

A Coaching Career in Figure Skating

By Claude Sweet

Are there career-coaching opportunities for someone who has earned a gold medal(s) in figure skating?

It is highly unlikely when a child enters kindergarten, parents consider the possibility he or she might become a schoolteacher. However, after funding multiple years of their child testing and competing, many parents may consider using money reserved for college education to fund skating expenses.

There are many similarities between the tools required to become a classroom teacher and a skating coach. The biggest different is that pension and security afforded by the teaching profession and the self employed nature of being a figure skating coach.

Trained educators provide learners with subject matter that is geared to the level of the students. Coaches also need to develop training programs and strategies that are designed to achieve winning.

It is not the actual learning and accomplishment that teachers and coaches strive to attain, but instilling the power of working towards achieving obtainable goals – one objective at a time

Many individuals, if left to their own devices, do not develop the drive, and persistence to focus on establishing short term or life goals.

Other individuals have a multitude of goals that use a shotgun approach, rather than a targeted, narrow focused aim. It is sad that more people are to

spend their lives not doing those things they would like to do.

Very broad, generalized goals and aspirations (i.e. making lots of money, marrying a wonderful mate, having lots of children, and a home in the suburbs) tend to set us up for disappointment.

Many occupations require career paths that demand sacrifice, prioritizing personal interests, and innumerable weary hours performing dull, boring tasks, mundane tasks assigned by superiors in a process known as “paying your dues”.

Figure skating does not have a formal degree in the USA to become a figure skating coach with credentials in:

- Recreation skating,
- Singles
- Pairs
- Dance
- Synchronized Team Skating
- Showcase
- Theater On Ice.

Passing figure, MITF, Free Skating, Pairs, Compulsory Dance, or Free Dance tests are only the first step for an individual to qualify to enter competitions. Very few skaters survive competitive process and progress up through the ranks to be a national senior competitive skater.

A Figure Skating coach facilitates the development of his or her skater’s skill through a process of personal knowledge and on the job experience. The ability to communicate information varies widely among coaches.

Coaches generally support and encourage skaters to develop their own unique capacities that is influenced by way of the coach responded to the challenges they themselves confronted when they skated.

The Coaching Profession

Coaching figure skating in the United States is an extremely demanding physically job that requires them to deal with emotionally stress skaters and parents. In times of economic recession, being a coach provides little financial benefit or security.

To achieve a reasonable level of income, coaches must spend long hours in cold, damp rinks, wearing skates, working split shifts- before and after school to accommodate the schedules of different families who have own unique needs.

Coaches must keep financial records for tax purposes and to organize their schedule by concentrating their efforts on certain sessions and excluding others. A coach's clientele is in a constant state of flux as skaters go off to school, change coaches, and are lost through attrition.

A constant flow of new skaters must be acquired to maintain a stable flow of revenues. A new schedule must be established for holidays, summer sessions, and the start of each new school year.

Coaches usually need to restrict their activities to those sessions in which their skaters' abilities and type of skating (free skating, MITF, Pairs, Compulsory Dances, and Free Dance, Showcase) are compatible.

As skaters advance in their skills, the coach and skaters must come in at "off" times to practice their unique skating skills.

Few coaches have the physical stamina to teach all areas of skating (Pre-School, Competitive Singles, Pair, and Dance, Interpretive/showcase, Synchronized Team Skating, Theater on Ice, Adult, and Special Olympics because of ice schedules for these activities.

Some coaches specialize as to types of skating or skill levels. Some coaches are excellent with beginners, while others prefer only to teach Competitive skaters that come from other coaches or through team teaching.

Some individuals serve as consulting specialists in choreography, MITF, or Jump/spin technicians. Few coach will be economically successful if they confining their cliental solely to gifted pupils.

Even a poor coach can get a talented pupil to improve; however, it requires really talented coaches teach the majority of students who have the desire to learn to skater, but lack the raw, natural talent of a gifted student.

Quality

Having fun is not a good reason to exclude a student from receiving good training. Skating is fun because the learner receives the tools necessary to make progress and master the challenges this sport inevitably presents.

It ceases to be fun when the skater is unable to progress because of poor technique or injury. Frustration drives people away from our sport. When individuals feel good about themselves, they will tolerate low levels of pain associated with pushing on to the next level of skills.

The lean, speed, and balance allow a figure skater to accomplish movements that are not possible anywhere else. Jumping, spinning, turning, and gliding

are complex moves. Skaters begin by performing simple skills whose performance levels must be continuously upgraded before the skater will be able to master more difficult versions such as multiple rotation jumps.

Failure by a coach not to constantly and consistently increase the technical and performance bar at each test level will make it more difficult to achieve their full future potential. This approach avoids the necessity to relearning basic skills and techniques when they are Novice, Junior, or Senior level skaters.

Skaters love to learn new skills because it is exciting to show off a new jump or spin. Parents love to see progress as it justifies the money they are expending. However, the execution of under rotated double or triple jumps will not be rewarded in the IJS competitions.

Skaters must also concentrate on the quality of the “well balanced performance” that equates Program Performance scores with the Grade of Executions technical marks.

Recognizing cheated jumps and poor spinning technique exists is the first step to modify a skater’s training program to one that stressed the successful execution of the advanced skills necessary to do well in regional, sections, and national competitions.

Preparing for a career as a figure skating coach is a long-term investment in passing tests and entering competitions. Like any long range investment there is no immediate return. Any individual who with faulty skating technique may pass tests; however, eventually they will suffer catastrophic consequences as a competitor.

The best preparation to become a coach is to acquire the proper foundation

of basic skating skills, and specifically be known for having learned correct jumping and spinning technique.

Judges and others that closely follow the sport of figure skating learn about a skater’s best and worst personality traits and actions in and around skating rinks. The actions as an amateur will follow the skater when they attempt to become a coach.

Parents and coaches are eager to see recognizable signs of progress and may over emphasize a skaters having a solo in a show/carnival, record in open competitions, and attempting to pass tests faster than their perceived competitors.

Off-Ice Practicing Considerations

Incorrectly practicing any skating skill incorrectly. Parents would be well advised to carefully check the credentials of anyone who is providing technical advice, for free or for a fee, on ice or off-ice. Auxiliary training should be considered only within the context of a comprehensive training program approved by the primary coach.

A successful training plan will list planned activities, priorities and organizes them in accord with commonly accepted general training principles. Adequate and appropriately rest periods must be part of the plan to allow the necessary recovery to occur.

Exercise is catabolic (destructive) and must be balanced by a recovery or rest period, which is anabolic (constructive). The timing or cycles of specific activities must be considered within a daily, weekly, monthly and yearly schedule.

Developing this plan is frequently overlooked in one’s zeal to progress quickly, yet the plan is one of the most critical features of training for a skater to

consistently perform well in tests and competitions. It is important for skaters to develop good technique before training hard. Training hard reinforces poor skills and thwarts future development.

The design of an ice rink precludes parents from knowing what transpires as hockey glass separates them from the ice surface. Coaches should require their skaters to keep a diary of their lessons and what they are expected to work on between lessons.

It would be very helpful to provide parents with a regular progress report on skill development and observations on practice sessions, especially how the progress relates to the training schedule.

Parents need to be attuned to comments that their children in the car and at home. The child may inadvertently (or intentionally) alert parents that there is tension between the coach and the child.

Does the coach adequately communicate instructions? Is the incapable of either remembering or following a coach's instructions? Skaters whose training experiences these problems often encounter the same problems at home and in school.

Parents' coaching their child never works. Parents are too emotionally involved with the skater. Problems at home or school spill over as disrupts progress at the skating rink. In extreme cases it becomes necessary for the coach to spend a disproportionate amount of lesson time dealing with the impact of the parental involvement.

Parents must understand that participating in a sport like figure skating provides their child with an opportunity to briefly participate in a unique world that is separate from the daily life at school and home. Each skater has an

opportunity to grow and mature as part of the daily struggle to progress and to deal with his or her own limitations.

Children look to their parents for guidance, support and love. Becoming a figure skater does not diminish the need for parents to provide emotional support. Positive involvement is a valuable part of parental support system.

There no way to predict skater's potential to become a world-class competitor. Coaches and judges treat every skater as having the potential to become a high performance athlete if provided with the necessary training.

It is up to each skater to strive to reach his or her full potential. The skater's focus, proficiency, and commitment interact with heredity and personality traits that will eventually determine the final outcome.

The number of skaters entering different levels of skating events varies from year to year and region to region. Expectations of what a skater needs to execute varies according to how well the field of skaters perform their competitive jumps and spins.

Often in lower events, the winner is the individual who has committed the fewest errors, this can lead to confusion over whether a skater is deserved to place higher in a competition.

Most skaters practice many hours and displays a deep commitment to becoming the best they can be. Competitive Free Skating training is not so much about the skills required as the depth of commitment of the skaters and parents' to acquire the skills.

In the final analysis, the parents place an emphasis is on winning; however, if a skater's lacks the ice time, lessons and

desire to work hard, it is unwise to make winning a priority.

Coaches and parents should never use anger as a motivator, threaten skaters or pit a skater against one another, or suggest they appear tough and threatening. There are no magic words, secret information or special tips to make skater an instant success; learning to skate well is simply, exquisite hard work.

Coaching Qualifications

Figure skating coaches who are involved in coaching USFS test and competitive skaters must join the Professional Skating Association. Fees vary according the skill levels of the coaches and their ranking of having competed at specific levels and/or coaching their students to specific levels.

- Level 5 Olympic athletes
- Level 4 National and International athletes
- Level 3 Sectional athletes
- Level 2 Regional athletes
- Level 1 Recreational athletes

Coaches must be able to draw upon their skating background and coaching experience to communicate information that is relevant to each unique skater. What distinguishes each skater and coach is the extent to which they possess or have been able to develop the component skills associated with each form of figure skating.

The effectiveness of a coach is extremely difficult process. The number and variety of factors impacting each skater's progress must be balanced by mitigating factors, which may have little or no consequence on the skating outcome.

Successful figure skating coaches share the following traits:

- Engaging personality
- Strong technical background
- Teaching experience
- Communication skills
- Logic
- Curriculum development
- Imagination
- Training methodology.
- Strong business and marketing skills
- Punctual
- Hold a valid First Aid certificate

Parents must ultimately evaluate the coach's effectiveness to be hired as a coach for their child. They must evaluate the coaching proficiency of the available pool of coaches.

Frequently parents must make decisions without sufficient knowledge of figure skating and the coaching process. It is amazing the amount of rumor and gossip that is communicated as fact.

Parents should be comfortable discussing their child's progress with their coach and to ask questions about any training decisions coaches might make.

There are basic principles good coaches subscribe to:

1. Coaches should be able to provide the rationale for why a specific skill or concept is being taught.
2. Outline the individual learning needs of each skater.
3. Explain the relevance of the instruction timetable and training schedule.
4. Explain how the practice sessions habits and performance should carry over to the competitive or test setting.