

SASHA COHEN: TURNING POINTS

By Edward Z. Epstein

Photo: William Coupon



"I admire anyone who has a talent that makes me tingle," said legendary British actor Ralph Richardson.

Sasha Cohen's talent-on-ice has always had that effect on audiences. Her breathtaking spirals, spins, air positions in her jumps, all are in a league of their own. She has been described as "a ballerina on skates." One of her coaches, the great John Nicks, saw in his pupil's skating elements of another renowned ballerina-on-ice, the one-and-only Belita.

It's interesting that Sasha's love affair with skating didn't follow a traditional path. She didn't embrace the sport to fulfill a parent's burning desire to enjoy, vicariously, a dazzling skating career. Quite the opposite. Furthermore, skating wasn't the first sport that captured the youngster's imagination.

"I was about four, and gymnastics came first," she recalls. "I was a very high energy child, and it was a great outlet for all that energy! Then, I discovered skating. The feeling of freedom out there! How it felt to glide. To spin. It was so much fun!"

At age seven, "I had to make a choice. Gymnastics or skating. I told Mom, 'I want skates.' I loved the sport. The pure athleticism of it, the challenge. The rink [eventually] became a place to work, achieve goals. All I'd learned as a gymnast proved very helpful, a great asset

for me as a skater." It was soon evident she was enormously talented.

Her mother was simply happy that her daughter had found something she loved to do. "When I did stretching exercises at home," recalls Sasha, "Mom helped me with my spiral position."

The fact that Mrs. Cohen was the antithesis of a stage mother was evident when, one day, young Sasha's coach said: "Your daughter should compete."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Cohen.

Sasha was all for it. "I'm a very competitive person," she says. "I've always been goal oriented." By age eight, she was, for the first time, avidly watching skating on TV. "My goal, even then, was to become an Olympian."

Alexandra Pauline "Sasha" Cohen — Sasha is a Russian diminutive of Alexandra — was born in Westwood, California. Her Mom, Galina, Ukrainian-born, is a former ballet dancer. Her Dad, Roger, is a corporate lawyer. Her younger sister, Natalia, a talented pianist, is a graduate of Barnard College.

"I was eleven when I began getting really serious about skating," recalls Sasha. She considers this a late start. "Most serious skaters began much earlier." But she made up for it with her attitude. "I wanted to be proud of myself. I worked very hard at the jumps, and it was very frustrating. I was around twelve

when I began working on the double axel, and I just couldn't get it. I had bruises up and down my legs from the falls. I almost quit skating because of it. Mom said, 'Give yourself time.' She was great at 'framing' situations, putting them in proper perspective."

By the time she was sixteen, the skating community regarded Sasha as a rising star. She placed first in the short program — "Wow! what a performance!" exclaimed more than one commentator — and second overall, in the 2000 U.S. championships. Her style, flexibility and air positions in her jumps were, as many critics described it, "amazing." And they were memorable. While her performances seemed effortless — "One should never be aware of the mechanics," noted famed dancer-director-choreographer Bob Fosse — she paid a heavy, ongoing physical price. A stress fracture in her back forced her to withdraw from the 2001 U.S. Nationals.

She graduated from Futures High School in Mission Viejo, California, in 2002. A college education was not on her immediate agenda.

"Another major turning point for me," notes Sasha, "came in the summer of 2002, when I moved to the East Coast to train with Tatiana Tarasova in Simsbury, Connecticut. I'd never been exposed to that kind of training regimen."

It produced dividends. She went on to win 2002 Skate Canada, then captured the Trophee Lalique. "Her skating is a thing of beauty," noted a French journalist. She won Silver at the Cup of Russia. Gold at the Grand Prix Final, where her short program set a world record in total points. At the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, she placed fourth. She'd established herself as a force to be reckoned with on the international skating scene.

Another turning point: she began training with Robin Wagner in Hackensack, New Jersey. She went on to win Silver at both the 2004 Nationals and Worlds. "It was the first time I medaled at Worlds! Very exciting," she said at the time.

Her back injury flared up, and she was unable to compete in the next year's Grand Prix events. In late '04, she returned to California to train with her original coach, John Nicks. He had her incorporate a "headless" spin into her repertoire, remembering how effective a move it had been for Belita. She placed second at both the 2005 Nationals and Worlds.

As the 2006 Olympic season approached, Sasha was the "It Girl" of the American skating world. She began the season by capturing first place in the Campbell's International Figure Skating Challenge. A hip injury forced her to withdraw from Skate America, but she placed second in the competition for the Trophee Eric Bompard.

There were falls. What was that like? "You're in shock, and disappointed, but you re-focus and skate on..." Despite a bad case of the flu, there were no shocks or disappointments awaiting her at the U.S. Championships that year. She won Gold. "At last!" cheered her fans. And, of course, she was guaranteed a spot on the Olympic team.

The excitement was high in Turin, Italy, site of the Games. Sasha placed first after the short program, "a brilliant display of style and technique," wrote one critic. Expectations were high. The long program, unfortunately, was less successful. She won Silver.

At the Worlds, in Calgary, Sasha was again in first place after a dazzling short program. The long was another story. She won Bronze. It's a fact that no other skater, in any competition she entered, rated higher marks for spins and spiral sequences.

She popularized the "I" spin, sometimes referred to as the Sasha spin. It's a spin in which she's literally in a vertical "split" position — an "I" — and woe to the skater without Sasha's flexibility who attempts it. Her "soft





knee" landings on her jumps were another trademark, and she was the first to land a quadruple salchow in competition.

Her choices of music ran the gamut: from Beethoven, Puccini and Rachmaninoff to Rihanna, Elvis, Streisand, Villa-Lobos, Celine Dion.

On the horizon was another turning point. After touring with "Champions on Ice" and "Stars on Ice," and fulfilling other skating obligations, she made a decision. "I needed a little down time from competing."

It became a three year hiatus. After years of living and breathing skating every day, it was a relief. Hollywood beckoned. A fresh challenge. She was a guest correspondent on "Inside Edition." There was a "cameo" appearance, as herself, in Ben Stiller's hit film, "Blades of Glory," which satirized the skating world. She had a major role in a Don Johnson film, "Moondance Alexander." She appeared on "CSI: NY," "Las Vegas" and "Project Runway," among others.

("I'm still offered scripts today," she notes.)

But the inevitable moment arrived: "I missed the intensity and purpose of competition. I decided I was going to try for the 2010 Olympics."

Regrettably, the attempt fell short of expectations. Another turning point: the time had come to permanently move on. "The world has so much to offer," says Sasha. "There's so much to learn and accomplish outside of skating."

She has written her autobiography, "Fire On Ice" (HarperCollins). In 2011, she moved to New York City. "Alone. It was intimidating at first. But I wanted to go to school, and began courses at Columbia University." Interesting that, as a student, she is "Alex," not Sasha. Her focus is on social issues.

In January 2016, she was inducted into the U.S. Figure Skating Hall of Fame. That summer, a life-changing turning point: Alexandra Pauline "Sasha" Cohen married her fiancé, Tom May, a

hedge fund manager. They'd known each other for two years, and it was a beautiful wedding in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Sasha was gorgeous in a gown by Israeli designer Galia Lahad.

Her family life on track, she is concentrated on "finding a meaningful career." She's currently affiliated with ZIG, a fascinating website which allows users to read everything from every source as it's published all in one place.

"Sasha's drive, determination and commitment to achieving her goals reflects Ice Theatre's ongoing quest to pursue and present the very finest of all aspects of figure skating," notes ITNY founder Moira North. "We're delighted and proud to have Sasha as one of this year's honorees."

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