

EVAN LYSACEK: JOURNEY TO GOLD AND BEYOND

By Edward Z. Epstein

Photo: William Coupon



What was Evan Lysacek's strategy for winning Olympic Gold?

"My philosophy: No one would out-work me. It was easy for me to get into that mentality because I enjoy working hard. Nothing makes me happier than knowing I've given one-hundred-and-fifty percent at the end of the day. I was willing to sacrifice everything I had. Every holiday. Every birthday. Every party. Every night out."

It worked — coupled, of course, with that other sure-fire ingredient: talent.

Born in Chicago, and raised in Naperville, Illinois, Evan is of Italian and Czech descent. His Mom, Tanya, is an educator. His Dad, Don, is a building contractor. He has two sisters: Laura and Christina.

Evan's journey-on-ice began when he was eight. His grandmother, who had wanted to be in the Ice Capades, bought him skates for Christmas. "I wanted to play hockey, not figure skate, but she was crucial in setting me on the right path."

By age eleven he'd won the U.S. Nationals on the Juvenile level. At thirteen, he won the U.S. Novice title. In 2000, at age sixteen, he became the first skater in years to win back-to-back Novice and Junior Men's titles.

The following year, however, making his Senior Men's national debut, his "Star

is Born" saga stopped far short of Gold: he placed twelfth. But Evan's resolve, and work ethic, remained unwavering.

The young teenager found himself having to cope with injuries. "People don't realize what's required, physically, to be a competitive figure skater. It may appear 'graceful,' effortless, but that's misleading. The training and discipline it takes is incredible. The injuries can be very painful. The torque is immense, sometimes one hundred times your body weight. You have to overcome injuries throughout your career."

In Evan's case, over the years, these injuries have included broken ribs, hip injuries, groin injuries, bursitis, tendonitis, stress fractures in his feet, and surgery to repair a torn muscle in his lower abdomen. Once, in Olympic competition, he came down with a stomach flu. He couldn't train and had to remain in bed receiving fluids from IVs. But he performed the next day, delivering a career-best free skate.

In 2003, the year he graduated from Neuque Valley High School, he began working with new coaches, Ken Congemi and Frank Carroll in El Segundo, California. He went on to capture two Junior Grand Prix events, and placed fifth at the 2004 U.S. championships.

"Although this young man's road to

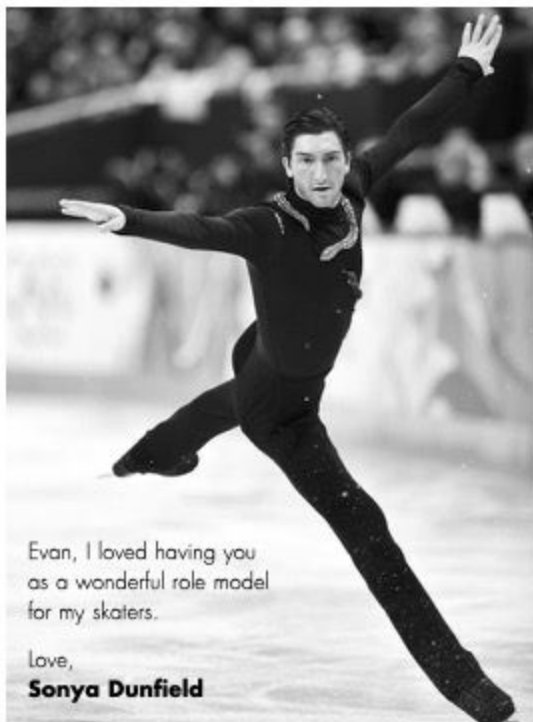
glory is paved with injuries," wrote one analyst, "he's obviously a fighter. Not a man who gives up."

Despite a bacterial infection requiring antibiotics — at one point he was coughing up blood — he won Bronze at the 2006 Worlds in Calgary. By the 2007-08 Grand Prix final, he landed a quad in both his short and long programs. He won Bronze.

At the 2008 Four Continents competition, there was high drama. A blade broke off his boot, causing him to fall, injuring the left side of his body. A cast, from his forearm to his shoulder, was required. "Is he through as a competitor?" asked press reports. Not as far as Evan was concerned. That season, he even managed to tour with Stars on Ice.

Despite a stress fracture in his left foot, he defied the odds and won Gold at the 2009 World championships. World champion! "While the foot injury prevented him from jumping a quad, it obviously didn't prevent him from winning the title," as one commentator observed. He acquired many sponsors, including Coca-Cola, AT&T, and Ralph Lauren, who compared the champion to a motion picture legend: Evan reminded him of a young Cary Grant.

Celebrated fashion designer Vera Wang, a former figure skater, had entered



Evan, I loved having you
as a wonderful role model
for my skaters.

Love,
Sonya Dunfield

the picture. She designed the "mock tuxedo" Evan wore at Worlds. (Ms. Wang, and her coaches, Sonya and Peter Dunfield, are all ITNY honorees.) A lasting friendship was formed. They collaborated on creating Evan's "suits," as he calls them, for the 2010 Olympics.

His spectacular triumph at the Games will always be remembered for its artistic and emotional power. "A lifelong dream realized," he said. Olympic champion! Pinnacle of the competitive ladder. He was also the first American man since Brian Boitano and Scott Hamilton to win men's singles. "Some of the best moments of my life were representing the United States, it gives me such pride," he said.

It was an Evan year. The U.S. Olympic Committee named him Sportsman of the Year. He was given the James E. Sullivan Award as top U.S. American athlete of 2010.

Post-Olympics, "the floodgates of the entertainment industry opened for me," he recalls. "I stepped away from skating." His appearances ran the gamut from "Sesame Street" to celebrity contestant on "Dancing With the Stars." As always, he was a tough competitor and, incidentally, a terrific dancer. With his professional dance partner on the show, Anna Trebunskaya, they narrowly missed out on winning the top prize.

He enrolled at the Professional Arts School in Beverly Hills, where he studied method acting. "But," he recalls today, "I missed skating..." He set a new goal for himself: to win a second Olympics, in 2014. "Dick Button had won two, and I was going to try to do the same. Getting back on the ice at that time felt right to me," he recalls. There was tremendous publicity announcing his "comeback." "I got close," he says, "but then I suffered a series of injuries..." At one point, surgery was necessary. "It will



be a long recovery," said his coach, Frank Carroll.

By the summer of 2014, he had no choice but to announce a heart-wrenching decision: "My physical pain has become unmanageable," he said at the time, fighting back tears. "The doctors say it will only get worse. Not to compete in the Olympics is an incredibly emotional decision. But my focus has to be on getting healthy."

In retrospect: "I had a hard time accepting it."

"If you're a dancer, or a skater, or a baseball or football player — any kind of world class athlete — there comes a time when, although you're still relatively young, you're going to have to make a transition to another career," observed the late, great dancer-actress Gwen Verdon. "The body dictates it. There were two exceptions I can think of — Fred Astaire and Margot Fonteyn. But even they were not functioning at anything close to top level beyond a certain point."

Evan's priorities have always extended beyond skating. His charitable interests include the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation, the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute (Jimmy Fund), and Figure Skating in Harlem. In April 2012 he was named a Sports Envoy by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs. "I very much enjoy the role of diplomat," he says.

In January 2016, he was inducted into the U.S. Figure Skating Hall of Fame, along with his friend, Sasha Cohen, who notes: "We've known each other since we were twelve years old!"

Evan has successfully transitioned into the business world, navigating the challenges with the same work ethic that has served him so successfully all along: "No matter what career you choose — real estate [he owns property in El Segundo, Chicago and Las Vegas], lawyer, actor, writer — there's a common thread: it's all about problem solving and creative solutions, right?" Currently, he is Vice President of Creative Affairs at the Vera Wang Group, where is involved in virtually all creative aspects pertaining to the luxury brand.

"Remember the old adage, 'Practice Makes Perfect'? Perhaps, in Evan Lysacek's case, we can add to that: 'Perseverance Produces Results.'" states ITNY founder Moira North. "With all that he's accomplished, and all that he is yet to accomplish, Evan is an ideal recipient of this year's ITNY honors."

Edward Z. Epstein's current book, *AUDREY & BILL: A Romantic Biography of Audrey Hepburn and William Holden* (Running Press), has been optioned for films.