

What is left of the art of Figure Skating?

by Sonia Bianchetti January 2006

In less than one month, the 2002–2006 Olympic cycle will be over. No doubt it was the most controversial and peculiar period in the history of figure skating.

Nothing was missing:

- a. the biggest scandal ever in the history of figure skating and the Olympic Winter Games, which, like a tsunami, swept away the credibility of the sport and of the International Skating Union (ISU);
- b. a new revolutionary judging and scoring system that was adopted to replace the century-old 6.0 system, which is supposed to solve all skating problems. Still, from what we have witnessed so far, the only sure result is that it has killed the originality, the creativity, the art and the beauty of the sport;
- c. and on the top of all this, for the first time in the history of figure skating, the scandal resulted in a new hero to celebrate: Marie Reine Le Gougne.

As everybody knows, Marie Reine Le Gougne was the French judge who in Salt Lake City awarded first place to the Russian pair, Elena Berezhnaya and Anton Sikharulidze, in an exchange of favours with the Russians, a deal for which she was banned from skating for three years for corruption.

Well, Marie Reine Le Gougne has now triumphantly come back on the skating scene and she feels vindicated by the introduction of a marvellous new judging system for which she claims all credit. In a recent interview, just as the skating world prepares for the Olympic Games in Torino, she spoke of her role in the judging scandal at the Salt Lake City games, saying it was not in vain because it helped the sport to undergo a revolution. She declared, "People know that I paid for the system," and that she was warmly received on her return from suspension last April by everyone including ISU president Ottavio Cinquanta. Le Gougne credits herself for the new voting system brought in after the Salt Lake City Games because it is thanks to her vote manipulation that Cinquanta was forced to adopt a judging system which she considers "fabulous." "Even Ottavio Cinquanta realised that it was time to change. It is only because of me that we have had this revolution. They can now say 'thank you Marie-Reine.'"

Isn't this incredible? Aren't we blessed to have such a "hero" who, with her magic touch, destroyed in one moment the credibility of the sport, its beauty and its artistry, and is even proud of her achievements? Our world has gone crazy. What can possibly happen next?

In March 2005, I described the World Figure Skating Championships held in Moscow as a unique mixture of everything that no one would ever expect to see in a skating event.

One year later, after having watched the most dreadful and uninspiring skating at the European Championships held in Lyon, I am wondering what is happening to our beautiful sport, what is left of the art of figure skating.

What I have feared, ever since the day the concepts on which the NJS system is based were announced, has come true, even sooner than I expected: the beauty, the artistry, the originality of the sport have been destroyed.

The programs, in all four disciplines, have been homogenized; they look exactly the same with the same step sequences, the same spins and spin combinations; because the rules are constraining the routines, they have taken away the freedom of the skaters. The skaters have now to learn to count how long they hold a position in a lift or in a spiral sequence, or how many turns they execute in each position in a spin. As the ice dancer Povilas Vanagas, bronze medallist in Lyon, commented, the skaters are going back to grade-school arithmetic. This system is turning them back into children.

The programs are filled up with jumps, jump combinations and sequences, lifts and throws one after the other, difficult step sequences and transitions, too often slow and scratchy because of the number of twizzles, brackets, counters and rockers they must include. In the spins there must be changes of foot, position, direction and edge, the result of which is often awkward looking. The skaters are compelled to perform all these difficult tricks to obtain the highest point values, but the quality of skating is definitely suffering; there is no time for the choreography.

We are no longer seeing the skaters' passion, the skaters' joy during their performances; we are only seeing skaters suffering and struggling to get to the end of overly demanding programs.

At the European Championships there was only one clean program in the ladies' event, Elena Sokolova's, and in the men's, none. Plushenko, although he skated an outstanding performance, doubled the triple Salchow and missed the quad/triple combination at the start of the free program. Is this normal in a European Championships? There must be some reasons behind this disaster and I think the ISU leaders should start to reconsider the whole structure of this Code of Points system.

I will not go through the programs here; I suppose that those who have seen them have drawn their own personal conclusions. As to mine, after what I am seeing on the ice these days, I have some difficulties in recognizing the reputedly extraordinary merits of the New Judging System, except that it has turned figure skating from a beautiful and artistic sport into a difficult, unattractive one. If this was the goal of Cinquanta, then he can be satisfied. But is this really good for the sport? Is this what the world is looking for?

In pair skating, the couples are putting everything they can in their programs, one lift or throw jump after another, sometimes of mediocre quality, but with the most unbelievable positions and dismounts, not always aesthetically pleasing, just to increase their level of difficulty. The same applies to the pair spin combinations, where the lady is spinning upside down or both partners are holding their free legs up to their noses in horrible positions. Is this something that deserves credit?

In the ladies we saw something like 50 or more spiral step sequences which were just photocopies of one another, with exactly the same positions of the free leg, the same holds, the same changes of edges — not to mention the Biellmann spins, some of which were really horrendous — and the same scratchy straight-line step sequences, the whole filled with failures and falls in jumps, jump combinations and sequences.

The same applies to ice dancing where again the couples are executing almost in an obsessive way the same number of twizzles, the same steps and the same lifts and spins, very often in dreadful positions. The programs are boring and not attractive.

What concerns me the most is that the current opinion among ISU leaders is that now, at last, the competitions are indeed won by skaters who can perform all the elements well, not only jumps, and can really skate using their feet and not just waving their arms up and down as they used to do.

I am wondering whether I understand anything about figure skating anymore, since I miss those "miserable" skaters who could only skate with their arms, and linked their casual triple or quadruple jumps with nothing but magnificent connecting steps or sequences, perhaps only "Level 1," but who skated on deep edges, at great speed, almost floating on the ice, and could transmit deep artistic emotions to the audience in the arena and at home — skaters such as Katarina Witt, Brian Orser and Brian Boitano, Kurt Browning, Michelle Kwan, Sasha Cohen, Shizuka Arakawa, Alexei Yagudin, Ekaterina Gordeeva and Sergei Grinkov, Jamie Sale and David Pelletier or Xue Chen and Hongbo Zhao, or in ice dancing Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean and the Duchesnays, just to mention a few to whom some strange judges, including myself, awarded some 6.0 marks out of the blue!

As to judging, the ISU claims that now the competitions are fairly judged and the skaters get the points and the places they really deserve based on their skating and not what used to happen with the old 6.0 system until two years ago, when the judges, like magicians, pulled marks out of their hats that had nothing to do with the actual skating, as if skating were a lottery.

Well, again I can only totally dissent. First of all, at least until two years ago, the judges showed their marks and were accountable and held responsible for them. Now nobody knows who has given what and this may be comfortable for the judges and beneficial for the ISU, but is definitely unfair to the skaters and wrong for the sport.

Second, the role of the judges is more or less reduced to that of a clerk or a counting machine. They are no longer identifying and recognizing the jumps or the other elements. This is the responsibility of the Technical Specialist. The judges are only supposed to mark the quality of the elements performed, but they have not been doing this at all. If you look at the detailed results of the competitions, you notice that the elements of the competitors, from the first to the last one in the classification list, are often given the same GOE: 0. Very seldom do the judges dare to give a +2 or +3.

In Lyon, Plushenko executed two marvellous, breathtaking step sequences, very difficult, at great speed, perfectly in time with the music. Well, in the circular step sequence, only three judges out of 12 gave +3, three gave +2 and six just +1. The same applies to the straight-line step sequence: two judges gave +3, three gave +2 and seven +1. What are the judges expecting from a skater to give +3?

And what to say about the assessment of the jumps? In the ladies' event, Sokolova skated the program of her life, with seven high, clean, strong triple jumps and a double Axel all perfectly rotated in the air and landed on firm edges. Well, believe it or not, the GOE was only rated 0 for practically all her elements. Her triple flip or her triple Salchow, for instance, were considered of the same quality of those of Annette Dyrtr of Germany or Tugba Karademir of Turkey, who placed 9th and 10th. With all respect and appreciation for those two girls, this really makes no sense.

The consequence of this is that the quality of the elements executed has practically no influence on the result. What counts is only the level of difficulty of each element as determined by the Technical Specialist. The skaters need only to stand up. A high, long jump taken at full speed, provided it is landed on one foot after the required number of revolutions, is worth exactly the same as one that is short, low, telegraphed and with wrapped legs.

The marks for the components are even more incomprehensible. Very often they do not reflect at all the performance on the ice. The components marks for Slutskaya really come from out of the blue! And this has been going on for years. She is a good skater, a seven-time European champion, she has beautiful jumps and excellent spins, but as for the transitions, the choreography or the interpretation of the music, it is another story. Still, the marks are all around 8. And this, in my opinion, is only based on reputation. The judges, in order to be safely within the famous "corridor," just always award the same marks. Furthermore, they all agree that to judge the five components properly is beyond human capacity.

Another example of how these marks mean nothing and are just used to rank the skaters is the case of Stéphane Lambiel and Brian Joubert in the mens event. Lambiel received lower total marks than Joubert, and based on that night's performances, this was really not correct unless the new system includes an added bonus for being French while skating in France!

And as the cherry on the cake, we had a scandal in ice dancing, for a change. As was the case at the European Championships in Torino in 2005, the podium was wrong. New system, old system, nothing has changed.

Except for the ISU president, Ottavio Cinquanta, who declared that he is absolutely convinced that the ISU has done an excellent job promoting and developing the new system and that he is confident things will go well in Torino with the new judging system, others have some doubts whether the system can produce the correct results at the Olympics in a couple of weeks.

In Lyon, nobody could actually understand the first place to the Ukrainian couple in the compulsory dance, as well as the marks for the French, the Israelis and the Lithuanians, who all performed wonderful and passionate free dances when compared to the Russians and the Ukrainians.

Two-time world champions Tatiana Navka and Roman Kostomarov of Russia earned their best score this season for a free dance and placed first even though they skated poorly. Elena Grushina and Ruslan Goncharov of Ukraine performed an

uninspiring routine, but won the silver medal. Although they finished fourth in the free dance, the point difference was so minimal that they held on to second place.

In addition, the Referee and the Technical Controller of the event were booed.

The New Judging System once again showed all its weaknesses.

First, and most disturbingly: it is destroying our beautiful sport.

Second: it has failed in its main purpose. It does not guarantee any objectivity in the judging. On the contrary! Besides having the judges still judging in subjective ways, using the components marks to push up a favoured skater, we have the callers who decide the level of far too many elements according to their personal views or interpretation of the rules. They have proven to be inconsistent. The levels of the same elements vary from competition to competition. The controllers can really have a say in the determination of the order of the podium.

Was it worthwhile to spend all that money to develop this new system, to instruct all the judges, the technical specialists and the technical controllers?

As we have said many times, the problem is not the system, it is the judges.

What will happen next? The Olympic Games in Torino start in two weeks. This is going to be very interesting.