



DOROTHY HAMILL

AND THE SOUND OF SKATING

by EDWARD Z. EPSTEIN

It was a cool Fall day, but, wearing red, she was a distinctly hot presence on the ice.

Dorothy was rehearsing for a special performance at Rockefeller Center, and the *sound* of her skating — the *whirr* of her edging as she skimmed the ice — placed her in a league of her own. It was figure skating in its purest form; the quintessence of the skater's art.

She kept repeating her flying camel, and the sound of those preparatory edges added another dimension to the experience of watching her skate.

"I think she's a better skater today than when she won the Olympics," states Dick Button, citing her incredible edging, stroking, and body positions.

Dorothy and her audience have always had a symbiotic relationship. When she smiles, her audience smiles with her — and no one is better at expressing emotion through her skating than Dorothy. But though her smile is dazzling and real, there have often been times when there was little to smile about.

Carefree, girl-next-door facade to the contrary, her roles in life have gone

far beyond skating. She has always functioned as daughter, sister, wife, and, above all, mother; there have been many serious issues to contend with over the years.

Through it all, Hamill has never been a complainer — in fact, she has a sharp sense of humor.

From the beginning, she possessed the ingredients necessary for achieving her goals: Passion. Talent. Intelligence. Ambition. Discipline. Perseverance. The willingness to take on challenges, endure heartbreak — even tragedy — without suffering permanent collapse.

Dorothy's parents, Carol and Chalmers, her sister, Marcia and brother, Sandy, comprised a strong family unit that encouraged, supported and made sacrifices so that Dorothy could pursue her skating career. The tensions and troubles existing in most families were present, often intense and stressful; but never in question was the fact that Dorothy was a loved and protected individual. Growing up in Connecticut, and Lake Placid, produced many happy memories and lasting friendships. Dorothy's own assessment of her child-

hood years: "I was a spoiled brat."

And Dorothy's rebellious teenage spirit was to prove an asset for a competitive athlete. For her parents, one can assume that was not always easy, although they possessed healthy temperaments of their own. Sparks often flew — but their mutual devotion was sound.

The choice to skate was strictly, one-hundred-percent Dorothy's — every step, or stroke — of the way: "I wanted to do it every day, all day." It was never a case of her parents living vicariously through their daughter's achievements. Dorothy's good fortune was that her parents recognized, from the outset, that her dream of success on the ice was an achievable goal.

Positive results surfaced early on, although it's interesting that she didn't enjoy competing — her heart raced, her legs felt wobbly. But she was a fast learner, and adored interpreting the music (she still does); it was a gratifying mode of self-expression for the youngster (her love of music was inherited from her father).

She worked with the best coaches — beginning with Barbara Taplin, later Otto Gold, Gustave "Gus" Lussi, Sonya and



Dorothy with guest host John Davidson on the Johnny Carson Show.

Peter Dunfield (ITNY honorees in 2000), Carlo Fassi, Peter Burrows.

The concept of hard work evolved slowly — but, as in all her endeavors, Dorothy adjusted to the requirements of the task. Audiences loved her, and it was mutual — Dorothy has described herself as having “a people-pleaser personality.”

Radiant, blonde Janet Lynn was her role model, but Hamill’s own style emerged in time. She eventually developed a signature spin, a version of the flying camel — “the Hamill Camel” — which added a back sit-spin, preceded by a toe-touch, to the move. Contrary to public perception, Hamill didn’t sail through her competitive years injury-free. There were times she skated in excruciating pain, but always soldiered-on.

At the age of twelve, in 1969, Dorothy won the Novice Ladies’ title at the U.S. Championships (and made her first appearance with Tom Collins’ Champions on Ice tour following the World Championships that year). At the 1970 U.S. Championships, competing in the Junior division, she placed second. In 1971, aged fifteen, she entered the Senior division, and from 1974 through ’76 she was United States Champion.

The press and public took major notice of Dorothy at the 1974 Worlds, in Munich, Germany, televised internation-

ally. It was during that competition when Hamill, taking to the ice for her long program — she was in second place after the compulsories — was greeted by a howl of catcalls from the audience, and was aware of a sign in the stands: “Which of the West? Dorothy?”

Dorothy assumed she was being called a witch! Shocked at first, she began to cry, and skated off the ice into her father’s arms. It turned out that she wasn’t being booed — the audience was expressing its anger at the marks a German skater had just received. The sign, supposedly, was asking which Western skater — Hamill or Diane de Leeuw — would defeat the East German champion.

There was confusion in the arena: what would happen next? Would Dorothy skate? She returned to the ice with a look of determination, and took her opening stance. She smiled, and went on to skate the performance of her life, receiving a perfect 6.0 from the Finnish judge. It was an emotional, dramatic experience that audiences would never forget. (She placed a very close second to Christine Errath of East Germany.)

Next year, at the Worlds, in Colorado Springs, she again won Silver.

In 1976, she was favored by many to win the Olympics, to be held in

Innsbruck, Austria. It was an nerve-racking time. The public was unaware that Dorothy faced a serious crisis of confidence in the weeks preceding the competition. Peter Burrows assumed the role of coach, stepping in for Carlo Fassi. Dorothy’s days were consumed by practicing figures, and skating her short and long programs straight through, no stopping. If she fell, she had to get up quickly and continue on, “because this could very well happen in competition.”

She was a perfectionist; so was Burrows. They were a formidable team.

As Olympics-fever built, so did interest in Dorothy. She was totally surprised when she made the cover of Time magazine. Noted Bergdorf Goodman hairstylist, Suga, gave Hamill a haircut, and the “wedge-cut” quickly became a fashion statement, copied by young women all over the world. Dorothy was unaware of the off-ice commotion she was causing; she was focused laser-like on the upcoming competition: “I had tuned out the rest of the world.”

She had connected with the philosophy in Norman Vincent Peale’s “The Power of Positive Thinking,” given to her by her friend Julie Lynn Holmes. She read, and re-read it, frequently.

Even though she came down with the flu, her practice sessions continued.



With Dad and Carlo Fassi.



Dorothy & Alex wearing Vera Wang gowns at John and Dorothy's wedding, November 2009.

When she placed second in figures, it was an unwelcome development — the Hamill team worried that it was a prelude to another Silver.

Then she skated a sensational short program — earning a perfect 6.0 from one judge — and moved into first place. This intensified the pressure — Dorothy knew that remaining in first was hardly a sure thing.

If not for her parents, the final result might have turned out differently. It was crucial to take Dorothy's mind off the imminent ordeal of the long program. A free day enabled Mom and Dad, over the objections of officials, to drive Dorothy to Salzburg and the actual sites where Dorothy's beloved "The Sound of Music" had actually been lived by the Trapp family. It was the kind of inspiration Dorothy required at that moment: "My Mom knew just what to do."

The key to skating a successful long program? Don't overthink the key elements. And even Dorothy had to contend with tired legs that would begin to burn, and feeling winded.

There was a moment, during the program — skated to Erich Wolfgang Korngold's thrilling music, selected by her father, from two of Errol Flynn's films — when Dorothy almost lost her balance, "but it went unnoticed." It was a gorgeous performance, even by today's standards, because of her timeless technique. She owned the ice, performing with great speed and vitality. That "extra spark" was present, and, as with all great performances, it appeared effortless. All nine judges placed Dorothy first and she got the Gold.

She was advised not to compete in the upcoming Worlds in Gothenburg, Sweden — what if she placed second? It was felt that would tarnish the Olympic Gold she'd just won. But Dorothy would have none of it — she competed, and won. Nineteen-year-old Hamill had captured figure skating's Triple Crown: U.S. Champion, World Champion, Olympic champion.

In the ensuing months, Dorothy became America's "It" girl, catapulted to the very pinnacle of stardom ("I wasn't really equipped to handle all that," she muses today). Entrepreneur (later movie producer extraordinaire) Jerry Weintraub guided and promoted her career, as she became the biggest box office draw figure skating had known since Sonja Henie. Dorothy didn't make movies, but her TV specials were at the top of the ratings (and attracted "A" list guests, including Gene Kelly). She signed with the legendary Ice Capades, touring the country and performing to sell-out crowds for the next eight years.

Her wholesome looks and image were in great demand by advertisers (there was even a Dorothy Hamill doll), and she was a success beyond the wildest dreams the Hamills (or anyone else) might have ever had.

When she met, fell in love with, and married Dean Paul Martin, to the public it seemed the most natural thing in the world. Dean was the adonis-like son of legendary star Dean Martin. Like Dorothy, he was a professional athlete: tennis was his game. He raced cars; he was an actor and a pilot. They were a beautiful couple, their per-

sonalities were in many ways similar, and he seemed an ideal mate for "America's Sweetheart."

To her fans, the dream seemed complete.

They were two young people deeply in love, but the demands of their careers, and the ordeal of life-in-a-goldfish bowl, took its toll. Their marriage didn't survive.

Dorothy's skating, as it always had, provided comfort and escape. In 1984, she won her first of four annual World Professional Figure Skating Championships. She won an Emmy for her television production-on-ice of "Romeo and Juliet." Professionally, she was in orbit; emotionally, it was another story. Ken Forsythe, a handsome doctor of sports medicine, entered her life. Their marriage produced Dorothy's greatest joy, her daughter Alexandra.

An unimaginable tragedy occurred when Dean, an officer in the California Air National Guard, was on a routine training mission; there was an accident — he was killed when his plane crashed.

His death left Dorothy crushed and near despair. It was a time of introspection and reevaluation of priorities. She was a wife and mother with a daughter to raise, a woman with great professional obligations. Her starpower remained bright, and she entered the world of big business when she and her husband bought Ice Capades, which had gone into bankruptcy. As Lucille Ball once noted, "Because you're a big success in one field, people think you know everything. You rely on trusted people around you to guide you in the right direction. Desi and I learned the hard way, when we bought RKO."

Dorothy weathered, as best she could, the treacherous business journey ahead; becoming a mogul was not a role she reveled in. Inspired by all that her dear friend John Curry had achieved with his acclaimed ice show — "working with John opened new doors for me, artistically, I felt re-born as a skater" — her goal with Ice Capades was to produce a show combining the art of skating, dance, entertainment. The logistics of producing an arena show proved to be overwhelming. Even Sonja Henie, when she left the protective cocoon of uber-producer Arthur Wirtz, was unable to successfully



On the cover of *Time*.

market her own ice show for long.

Hamill's legend, in the nineties, continued to glow — a national study by Nye Lavelle's Sports Marketing Group placed Dorothy (tied with gymnast Mary Lou Retton) in the top spot, the most popular athlete in America. Far behind were Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Troy Aikman, to name a few.

To Dorothy's regret and dismay, Ice Capades eventually had to be sold. Her marriage to Ken Forsythe had endured rocky times; but after eight years, the couple divorced.

Dorothy's major source of strength during this period was her love for and devotion to her daughter, Alexandra. That, along with time and help, enabled her to regain her passion and enthusiasm for life.

She has sometimes been referred to as "a skating Julie Andrews" (an actress Hamill happens to adore). It's a valid comparison — and, like Andrews, Dorothy's appeal hasn't diminished with time. She has skated with Champions on Ice, the Next Ice Age and Broadway on Ice in recent years; she is in great demand

by women's organizations and corporations for motivational speaking engagements.

There are few awards she hasn't won — she's been inducted into the Olympic Hall of Fame and the Figure Skating Hall of Fame; she ran the torch into the Olympic Stadium in Salt Lake City with her longtime friend Dick Button, and skated at the closing ceremonies.

She was the first recipient of the Stars of Madison Avenue Award for her continued roles in successful advertising campaigns.

She is passionate about the many charities she is involved with — the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, the International Special Olympics, Big Brothers & Sisters of America, Buoniconti Fund, Olympic Aid, Vaccine Fund, American Cancer Society (Dorothy is a survivor), Ronald McDonald House, and teaching blind children to skate through the March of Dimes. While skating with one of the youngsters, Dorothy was deeply moved when the child told her: "Oh! I can feel the wind on my face!"

Dorothy has lost close friends to AIDS, and has raised money for a variety of AIDS foundations.

This month, with proceeds to benefit cancer research, a Dorothy Hamill jewelry line will be introduced by the Helzberg chain of jewelry stores (Dorothy has had a lifelong love affair with beautiful jewelry).

The Dorothy Hamill Figure Skating Fantasy Camp, which had its inaugural season last year in Nantucket, is a long-time dream of Dorothy's that has become reality. "It's an adult skating camp," she explains, "we keep it fun, light, it's my attempt to share the love of skating, to inspire the skater." (One of the coaches at the camp, Elin Albright Schran, is the daughter of former Olympic champion Tenley Albright.)

Dorothy is involved with the Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore, which is dedicated to improving the lives of children and adolescents with pediatric development disabilities. There's a sports education program, which now includes, thanks to Dorothy, "I Skate," an adaptive skating program for children with spinal

chord injuries and other special needs.

Longtime Hamill friend Debbie Gordon notes, "There's so much going on in her life — you know the phrase 'grace under pressure'? That, in my opinion, describes Dorothy perfectly. She's an absolutely amazing woman — there's a bright light within her, which everybody sees. It's only Dorothy who seems to be unaware of it. She's a wonderful human being — I'm honored to call her my friend."

There's an old Proverb: "You don't know where you're going unless you know where you've been..." In 2007, she wrote her autobiography, *A Skating Life: My Story*. It became a New York Times bestseller.

On November 21, 2009, a happy Dorothy became the wife of attorney John MacColl.

Dorothy voices no complaints, few regrets about the past. If she had it all to do over, would she do anything differently? "Probably, yes. Then again, like most human beings, I'm sure I would make many of the same mistakes."

She's a longtime advocate of Ice

Theatre: "Twenty-five years ago, when she founded Ice Theatre of New York, Moira North Colton had a vision of a skating company that would not only combine the art of figure skating and dance — but which would explore, through music and choreography, new avenues of expression on the ice. That vision has become a reality. In blazing the trail, Moira, and my late, great friend John Curry, were pioneers. I'm thrilled and delighted to be the Honoree on the occasion of Ice Theatre's Silver Anniversary. Congratulations, Moira — here's looking forward to the next twenty-five years!"

Edward Z. Epstein has written nineteen books to date. His subjects have included Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, Lucille Ball, and Mia Farrow. A dedicated figure skater, a former Middle Atlantic States Novice champion, he's the author of *Born to Skate: The Michelle Kwan Story*. He helped organize a festival of Sonja Henie's films for New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and wrote the official museum notes for the series. A complete list of his credits and background appears on his website: EdwardZEpstein.com.



Dorothy,

Your yellow brick road was pure gold and you take us to Oz with talent and dedication even today.

Fondly,
Dick Button