

Tony Wheeler's Thoughts in the World of Figure Skating

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[Patrick Ibens Interview](#)

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NOTE: This interview as well as many of my other thoughts can now be found at <http://tony-wheeler.blogspot.com>

Former ISU official Sonia Bianchetti has also submitted her thoughts to me on the below interview, and can be read here: <http://tony-wheeler.blogspot.com/2010/03/sonia-bianchetti-role-of-judge-now-is.html>

Thank You!!!

"I Would Say 10% of Judges Are Completely Honest"

A Chat with Olympic-Level Figure Skating Judge, Patrick Ibens

Tony Wheeler: Hello Patrick, thanks for taking the time to answer my questions. Can you start by telling me about your own figure skating background, and how long you have been involved in the sport?

Patrick Ibens: This is my 40th year in figure skating. I started skating when I was 5 years old, and was done by the time I was 18 due to a back injury. There were only a few other male skaters here in Belgium: Eric Kroll, Tom Dujardin, Carl Dujardin, Hendrick Sassen, Danny Dillen, Patrick Van Reeth, and myself. Eric Kroll managed something like 24th at Europeans, which was the biggest success any of us had achieved during the time!

TW: What are some of the international competitions you have been able to judge throughout the years?

PI: I've judged several European, Four Continents, and World Championships, as well as many junior and senior Grand Prix events. I also judged the men's event in both the Torino 2006 and Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics. Too bad I only was assigned to judge the short program in Vancouver. [Judging panels are now switched up between portions of competitions. Five of the nine judges from the short program were randomly selected to also judge the long program-- Ibens was not chosen.]

TW: Do you judge all four disciplines?

PI: I only judge singles and pairs. No ice dance for me. I'm a REAL judge!

TW: Which means?

PI: That's an inside joke in figure skating. In ice dance, everyone knows all the results before they even judge, yet they still sit through every practice session from five in the morning until late at night.

TW: So who DOES determine the ice dance results, then?

PI: The previous competitions and the country you're from play a huge part. And I guess from time-to-time, the quality of skating matters. But that's not my department..

TW: Do you think that judging has become more or less honest since the 2002 Salt Lake City scandal in the pairs competition, when the French judge admitted she voted a certain way after pressure from her federation?

PI: I think it's exactly the same as before! No matter what system you use, people will always find a way to cheat. That is why I was glad to have such a great panel for the mens short program in Vancouver. No controversy there!

TW: What percent of judges do you feel are/have been completely honest?

PI: Completely honest? I would say 10%.

TW: Really, that low? Why is that?

PI: Yes, but for different reasons. Judges still afraid of their federations even though they are scoring anonymously now, defending their own skaters (national bias) against skaters ranked close to their own, pushing their favorite skaters, judges afraid of being outside the corridor, trying to push a skater from a country to get invitations to act as a referee in that country, or just simply they don't know what they are doing!

TW: Have you personally ever been asked to judge a certain way or hold a skater up or down by other judges or federations?

PI: Only once, but it wasn't at a high level competition. In fact, it happened at a national championship where a certain skater needed to win to be sent to the Europeans. Even then, I didn't give in. As a result, I was never invited to judge there again!

TW: And as a retiring judge, you are allowed to share your opinions freely?

PI: I spoke freely while I was judging. It is against the rules to talk about anything regarding the specific event that you are judging while it is happening, but once the event review meeting is complete, you can comment on everything you see to whoever wants to listen. We live in a free world!

TW: Over the years that you have judged, who are your favorite skaters?

PI: Ooh, this is a tough one! Michelle Kwan, Michael Weiss, Jeffrey Buttle, Alexei Yagudin, Jamie Sale/David Pelletier.

And in recent years, Aliona Savchenko/Robin Szolkowy, Patrick Chan, Florent Amodio, Denis Ten, Javier Fernandez, Yannick Ponsoero, and Joannie Rochette.

TW: If you are judging those particular skaters in competition, do you find it hard to judge them, or possibly are you more critical of their skating?

PI: To be honest I never had any problems judging them and the only reason is that I know them personally and they know me. They know that they can come up to me with any questions and that I will give them the correct answer and help them wherever I can. However, in the moment that I become the skating judge, all personal relationships vanish and they are become the skaters I have to judge and they will receive the marks they deserve. Good or bad!

That is the only way it works, and they will respect you even more as a judge and person.

TW: What is the single best performance you have ever been on the judging panel for?

PI: "Love Story" by Sale and Pelletier at the 1999 Skate America. It brought me to tears while judging!

TW: So let me ask some questions about the judging itself. What kind of training do/did the judges receive when it came to the new system, which began during select international competitions in the fall of 2003?

PI: We did and still do have ISU seminars where they explain the most recent rules and changes to old rules, as well as what to look for while judging. This includes obvious and subtle errors, downgrades, transitions, and footwork into the solo jump in the singles discipline short programs, plus many other things. They also explain the differences between the short and long

programs, and what to look for while judging the components. It is the responsibility of the national federations and the judge him or herself to read about the rule changes, though. They are published on the International Skating Union website in the form of communications, open for everyone to see. At every competition, the judges have an initial meeting where we go over the general rules. An hour before every segment of the competition, we again go over all the rules and the basics about program elements and components.

TW: Can you quickly summarize your own definitions of the five program components in singles and pairs skating? If you know the actual definitions by heart, feel free to use them, but try to put them in your own words rather than cheating! [Note: these answers were given immediately and haven't been edited from the original quote. I thought it would be more interesting to get immediate definitions rather than giving Ibens time to think about the answers.]

PI: Skating Skills:

1. Flow and effortless glide with deep edges of steps and turns
2. Variety of speed and acceleration
3. Multi directional skating

Transitions:

That there are transitional moves and that there is variety in them. Not always the same movement. A good example is the long program of Stephane Lambiel. He is always doing the same upper body movements as his transitions, even if he has many.

Performance/Execution:

1. The skater gives you the "I am and I am going to be..." feeling.
2. Personality (if you can't remember a skater's performance after 5 minutes... he/she doesn't have any personality).
3. Projection
 - a) gives you the feeling that he/she jumps into the judges stand/audience.
 - b) takes you with him/her into his/her own little world.
4. Quality of each movement. Each movement should be done to the end instead of cutting the movement short halfway.

Choreography:

1. Nice programs with beautiful choreography and good lay-out of the entire program.
2. Good use of the music.

Interpretation:

1. If most of the notes are used by the skater.
2. If the music goes up the moves should also lift upward and if the music goes down... the moves should be done downward.
3. When a skater becomes the character.
4. That the skater is interpreting the music instead of putting on a show program.

TW: Based on your own definitions and since you were on the judging panel for the mens competition, which man would you consider the strongest on each of the five?

PI: Skating skills: Takahashi, Transitions and choreography: Chan, Performance: Lysacek, Interpretation: Abbott.

TW: When it comes to Lysacek vs. Plushenko, what do you personally see as the strengths and weaknesses of each skater?

PI: Plushenko is very confident of himself and really believes in what he is doing. His weakness is the fact that he still comes from the 6.0 system and doesn't calculate every element to be of great importance, but that is the way it's done now.

Lysacek is a fighter a hard worker. I remember times when I thought... "oh my God, this boy will never make it.. he doesn't really have it!" So his devotion to do his absolute best really worked in his favor. His weakness? Let me think. Probably his cheating on the triple Axel take-off. Sometimes his skid [or pre-rotation] on take-off is rotated for more than half of a turn making it a triple Salchow, so to speak. But that is the only minor issue I can find with him, and it doesn't happen all the time.

TW: There have been many comments complaining that Plushenko was not properly rewarded for being able to do the quadruple jump (toe loop) successfully in both portions of the competition, including Evgeny himself. You mentioned that you feel he does not look at the “whole picture” in your last response, so what do you feel about this, and what are your general thoughts about this system?

PI: He did get rewarded for the quadruple toe loop by attempting and landing it, but then he also lost points for the bad landings on the other jumps. If in his opinion only the quadruple jump should have made the difference between first and second place, then I think it's time that Sweden starts complaining as well because their skater, Adrian Schultheiss, had the best quadruple toe loop of the evening and didn't even make it to the top five! [Schultheiss was 13th in the free skate]

On the other hand, in most languages figure skating has the word “ART” in it. This means that there has to be something more than just jumping around the ice.

Remember when Katarina Witt won with Carmen? She only displayed two different triples, being a toe loop and Salchow, while others had more difficult jumps. But Katarina was art on ice!

TW: So do you like this system better than the 6.0 system? Explain.

PI: Well, I have mixed feelings here cause it has both good and bad aspects.

Some of the good aspects are that skaters finally had to work their footwork. Back to clean edges, etc. Also, as I mentioned, they get rewarded for every element and not only for difficult jumps! The negatives are that all elements look alike, especially the spins and steps. There is also not much time left for much creativity.

What I hate the most about this system is that it is made to save the “not-so-good” judges, while the really good judges who are marking the way it's meant to be (every component separately) risk the chance of being out of the corridor of average marks, and risk getting some assessments. A judge who basically does not know anything can give all the wrong marks or completely guess and their marks fall into an average! But someone who wants to have wide margins between components might be singled out for doing so. For example, when scoring the first three groups at the World Championships, you give between 5.50 and 7.00 and you are in the safe corridor. When the last groups come on the ice, give between 7.00 and 8.50 and you're safe again!

It also, in a way, took the word sport out of the sport itself! Remember the Battle of the Brians? Well, Boitano added a second triple Axel towards the end of his program which landed him the gold that day. If today's skaters would add something extra, they don't get any extra points for it cause it will be an element with no value since there are a maximum amount of jumps and spins allowed to be completed.

TW: Back to Evgeny Plushenko. There was a big controversy started when Plushenko apparently commented that he and a fellow competitor (Brian Joubert) did not have “any transitions” because they were too focused on the jumps. Were you in attendance at Europeans for this particular press conference after the event?

PI: No I wasn't at Europeans, but I heard about it!

TW: What do you think of his comments?

PI: I think it was stupid to do but Plushenko is blond isn't he? Just joking! I can see what he was trying to explain, but too bad that in doing so, he took Brian Joubert down as well. You don't do that! I am not Joubert's biggest fan, but I think it's the lowest thing an athlete can do is to try to put your fellow competitors in a negative light, so to speak.

TW: Did you receive the original e-mail from Joseph Inman that was published by the French media, and if so, do you think that it had any effect on the way the mens competition was judged in Vancouver? Did it personally effect your judging?

PI: Yes, I did receive the e-mail, but everybody who knows me also knows that I won't be influenced by such things. This Inman e-mail was the second of the kind sent. Like I said at the beginning, I'm a real judge and I don't need anybody's e-mails or comments to make up my mind! I'm perfectly capable of doing that for myself. I judge what I see no matter who it is!

TW: You were on the panel in the short program. How did you think Plushenko and Lysacek skated in that particular portion? Also, how would you have scored Daisuke Takahashi, as the top three were separated by less than a point in that portion of the competition? Anyone that you thought was held up or down, way different from how you judged?

PI: Right after the completion of the short program I could see that the top three skaters were less than a point apart. I knew that the panel had done a great job! During that segment, those three were equally good and all for different reasons. However, in my opinion, I thought Takahashi would have won the short program but anything is possible now since we as judges don't know what the technical panel has decided on as far as levels and downgrades. We also do not know our previous marks so it is possible that you accidentally gave the higher mark to the other skater although as a good judge you have your ways to get around that!

TW: Please explain the last part in more detail.

PI: If I gave, say, a 7.25 to skater A, then skater B is ten skaters later and in my opinion he is better, but gave him a 7.00, then I accidentally gave "first place" to the wrong skater for that component.

But, as a good judge you add up all of your components for the first skater, which we will say makes an average 7.00. Then you remember that and when the next skater comes on you do the same. If he is better all-around on the components, your average should obviously be higher than 7.00!

TW: But this system is supposed to make it so that you are marking a skater against a 10-point scale, not pitting the skaters against each other. Do you think the reason that happens is because there is too much going on at once?

PI: Yes and no. As I said, our sport is out of the "sport". Sport is that one is better than two is better than three. You can only come up with that result by comparing. If you call it speed skating, then there's a clock but of course there are no marks for skills and artistry—they only have to be fast! Scoring only on a scale of 10 is impossible in a competition.

TW: Do you or many of the other judges watch practices, including skater run-throughs to get an idea of their abilities on the components marks?

PI: I personally go to one practice just to get myself in the right mood to focus on the job that I have to do. I never watch the exact details of what the skaters are doing. They do different things when they are under stress of a competition, anyways! But there are some judges that go watch every practice. Don't ask me why but they do. Since I never watch in detail I can't get a feeling for the components either during a practice session.

In real time it's sometimes hard cause you have to focus on so many different things. The elements, the mistakes, the rules and then the five components. This is sometimes hard to do but a good judge can train himself so that his mind picks up on all the smaller things so you can focus on the important things during a program.

TW: Do you think that the components are judged fairly or used as a "place-holder" of types? You mentioned before that at the end of the day it is basically used in a way to compare the skaters.

PI: I don't think that the components are judged fairly and not because they are a place-holder, but because some judges are not only missing artistic background, but even more to stay in that stupid corridor of average marks.

TW: So you feel that some judges mark their five components on a generally similar level so that they won't be outside of the judging "corridor" and have an assessment at the end of the competition, possibly leading to no future assignments?

PI: They certainly do!!!

TW: Who do you think the Olympic mens champion should have been and why?

PI: For me the Olympic champion should have been Takahashi. He has it all! The skating skills, the charisma, the technique. Too bad he had problems with some of his jumps and fell once!

TW: Okay, and since he wasn't able to perform at his best- Lysacek or Plushenko?!

PI: Takahashi!

TW: I see that I'm not going to get an answer out of you on that one.

PI: Oh, Lysacek! There's no doubt about it when it comes down to those two. But if it came to the whole field skating great that night.. Takahashi.

TW: Did you watch any of the other competitions while in Vancouver? Who do you think to look out for in the next four years leading up to the 2014 Sochi Games?

PI: I only watched the pairs event and the mens long program, since I was not assigned to judge that.

Look out for Patrick Chan, Denis Ten and Florent Amodio. And don't forget Javier Fernandez, either!

TW: What is in the future for you now that you've decided to stop judging?

PI: I haven't decided yet, but probably giving advice to skaters nationally/internationally. I also put together a judges manual for new judges to learn what to look for when they first start to judge. It contains more than 100 pages and handles all different aspects of judging. I will also be doing commentary at the upcoming World Championships for Belgian television.

TW: Thank you for your time!

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