



"I FELT I WAS FLYING!..." THE AMAZING DR. TENLEY ALBRIGHT

by EDWARD Z. EPSTEIN

As far as young Tenley Emma Albright was concerned, figure skating was a thrilling endeavor: "I felt I was flying! As a child, I wanted to fly, and at the peak of my delayed axel — that instant when you feel suspended in the air — I truly felt I was flying!" It was her favorite jump, that and the split jump, which gave her the same sensation. For one seated rink side when Tenley performed these jumps, it was not unusual to see, at the peak of the jump, a smile on her face, not a strained, tight expression, which characterizes most skaters.

But, unlike most other skaters of her generation, she never, while growing up, saw the films of Sonja Henie or Belita, nor was she taken to glamorous ice shows. Focusing on skating resulted from a medical emergency, and the diagnosis was chilling.

Just the very word, polio, was ter-

rifying. The vaccine against the disease had yet to be discovered. Tenley was ten when the illness struck, and she has recalled holding her six-week-old cousin when her arm suddenly felt weak. "I said to my mother, please take the baby, I think I'm going to drop her..."

She spent weeks in a hospital bed, her neck, back and right leg affected by the malady. It was fortunate that Tenley's father was a noted surgeon, but her road to recovery was hardly a certainty. That road was literally a slippery one — it was ice skating. Before polio had struck she'd been a recreational skater — now the activity blossomed into a passion. Only a year after the polio diagnosis, Tenley won Eastern Juveniles. Within seven years she won the U.S. Senior Ladies and a Silver medal in the Oslo Olympics.

She has remained a champion, although the venue has changed.

"She won her first Nationals the year I won my last [1952]," recalls Dick Button, who was impressed with Tenley's focus and perseverance. "She is — and was — always exceptionally intelligent, upbeat and funny! She never fails to make me smile in the course of a conversation. We have the same birthday, you know [July 18] — the day, not the year!"

In addition to her jumps, Tenley was a great spinner — that, too, provided a unique feeling: "It was a feeling of perpetual motion — there was no friction, it was like being in a world of your own..." Her *blur* and cross-foot spins were always perfectly centered. Gracefully performed Mazurka jumps punctuated her programs, adding a touch of whimsy. Technical expertise was one of her great assets: her school figures "were works of art," according to an observer at the time.

Unlike many skaters, she was not a



product of one great coach whose vision would carry his pupil to the top ranks. There were a number of coaches, including "Willie" Frick, the coach of Gretchen Merrill, a champion whose skating Tenley admired as a child. "Willie wasn't the Frick of Frick and Frack, he had his own fame, he was known as 'the Austrian Wonder Boy,'" she recalls. There was Michael Mickeler, the great Maribel Vinson, Karl Schaefer [in Garmisch], Eugene Turner. There were a few lessons with the one and only Gus Lussi.

Ultimately, Tenley was in charge of her own skating, and the sport was not a newcomer to the Albright family. Her brother, Nile, four years her junior, was a North American speed skating champion. "He went from hockey to figure to speed

skates, then back to hockey," she recalls. Once she took his speed skates and gave them a try. "I couldn't believe how difficult it was," she recalls, having much greater respect for her brother's achievements. Her father was a cross-country runner. Her mother was an artist, who gave her daughter a first name no one else had, although, in later years, thanks to her fame on ice, other Tenleys would emerge. Tenley asked her mother how she'd come up with the name: "I just liked the sound of it."

Dick Button recalls the Albrights: "They looked like The Perfect American Family. Her mother was very beautiful, her father and brother were handsome men. Her Dad, by the way, saved me from what could have been a disastrous

World championship back in 1951. I had a violent cold, and Dr. Albright's care enabled me to get through it successfully."

Coincidentally, as far as her performances were concerned, Tenley is pleasantly surprised to learn that she shared film star Doris Day's approach: visualization. In her singing days, Day would prepare for her performances by visualizing the final result. Then, "I'd go out and do it exactly as I did it in my mind's eye." To a great extent, that's how Tenley prepared — plus, of course, the countless hours of on-ice practice, sometimes getting up at 3AM, to insure the technical expertise and stamina necessary for athletic brilliance.

All of Tenley's considerable mental



and physical resources — that inner spark of indomitable determination — would be put to a crucial test when she'd have to contend with a totally unexpected physical ordeal ten days before competing for Olympic gold in 1956.

From the beginning, Tenley "always choreographed my own programs," she explains. "I loved the jumps so much that once, after I'd performed a routine, it was pointed out to me that 'You haven't included any spins, Tenley!'"

It has been said that one's love of music is a soulful expression of true self. Tenley spent as many as six hours at a time listening to, selecting, and then editing her music. She spliced her own tapes in her bedroom, sitting on the floor with a razor, cello tape and a tape recorder. "Then I'd go to the Ace Recording Studios, and the engineer would transfer the tape to a record." Her choices were always on-target, ranging from classical to Gershwin. And the final result would be structured like a play, with a distinct Act I, Act II, and building to a show-stopping Act III.

"She was exceedingly musical," recalls Dick Button, "and incorporated music brilliantly into her programs. Her moves were original, and there was great variety, with unexpected changes of edge and direction. There was always a terrific sense of performance to her programs, and her jumps had what the French call *ballon*, a sense of suspension while floating in the air at the peak of the jump.

"Everything was performed with pointed toes, I might add, which so many skaters, then and especially now, fail to do. It brings a sense of completeness to the way a skater looks on the ice — it completes the 'line.' Tenley always had it. She was ahead of her time in body position, style — very elegant, inventive."

And Tenley was inventive in more ways than one. "I was the first to wear flesh-colored boots," she laughs.

Skaters today are unaware of the difficulties, courtesy Mother Nature, that competitive skaters faced on outdoor rinks. Conditions were totally unpredictable. There were snow banks. High winds. And the sun! "I remember [in Cortina] taking off on a double axel, in the sun, and landing in the shade," recalls Tenley. "The huge shadow line could be disconcerting, throwing off any skater's timing." And there were other situations to contend with. "I remember [in Davos, at the 1953 World Championship] one judge, Walter Powell, after observing one of my practice sessions, calling me over and saying, 'You're not going to do those silly steps, are you?'" Tenley subsequently performed the steps, and won.

The rules separating amateur and professional were iron-clad. "Once, at an exhibition, after Dick Button had turned pro, I was going to skate after him," she remem-



bers. "I was still a competitor. 'You didn't put your foot on the ice when Dick was still on the ice, did you?' asked an official. That would have meant I was turning pro, if you can believe that! Things like that really happened, and happened all the time."

Tenley faced two consistently formidable, exciting rivals during her competitive years, and liked and respected them both: Sonya Klopfer — "I remember Maribel [Vinson] once saying to me, 'She skates with the grace of a gazelle'" — and Carol Heiss, coach Pierre Brunet's gifted star pupil.

By the time of the 1956 Olympics, Tenley had won five consecutive U.S. championships, two World titles, two North American championships, a Silver medal at the '52 Olympics. If she won Olympic gold, she'd be the first female American skater to do so.

Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, was the site of the '56 Games, which were considered unique in that many of the venues were within walking distance of each other; and it was the last time the figure skating event would be held outdoors. It was also the first time the competition would be televised worldwide, although the coverage was not remotely on the scale of future Olympics.

A terrible thing happened to Tenley only days before the competition. "I'd hit a rut in practice," she recalls, "and slid flat across the ice. My left heel slashed my right ankle and I couldn't get up." Fellow competitor Catherine Machado helped her off the ice. The doctor assigned to the rink, Dr. Gasparini, cut off her boot. "He poured mercurochrome on the wound, and then blew on it!" recalls Tenley. "I was in total denial."

During a morning warm-up, "I fell doing a waltz jump! I couldn't even walk on my right leg." Back in her room, when her father arrived, Tenley tried to stand up. "Is that all you can do?" he said, and re-strapped my ankle so I could move it."

How was it possible that she'd be able to compete? "I don't know how I got through it," recalls Tenley today. Her ability to visualize had never faced a more monumental challenge, but she tackled it head-on. The day of the free skate, she kept telling herself, "Somehow I'm going to get through this program. But I don't know how I'll get off the ice..."

Just as her name was called to skate, ice show producer John Harris wished her good luck and planted a kiss on her cheek. What a moment for the specter of turning pro to pop up! (There would, in fact, be negative feedback. "'Hope nobody saw that,' someone said," recalls Tenley.)

Her performance? "It was mind over matter. My adrenaline reaction carried me, but what really lifted me was when the crowd started humming my music in the middle of the program."

She won the Gold, topping off a fantastic competi-

tive career. It was a great year for American figure skaters: Carol Heiss won Silver, and Hayes Alan Jenkins won the men's event.

Tenley's next goal went far beyond the confines of an ice rink, and her plans didn't include the kind of show-biz follow-up that was standard procedure for a female Olympic champion.

Albright never sought out publicity, which came to her anyway. "She's simply not the kind of person to broadcast her achievements," notes Dick Button, adding, with a smile: "It's interesting, too, that she always won a prize for what she did. She was constantly working on something — in her skating career, and, later, in her medical career, applying the same sense of dedication, and focus, she had on the ice."

Tenley hadn't neglected her education during the skating years: she'd enrolled at Radcliffe College as a pre-med student in 1953, the year she won her first Worlds. She planned on completing her education after the '56 Olympics.

"Since I was a child, I always wanted to be a doctor, like my father," she said, hoping to specialize in pediatrics. In 1961, she graduated from Harvard Medical School, and a friend summed up, in Hemingway-esque fashion, her decision to become a surgeon: "You've exchanged one blade for another." There is a further connection between skating and surgery — there's a rhythm, a kind of musicality, that exists in a talented surgeon's hand movements.

But Olympic competition, even with a severely injured foot, had to be a breeze compared to the challenge she faced with her first surgical procedure, which was on an infant. "It took all of my mettle," she says, in what has to be, for non-medically inclined civilians, a dramatic understatement.

She practiced for over two decades, continuing as a faculty member and lecturer at Harvard Medical School. She did outstanding work in clinical medical research; chaired the Board of Regents of the National Library of Medicine at the National Institute of Health. She has served as a director for the non-profit Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research; the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution; and for profit enterprises such as West Pharmaceutical Services, Inc., and State Street Bank and Trust Company. She is currently the Director of the MIT Collaborative Initiatives, which, Tenley is proud to note, "brings experts together from different fields — the arts, government — the results are, to say the least, colorful and fascinating."

In 1988, Tenley was inducted into the U.S. Figure Skating Association's Hall of Fame. During her skating career, Tenley may have toiled away for hours on end listening to records in order to select music for her programs, but that was a listening experience. One can only imagine how thrilled she was when, recently, conductor Keith Lockhart invited her to conduct the orchestra — including a full choir — at the Pops in Boston. "It was breathtaking," she recalls, her passion and enthusiasm so intense "that at one point the baton flew out of my hand!" She didn't need it — Lockhart later returned it to her. An audience member presented her with a beautiful bouquet of flowers. Tenley broke off a rose and handed it to Mr. Lockhart.

As the great film producer Arthur Freed once noted, "There

is no expiration date on talent." Tenley's talents, in whatever field they are utilized, remain timeless. There's always a twinkle in her eyes, and she's quick to smile. She's mother of three daughters: Elin Gardiner Schran, who is a skater-choreographer ("She teaches people to appreciate the joy of skating," notes Tenley); Rhys Gardiner; and Elee Kraljii Gardiner. From 1962 through '76, Tenley was married to Tudor Gardiner, a lawyer. In 1981, she married Gerald Blakeley, a commercial real estate developer, who shares her association with Woods Hole.

Her interest in skating has not abated, although she is no fan on how the rules have changed. One can offer the opinion, however, that if Dr. Albright was ten again, and just beginning a career on ice, she'd still skate her way to Gold. Moira North, founder of ITNY, observes: "Tenley Albright is that rarest of individuals in today's society: a genuine role model. She personifies everything positive about skating — and about life. Her accomplishments, in the worlds of skating and medicine, and in other venues, speak for themselves; and she does it all with quiet assurance, dignity and humor — no mean accomplishment. Dr. Albright epitomizes all that Ice Theatre stands for, and strives for, and it's our honor to honor her this year."

Edward Z. Epstein's new book, "AUDREY & BILL: A Romantic Biography of Audrey Hepburn and William Holden," will be published by Running Press in the Spring of 2015.

