

Sarah Hughes and Robin Wagner

by Edward Z. Epstein

She combines the beauty and bearing of a Renaissance princess with the sweetness and vulnerability of an American Girl-Next-Door. Skating swiftly across the ice, she comes alive like a snow bird whose wings have suddenly grown strong. Her blades flash like lightning bolts as she performs her intricate moves, never losing control or speed.

Always observing her intently is her coach. Her pupil makes her proud. Here is a young woman who's chosen what she wants to do and finds joy in it. Both pupil and coach have set high standards, and live up to them.

Sarah Hughes and Robin Wagner are a winning team. In the harshly competitive world of fig-

ure skating, the pursuit of perfection is never a carefree undertaking. As Sophocles once noted, "Fortune is not on the side of the faint-hearted."

Neither Sarah nor Robin are plagued by such dilemmas. Sarah's goal emerged early-on: a desire to compete in the Olympics ("You really don't mean that when you're five!"). Sarah's Dad, John, an attorney, and her Mom, Amy, are proud parents of six children (Sarah was fourth to arrive): David, Matt, Rebecca, Emily and Taylor. All are talented, with varied interests (twelve-year-old Emily is also an accomplished figure skater). Sarah's desire to skate (she was three) was a direct result of observing her two older brothers

and sister on the ice.

"I met Sarah when she was nine," recalls Robin Wagner. "I thought she had a great deal of talent, but she was only a child - it remained to be seen if we could really work together. She wanted to

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hop around, not pay attention to details. She had to be developed. But I thought, If she proved to be really serious about skating, I felt I could do some wonderful things with her."

"I entered a world of a very different kind of skating when I began working with Robin," states Sarah. "She focused on the 'artistic' side of the sport - it was a far more rewarding experience than just working on spins and jumps, which is what I'd been doing."

Sarah had an exciting role model in Robin - Ms. Wagner, a top-level competitor, champion, choreographer and performer, was still in her prime as a figure skater (as anyone who has seen her spiral and camel spin can attest). A U.S. Gold Medalist, her coaches included the legendary Gustave Lussi and Peter and Sonya Dunfield (last year's Ice Theatre honorees).

Photo Courtesy of Michelle Wojdyla.



Developing a long-lasting, trusting relationship between pupil and teacher is a painstaking process. It requires patience, understanding and the support of those behind the scenes. "Sarah's parents are wonderful," states Robin. "They've always been there (we touch base every day)."

"Look, there are always good times and bad times. But no matter what, Sarah and I love coming to 'work' every day. We enjoy working through the hard times. And then there are those moments when it all comes together, and there's nothing quite like that."

A skating career (Sarah represents the Skating Club of New York, home of many champions over the years) came together swiftly for Hughes, along with an understanding that life was not all glitter and gold medals. Sarah was twelve when her mother became seriously ill. The family responded to the crisis as a team, with Sarah's nickname becoming "Dr. Sarah" (she acknowledges a strong interest in studying medicine).

In 1997, the year Sarah turned twelve, she won the North Atlantic Novice title. In 1998, she won three competitions: North Atlantic Juniors, Eastern Juniors and a national title, the U.S. Junior championship. The press took notice. Suddenly Sarah was "a young lady to watch closely."

Sarah was selected for the World Junior Team in 1999 (she was fourteen); it was, to quote a lyric from one of Frank Sinatra's songs, "a very good year" for the skater. Her silver medal at the World Junior championships enabled her to become the youngest competitor in the 1999, 2000 and 2001 World championships. In the meantime, she placed seventh at the '99 Worlds, and won Silver



medals that year at both the Hershey's Kisses tournament (skating for Team USA) and the Keri Lotion Classic.

Sarah won Gold at the prestigious 1999 Vienna Cup competition. Her personal philosophy was an asset during these hectic times – keep everything in perspective; don't get a swelled head (unlikely in a family with six children).

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Concentrate on the skating, on improving technique and artistry.

At the 2000 U.S. championships, Sarah took another step up the ladder, winning the Bronze medal. She captured Silver at Skate America, and placed an impressive fifth at Worlds. "A terrific showing, to say the least," observed one critic.

At the 2001 Grand Prix Final,

there was an upset – no one had expected Hughes to place ahead of former World champion Maria Butyrskaya. Sarah went on to win Silver at the U.S. championships that year, and scored an outstanding success at Worlds – the Bronze medal. "That was a dream come true," recalls Sarah. "What a moment, standing on that podium!"

Consistency of performance has proven an invaluable asset for the rising star – Sarah has no "flash in the pan," no "one-performance wonder." Neither Sarah nor Robin Wagner have any illusions regarding the road ahead. People's priorities have changed since the catastrophic events of September 11, 2001. The Olympics, however, represent the ideals of freedom-loving people throughout the world.

"It's always been Sarah's dream to compete at the Olympics, and my dream is to get her there," states Robin, cognizant of the formidable line-up of competitions over the next few months preceding the Games: Skate America, Skate Canada, Trophée Lalique, Grand Prix and the U.S. Nationals (in January 2002).

"What's our Olympic strategy? Well," says Robin Wagner, "I don't want to sound cliché, but an old adage sums it up: 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.' Not to mention a little bit of luck, and a lot of prayers."

For Sarah, anticipating the experience is "extremely exciting." A feeling shared by skating enthusiasts throughout the world.

Edward Z. Epstein is author of twenty books, including *BORN TO SKATE: The Michelle Kwan Story* (Ballantine). He has appeared on the A&E Biography television series and the "E" channel on numerous occasions. *AVA*, a play he's written based on the life of Ava Gardner, is currently under option to producer David Brown. A skating devotee since childhood, he's a former Mid-Atlantic States Novice champion.