

# Nurturing a figure skater; A Complex Journey

by Claude Sweet

## The Improbable Dream

Yes, an individual can dream a goal like being an Olympic champion which is almost impossible to achieve unless you are blessed with great natural physical skills and the mental strength to overcome many adversities for a quest that can exceed a decade or more.

Many young children may suddenly start to dream of becoming an Olympian after watching the many sports venues televised from Vancouver's Winter Games. Even if parents have participated in individual and team sports themselves, they frequently are unaware of the financial costs associated with becoming an elite individual athlete in a sport not sponsored by a high school or university.

The ten plus years required to pursue this dream is a meaningless concept to most young athletes and their parents. To accomplish this dream, the entire family must be prepared to establish priorities involving time and financial resources that affect the entire family.

***Every family member will be required to make sacrifices, persevere, and overcome obstacles encountered along the road to pursue the Olympic dream.***

The competition experience is less stressful when the relative few skaters in an event and the others in the event are at the same relative level. Skaters aspiring to succeed in Elite track competitions experience even more stress, as the stakes are considerably higher. Every training session is competition rehearsal and skaters must complete a high percentage of perfect performances in practice sessions. The goal is to acquire the consistency to perform without mistakes in competitions.

There is certainly a "luck" factor that exists in physical sports, especially where external factors can affect the conditions from the beginning to the end of the competition round.

If you are an established skater, drawing the position of skating first allows the skater to set the bar at a high level in an initial round. The top skaters in the short program are seeded to skate in the last group of skaters in the free skating round.

Athletes and coaches generally develop strategies for various possibilities. These scenarios usually involve assessments of a risk/reward nature. These decisions can be made after an initial round of a competition and/or after the scores of earlier competitors in the final free skate are announced.

The new International Judging System emphasizes technical elements and all of the five performance qualities (Skating Skills, Transitions, Execution, Interpretation, and Choreography) in a pleasing balanced program.

Winning a medal at any level of competition is nice; however, the ultimate challenge of most competitors is striving to perform their personal best. For many the ultimate quest and measurement of succeeding is not winning at any cost or winning based on the poor execution of other athletes.

The demands on a family's time and finances are modest when a child first starts beginning skating classes; however, this gradually changes if they become involved in taking figure skating tests and entering competitions.

Pursuing a career in sports requires intensive physical training complicates a family's schedule for a child and parent with the stress of transporting a child to daily practices in addition to the challenges of working outside the home, preparing meals, and completing other household tasks – shopping, laundry, cleaning, etc.

## Education vs. Sports

Most parents place a higher priority on education over sports. However, others feel sports or other activities (music, performing arts, drawing, etc.) are part of a balanced childhood and can be achieved without interfering with a good education.

For some families, participation in sports (football, basketball, baseball etc.) is a means of receiving a sports scholarship as a way of accessing educational opportunities they could not otherwise afford. Some see sports as leading to professional careers with fame and lucrative sponsor endorsements.

## Planning – The Path to Achieving Success

Besides arranging to fund for the activity, parents must provide transportation to and from practices. This eventually leads to the expenses associated with preparing for and attending competitions, shows, recitals, etc. which involve traveling to distance sites and stays in hotels for the child and a parent.

Families must balance busy schedules of their jobs, household duties, and childcare. Schedules become even more difficult when there is more than one child. Parents must balance their time and attention between the siblings to establish family dynamics that is relatively stress free and

without any feelings of favoritism.

***There are also sibling dynamics that develop from perception of favoritism other than normal family conflicts caused by different personalities, ages, and naturally occurring sibling tensions that occur as each child seeks to establish their position in the family hierarchy.***

Family dynamics may become highly charged between siblings who compete against one another in school, athletics, and social (interest in dating the same person) activities.

The care and nurturing of a figure skater opens up additional issues besides the everyday trials and tribulations of raising a teenager. Luckily there are some simple things that you can do to foster a life long positive relationship involving figure skating for parents, coaches, and skaters.

### **Parenting Skill Sets**

Parents who have developed successful parenting skills have gained an understanding of the psychological needs of each family member and the dynamics of how each family member functions and interacts within the group.

Unfortunately there is no written manual and objective means of measuring success of a parent's child rising skills. Parenting definitely consists of "on the job training" for each child because of their different personalities. Each child will go through various stages of physical, mental, and emotional development as part of the natural growth/hormone changes.

Parents need to be able to separate the normal development of a child's physical and emotional phases that occur because of hormone changes in combination with the ordinary conflicts that arise from dealing with schoolwork, skating, and social development/dating issues associated with boy/girl relationships.

Each individual possesses a different combination of genetics that interacts with environmental forces found in family's dynamics that interact to mold and shape the development of each individual; however, ultimately the responsibility, for who they become as a young adult, is the responsibility of the individual and the choices they make.

### **The Do's:**

As a parent, you should become both informed and involved in every aspect of your child's life – home, school, church, social activities, etc. You should also become familiar with the sport of figure skating if your child shows signs of wanting to participate as a test or elite skater.

Don't be an absentee parent and allow the coach and local figure skating club make all of the decisions concerning your child's dreams and ambitions.

Today, most families consist of two working parents. With busy schedules, it is frequently easier to drop off your child at the rink and then run errands or attend to job related business. Make sure you have a cell phone that is on and your cell number is on file with the rink and your coach so you can immediately be contacted in case of an injury to your child.

Too many parents neglect to select someone to act in their absence and provide them with a written legal document giving them the authority to make medical decisions when an accident occurs at a practice session or at a competition. You also need to provide a complete list of medications, dosages, blood type, reaction to specific drugs, foods, etc., plus the contact information of doctors who should be contacted.

Skaters of all ages appreciate being showered with attention, praise, and affection because it helps build their confidence and makes them feel secure. Skaters that are not given positive feedback tend to become withdrawn and develop an unhappy personality, which is not a desirable trait when interacting with peers and adults.

***Every child needs to have some time to play, socialize with friends from school and skating, and just plain private time that they control. Don't deprive your child from having a childhood because they become very involved in figure skating.***

Sometimes parents want to provide their child with an extra edge. Some go overboard scheduling lessons with the result the child rarely is independently practicing between lessons. The quality of the training time is as important as the quantity. A skater must learn the concepts of physics that apply to developing skating skills.

Parents of young skaters need to set some time each day for personal, one on one, quality time for each child. Sitting in the stands at a rink should not be considered quality time. The time you spend with your child should involve some physical contact and conversations designed to make them feel loved.

Figure skating training and school homework require the child to follow the rules you have set. Being a parent requires you to be firm while enforcing the rules, but you must do this in a loving manner. A child that understands the rules will be more

likely to follow the rules compared to being arbitrary and forcing them to comply.

Every child must be provided with a nurturing home environment that is safe, with an appropriate schedule that encourages a regular sleep schedule. A specific part of the house needs to be selected to complete their homework. Internet access should be supervised when they conduct research for school assignments. As a parent, you may wish to block access to specific TV channels and Internet sites.

Parents need to place reasonable restrictions on weekday TV viewing. Cell phone use and texting must have limits so they do not become a distraction from performing prioritized responsibilities.

### **Athletes Need a Healthy Diet**

Athletes require a diet that is varied, balanced, and healthy. The foods do not need to be specially prepared for them if a menu is created that is healthy, nutritious, and appeals to the tastes the entire family.

Don't make mealtime a battle zone by adding a food to the menu that only one person enjoys eating. Do encourage everyone to expand his or her food choices by sampling new dishes. Allow each person to serve him or herself. Don't put large servings on their plate and force them to eat adult portions.

A consistent pattern of over concern with a skater's weight, especially in girls, can be a sign of an eating disorder. Monitor the child to see if they regularly visit the bathroom after eating. They could be forcing themselves to throw up what they have just eaten.

Don't add salt or sugar to the food prior to serving. Use herbs and spices to add flavor to food. There are salt and sugar substitutes that can be added individually to servings at the table.

Parents and coaches must be sensitive to the child's physical and emotional well being. Physical injuries and mood swings (depression) can vary in their need for professional treatment. Abrupt personality changes can signal a serious problem, including the possibility of using drugs.

Don't assume that physical problems and difficult personal relationships will just go away and heal with time. Pain is a signal that something is wrong. Don't encourage them to skate through the pain – immediately arrange an appointment with a doctor when you sense there is something wrong.

An individual may attempt to hide injuries, especially close to an important competition because

they are afraid a doctor will tell them to take time off from skating. Minor injuries can develop into chronic problems that require aggressive treatments and perhaps a loss of a competitive season.

From a youthful perspective their life centers around the "now" and they tend to not consider the possibility of their actions may morph into a life long disability preventing them from skating and affecting their normal, everyday activities.

In school and in sports, it is extremely important to learn to focus attention to maximize results. Understanding practice goals and how to check to see that there is actual positive progress is critical. Too many skaters have allowed basic errors to remain uncorrected even as they have pursued higher goals.

Many athletes do not appreciate that participating in sports requires a training schedule that involves devising activities to both mentally and physically peak for the actual competition.

Achieving and maintaining a high performance level for days, weeks, or months is an impossible task; however, this does not mean that every athlete must keep pushing the limits of their abilities, strive for consistency of their performance, and achieve the highest possible level of endurance/stamina.

### **Channeling Positive Emotions**

Acquiring new physical skills can involve periods of rapid progress followed by periods that are referred to as "plateaus" with little or no progress being obvious. This causes some skaters to begin to view their skating in a negative manner.

Coaches attempt to channel the skater's drive to focus on other training aspects to stimulate a positive training environment. One way is to institute a list of items to be practiced on each session and limit the number of repetitions to no more than 4 or 5 total.

***Teenagers, both boys and girls, tend to experience mood swings; however, prolonged periods of depression/dark moods require the consultation with a medical professional to determine if there is a physical or chemical imbalance causing the problem.***

A skater's mood can quickly change following repeated, unsuccessful attempts to complete an element. This can occur when learning a new skill or an inability to perform previous skill sets because of rapid growth changes - increases in height, weight, and other changes of their body's proportions.

A skater who begins to fall repeatedly on a jump or messes up a spin or footwork sequence – needs to move on to another element that they are able to do for the positive reinforcement. Constantly falling on the same spot can result in deep muscle bruising that affects daily training performances and in competitions due to residual pain and tissue swelling.

Parents and coaches of talented individuals frequently overlook the need to stress the need of acquiring basics technical skills necessary to be successful in figure skating. It is easy to overlook a young skater's flaws when they are winning a lot of low-level competitions, especially if the parent lacks the training to identify that there are problems.

***It is always better to avoid acquiring career ending bad technical habits than to ignore or be in a state of denial that there is a problem until it has become very difficult and exceedingly expensive to correct the errors.***

Parents and coaches must resist the temptation to substitute their hopes, desires, and ambitions for that of the skater. Impatience is a common trait of young skaters; however, rushing through the Moves In The Field (MITF) tests results in fundamental errors that exist when the test is passed at a minimum score that equates to a "C" grade in school.

Eventually raw talent cannot compensate for flawed technique. At this point it is very difficult for an individual to go back and unlearn the basic mistakes that hinder their performance.

#### **The Don'ts:**

Every child has the right to grow up in a safe and healthy living environment with necessities such as clothes, shoes, nutritious food, and/or appropriate medical attention – vaccinations, eye, dental, and hearing exams. Any action by a parent or guardian to withhold these care to coerce a child to bend to their will is generally considered a form of child endangerment.

A child should never be exposed to any physical, mental or emotional abuse from siblings and other relatives or from outside sources. Cyber harassment has now emerged as another problem that parents need to be aware of besides schoolyard bullying and verbal abuse from schoolmates.

No child should ever be threatened with a physical punishment to obtain compliance of orders for any reason. Inflicting physical pain is never justified and especially because a person is unhappy with the child's actions on or off the ice. This can

permanently destroy the child's trust and love of the individual.

Establishing a reasonable behavior code should be age appropriate and start with how a child acts at home and expand to their actions in public. Setting limits and consequences are necessary starting with toddlers. When a child acts poorly in a public situation, quietly remove your child from a confrontation if they lose self-control. Indicate you are disappointed, then establish a time and place when you will discuss the situation in private.

It is never a good decision to attempt to interact with anyone when you don't have complete control of your own emotions. A timeout allows both yourself and the other individual to calm down, thus allowing a rational exchange. It is very important that neither party to a conflict allow it escalates and saying things that cannot be taken back or be erased by an apology.

***Don't allow a child or adult to use the threat of their bad behavior to "blackmail" you into making decisions you don't wish to make. When parents and coaches have made a contract with the athlete, and they fail to meet the terms, you must follow through with tough love – even if it that means withdrawing your financial support.***

Good luck.