

Strategic Tactics

By Claude Sweet

Free Skating Program Skills

Free skating tests at each level list specific required elements plus additional optional elements selected for their ability to enhance the program technical or artistic score.

Skaters may be required, by the rules, to perform an element they do poorly and must eventually be mastered; however, if other required elements are performed well, judges may adjust their scores to pass the test. A good choreographer may be able disguise flaws and highlight other elements that the skater is able to perform above the minimum passing standard.

It is the responsibility of the skater and coach to review test and competition rules to be sure the free skating program does not violate the rules. Examples of areas that must not be violated include:

- *Program length* – counting starts with the skater's first movement of any part of their body in the initial pose.
 - The 10-second rule allows a variation of 10 seconds under or over the stated program length. Judges take a .1 deduction for each 10 seconds (or portion thereof) beyond the accepted margin.
 - The 10-second rule does NOT apply when the rules state a maximum program length or a range of times i.e. 1.5 to 2 minutes.
- *Successful performance of specific required jumps.* In a test a skater may meet the requirement and receive credit after a failed attempt. In a competitive short program any second attempt of an element has no value.

The long program may limit repetitions of a jump and allow the same jump to be repeated only once as an

individual jump, in a combination, and/or sequence.

- Spins may have one or more required spins, plus an optional spin that must have a different IJS computer code. A flying entry may be required at specific test and competition levels.
- Step Sequences have specific starting and ending requirements that must be fulfilled. Not having a distinctive start and ending are common errors.
- Changing the order of the elements while allowable can cause the Technical panel and judges to have unnecessary concerns the step and spiral sequences have been properly completed.
- Improvising is allowable, but the skater can easily leave out a required element and add an extra element, which cause deductions even if the program is performed without any errors.

Sequencing Elements

The order in which the skater performs technical elements has an impact on their execution. Usually coaches decide to present elements from the most to the least difficult as this more likely to insure the successful execution of the maximum elements.

Generally a major performance error early in the program will have a very negative impact for the remainder of the elements.

If the skater lacks the necessary physical fitness and stamina, they not be able to execute the difficult elements as they start to become tired starting at about the halfway mark.

PA well balance program should spread the elements evenly throughout the program; however, many skaters tend to front end the program with their most difficult elements.

Artistically, it is better to arrange the elements to give an impression of building strength, increasing in artistic complexity, and finish with strong technically demanding elements. Elements that decrease in difficulty can leave an overall impression of running out of gas at the end of the program.

The complexity of the transition immediately preceding or following a jump or spin also affects the judges' scores. The choreographer must be careful not to increase transition's difficulty and failure or otherwise hinder the correct execution of the required technical elements.

Speed and Flow

A skater's speed throughout a free skating performance must be varied to support and create a desired effect necessitated by the musical score. A coach must consider the optimal speed each skater require to technically perform each element and the choreographer desires the proper speed to achieve the program's artistic goals.

A skater who can perform elements and transitions at top speed create an emotional impression of forcefulness, drive and attack. These are very desirable characteristics to achieve in a free skating performance and must be contrasted with periods of slower speed to reflect the changes in musical tempo.

Complete stops and periods of slower speed allows the skater to accelerate and decelerate that is a nuance generally exhibited by more experienced skaters. Sometimes choreographers can create an impression of speed even when it is not present.

Patterns

The choreographer creates a visual representation of the program to insure the finished program uses the complete ice surface that includes frequent changes of direction and no telegraphing of elements.

Choreography that requires elaborate preparations frequently will conflict with optimal preparations for jumps and spins and thus, affect the consistency of the performance.

Judges are well aware of the lost of speed and excessively holding of edges in anticipation of difficult multi-rotation jumps and reduce both Grades of Execution (GOE) and Program Component scores.

Variety and variability result in higher scores, but too much variety before a strong technical foundation has been acquired frequently overloads a young skater who is trying to just to perform the jump or spin.

Large curves combined with changes of flow/speed and quick reverses of direction demonstrate agility and skating skills. Shallow curves and straight lines may quickly get the skater from one end of the rink to the other; they generally do not indicate an impression of forcefulness or attack.

Choreographers must be creative in finding ways to maximize the natural curves, lines and still moments throughout a program to show variety without increasing the elapsed time to perform the required elements.

Elements should be distributed over the entire ice surface and play to all four sides of the rink, not just the judges. If the majority of the elements are presented in front of the judges, a large portion of the audience is excluded causing

the choreography to become unbalanced and very two-dimensional.

The Relationship of Performance to Time

Free Skating program have fixed time limits in which the required elements in the short program and components of a well-balanced long program must be performed.

Accomplished skater can combine the difficulty of technical skills with the connecting transitions and element entries that establish a relationship to the other elements and the timing (early, middle, or late) at which the highlights are performed in the program. The amounts of time between the required elements are relative to the music and choreographic factors.

Sometimes the music allows elements to be clustered (performed in tighter sequences in some sections of the program; however, this may cause judges to fully evaluate these dense clusters. Allowing more measures of music to be used assists in developing more complex choreographic movement in the program.

Choreographers need to space elements irregularly throughout the program to create a feeling of tension, excitement, and surprise. A musical score and choreography that is hypnotic or comforting quickly becomes boring.

A rapid and/or irregular interval of performing elements makes it more enjoyable for the audience to watch and results in higher marks from judges because the increased physical and mental control increases the difficulty.