



The Art of Sarah Kawahara

by EDWARD Z. EPSTEIN

What do Peggy Fleming, Michelle Kwan, JoJo Starbuck, Dorothy Hamill, John Curry, Scott Hamilton, Pang and Tong, the 2002 Olympics, and Will Ferrell — *Will Ferrell!* — have in common? The one and only Sarah Kawahara, who has worked her magic for all of them.

Whether it's creating choreography for an individual or an ensemble, shooting a film or conceiving a concept, Kawahara has never followed the well-traveled road. "She always finds a new way to do things," observes her friend JoJo Starbuck, and it is exciting to watch Sarah work — her energy level is so intense, her movements so interesting, you can't take your eyes off her. All accounts confirm that from the beginning she's had that "something extra" that not

only defines the tasks she undertakes but inspires those she works with to achieve their full potential.

Off the ice, Sarah's ingratiating smile, direct gaze, firm handshake and feminine demeanor bely the fact that she's a dynamo, a thoughtful woman who means business and whose persona is perhaps best described by two words: positive energy.

"My career has been so diverse, I've never been 'saddled' with it, never been 'type-cast,' so to speak. For the most part, I've been happy with the finished product. I always strive for perfection, while realizing it's not available." A sense of humor has proven an asset in a profession that requires virtually superhuman focus, dedication and attention to detail.

She grew up in Montreal; played piano, violin, and dreamed of becoming a ballerina. "Alvin Ailey's work had a big influence on me. I was encouraged to enjoy all the arts — theater, opera, movies. Gene Kelly in 'American in Paris,' and his 'Slaughter on Tenth Avenue' ballet in 'On the Town.' Fred Astaire's work, Cyd Charisse's."

When the family moved to Toronto, "we passed an outdoor ice rink and I wanted to skate. It turned out I was good at it, I loved to jump." The youngster's passion and enthusiasm did not go un-noticed. She trained at the Cricket Club, where her artistic potential was recognized and nurtured by coach Osborne Colson ("Mr. C"). "He was a great source of inspiration and

strength," notes Sarah. "He was Sarah's mentor, he unlocked a whole new artistic world for her," notes JoJo Starbuck.

Toller Cranston observed with interest the young Kawahara of these years. With his usual flair, he has described her as "another of the golden guppies spawned by the Cricket Club, an artistic skater with an exceptional brain."

Sarah eventually faced a life-altering decision: "The time came when I had to make a choice: ballet or skating." Although an excellent dancer, she felt she was a better skater, followed her instincts and opted for skating

In the early nineteen-seventies, she joined the famed Ice Capades as a principal skater. She performed a memorable solo in the elaborate opening production number, and those on the scene recall that she was "really something." "I got to express myself in Ice Capades," recalls Sarah, remembering how choreographer Bob Turk "encouraged and guided me."

JoJoStarbuck and her partner, Ken Shelley, former 3-time U.S. National Pairs



Sarah with renowned coach and mentor Osborne Colson.

champions [and last year's ITNY honorees], were stars of the show, and JoJo and Sarah roomed together. "I loved studying Sarah, watching how she observed life," recalls JoJo. "She saw things with an artistic slant — so unique. In everything, even her make-up. On the ice, she never did things in an expected way, she was relentless in pursuit of creative expression. We were ideal roommates, because we were both very diligent about our work, and appreciated and valued what we were doing. We didn't take things for granted. Sometimes we'd talk into the wee hours of the night."

JoJo makes an interesting point: "When you do as many shows a week as we were doing in Ice Capades, you don't usually watch the other skaters perform. But Sarah's skating was so fascinating, a lot of us made a point to watch her. She was different, mesmerizing. Sometimes I'd see her in tears if her performance hadn't been perfect, she was really tough on herself. That's one of the things that made her great, I think." In later years, Kawahara had a reputation as quite a task-master. "Champion or chorus kid, Sarah pushes you till you get

it," notes JoJo approvingly.

Touring with Ice Capades was an arduous, invaluable education in discipline, endurance and observing audience response to skaters' routines. "When creating a program for a competitive skater, you have the judges in mind," notes Sarah. "In professional skating, you have the audience in mind." From the beginning, Sarah's goal, with all skaters she worked with, was distinct: "I love to bring skaters to a place they weren't when they started with me."

JoJo Starbuck recalls, "When Sarah created a solo for me, it was *really* hard, a total departure from everything I'd known. Everything was unique, a new challenge. The experience was well worth it."

"I was very lucky from the beginning," reflects Sarah, recalling JoJo and then Peggy Fleming's entrance into her life. "Peggy changed my professional life," states Sarah. Fleming saw Sarah perform, and recognized the similarity in their styles. "I did a piece for her when she was a guest-star in Ice Capades," recalls Sarah. Fleming had her own show, "Evening on Ice," and asked Sarah to choreograph the entire production.

"It was a major step in my career," recalls Sarah. "Everyone wanted to work with me after that." Future endeavors included, with producer (and former competitive skater) Willy Bietak, "Fantasy on Ice," starring Dorothy Hamill, Babilonia and Gardner, and Brian Pockar. She created choreography for Robin Cousins, Charlie Tickner and legendary John Curry. Still in her prime as a performer, she skated in Curry's TV special, "Peter and The Wolf," and in Toller Cranston's "Strawberry Ice."

In '86, Kawahara returned to Ice Capades as head choreographer, a daunting assignment. Her approach, and philosophy, remained simple: "Just do it." She viewed the challenge on a mathematical level: "With groups of people, you utilize lots of math — multiples, shapes, getting it lyrically..." She never did things in an expected way — "expect the unexpected" might have been her motto.

Kawahara observes that today, as far as competitive skating is concerned, "It's *all* about math and numbers. It's as though the system is trying to take the human factor out of it. The individual who practices the





Banff skating group.



Sarah with Scott Hamilton at the 2002 Winter Olympics.

smartest math in competition will win — if there's not enough content, the skater will lose."

In '86, another milestone for Kawahara: Scott Hamilton entered her life. America's reigning male superstar-on-ice was faced with a professional dilemma: he needed to inject fresh perspective into his work; he didn't want to skate programs similar to those of his competitors. World Professional competition was his current venue, and Sarah observed that his programs "didn't have a point of view." Being cute and funny was fine, but technical expertise had to be properly displayed within that context to win the competitions.

"It takes a long time to handle [Sarah's] way of movement," noted Hamilton. His stamina was put to the test, but his virtuosity emerged as never before. Their collaboration produced the desired results — a successful re-invention of Scott Hamilton. "I owe Sarah my entire professional career," he wrote in his autobiography. He has described Sarah bluntly: "She's a genius." They remain devoted friends.

In '89, performing programs created for him by Kawahara, Christopher Bowman won the U.S. Nationals, and was runner-up that year at Worlds. In '93, she devised Chen Lu's programs. That year, the USFSA Coach's Committee awarded Sarah the prestigious Paul McGrath Award, in recognition of her unique choreography.

Where does her inspiration spring from? "Everywhere. I draw from patterns in nature — the sun coming through the leaves, shadows when a cloud hits the rolling hills, colors and textures — the white windmills in California — the vast horizon — I choreograph so movements are a series of moving pictures..."

In 2000, she began working on a project that, in sheer scope, was a breathtaking challenge on all levels: choreographing the opening and closing ceremonies for the 2002 Olympics. "It was the kind of project that takes over your life, but I never felt I was drowning," she recalls. "It was a positive, complex experience — very, very interesting." She won an Emmy for her efforts.

One can understand why, in 2006, filmmakers Josh Gordon and Will Speck chose Sarah for a seemingly impossible task: to create the illusion of "real," i.e. believable skating routines *et al.* for a major motion picture featuring the greatest cast of non-skaters since Joan Crawford and James Stewart in "Ice Follies of 1939." "Blades of Glory," written by Jeff Cox, Craig Cox, John Altschuler and Dave Krinsky, was contemporary comedy at its broadest. Set in the world of highest-level competitive figure skating, Will Ferrell and Jon Heder toplined the cast. Kawahara describes the challenge of creating Olympic-caliber choreography for Ferrell and Heder — not only non-figure skaters but each over six

feet tall — equivalent to "doing choreography for the Marx Brothers."

She advised the filmmakers right off the bat that their film would be outdated before it was released: "You utilize the old scoring system?" "Who cares!" they replied. The new system had unfortunately stripped away the suspense, and transparency, of the "old" system.

The film, one of the big hits of 2007, won plaudits from many critics, who took special note of its savvy skating sequences. Kawahara could add the medium of motion pictures to her resumé.

Sarah continues to demonstrate her versatility: she works with the Miami synchronized skating program, choreographed Feld Entertainment's "Anastasia on Ice," and the opening and closing numbers of Tom Collins's "Champions on Ice." She continues to create for competitive as well as professional skaters and one of her goals is to recreate, on film, under her direction, favorite routines she has devised over the years.

She hasn't sacrificed a private life. Married to Jamie Alcroft, of the popular

comedy team "Mack and Jamie," the couple reside in California and have three children: Alyce, Haley and Thatcher. The two daughters, twenty and fourteen, are headed for careers in the arts; the son, twelve, is passionate about baseball.

"Sarah is an ideal choice for Ice Theater's annual award," states ITNY founder Moira North. "There are no boundaries stifling her creativity; she pushes the envelope, always, and the results benefit and inspire all of us. The art of Sarah Kawahara — her capacity for innovation — has advanced the art of skating. Sarah, for all you have accomplished, and will accomplish, on and off the ice, we happily salute you."

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EDWARD Z. EPSTEIN is author of twenty books, including "BORN TO SKATE: The Michelle Kwan Story" (Ballantine). Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, Mia Farrow, Jane Wyman, 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 Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). He wrote the official Museum notes for the series. Epstein is a graduate of NYU.