



ELEGANCE ON ICE: RICHARD DWYER MR. DEBONAIR

—by EDWARD Z. EPSTEIN

When a performer succeeds in creating and communicating a character that audiences respond to and connect with, the result is often stardom. On screen, Bogart was the intriguing Tough Guy; John Wayne, the Hero; James Dean, the Rebel.

On the ice, Richard Dwyer brought his distinctive personality, and heartfelt enthusiasm, to "Mr. Debonair," creating his own legend. Always impeccably groomed in tuxedo and top hat, he was charming, handsome and charismatic; with flair and finesse, he brought to American ice shows his own version of what Fred Astaire brought to the screen — elegance, artistry, showmanship and a seemingly effortless command of his medium. One quickly forgot about any superficial resemblance to Astaire once Dwyer's performances were underway.

Power and speed, deep edges, long, dramatic slides across the ice, spread eagles — performed with an all-enveloping "Let's enjoy ourselves!" smile — were among his trademark moves, skated to such romantic pop classics as "The Very

Thought of You" and "As Time Goes By." He possessed an additional gift — the ability to enable audiences to share, as opposed to just observing, his joy of skating.

"Audiences adored him," recalls former two-time World champion, European champion and four-time Czech champion Aja Zanova Steindler (2005 Ice Theatre honoree). "Pleasing an audience is an art unto itself, and Richard was a master at it — still is."

Shipstad and Johnson's Ice Follies was where Richard met Aja, and other skaters who would become lifelong friends — "We were a family," he notes. The show, which was the first of all traveling ice shows, was a glittering in-person extravaganza, complete with its own live orchestra and breathtaking costumes by Helen Rose, who was concurrently head designer at MGM (Grace Kelly's wedding gown, for her marriage to Prince Rainier, was among her creations).

Ice Follies was an entertainment staple for decades that played to millions throughout the country. "Mr. Debonair"

was a consistent highlight. Richard wasn't only a soloist; he also partnered a number of "leading ladies" (thirteen over the course of his Ice Follies career). And there were "The Dwyer Girls," a line of skating beauties.

"The Swing Waltz" ensemble was another hugely popular audience favorite. When, at the end of every performance, he presented an armful of roses to a lucky lady seated rinkside, it stopped the show. Afterwards, his dressing room was always overflowing with fans, who could count on receiving an autograph.

Female skating stars, with rare exception, were usually top-billed in ice shows; Richard occupied his own niche. Singer Tony Bennett and, yes, Fred Astaire, were among those who applauded his performances. Along the way, Richard accomplished the impossible: according to Guinness World Records, he has had "the longest career as a professional ice skater — sixty-two years."

How did he do it?

Richard is a classic example of a person doing what he was born to



do. Santa Monica, California, was his birthplace, and when he was nine months old the family moved to Burbank. Richard discovered skating — "My father *loved* to skate as a kid" — when his parents took him, his brother Ron, and sister Dolores, to see the Ice Follies at the Pan Pacific Auditorium in Los Angeles. It was 1943, and Richard was almost eight. He couldn't wait to try skating himself.

There were family visits on Friday nights to the local rink. Richard was hooked. His parents, Mary and Tony, both mid-westerners (his Dad was from Nebraska, his Mom from Illinois), were

the antithesis of stage parents. Richard exhibited such an aptitude for the sport, and derived such enjoyment from it, that he had the unwavering support of his family from the beginning.

Richard's Dad was head of the sheet-metal department at Warner Brothers studios, and Richard recalls that "I had support on the Warners lot, too. My parents were wonderful. My mother's main concern was that I get a good education, and she wanted me always to be well-mannered, to be a 'nice kid.' She

Dear Richard,

With many fond memories of good times and winning National Jr. titles the same year.

You are the best — never stopped giving to our beloved sport.

Love always,

**Sonya Klopfer
Dunfield**

wanted to be sure I turned out a gentleman!"

Skating was hugely popular in California. Television, as yet, was providing virtually no coverage, and ice shows were the venue where the public could flock to the sport in-person. As far as a potential skating career was concerned, all choices were Richard's. He skated exhibitions in Chicago, the Rotary club in Seattle, in Vancouver. He became best friends with Roy Shipstad's children, they all skated at the Sonja Henie Rink in Westwood (Sonja, thirty-three and still at the peak of her professional career, would



always remind Richard, "You got your start at my rink!").

Later, he became friends with Ozzie and Harriet Nelson and their two sons, David and Ricky, when they all skated at the Polar Palace in Hollywood (across from Paramount studios).

Things moved fast. He entered the world of amateur competition. Not too long after that first Ice Follies visit, Richard, age ten, became Pacific Coast Juvenile Men's Champion. Two years later, in 1948, U.S. Novice Champion. The next year, U.S. Junior Champion. In 1950 he competed in the senior division of the U.S. Nationals. Dick Button, already a World and Olympic champion, won for the fourth consecutive time. Richard placed second in the free skate, fourth in figures, third overall (behind Hayes Jenkins). A major career as a competitor seemed certain. He was slated to compete in his first Worlds.

He has recalled that Shipstad and Johnson "made me an offer immediately after the 1950 Nationals in Washington." Turn pro at fourteen?! The Dwyers had the benefit of expert advice. Show business veterans Ozzie and Harriet, among others ("Harriet was a skater," recalls Richard), recommended to Richard's parents that he do it — he, like their sons, was a natural performer.

Competitive skating, with its mind-boggling rules and regulations, would greatly inhibit that aspect of his style. Skating-savvy friends also recognized that Dick Button was virtually an unbeatable champion, and would be competing for at least the next three years, through the 1952 Olympics.

(Button, tongue firmly in cheek, finally goes public with the reason Ice Follies offered young Dwyer the contract: "After watching Dick Dwyer progress from the Novice to the Junior to the Senior ranks at the Nationals, the other competitors and I got together, raised a lot of cash, and paid Follies to make him an offer he couldn't refuse. It was the easiest way to keep him away from challenging us in



amateur competition!")

Roy Shipstad had something special in mind for Richard — Shipstad had created and skated the popular "Mr. Debonair" character, but he couldn't skate the role much longer, and saw Richard as his likely successor. "Playing the young Debonair was an exciting prospect," he recalled; in the beginning, Richard was billed as "The Young Debonair." "I loved skating the role," he says. "It gave me a wonderful feeling."

His introduction into the world of big-time professional ice shows was not always star-like. An emergency arose that first year: Shipstad and Johnson had gone to great expense to engage eighteen-year-old Aja Zanova (then Vrzanova), fresh from winning her second World championship, to star in the 1950 edition of Ice Follies. To present her in spectacular fashion, an elaborate moving prop was constructed — a platform, around four feet high, seven feet long, with Aja, glamorously costumed, seated atop the platform alongside a glittering globe — the globe signifying that she was current champion of the world.

The problem: only a diminutive person could fit inside the platform — he wouldn't be visible to the audience — in order to drive it around the rink. He would have to lie on his stomach, and look through a little window so that he could see where he was driving. "If you had claustrophobia," laughs Aja today, "that wasn't the job for you."

Illness forced the man who had the job to cancel out. Who on earth could fill in for him? Since Richard was still a young teenager, he was small enough to physically do it. Would he do it? He not only would, he was *happy* to! "Aja was world champion! Twice! I'd be part of her act!" He recalls one worry — he kept

telling himself, "Don't drive into the sideboards!" He didn't. (Richard and Aja have remained best friends — "like brother and sister" — to the present day.)

The strict Dwyer family condition that Richard get a proper education was adhered to, no small feat. "I went to twenty-six high schools. I went to the Jesuit High Schools and where there wasn't one in a particular city I went to the Christian Brother." His Mom, taking no chances that other interests would intrude on Richard's schooling, traveled with him until he graduated, at age eighteen.

The rigorous schedule paid dividends — since Ice Follies played the same towns year after year, "I made [and kept] a lot of friends in all those different cities." And he became an "honorary member" of many families. (Dwyer received his college degree from the University of San Francisco in 1975, after over twenty years of taking summer courses between tours.)

Meanwhile, at the age of twenty-three, he had joined the Army Reserves, as a private, and served six months active duty. "I didn't skate for those six months. Then I went right back to the Follies and made that season's opening." When he was called up, in 1961, when the Berlin Wall went up, there was a ten month gap in his skating career; he promptly returned to the show after fulfilling his obligation.

While an athlete's professional lifespan is, with rare exception, extremely limited, Richard has certainly defied all odds. Of course, there have been physical strains, spills and injuries over the years, all managed with that unshakable Dwyer resolve that has enabled him to survive and flourish.

"Lots went wrong," he noted. "I had my moments. Once,



during one of my numbers, I fell just doing simple back cross-overs — it was like something from a comedy film! I not only slipped, but slid under the gowns of a couple of the beautifully costumed girls, and kept going! I felt like a fool, but smiled every 'step' of the way!"

There was uncertainty, for years, regarding the future of Ice Follies. "It went through five ownerships," recalls Richard, "and I never knew how it would work out." "Mr. Debonair" survived each time, but finally the show succumbed. Richard felt the loss; he loved the show, the glamour, the fact that audiences knew the skaters. "They didn't have to wonder, for example, as they did after the conglomerates took over, who was playing 'Cinderella.'"

An attempt to become a television broadcaster, after he retired from skating at age forty, didn't pan out. However, a call came from Charles Schultz, creator of the iconic "Peanuts" cartoon character, and a tremendous fan and supporter of figure skating. He wanted to know if Richard would be interested in bringing Mr. Debonair as a guest artist to Ice Capades. "So I was back on the ice, where I belonged," recalls Richard. (To date, he's given over 12,000 performances as "Mr. Debonair.")

Beginning in 1989 — he was fifty-four — he skated full-time, for four seasons, with Ice Capades, which was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. When he required rotator-cuff surgery — "from all those years of lifting and 'throwing' my pair partners" — he arranged for the surgery so that it would be performed between seasons, enabling him to be back on the ice in time for the next season's opening. Everyone was amazed at his ability to bounce back.

Richard has worked with the Ice Capades Chalets, the ISI, he's been a judge at skating events, and performed and coached in Hong Kong and Dubai. His expertise in ice arena management included managing New York's Wollman Rink in Central Park. "I loved it all," he says today.

Dick Button describes Dwyer as "a wonderful skater, a forceful theatrical personality, and someone who's been



supportive and helpful to others both in and out of the skating world. I have the greatest respect for him, and am a huge fan; but I do have some complaints: How can I cheer on someone who has more hair, a thinner waist, and skates better than I can???"

Dwyer has been elected to the International Ice Skating Institute of America's Hall of Fame, and was inducted into the United States Figure Skating Association's World Hall of Fame in 1993. "That was a great moment, being recognized alongside all of the other great sporting champions."

People always wonder how he's been able to maintain such a high level of

skating over such a long period of time (he can still jump an Axel). "I've never stopped," he explains. "I've always found it a challenge to keep in shape. That, I believe, is the 'secret': *Don't stop*. I've worked diligently to keep my skating at a certain level. I've also been lucky — God has been good to me."

He's built up an incredible amount of good will over the years. There was a huge response to Richard's being named this year's Ice Theatre honoree, prompting company founder Moira North to exclaim: "It's going to be big!" "Richard is one-of-a-kind," states Moira. "He has succeeded in maintaining the highest of standards not only as a skater, but in life — he's

a wonderful human being. We're truly delighted, and honored, to honor him!"

Edward Z. Epstein's biography of actress Jennifer Jones, *Portrait of Jennifer*, has recently been published in a trade paperback edition by Simon & Schuster. He's written nineteen books to date; his other subjects have included Lucille Ball, Lana Turner, Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, Mia Farrow, and Michelle Kwan (*Born to Skate: The Michelle Kwan Story*, published by Ballantine). A dedicated figure skater, a former Middle Atlantic States Novice champion, he organized a festival of Sonja Henie's films for New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), and wrote the museum notes for the series. He's completed a novel, *KISS & CRY: Skating for Gold*, and has written a play, *Ava*, based on the life of Ava Gardner.