

SONYA AND PETER DUNFIELD

WINGS ON THEIR FEET

by Edward Z. Epstein

She was one of the most exciting figure skaters the United States ever produced. He was one of Canada's leading "creator of champions." They were young when they met, from different worlds. He was handsome, talented and totally devoted to the world of skating. She was not only pretty but possessed an iron will to succeed.

They fell in love.

The stories of Sonya Klopfer and Peter Dunfield are not the stuff of typical skaters. But then there is little that is typical about these two people.

Her talent surfaced early on - she became the youngest gold medalist in the U.S.A., passing her eighth test by the age of thirteen (Dick Button later described her as the strongest female skater he'd ever seen). Her rise to the top was hard-won, a family effort, fueled not by dreams of wealth and acclaim but by a youngster's heart-felt love of the sport. "It was - still is - in my blood," states Sonya Klopfer Dunfield today.

Brooklyn, New York, has produced many renowned females (Barbra Streisand, actresses Barbara Stanwyck and Susan Hayward among them), but Sonya Klopfer is unquestionably the borough's most famous figure skater.

She was brought up in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area. "My mother, Margaret, named me for Sonja Henie," recalls Sonya, "but not because she thought I would become a skater."

"I was told that the day Mrs. Klopfer gave birth," smiles Peter Dunfield, "she'd seen a picture in the New York Times of Sonja Henie, who

was skating at Madison Square Garden. She looked at her new baby girl, who had the same dimples, and named her Sonya, with a 'y.'"

Sonya's dad, Oswald, a machinist by trade, had ongoing health problems, a result of a near-fatal accident (fellow workers at first thought he was dead). He'd broken his back, and during the slow, painful recovery process, the family's savings were depleted. (With typical Klopfer family resolve, Mr. Klopfer eventually returned to work.)

How did young Sonya find her way onto the ice? She can't recall a time she didn't want to skate (she began when her mother, who loved the sport, bought her a pair of double runners). On one occasion, alone, she went to a pool that was frozen over. She never held back, and, "as a kid, I broke my nose. It left me with only ninety-percent of two hundred-percent of the air I

Her sisters skated at the old Brooklyn Ice Palace. Sonya begged to go along. Once there, she never wanted to leave, which was fine with her mom. As Sonya recalls, "Skating kept me off the streets, and out of trouble."

"I started late," reflects Sonya (she was nine). A pro at the rink, Ingrid Lordahl, spotted the youngster and lessons began. After only six weeks of one fifteen-minute lesson per week, the child was doing a sit-spin.

There were no sponsors for aspiring competitors in those days - the enormous costs of skating were borne by the skater's family. In most cases, it was an impossible burden.

"But I was fortunate," states Sonya. "My sisters were very supportive, and helped a great deal." Later, Sonya's brother-in-law, and several of his friends, financed Sonya's amateur skating career ("I paid it all back," she notes).

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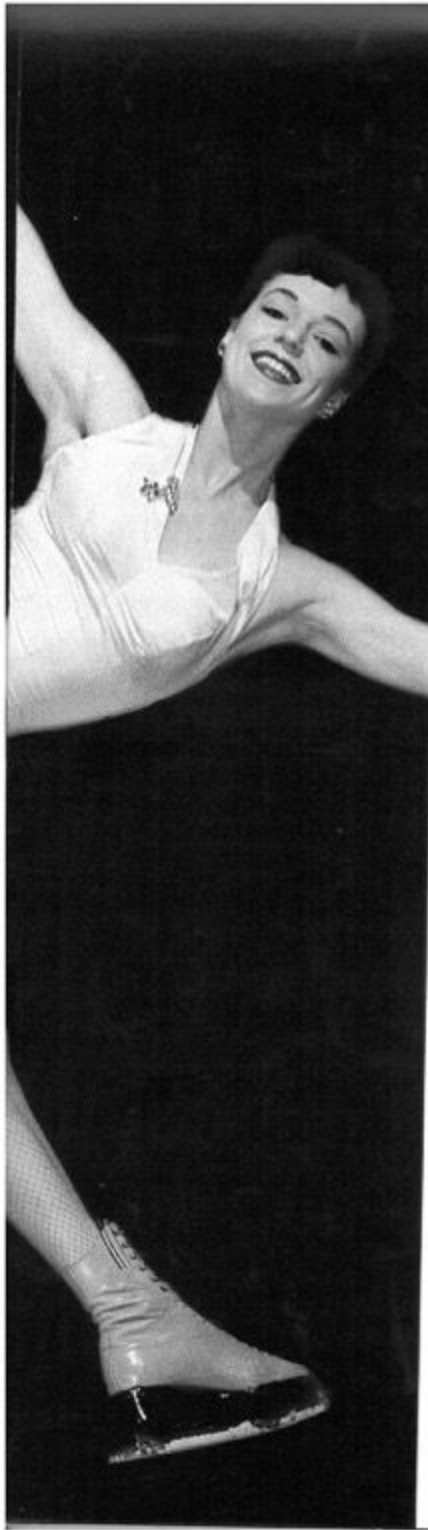
should have been taking in through my nostrils."

Her limited air intake was a condition that never improved. The athlete was always amused that she was regarded as "such a powerhouse skater. It never dawned on me that my breathing problem should have been a problem."

Growing up in Brooklyn permitted no room for coddling. Sonya had three sisters, two older (Ursula and Trudy), one younger (Anita). "I always ran up the five flights of stairs to our apartment," recalls Sonya. "And I could climb a barbed-wire fence without any problem." Her physical stamina would prove to be a great asset in her arsenal.

Her progress was swift. She was enrolled in the Brooklyn Figure Skating Club, and after only one year, placed fifth ("but of sixteen skaters") in the Mid-Atlantic juveniles (she was the youngest competitor). "I felt I had won!" she exclaims. Within four years (it took others closer to twelve) she'd passed her eighth test (she was thirteen years old).

Bill Chase was another pro at the Brooklyn Ice Palace who recognized Sonya's talent. His teaching methods were unconventional. "He would push you into positions," explains Sonya. "He was a genius at working with body structure. He taught me body balance. Strengthened



those parts of the body that needed it - he was like a one-man dance class, taught you the proper stretch, gave you the right line. I responded to his method - I always liked to figure things out, to learn how things worked.

"With Bill, your skating was fluid - you had strength without showing it - you weren't 'locked' into position, you remained flexible, not tense."

Sonya's signature moves included her powerful, smooth stroking. "I'll tell you how I learned that," she laughs. "Speed skaters used to prepare the ice at the Brooklyn Ice Palace. I'd skate all day on Saturday, and my sisters came to the evening sessions. The speed skaters would want to meet my sisters, and to coax me into introducing them, they taught me those nice, long power strokes - they knew I was in love with every aspect of skating - I was a kid obsessed!"

Sonya won National Juniors when she was fourteen years old - "that's when the Skating Club of New York invited me to skate with them."

Her "personality and vitality" on the ice were memorable, recalls Nancy Streeter. "And that split-jump!"

The Club's *modus operandi* back then was somewhat Byzantine. A highly-respected coach had initially turned down the opportunity to teach Sonya (that was before she'd won National Juniors). Once the youngster had that accomplishment under her belt, the coach changed his mind. But Sonya and her mother, in a position to choose, selected Freddie Mesot.

"The Rockefeller Center Observers," a group of veteran skating lovers who frequented New York's famous outdoor skating pond, became aware of the 15-year-old.

One day, after she'd skated an exhibition between public sessions, one of the "observers" excitedly phoned another. Word was soon out: "Wait 'til you see this incredible kid from Brooklyn!" They avidly followed

her career, attended many of her competitions - and subsequently awarded her a trophy. "For all those you didn't get!"

Sonya, her mother and sister spent summertimes at Lake Placid, where Sonya was coached by the renowned Howard Nicholson, an older pro whose students had included Sonja Henie. Nicholson took Sonya-with-a-'y' through her eighth test. "Bill Chase gave me my spiral, Nicholson my figures, and Mr. Mesot gave me my program."

As a youngster Sonya loved movie musicals - "We'd sail out of the theater dancing through the lobby" - and she was inspired by a skating innovator on the silver screen: Balita. "I loved her skating - her extension, power, her control." (Sonya's own spiral and split-jump were among the few in Balita's league.)

Sonya's affinity for music translated onto the ice. She was among the first in competition to have "a *cut* piece of music," with a structure that wasn't predetermined. "Up to then," explains Sonya, "skaters performed [mostly] to overtures."

Secrecy was required to retain the advantage. "At competitions, I'd practice my program without music," she recalls. "We kept [my music] secret, until the night of the competition. It worked."

An intense rivalry existed between the New York and Boston skating clubs, each very protective of its star competitors. Being home club to a National champion was a highly sought-after honor.

The politics of skating were Machiavellian, the tensions and pressures of competition not for the faint-of-heart. In 1951, thanks to Sonya, the Skating Club of New York was triumphant. She won the U.S. Ladies Championship (Tenley Albright was runner-up). Sonya was the youngest female ever to win the title (a distinction that remained intact until Tara Lipinski's U.S. victory decades later).

Sonya won North Americans that year, and placed second the following year in the World championships (she was also captain of the Olympic team that year).

Over the years, Sonya remained one of the few competitors who excelled at both school figures and free skating. Figures were then worth sixty-percent towards the final score, and as long as the leader didn't skate a disastrous free program, the title would be hers (or his). Sonya and Dick Button were in the vanguard of the new order: outstanding in both categories (Sonya bemoans

of a vintage Hollywood film. "It was snowing. I was alone, walking around the beautiful lake at Broadmoor. Halfway around, I saw a young lady approaching me. Somehow, I knew - 'Is your name Sonya Klopfer?' I asked. We ended up talking for hours..." Dunfield smiles at the recollection, adding quietly: "It was very much meant to be."

But it didn't happen overnight.

Peter loved to teach, and built a prominent career as a coach (with bases of operation in Baltimore, Chicago, New York and Ottawa

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the phasing out of school figures: "A great loss for today's skaters.").

For Sonya, it was always the performing, not the accolades or medals, which remained meaningful and memorable.

Peter Dunfield, born and educated in Toronto, Ontario, never saw Sonya skate in competition (television coverage of figure-skating was non-existent at that time). He was hard at work on his own promising competitive career, having trained at the Toronto Skating Club and, in the United States, at the Broadmoor Skating Club in Colorado Springs. His coaches included the noted Sheldon Galbraith, Arnold Gerschwiler and Eileen Seigh.

Dunfield won the Canadian Men's Junior championship in 1951, the year Sonya triumphed at the U.S. nationals. Peter's coach had raved about her performance, and Dunfield recalls, "It was the first time I'd heard her name."

By the time Peter entered international competition, representing his native Canada in the World championships in 1953 and 1954, Sonya had turned pro.

"We met in 1961 in Colorado Springs," he recalls, describing an encounter virtually out

[Canada]]. Over the years, a myriad of medalists and champions have been his pupils: Ronald and Vivian Joseph (1964 Olympic Pairs Bronze medalists; 1965 Worlds Silver medalists); Tina Noyes (1968 Olympics, fourth place); Scott Ethan Allen (1968 Worlds, fourth place); Patrick Pera (1972 Olympic Bronze medalist); Elizabeth Manley (1988 Olympic Silver medalist); Yuka Sato (1994 World Champion). Peter has also worked with Janet Lynn, Peggy Fleming, John Curry and Toller Cranston. To date, he has coached at six Olympic Games and twenty World championships.

Sophisticated and dapper, Dunfield has always had a distinctive personal style (a reporter once characterized him as "dressing much like one would expect the most staid banker to be. His dark suit and conservative tie only heighten his good looks."). "I never touch the barrier when I coach," he explains. "My skates are on, and my method is hands-on."

After the 1952 Olympics, Sonya had hoped to remain in competition, but financial pressures dictated another decision. She launched a distinguished professional career, starring in *Ice Capades*, *Holiday on Ice*, and *Cinderella on Ice* at Empress Hall in





London, England. She replaced her namesake, Sonja Henie, for a year in Henie's own ice revue, and was the final in-person skating attraction at the legendary Roxy Theater in New York.

In New York, in 1964, Peter and Sonya tied the knot. "I knew I wanted to be married and have children," states Sonya. She'd turned her back on a Hollywood offer - "I made the decision not to take it. I wanted a home and family. I knew I wouldn't miss the spotlight."

She made a brief foray into the land of professional competition, and won the World Professional Championship in Lake Placid (the event had been organized by her former pro Howard Nicholson and Gus Lussi).

When Peter and Sonya joined the staff at the Skating Club of New York, "We lived on Eighth Avenue," recalls Peter, "only a few blocks walk from the old Iceland rink at Madison Square Garden, where Sonya and I taught individually and together."

Their careers flourished. "They worked so well together, they formed such a good team as teachers," recalls Nancy Streeter, who came to know them well during this period. "Sonya was so specific about how to be in contact with various parts of the body. Peter was precise in a different way - but each knew what your hip was doing wrong!"

"They were champions in their own right, of course, but cared as much for adult skaters as the younger ones. They saw to it that the older skaters kept up in free-skating. Sonya worked with a lot of adults. Peter was wonderful at teaching one how to partner - and he'd encourage us all to skate."

"They were wonderful with the Junior Club, too, beginners-on-up. It's very unusual to have that dual capability. Peter set realistic expectations - he gave my daughter Meg a joy of skating that might not have been there with other pros."

"It's remarkable what Peter and Sonya are able to give students regardless of age or

stage." Not to mention the fact that, on and off the ice, "They're fun!" exclaims Mrs. Streeter.

The most rewarding dividends in the personal lives of the Dunfields arrived in 1968 and 1970, when sons Gregory and Roger were born. "We were careful, over the years, to educate them to tolerate our high-energy lives, our crazy occupation," observes Peter.

The boys were raised in Cresskill, New Jersey, and Ottawa, capital of Canada. "They're very cosmopolitan," observes their dad today, referring to their lifestyles, education and the fact that they enjoy dual citizenship: "We consider them North Americans," smiles Peter.

Sonya trained Dorothy Hamill, from her fourth to eighth tests, through her National Novice and Junior titles, her first year in National Seniors and the 1971 pre-Olympic competition in Sapporo, Japan. (Peter worked with Hamill on her programs.) Sonya worked with Toller Cranston (she taught him his signature camel spin), and worked with Elizabeth Manley and Yuka Sato. She coached David Liu for the 1994 and 1998 Olympics.

One promising young New York Club pupil, passionate about skating, was Vera Wang. Sonya taught her figures and free skating. Peter worked with her on her programs, choreography and pairs. Vera and partner Jimmy Stewart were National Junior pairs competitors.

When Peter and Yuka Sato began their collaboration (she couldn't speak English), he asked her what she liked best about skating. She looked up his question in her dictionary, word by word. Her response: "I like to sweat, I like to work hard." Peter recalls his response - he thought, "Honey, you're on!"

Yuka recalls her response to Peter: "My father had brought me to Ottawa, to train with Mr. Dunfield [Yuka's parents had known him for years]. He met us at the airport, and seemed like such a nice guy! Too nice - I wondered, 'Is he really going to be able to lead me

as a strict coach? Will things work out?"

"The next day, I had my first lesson with him - we looked at each other eye-to-eye, and connected instantly as student-and-teacher. He would look in his dictionary and give me a word - I'd look in mine - the connection between us was very strong.

"It was quite amazing - we didn't speak the same language, but he could reach into your soul. He would try and feel what I felt. That was a relief for me!"

Things worked out very well indeed - Yuka won the World championship in 1994 (that season Dunfield was named PSA's Coach of the Year).

Peter always had innovative ideas on the future of skating; his impact on the skating world has reached into the lives of all skaters. In New York, he created, owned and operated the renowned Sky Rink Skating School. Until the mid-nineteen-eighties, he was head coach of the Skating Club of New York.

With SCNY's cooperation, for fifteen years Dunfield produced and directed the ice show at Rockefeller Center for the benefit of the United Hospital Fund of New York ("I considered that my personal contribution to New York City," he declares today).

"Peter is a wonderful organizer," observes Nancy Streeter. "We had a ball doing those Rockefeller Center shows - every year he pulled it all together in such a short time!"

A past president of the PSA, during his presidency the inauguration of the National Rating System for coaches and the first annual coaches conferences were started. To date, both of these initiatives have become the largest in the world of their kind. A charter member of the ISI, he was a member of the committee that developed and inaugurated the ISI recreational test program. Peter was the first chairman of the coaching coordinating committee of the Canadian Figure Skating Association (he represented 3500

Canadian coaches on the CFSA Board).

The years have not diminished the creative capacities of Sonya and Peter. Personally and professionally, they continue to thrive. Peter has launched a new worldwide service company based in New York City, called "Ice Advice." He specializes in "on site work" with coaches of individual facilities to develop their skills.

The Dunfields are thrilled that their children lead "really interesting lives, with friends all over the world." Peter and Sonya will soon become grandparents, and this year celebrate thirty-six years of marriage. Their secret? "We've always been careful to maintain our individuality," declares Peter. "We like doing many things together, many things separately." It's a near-perfect relationship: "We can be apart and together."

The couple's admiration and respect for Ice Theater of New York, its accomplishments, aspirations, and goals, reflect the standard of artistic integrity they've maintained for themselves throughout their careers. New challenges intrigue them, and their enthusiasm is contagious.

The couple maintains an apartment in New York, and homes in Sun Valley, Idaho and on Berford Lake, north of Toronto, Canada. A philosopher once observed that success is a toy balloon among children armed with sharp pins. The Dunfields have managed to elude the "sharp pins." Their saga continues, their impact endures.

Edward Z. Epstein is author of twenty books, the most recent: *BORN TO SKATE: The Michelle Kwan Story* (Ballantine). In the Fall, he will appear on the A&E Biography television series, in regard to PORTRAIT OF JENNIFER, his biography of actress Jennifer Jones (Simon & Schuster). *ARK*, a play he's written based on the life of Ava Gardner, is currently under option to producer David Brown. Epstein is currently at work on a book with ice dance champions Maya Usova and Evgeny Platov. A skating devotee since childhood, he is a former Mid-Atlantic States Novice champion.

