

Journal Entry #14
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***Training and Coaching:
The 2005 World Figure Skating
Championships in Moscow***

This week I went to Moscow to attend *The 2005 World Figure Skating Championships*. I am a long time figure skating fan, but this event allowed me to observe two particular aspects of the skating world: how the very best skaters train and prepare for competition, and how coaches interact with skaters under performance conditions.

Training For Competition

When I arrive in Moscow, Russians, Americans, Canadians, Japanese and Swiss people were lining up to buy tickets for the skating competition. I, however, was purchasing tickets for the *training* sessions. At the World Championships, ordinary people can buy tickets for as little as 200 rubles (\$8US) to watch the skaters rehearse before the official competition starts. In other words, I wanted to see what you *don't* see on television. Moreover, observing how professional athletes train and prepare for high-pressure competition is particularly useful to me. As a choreographer and teacher, I am responsible for preparing my professional dancers for performance conditions. The better I understand the various mindsets of professional athletes, the better I can create effective training conditions within my own studio and company in the future.

Getting Access to The Rink

Training started at 6am in the morning; consequently, I was late because the metro does not open until 6am and I was commuting. Despite the fact that I had a ticket, the security guards asked me several questions, and I can't say it was particularly easy to gain access to the rink. The guards seemed to be very confused as to why a Russian-speaking American with her hair in a bun was so eager to watch skaters warm up at 6:30am in the morning. "Are you a coach?" "No." "Are you a skater?" "No." "Are you a family member of a competitor?" "No." "Are you here to get the autographs of the famous American skaters?" "No. I am actually cheering for the Russians." Eventually, the guards got frustrated with my poor Russian, told me to buy "another type of ticket", and finally allowed me to enter the stadium.

The Training Environment

The skaters warm up on the ice for 40 minutes in groups of five or six. Each skater's music is played once. During that time, the other skaters remain on the ice, but they pay special attention not to intrude on the performing athlete.

I was surprised by two things during these training sessions. First, some of the skaters leave the ice early or do not come at all. For example, Michelle Kwan (USA) left the ice before her music was played. Neither Evgeny Plushenko (Russia) nor Andrei Griazev (Russia) came to their practice sessions for the free skate (long program). The only Russian male skater who did appear, Sergei Dobrin, was bombarded by fans seeking autographs.

The second surprise was that the skaters do not skate their program in full, even when it is their turn and their music is being played. Instead, they skate the pattern of the program and do the footwork sequences, but they do not do any of the jumps. They practice the jumps separately afterwards. I assume this is to conserve energy for the actual performance, but I cannot say for certain if this is the rationale. As dancers, we *always* dance in full in the final rehearsals before our performances.

As I observed the training sessions, I noticed that people seemed to be struck by the fact that there was a "non-skater" in the stadium, especially because the audience was practically

empty besides the competitors and their judges. All of this changed, however, when the competition started. Suddenly, I found myself immersed in a sea of Russian flags and fans chanting *молодец* (“the great one”) whenever Russian skaters appeared on the ice.

The Relationship: Coach and Skater

For me, the most fascinating part of the actual competition was watching the coaches at the edge of the rink when their skaters performed. I believe there are many parallels between the relationship of coach and skater and the relationship of choreographer/teacher and dancer.

I discovered that the ice skating coaches have sharply contrasting personalities and approaches. For example, the legendary Russian choreographer and coach *Tatiana Tarasova* was practically skating every single move along with her pupils. When Andrei Griazev skated his long program, she would move up to the edge of the rink every time he prepared for a jump, and simply by watching her facial expression, I could tell if Griazev had safely landed the jump. In contrast, Frank Carroll, the American coach who used to train Michelle Kwan and now works with Evan Lysacek (USA), had an absolutely frozen and stern expression on his face when his skaters were on the ice. In fact, I saw him in the lobby and he had this same expression.

The skill of simultaneously praising, encouraging and demanding absolute perfection from young athletes is something I want to understand better. When the coach-skater relationship works, an athlete achieves self-actualization. However, if this relationship is weak, the quality of the artistry is sacrificed. I have been lucky to observe some of the most effective trainer-athlete relationships in the skating world; now my challenge is to form similar synergies in the Russian and American dance worlds.

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