It is not a question of whether our sport is skating on thin ice or not... the question is will there be anyone around to save us when we fall through?

The U.S. Figure Skating Strategic Planning committee, of which I am a member, has been hard at work, focusing on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing U.S. Figure Skating and the industry in general.

My sources also tell me that ISI has been meeting as well. But as we all work to discover an achievable solution to the current issues at hand, they are quite honestly, issues that no one has been able to identify with any certainty.

We know the symptoms, but we have not yet discovered the cause or cure. It reminds me of a recent e-mail going around, “Due to the current economic issues - high oil prices, high cost of electricity, plunging stock prices, the light at the end of the tunnel has been turned off. We regret the inconvenience.”

My opinion is that there are three distinct issues that are contributing to the existing struggles in our sport. A fourth, the IJS is thought by many to be the only issue, but I am not going to go there. We were skating on thin ice long before IJS was a thought in any mind. My first fear is that while looking for a solution, we will continue to “diversify,” a term coined by investment guru Peter Lynch regarding the diversifying of assets in poorly chosen investments that strain companies or investors.

In a nutshell, are we making our “ice” too thin, trying to be too many things to too many people? Singles, pairs, dance, synchronized skating, showcase, theater on ice, adults, collegiate, basic skills, well balanced program, test track, judges and coaches education; that's just U.S. Figure Skating.

Add ISI into the mix and we have double the opportunities but the same size pie. As more programs are implemented, staff and expenses increase while the revenue remains the same.

Yes, these extra programs keep skaters in both U.S. Figure Skating and ISI, and obviously keep the coaches busy... that's a good thing, but they don't attract new skaters and moreover, take an unbelievable amount of resources to manage, both financially and in the way of staff and volunteer hours.

Already, a common complaint from these user groups is the lack of funding and attention. If the association were to increase the funding, where would the money come from and at whose expense? Either from increased participation or fees, the latter creating more tension among the already taxed stakeholders.

My second issue is the ISU. On the world stage, I believe it is time that figure skating and speed skating seek a divorce from each other and form two independent international governing bodies. Regardless of what anyone at the ISU believes, having two rival skating sports under the same governing body is counterproductive to the well being of either sport.

Who is supporting whom? Resources will never be shared equally and one group will always benefit at the others expense. While one could argue that the sharing of operational expenses is cost affective, those savings do not actually benefit the figure skating side of the organization.

I have every confidence that Mr. Dore, the ISU Vice President of Figure Skating could lead the recovery at the realm of an independent organization. Unfortunately, ISU President and former speed skater, Ottavio Cinquanta who has had his hands in many decisions to the detriment of figure skating, i.e. the elimination of school figures and the implementation of the International Judging System, will not let that happen.

If Mr. Cinquanta had developed a policy to monitor the judges more closely when he took office in 1994, we never would have developed the poor image that we enjoy today.
I want to clarify that I don’t believe that the IJS itself is the issue, but the lack of information and education to the average skating fan on the finer points of the system.

At U.S. Nationals in Cleveland, two couples sitting in front of President Morris-Adair, Kelley’s husband and former U.S. Dance Champion, Donny Adair, Carol Rossignol, and myself, turned around and said, “We don’t get it. We heard you talking and figured you knew what was going on."

There was a brief hesitation as we all looked at each other, not saying what we all thought, “it is confusing.” With a confident smile on my face, I explained to them that the judging is a lot like the stock market. Like a stock, each skating program has value, and with good execution, grows in value.

Mistakes or poor execution costs the skaters points, just like an investor would devalue a stock when the company underperforms and loses money. I went on to add that there were benchmarks that each maneuver needed to achieve in order to maintain their points. They seemed to understand that concept and enjoyed the rest of the event.

Finally, I don’t believe those in the media that say that the sport has no stars. I realize that the media has their problems to deal with. The print media such as the Chicago Tribune, LA Times, and New York Times are all in serious financial trouble.

Broadcast media such as network television is in trouble and cable is just too big. Can I say “dil-worsification?” Do we really need the Bass channel? Talk about spreading yourself too thin, I can choose between 600 channels, thousands of radio stations and an infinite number of websites.

It is not the lack of a skating star but the plethora of choices we have in our lives and a dwindling attention span. U.S. Figure Skating is not in the business of making “stars”; that’s the media’s responsibility.

The media has “made” every skating star since Sonia Henie. If we don’t have a skating star, it’s because the media didn’t do their job. What happened to the old “up close and personal” features that ABC did. I don’t recall even seeing anything in the U.S Championships coverage resembling a human-interest story.

Also, what is with the “truth booth?” It just looked like NBC did not want to spend any money on someone to interview the skaters. Sticking Jeremy Abbott into the booth and letting him ramble... didn’t do anything for me or Jeremy’s image.

As far as I’m concerned, if the media is looking for someone to blame for the lack of a star, don’t point your fingers at us, just turn on the TV and watch your own broadcast or read your own column.

I hope the powers that be do not think that we should become the new X games. It is not what we do. We don’t need to change who and what we are to become popular again by adding more sparkle and flash; its just smoke and mirrors.

Let’s continue to look forward to the future by respecting the past, honoring our traditions and staying true to the sport that represents the purest form of art and athleticism. Interestingly enough, I was discussing this editorial with a friend of mine and he reminded me of what the PSA’s mission was - the education and accreditation of coaches.