Paul Wylie answers questions exclusively for U.S. Figure Skating Online

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Q: Since you went to Colorado Academy as a full-time student and then went on to Harvard, do you think it is better to go to school full-time and work skating into your busy schedule or be home-schooled so that you have more time to skate?

A: It is my opinion that it is better to go to school than to be home-schooled.

1) An Olympic skater’s focus is very narrow and home-schooling, by its very nature, only narrows the world to which you are exposed.

2) It has been said that the sport at the Olympic level becomes 90% mental. How is it that you train your brain? Rigorous and broad-based academics is not only a requirement for college and advancement, it makes you a better skater.

I realize that many home-schooling programs are rigorous and broad-based, but this is not guaranteed. Correspondence school is not the same thing! Ask any college admissions officer.

3) There is more to going to school than academics. I believe that skaters are already somewhat deprived of ‘normal’ social lives and miss out on important friendships, activities, field trips, and potentially inspiring relationships with teachers and mentors.

I drew on many different sources of strength in my career, and it was critical to have many of the voices I heard come from outside of the rink. I do not regret one day I spent at school, in fact I wish I had been more involved, not less.

4) Future endeavors: Schoolwork, even in the Harvard days, enabled me to feel like I was moving in a secure direction for my future, growing with my peers, keeping in step. My skating was enhanced by academics and vice versa, enabling me to write about what I was experiencing in international travel and cultural exchange.

5) Skaters have more time on their hands than we did in the era of compulsory figures. There is no reason for training time to be the reason for a child to not attend school, unless the rink has no ice time during non-school hours.

If that is the case, I would attempt to find a more flexible arrangement with the school and/or the rink.

Many coaches pressure their skaters to do home-schooling so that they can have their lessons in the middle of the day. I think parents should weigh the sacrifice they are being asked to make.

Caveat: I want to add to my opinion a large caveat, that both Colorado Academy and Harvard were special places, where my skating and my individuality as a student/athlete/artist was not only understood, but celebrated by teachers, administration and fellow classmates.

I was in the top five in my class throughout secondary school, and I made honors grades at Harvard through hard work and staying on top of the inevitable make-up work. That being said, both schools were flexible with me:

I attended high school for five years, not four, and even Harvard allowed me to finish in five years and three summers (I was often taking 75% load).

I found it necessary to communicate directly and up-front with my principal and teachers, and to strive to do everything I could to earn the right to have the leniency for time away for competition.

Homework was a priority, and if I did not have my schoolwork done, I didn’t go to the rink.

Also, if you have a school where you are being picked on, a school where they will not excuse your absences for competitions or a school where there is not the proper respect of skating as a sport, you may want to ask for a meeting with your principal, your coach and perhaps have a USFSA official write a letter.

Dick Button once gave me the advice to ask a USFSA official to write a letter to the school explaining the absences in advance of the skating year. This helps to put it in official context, so they don’t feel you’re trying to ditch school.
Q: When you were skating and going to school at the same time, how were you able to keep a balance? What advice would you give skaters who want to maintain their skating career but at the same time get a good education? Courtney, 13, Minneapolis, Minn.; Bethany, 14, Wilkesboro

A: For me, it was about giving each effort its devoted time and concentration. When I was on the rink, I was not focused on school, and vice versa. It's often a matter of time management. Make sure your schedule has a study hall in the morning and don't spend it talking! Get to know your teachers and help them help you. Stay after class when you can, and utilize the off-season to catch up or get ahead. Springtime was when I really poured it on.

Give yourself the flexibility you may need (and ask teachers and administration to do so, as well). Making up a whole week's worth of work may take some extra time, and it's going to take the cooperation of the faculty (and even your classmates).

I also had wonderful friends in school who took notes for me and helped me to keep up. Be sure to reciprocate whenever possible.