



STARBUCK & SHELLEY:

A Passion for Skating

by EDWARD Z. EPSTEIN

It's fascinating to observe how tuned in they are to each other — in conversation, their give-and-take crackles with energy and enthusiasm, and their humor is contagious. They are individualists who compliment each other in every way — JoJo seems to know what Ken is thinking, and vice-versa, and they sometimes complete each other's sentences.

No wonder they evolved into an extraordinary pair team, one of figure skating's all-time best. Quintessentially American in style and substance, the beautiful blonde with legs like Cyd Charisse and her handsome partner, reminiscent on ice of a young Gene Kelly, not only won the U.S. pair championship three years in a row; they became the first

Americans to break Soviet domination in the pairs event by capturing Bronze at the Worlds in '71 and '72.

Uniquely gifted solo skaters, although JoJo didn't compete in singles, Ken was both U.S. Men's champion and U.S. Pair champion with JoJo in '72, a feat that hadn't been accomplished in decades. That same year he competed in both disciplines in the Olympics.

It's notable that competitive skating wasn't ever JoJo or Ken's *raison d'être* — from the beginning their passion was for performing; that, and their love of skating, bolstered by an inner resolve strong as thin invisible steel, were the driving forces in their skating careers. "We always thought of ourselves as performers first,"

says Ken. "The applause was our motivation," adds JoJo.

Their rapport was evident from the beginning. "When we started out, television barely covered figure skating," recalls Ken. "We didn't know anything about the Olympics or Worlds. Our dream," says JoJo, "was to be in the Ice Capades. That was magical for us."

And so was the tiny — 30x40 — rink in Downey, California, where, at the age of seven — "I'm eight months older," laughs JoJo — the duo first skated together. "The rink had a front door that was like the door to a private house. There was no bathroom! Three rows of bleachers to watch the shows —" "they were recitals, really," interjects Ken — "and our first routine together was

as snowflakes in a winter carnival," continues JoJo. "I remember a highlight one season was a Peter Pan number, complete with 'real' flying. It was pure show biz, and we loved it."

"We didn't know the difference between pairs and ice dancing," says Ken. "Each of us loved to spin and jump, and ice dancing seemed so formal," adds JoJo. "School figures and skating tests? We never heard of them either," says Ken.

"We didn't have the baggage, at the very beginning, that kids do today," notes JoJo. "The more you know, the more nervous you get — today's kids know an awful lot."

There was a strong support system at home: JoJo's mom, Alice, and Ken's parents, Theora and Rulon Gene. Mrs. Starbuck and Mr. Shelley both worked for the same company, North American Aviation. It was Alice who first publicized young JoJo and Ken's budding skating "partnership" in the company newsletter.

JoJo describes her Mom affectionately as "a 'Madame Rose,' but in a positive sense," she laughs. ("Rose," of course, in "Gypsy," is the ultimate, albeit fictional, stage mother.)



Great team work
takes heart.

When the little rink closed, the kids were crestfallen. Their parents enrolled them at the Arctic Blades Figure Skating Club in Paramount, California, at a rink owned by Frank Zamboni, creator and manufacturer of the legendary Zamboni ice-surfacing machine ("they were built across the street from the rink," recalls Ken).

Mrs. Starbuck and the Shelleys would take turns driving the kids to and from the rink, and co-ordinating their respective family's lives to accommodate JoJo and Ken's skating.

(The skating gene obviously runs in the Shelley family — Ken's sister, Patricia, went on to become Pacific Coast Senior Ladies champion, and placed third in National Junior Ladies.)

It was not by design — "it just happened," smiles Ken — that John Nicks began teaching at the Zamboni rink. "We were lucky — two kids in the right place at the right time," states JoJo. "Would you teach us?" they asked. Nicks and his sister had been British and World Pair champions in 1953. Starbuck and Shelley became his first, and for years his only, pair team. "John gave us a bigger dream than we

would have ever had," says JoJo.

By the age of eleven, Ken and JoJo were entering competitions, with Ken also competing in singles'. Nicks tolerated no emotional outbursts — he insisted his pupils be highly disciplined; this approach proved invaluable over the years — "in our personal as well as professional lives."

Nicks didn't ask his pupils for the moon; when first teaching them throw jumps, he said: "Just jump two feet." The soaring throw axel that eventually developed, along with other spectacular moves, was based on rock-solid technique. JoJo and Ken mastered school figures and became Gold Medalists. Perfect edges, stroking, posture, control, line, energy, artistry — were all evident, in abundance, in a Starbuck-Shelley performance. On viewing tapes of the young skaters, it's obvious that a throw double-axel, or throw triple jumps, had they existed, would have required only modest technical adjustment for the duo to have executed them successfully.

Their basic training took place years before skaters went religiously to gyms — incredibly, Ken did no special weight training for the lifts. Ken and JoJo were evenly

matched in size, not unusual in those days, before strapping six-foot-tall males skated with four-foot-nine partners. Special attention wasn't placed on diet; even dance training was not practiced universally by competitive skaters.

The Starbuck-Shelley contingent, however, recognized the benefits of learning dance technique. JoJo began ballet training with Al and Harriet DeRea. Ken took one ballet class per week, and they were also taught tap (evidence confirms they were good at that, too).

Ken makes an interesting point: "Skating requires a 'different' kind of stamina than, for example, running around a track a thousand times. Two-and-a-half minutes into our programs — and don't forget that free programs were five minutes long back then — took more of everything."

JoJo recalls their daily routine: "Up at 4:45AM, pack skating essentials, ballet gear. Mom would pick up Ken (or his Mom would pick me up) and drive us to the rink for a 6AM-7AM patch; 7AM to 8AM, we'd skate freestyle. Mr. Zamboni gave us free ice during the day, and we also skated at public sessions." Homework was



1971 World Championships, Lyon, France

often done by flashlight. Sunday was a day of rest; Saturdays and Mondays were days of "light skating"; Tuesdays through Fridays were "busy."

As they progressed, the pair's easy-going, friendly personas, and the effortless quality of their performances, made their skating seem easy as Sinatra gliding through a ballad. In fact: "I was very nervous all the time," recalled Ken. "We felt half-dead after some of our workouts, there were times we wanted to quit," JoJo has recalled candidly. "But they had such enthusiasm," remembered the DeReas. "They were bound to be winners."

In 1968, competing at Nationals, the pair won Bronze — Ken also won the National Junior Men's title that year — and became the youngest pair team America had ever sent to the Olympic Games. European audiences were impressed.

The buzz had begun. The next year, at Nationals, Starbuck and Shelley won Silver. Then, for three consecutive years — '70, '71 and '72 — they won gold, and lots of fans. "We were traveling all over the world, meeting royalty, doing things most people read about only in magazines," recalls JoJo.

"It was a truly joyful experience."

They captured Bronze at the '71 Worlds, and hopes were high for the Olympics the next year. "We missed winning Olympic Bronze by one-one hundredth of a point!" exclaims JoJo. Ken missed Bronze in the men's event by an equally minute fraction of a point. They're philosophical about it: "Look," he says quietly, "I was happy and fortunate to have achieved everything I wanted. What different does that loss make in our lives today?" "We have so much to be grateful for," smiles JoJo, and she means it.

Many felt the couple would have won the title at the next Worlds, and Olympics, if they hadn't turned professional. "Believe it or not, twenty was more-or-less the unofficial 'retirement' age for 'amateur' skaters back then," states Ken. Starbuck and Shelley went on to achieve their childhood dream: they were signed to star in Ice Capades. They headlined the extravaganza for four highly successful years, traveling all over the U.S. and Canada; they continued to appear in the show as guest stars through 1990.

No competitive venues existed for pro-

fessional skaters still in their prime, like JoJo and Ken — Dick Button changed all that. By age 22, he had won seven consecutive U.S. championships, five World titles and two Olympic gold medals. "But I didn't really want to stop skating," he said. "I would have loved to have taken part in professional competition, but they were not only non-existent but frowned upon." It wasn't until 1973 that he secured a commitment to broadcast the first World Professional Figure Skating Championship. JoJo and Ken, once again, were in the right place at the right time — they competed in the annual event for four seasons, sparking other opportunities: televised ice shows, new All-Star competitions, and they skated exhibitions all over the globe.

"Ken and I even got to skate on Broadway," notes JoJo, "but not together!" Legendary champion John Curry chose JoJo to be his partner for "Ice Dancing," Curry's innovative production which won raves from critics and audiences in its New York engagement at the Metropolitan Opera House, then toured throughout the world.

Ken's Broadway debut was in Toller

Cranston's trail-blazing ice show at the Palace Theatre. On a surface even smaller than the now-defunct rink in Downey, California, where he first met JoJo, he managed a perfect delayed double-axel any skater would have sold his skates for!

In 1987, American Skating World Magazine named Starbuck and Shelley "Professional Skater of the Year." In 1994, they received an ultimate honor: induction into the United States Figure Skating Hall of Fame. In 1997, they were reunited-on-ice for the "Legends of Figure Skating" championship televised on ESPN. Although it was a quarter-of-a-century after their last competitive performance, the still-charismatic pair placed ahead of recent world champions. In 2004, they made their final appearance — to date — in the "Legends" exhibition.

Starbuck and Shelley continue to do it all — they have been successful as producers, directors, choreographers, commentators and more — JoJo, creator of Starbuck & Co. Inc., a special events production group, is also a motivational speaker and spokesperson; she's head pro at The Rink at Rockefeller Center, and her interest in

social causes is an important factor in her life: she's an avid supporter of the Walter Hoving Home for Girls and the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse.

She is married to architect Jeff Gertler, and they have two sons: Noah and Abraham, born in 1995. Do the boys figure skate? "They're devoted hockey players," laughs JoJo.

Ken has produced ice events for the advertising, corporate and entertainment industries; he was Assistant general Manager for American Ballet Theater; worked in theatrical administration and production — he was Company Manager on Broadway for, among other shows, "Annie," "Zorba" and "The Three Musketeers"; he's a past president of the Skating Club of New York; a Board Member of the USFSA; he was a national competition and Gold Test Judge; and he is currently a Technical Specialist for eligible competitions. Ken is on the Board of Directors of the Mid-Hudson Civic Center and the Sky Rink Youth Scholarship Fund in New York City.

JoJo and Ken's deep friendship, and passion for skating, have survived the test of time. "It wouldn't have been fun, if I didn't

have Kenny to share it with," says JoJo. "Between us, we've gotten to do practically everything in skating. We were so lucky to have found each other and go on a very privileged journey." "A journey we're still on," adds Ken.

A journey that has won the admiration and appreciation of ITNY's founder, Moira North. "JoJo and Ken's professionalism, talent, artistry, athleticism and creativity are an inspiring example of what dedication and teamwork can accomplish. I'm reminded of the expression, 'Luck favors the prepared.' Their willingness and ability to work with others, to 'give back,' as Ken and JoJo say, certainly reflects the values we, at Ice Theatre, are all about. Starbuck and Shelley are ideal choices to be ITNY's 2006 honorees."

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EDWARD Z. EPSTEIN is author of twenty books, including "BORN TO SKATE: The Michelle Kwan Story" (Ballantine). Paul Newman & Joanne Woodward, Mia Farrow, Lana Turner, Lucille Ball and Jennifer Jones are among his other subjects. A lifelong figure skating enthusiast, Epstein is a former Middle-Atlantic States Novice champion. His biographical essay on Sonja Henie was published by "Scandinavian Review," and he helped organize a festival of Henie's films for New York's MOMA. He wrote the official Museum notes for the series. Epstein is a graduate of NYU.