncommon sight in the sport of figure skating.

It is also not uncommon for a skater to seek a sports psychologist to help them deal with the pressure as they glide along that fine line between success and failure.

Is figure skating different from other sports? Is a skater forced to endure more pressure than other athletes? And does that pressure become unhealthy?

Yes and no, sports psychologist Caroline Silby says to all of those questions.

With a team sport, "there's a general feeling that everybody has to come together to do well," says Silby, a former international skating competitor herself. "In skating, you're performing all alone. Expectations get bigger and bigger, and the fear of failure grows."

Add to that the age at which a skater approaches his or her potential and you've got a double whammy.

"In this sport, skaters start very young and they peak very young," says Silby. "As they are developing as athletes, they are still developing their personality, as well."

So, the pressures can at times become overwhelming.

"Typically, an athlete will come to me and spend the first 45 minutes telling me all of the reasons why they can't achieve what they want," says Silby, who works with several skaters competing at this week's nationals. The first step usually involves readjusting the skater's goals.

"Sometimes the parents have a totally different view from the skater," says Silby. "Families put a lot of emotional and physical energy into this, and a skater hears over and over again how much money their parents are spending. They start feeling the pressure to produce, and that's when problems start."

Beyond traditional counseling, Silby also offers skaters and other athletes advice on how to improve their performance.

"They come to me because they want to be the best at something, and I can give them the skills they need to do that," she says. "These are emotionally healthy people. I'm just helping them to refocus and to have the most effective practice."

Silby does much of her work right at the ice rink, and most of it involves teaching skaters about "effective thinking."

"The main thing I see are athletes who do really well in practice but not in competition," she says. "So, I spend a lot of time examining how the skater thinks about things . . . They need to realize they do all of that training so that when it comes time to compete, they can rely on the fact that their body knows what to do."

Sometimes, Silby says, a skater "just needs to learn the difference between anxiety and arousal. They interpret the butterflies and sweaty palms that they get just before they compete as a bad thing. They don't think they're supposed to be nervous, and they see that as a weakness and begin to doubt themselves."

Many problems can be avoided with a few simple precautions:

When hiring a coach, parents should sit down and discuss that coach's training philosophy to make sure everyone's on the same wavelength.

Parents and skaters should stay in touch with each other's expectations. Be sure that everyone has set realistic goals.

Make sure your child gets involved in different activities. After spending hours in the rink, they need other outlets.

Above all, make sure that a child is skating because they enjoy it. When it's no longer fun, it's time to move on.