



PAUL WYLIE

THAT SOMETHING EXTRA

by EDWARD Z. EPSTEIN

What makes Paul Wylie special?

Talent, discipline, determination, focus, drive — these have characterized his *persona*, over the years, on and off the ice. But Wylie has always had that “something extra” that defines star quality; in his case, a confluence of intelligence and artistry have enabled him to shine in a series of stunning, carefully thought out and directed, truly memorable programs — “JFK,” “Schindler’s List,” “Carmina Burana” and “On the Waterfront” among them. Lar Lubovitch and other top choreographers have created numbers for him. Something from within lights up Wylie’s skating; he’s able to engage audiences intellectually as well as emotionally.

In conversation, he has a wonderful sense of humor — asked if he always knew what he wanted to do with his life, he replies, laughing: “I *still* don’t know what I want to do!” An urgent sense of drama, however, is the quality he brings to his performances: “He’s able to open up and let you into his soul, like a great actor, and make you feel welcome,” notes Dick Button. JoJo Starbuck observes: “Paul’s artistry is so refined, so pure and honest

— his style is not contrived, he’s masculine, athletic, dynamic — he’s unique.”

It’s no surprise that Wylie has come to occupy a special niche in the skating world (in 2008 he was inducted into the U.S. Figure Skating Hall of Fame).

Wylie’s totally unexpected Silver Medal win in the 1992 Olympics — many thought he should have won Gold — capped a difficult amateur career; while a five-time U.S. National medalist, and *never* dull or predictable, his was hardly an easy, carefree romp through the competitive ranks.

In 1967, at age three-and-a-half, Dallas-born Paul Stanton Wylie took his first steps on the ice. His older sisters, Dawn and Clare, were skating at a local rink, and Paul has recalled that it was simpler for his mother to baby-sit him, and his toy trucks, at the rink. “It’s not like I had any great interest in skating,” he recalls. “I did start kind of young,” he laughs. “But it becomes second nature when you start young. It felt very natural to me, instinctive. It was a gift.”

He won his first competition at age nine. When he was ten, the family moved to Denver, Colorado, where the famed

Carlo Fassi became the youngster’s coach. Contrary to popular belief, “It wasn’t a skating move,” notes Paul. His Dad, Robert, was a geophysicist — the study of seismic data — and his career was the reason for the move.

It was in the vast, Olympic-sized Colorado Ice Arena, which had been built by Fassi (and where Paul’s Mom Elizabeth became manager of the pro shop), that Paul’s love affair with skating was launched. “It was a genuine mecca in one rink,” he recalls. Scott Hamilton, Dorothy Hamill and John Curry were training there: “Being with those skaters in that kind of environment really inspired me,” he says. “Curry worked with me for a few weeks, an hour a day — I wanted to do jumps, high jumps, but he concentrated on stroking, spins, and on getting me to understand the concept of ‘line’ — I’d have to say he created a new standard for me. This was a genuine fork in the road in determining my future skating style.”

Wylie has recalled that from the time he was four until he was twenty-five, his time on ice consisted “largely of practicing school figures,” which were never his



forte; in competition, he'd usually come from behind with his free-skating. It was a pattern he was aware of: he knew there were moments of brilliance in his free skating, but the moments where he had great difficulty were those that he remembered. When figures were eliminated from competition (in 1990), it was hoped that this would work to Paul's advantage.

From Wylie's point of view, skating was all about the opportunity of expressing himself; he once recalled how he loved the "incomparable feeling of speed and control over a frictionless surface, dancing and being alive..." His signature moves developed: perfectly positioned and controlled spiral-entrances to jumps, spread eagles, and innovative footwork performed at great speed, mirroring the drama of the music; his spins were outstanding, his posture perfect. He was inspired by performers, musicians, ballet dancers and athletes who had that something extra, "who can make the hair stand up on my neck." Obviously, he strove for this effect in his own work.

Wylie remained Fassi's student for nine years; when asked, today, if he were just starting out, would he do anything differently?, he replies: "Yes! I probably would have made the decision to leave Denver sooner." With Fassi, he grew to feel "a degree of separation..." Over time he found himself struggling with what he

wasn't being taught — how to jump higher and more consistently; having someone on the scene who would "help me get through creatively."

Meanwhile, the fifteen-year-old won the 1979 Novice Men's title at the U.S. Figure Skating Championships; two years later he was World Junior Champion and U.S. Junior Men's Champion. He also competed in pair skating (Paul's partner was Dana Graham); they won the Junior Pairs title at the 1980 U.S. Nationals, with John Nicks as their coach (Nicks had coached Starbuck and Shelley). But when Wylie and Graham's sponsor funding ran out, the partnership ended.

Over the next few years, Wylie's competitive career seemed stalled — he was placing fourth and fifth in National competitions, hardly fulfilling the potential he'd exhibited; action finally had to be taken, some re-inventing of the Wylie *modus operandi* was in order.

Mary Batdorf Scotvold, as a youth, had been a United States Novice Ladies Champion; she later skated with the Ice Follies. When she began coaching, one of her pupils was Scott Hamilton. It was around this time, in the mid-seventies, that Mary teamed up with, and married, Evy Scotvold. While Mary's specialty was choreography, Evy was the technician. Together, they were a powerful coaching team (Nancy Kerrigan became

one of their star pupils; to the present day, Kerrigan remains one of Wylie's closest friends).

The Scotvolds, and the Wylie family, relocated to the Boston area where Paul fulfilled another ambition. He had no intention of neglecting other vital elements of his life — a first-rate education was a priority (he'd earned his high school diploma from Colorado Academy, a private school). In 1986 he was thrilled to be accepted at Harvard, and was taking on a daunting, exhausting task: combining a full-time competitive skating career with an equally demanding commitment to college. A Bachelor of Arts, in Government, which had always interested him, was his goal. (The extensive international traveling he would do during the course of his amateur career piqued his interest further. "When I was a kid I wanted to be a diplomat," he recalls.)

He began a long-term association with a Harvard organization that had been founded by a figure skater: in 1970, through the efforts of Harvard student and skating champion John Misha Petkevich, "An Evening with Champions: A Jimmy Fund Benefit" was launched. The organization's mission was to raise money to fight cancer (the Jimmy Fund is the fundraising arm of Dana-Farber Cancer Institute). Eventually, Wylie would host many of the annual TV specials celebrat-



ing the event, which always featured the world's greatest skaters. Paul's involvement continues to the present day.

In '86, the year he began Harvard, he won the U.S. Collegiate Championships. He won the Trophée Lalique two years later, and placed second at the U.S. Championships; but he didn't fare well at the Worlds or the 1988 Olympics.

"Figure skating is so difficult," observes Dick Button. "It combines so many elements — athleticism, technique, competitive spirit. I give Paul tremendous credit — he stuck with it — he stayed at Harvard, while keeping after the championships; and, in his programs, he always let you know where he was going, what he was doing, what the theme of the program was — he certainly had what it took, the strength, energy, speed, he was elegant, stylish —"

During these years, Paul's skating was consistently exciting; but his attitude seemed one of grim determination — communicating the joy of skating came later. An unexpected joy, he recalls, was "Mary Scottvold's creative ability — not only choreographically, but musically. She had a fantastic talent for appreciating and editing music — like an arranger — the music tells the story, and how it's put together for the program is absolutely vital. *What is the music saying? What do I feel? What do I really want to say?* I try to interpret every musical phrase with meaning beyond just jumps, spins and footwork."

In 1989, at the U.S. Nationals, he galvanized the Denver audience with a free skating performance that was dazzling, although marred by mistakes on a few jumps. Nonetheless, the audience roared its approval and gave him a standing ovation; several perfect performance scores of 6.0 attested to his brilliance — but it wasn't enough. He placed third and missed, by a hair, making the World team.

He was in good form at the Nationals the next year (he placed second) but had problems at Worlds: the competition had come during mid-terms. "I had too much going on, and had a bad showing," he recalled. The next year, 1991, he had every reason to feel extremely proud of himself: he graduated Harvard, *cum laude*, and won a Bronze at Nationals.

"In 1992, I basically knew [the Olympics] would be my last competition. A lot of people thought I didn't deserve to be there." He'd competed in eleven consecutive Nationals at senior level and was no longer a "new face"; he knew all too well what was being said about him now — that it was *impossible* for him to win a medal.

Only an upset of Shakespearean proportions — "Most unlikely," intoned critics — could alter the trajectory of Paul's career. But he was a person of deep faith and religious conviction and he never gave up hope: "When you start losing hope, all sorts of bad things happen."

It usually only happens in the movies — but, in Albertville, France, in 1992, it happened to Paul Wylie. He faced incredible competition, the field was packed with stars and rising stars, including Viktor Petrenko, Peter Barna, Alexei Urmanov, Kurt Browning, Elvis Stojko, Christopher Bowman, Todd Eldredge. Paul was twenty-seven; many of the others were years younger.

But it all came together for Wylie in the long program, skated to the thrilling music of "Henry V." Against the odds, "I delivered the best performance of my career," he later recalled — and the judges were stunned; there were insiders who later speculated that Wylie (who had placed third in the short) actually

should have won, but the judges were taken by surprise; according to one woman, Wylie was "simply not in the mainstream for winning, you know what I'm saying?" But Paul had come through in the long program with the whole package, including a triple Axel, triple Lutz-double toe combination, and a triple flip; all executed within the framework of a beautifully constructed, dynamic and intricate program delivered with uninhibited Wylie flair and *panache*.

He won Silver. The man who'd been written off by the experts had broken through to the top rank in the top competition. (Petrenko placed first; in the ladies division, Kristi Yamaguchi won Gold, Nancy Kerrigan placed third.)

It was a euphoric evening. JoJo Starbuck, in Albertville coaching her pupil, competitor David Liu, was among the guests at an intimate post-competition dinner for Paul and his family hosted by sponsor Lisa Webster. JoJo recalls: "What an ordeal he'd been through, but he'd proved that if you tough it out long enough, things will work out. Paul was so happy and grateful at what happened. It had been an unforgettable evening."

The Olympic triumph launched Wylie into a stellar professional career, complete, this time, with a series of Gold Medal wins, including the U.S. Open Professional Championship in 1992, and, in 1993, the World Professional Figure Skating Championship. He became four-times World Challenge of Champions Gold Medalist, four-times Masters Miko Champion and winner of the first-ever head-to-head Pro-Am event.

"He never let any of this success change him," notes JoJo Starbuck. "He's always been gracious and funny, whether he's winning or not winning. Paul has always had, and has, a 'buzz' about him. He's always had this wonderful zest for life, for every moment. He's grateful for what's happened for him."

As a pro, skating became a joy, as opposed to a chore; Paul had learned "not to grit my teeth...not to treat it as an amusement park ride." He enjoyed his professional career far more than his amateur days; as a pro, he was totally free to be creative.

How did the Wylie creative process work? He approached his programs by visualizing scenes that would help him



convey the mood and atmosphere he was going for in his skating performance; he approached it, in fact, like an actor, seeing himself as an actor at times.

Audiences responded as never before. "Paul really hit his stride as a pro," notes Dick Button. For four years Wylie co-starred in "Discover Card Stars on Ice," touring the world. He reveled in the experience: "I could play four or five different 'roles' per show and my solo performances were given Tony-Award winning lighting and costuming, in addition to incredible choreography from Mary Scotvold." He enjoyed the group numbers, performing alongside legends of the skating world: Torvill and Dean, Kristi Yamaguchi, Scott Hamilton, Ekaterina Gordeeva, Sergei Grinkov, Katarina Witt, the Carruthers, Kurt Browning.

"I think the experience of those early years as a pair skater stood him in good stead," smiles JoJo Starbuck. "He had no problem skating with a partner; he did some wonderful exhibition skating with Nancy Kerrigan."

At one point, touring with Stars on Ice, Wylie suffered a groin pull, which nagged at him for a year; he faced the fact that his skating career wasn't going

to last indefinitely. (He enjoyed other sports — waterskiing, biking, scuba diving, hiking, camping, skiing; he also loved to read and listen to music.)

With a Harvard degree, he had an option for a career other than skating; and 1998 was his last season with Stars on Ice. ("The pro circuit in the nineties offered wonderful opportunities for skaters retiring from amateur competition," he notes. "It's a shame that skaters today don't have that.")

Wylie's private life took a spectacular turn — on August 14, 1999, he married Kate Presbrey, a lovely, socially prominent Cape Cod native. They'd met in church, and she was a young woman not unfamiliar with skating on ice: she was a former college hockey player. They were married in Christ Chapel in Centerville, Maryland. It was a wedding attended by more figure skating Gold medalists than were usually gathered at any USFSA event: Scott Hamilton was groomsman; Kristi Yamaguchi and her husband, hockey player Bret Hedican, Nancy Kerrigan, the Scotvolds, Ekaterina Gordeeva, Ilia Kulik, Denis Petrov, Dick Button, Brian Boitano, Christopher Bowman and Kyoko Ina were among the guests.

The Wylies today are parents of three children, Hanna (five), Emma (two) and Caleb (one).

Wylie's career in the business world has flourished. He received his Masters Degree in Business from Harvard — the journey from entering the university to earning his M.B.A. had taken fourteen years — and became Director of Marketing and Synergy for the Buena Vista Marketing Group, headquartered in Burbank, California, for the Walt Disney Company. He directed cross-marketing efforts supporting key Disney video releases and the Princess brands.

He has been Color Commentator for Turner Broadcasting and Fox Sports, and is a highly sought after motivational speaker for a variety of corporate entities, and is one of a select few athletes chosen to speak at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. He once served as an analyst for CBS and its 1994 Winter Olympics (Short Track) coverage. His skills as a writer have not been overlooked: he's been a Guest Columnist/Journalist for the Dallas Morning News, USA Today, the Atlanta Constitution and

Newsweek Magazine.

For the last five years, Paul has served as commentator for ESPN and ABC, covering the ISU Grand Prix and International Championships as an on-air analyst. He was host of "All Access" and highlight specials for the World Championships in Moscow and Calgary, and provided color for ABC/ESPN's 2006 and 2008 World Championships. He will be working with Westwood One to do the radio broadcast of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics for all figure skating disciplines.

He's currently coaching at the Extreme Ice Center, in Indian Trail, NC and providing seminars nationwide. He has served this year as a mentor for US Figure Skating, working this past year with 2009 United States Champion, Jeremy Abbott.

It's safe to say that Paul Wylie is a genuine Renaissance Man.

It's gratifying to note that, in pursuit of a pure artistic ethic, Wylie and ITNY are totally in synch: "I admire and respect the time and effort spent on pursuing and exploring the art of figure

skating," he says. "I subscribe to the importance of Ice Theatre, which looks at skating through a lens I have come to appreciate more and more."

Moir North, founder of ITNY, notes: "It's a delightful coincidence that we're honoring Paul Wylie just when he's celebrating his birthday. His commitment to the art of figure skating reflects our mutual understanding of the importance of — and dedication to — the creative individual. To quote one of Stephen Sondheim's lyrics, 'The art of making art...is putting it together, bit by bit, link by link...' Paul has succeeded in doing this; we look forward to our continued association, and wish him many more years of success in all his endeavors."

Edward Z. Epstein, whose books include biographies of Mia Farrow, Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, Lucille Ball, Jennifer Jones, and "BORN TO SKATE: The Michelle Kwan Story," is also a dedicated figure skater and 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 MoMA. He's worked with and written articles on the lives of, among others, Natalie Wood and Ava Gardner (about whom he's written a play, optioned by David Brown). Mr. Epstein, a graduate of NYU, is a native New Yorker.



Congratulations to Paul Wylie and to Ice Theatre of New York

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