

# VERA WANG:

## Remembering the Magic

by EDWARD Z. EPSTEIN

Talent. Intelligence. Ambition. Personality. Luck. Discipline. Passion. Alone or in clusters, all are essentials for success; but to achieve greatness, one must possess courage. That is the golden thread connecting champions in every field.

Vera Wang's passion for figure skating emerged early on. One Christmas, her father took her skating at Central Park's sailboat pond. The experience was magical: "I fell in love with it - the speed, the flow and the wind in my face."

She asked for skating lessons, and her pursuit of a life-on-ice was launched. Vera appeared to be a child who had everything, one who had attained all her heart's desires. Skating was a costly pastime, but her parents could afford it. Her father, a Chinese-American immigrant, had done his graduate work at MIT and was a highly successful businessman. Mr. Wang himself was no stranger to ice skating — with friends, he had learned it on lakes in China.

By age seven, Vera had won several New York Junior Club competitions. The joy of skating, however, was counterbalanced by the pressure of family expectations. Vera has observed, "My background, sophisticated as it was, was also very

traditionally Asian, and there was always enormous responsibility attached to anything I took on."

"There was always a very high 'achievement factor' in the Wang fam-

ily," recalls Peter Dunfield (along with wife Sonya Klopfer Dunfield, they would one day become Wang's coaches). It was the formidable French-born Pierre Brunet who became Vera's first important coach. World and future Olympic champion Carol Heiss, along with her brother Bruce and sister Nancy, were among Brunet's students. His methods were not for everyone. A former Olympic pairs champion (his partner was his wife, Andree, who also taught at the New York Club), Brunet, according to some, was the sternest and most unforgiving of taskmasters. "I always thought he had an aversion to teaching the kids in the Junior Club. He thought it was beneath him," said one on the scene at the time. "I once saw him twist the arm of one of his little students, to get her to follow his instructions."

Brunet, however, was an undisputed master at teaching the art of school figures, and, in those days, that was the name of the game. "Figures took seventy-percent of our training time, and counted for fifty-percent of the final score in competition," recalls Sonya, who worked with Vera on her seventh and eighth teams. Wang eventually became a Gold Medalist, joining the brilliantly skilled group that passed all eight figure skating tests (one couldn't become a National, World or Olympic champion without them). This is an achievement she has rarely spoken about.



Figure skater and figure skating champion Vera Wang (right) and Peter Dunfield (left).

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As she embarked on her teen years, a top-level competitive career seemed within her grasp. "The drive, tenacity and discipline were there," recalls Peter. "She put every ounce of her heart and soul into it."

Her free skating reflected the dance training she had received at George Ballanchine's School of American Ballet. Her forte was not in the depth of difficulty of her jumps, but in the beauty of her movements, a compelling "feline, femme fatale quality" she possessed. "Liquid motion on ice, with very little apparent effort," recalls an onlooker. "Very dramatic, highly interpretive, ultra-feminine. Intrinsically artistic, and she made it appear effortless." Sonya recalls, "The program she skated to Scheherazade was outstanding; it gave me chills."

But it wasn't easy, and consistency of performance was a *bête noir* for the young woman. However, according to a friend, "Her spirit was remarkable; she'd call an energy her body didn't always have, and come through. She had courage - she never considered the possibility of not being able to do it."

Only days before entering her senior year at Chapin (she had previously attended Friends Seminary), Vera dropped out to focus all her energies on training for a berth on the 1968 Olympic team. Her efforts were unsuccessful, to the honor of her parents.

A new obstacle surfaced. Iceland, the rink in the old Madison Square Garden building at 50th Street and 8th Avenue in Manhattan that was training ground for all New York-based skaters, was demolished. It would take at least two years for the New York Club's new rink, Sky Rink, on the 16th floor of a skyscraper on 33rd Street, to be built.

"Without a convenient rink to train on, when Vera entered Sarah Lawrence College, it became impossible for her to achieve her skating goals - although none of us acknowledged it at the time" states Peter. "Today she might have been able to do it, as there are no

school figures. But back then, she no longer had the hours to devote to figures, and the absence of a rink in Manhattan meant a two-hour drive to the 'temporary' rink in West New York. She was lucky if she was able to skate four hours a week. Her competitors were skating four hours a day!"

Vera's parents' expectations for their daughter remained skyhigh. She has recalled saying to her mother, "Mom, I can't compete if I'm skating half the time that others skate." Mrs. Wang's reply: "Well, I don't really understand that, because Dick Button and Tenley Albright won Olympic medals, and they both went to Harvard."

Vera had left Brunet, which was the talk of the rink. Sonya, and then Peter, became her coaches and have remained her friends to the present day. Vera plunged into a new category of skating - pairs, which required no school figures. She teamed with the young, talented James Stuart, and they began a promising partnership. In one competition, they placed second to JoJo Starbuck and Ken Shelley.

It was 1969. Vera was nineteen. Her skating partner was confronting a turning point in his own life - he wanted to quit pairs and compete as a single. Vera was devastated. "It was too late for me to go back into singles," she recalled. And her skating career was over - "over in literally one day."

Skating had been her life. It took years to come to terms with the heart-break, to recover her emotional equilibrium and to overcome the feeling of emptiness, which she later learned was depression - a condition that was not discussed openly as it is today.

She re-entered Sarah Lawrence and graduated with a BA in Art History (she would also attend the Sorbonne). The gleam of spotlights would one day focus on Vera Wang, but the sound and the fury of the fashion world would provide the arena in which her gifts would flourish, the venue in which she had achieved greatness. She had found her own calling at last. It is fascinating that the attention to detail, which character-

izes her style, surely found its mirror image in the years of process of building and refining her repertoire of school figures, which was all about detail and discipline.

"Things happen for a reason," Ms. Wang has observed. And today, while balancing a professional and personal life "is hard" (she is married with two daughters), she appears to have mastered that art as well. "Every year I believe in myself a little more," she recently said.

While she is the world's preeminent designer of bridal gowns and evening-wear (Oprah Winfrey has described Wang's book on weddings as "a work of art"), it was inevitable that her passion for fashion and for skating would merge. "Civilians" learned of her involvement with the ice world when she created the shimmering costume Nancy Kerrigan wore in the 1994 Olympics; in recent years, she has designed for Michelle Kwan (the finished product is always "a collaboration between the artist and the designer," notes Wang).

It seems a natural progression of events that the creative vision and artistic daring of Ice Theatre of New York would find an admirer and a champion in Ms. Wang, and vice versa. Ice Theatre founder Maira North sums it up: "Vera is an extraordinary woman who is committed to excellence on all levels. Her passion and enthusiasm for people and the projects she believes in are not only exciting, but inspiring! Exploring new horizons and chartering new territory in the land of every skater's imagination - these are our shared goals at Ice Theatre. I am absolutely thrilled to welcome Vera Wang as a member of the Ice Theatre family. It is a joy to honor her at our 2003 Gala."

*Edward Z. Epstein has written twenty books, including bestselling biographies of Lana Turner, Lucille Ball and Jennifer Jones. BORN TO SKATE: The Michelle Kwan Story was published by Ballantine. A lifelong figure skating enthusiast, Epstein, a graduate of New York University, is a former Middle-Atlantic States Novice Champion.*