

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.