

# TAI & RANDY: A PERFECT MATCH

By Edward Z. Epstein



"Everyone thought our partnership was over," recalls Tai.

It was 1975. Panic time. Tai was fifteen, Randy seventeen. It wasn't a question of talent, they had all the talent in the world. "But 'the puberty fairy' had dropped by," remembers Tai. "I was suddenly 'developing' physically, and Randy had stopped growing!"

Their skating reflected the changes. Up until then, everything had progressed beautifully. They'd won the National Junior Pairs title only two years earlier. But facts had to be faced, and perhaps the time had come for each to move on. Changing partners in the pair skating world wasn't uncommon.

"Randy certainly could have gone for another partner," observes Tai. Both were powerful individual skaters with promising futures as solo competitors. However, to quote a champion in another field: "Not so fast," as a young Frank Sinatra told a columnist who wrote, early on, that Frank's glory days were over.

Anyone who really knew Tai and Randy, and how they functioned, knew that if and when it was time for them to move on, they'd be doing it together. They'd formed an unbreakable bond, a brother-and-sister-like deep friendship destined not only to endure, but to see them through many crises, personal and professional, that they'd have to contend

with over the years. "We were committed to each other, we had the same goals," states Tai.

They'd grown up together, and had been skating since Tai was eight, Randy ten. "I was the shy one," Tai recalled. They were inspired by ice shows they saw. Aja Zanova's dazzling skating [the late Aja Zanova Steindler is a former ITNY honoree] made a strong impression. "I'd sit in the front row," recalls Randy, "watching the skating, and hear-



ing the sound of the blades – which is something that never comes through on television – I remember that vividly."

When he began skating with Tai, their coaches – first Mabel Fairbanks, who teamed them up, then John Nicks – explained how important it was "for you guys to be united. Don't let people split you up."

The "ideal" pair skating team was a male with an ultra-petite female, who was "easy" to lift and catch, to "throw" into jumps et al. Tai and Randy, however, were evenly matched physically, virtually the same height, not unlike their predecessors, U.S. champions [and former ITNY honorees] Jo Jo Starbuck and Ken Shelley ("a hard act to follow," as one critic noted). But their potential was unmistakable, and Babilonia and Gardner were working with Starbuck and Shelley's coach, John Nicks.

"Within a year – 1976 – our bodies had calmed down. Randy even grew an inch!" recalls Tai. It was possible then for skaters to compete both as individuals and in the pairs event, and Randy won a U.S. National Junior Men's title and competed in the Senior Men's singles in 1977. "But skating singles and pairs was too much," he says. "Don't forget, skating solo, at that time, there were also school figures, which were really tough, to worry about!" The decision was made: concentrate on

pairs.

The hard work intensified, and Gold medals were in sight. John Nicks had a goal in mind: "There hasn't been an American pair to win a world championship in thirty years."

Great talents in any field share an outstanding quality: the ability to make what they're doing appear effortless. "Whether it's a ballet dancer, a figure skater, a singer, a writer, whatever the field – the blood, sweat and tears that go into a performance, or a script, or a book, should be invisible," noted the great playwright and theatre director Moss Hart. "If the artist is truly gifted, only the result shines through."

In Tai and Randy's case, it did. There were problems, of course. A solo skater, out there alone on the ice, has only himself, or herself, to contend with. A different dynamic is in play when skating with a partner, or dancing with one; as Ginger Rogers once said, regarding Fred Astaire: "I did everything he did, only I did it backwards and in heels."

"In effect, it's a marriage," notes Randy, "with all the pitfalls. Sometimes you have to compromise your feelings, you have to edit yourself – what to say, what not to say – but the focus has to remain constant. You both have to stay on the same path; you have to get out of your own way. Accept. Respect. Patience. Passion."

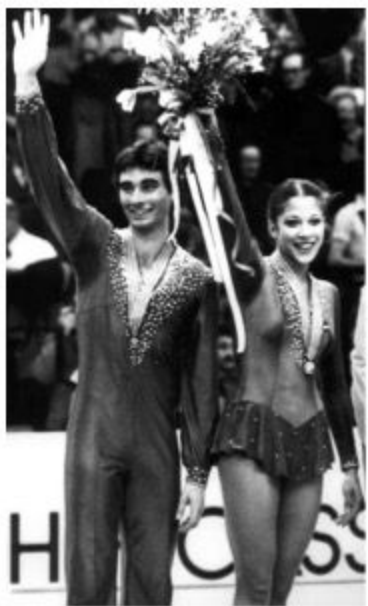
"We were in it together," states Tai. "You're either in it one hundred-and-fifty percent, or you're not in it at all."

Babilonia and Gardner went on to win five consecutive U.S. National Senior Pair Championships, culminating with a World championship in 1979. Their program was a perfect blend of artistry and athleticism (it included a throw triple-salchow, a split double-flip, and a throw double-axel). They were the youngest pair ever to represent the USA, and, barring some unforeseen development, an Olympic victory the following year seemed inevitable.

The 1980 Winter Olympics took place in Lake Placid, the second time since 1932 that the Upstate New York village hosted the Games. Babilonia and Gardner seemed in great shape. What could possibly go wrong?

It wasn't that, while performing their program, they missed a lift or a throw jump or a side-by-side move that they'd done thousands of times, and suddenly concentration wavered; or that their timing was off, or one of them tripped or caught an edge in an unseen rut in the ice; or that at a key moment one had said the wrong thing to the other; it wasn't anything like that.





It was something over which neither Tai nor Randy nor John Nicks nor any other human being had any control; during practice, Randy had suffered a leg injury, and was given a shot for the pain. All knew it was serious. During warm-up, before the competition, a worst-case scenario became real: there was no way that Randy would be able to perform.

They had to withdraw from the competition. The world was watching. Confusion ensued, emotions ran rampant. To describe the scene, and subsequent events, as traumatic for all concerned would be insufficient – it was traumatic, all right, and beyond. There was disbelief. Anger. Rage. Why did it have to happen? What happens next? Nobody knew if Randy would ever be able to skate again.

Tai recalls vividly how “the incredible understanding and support we received from Dick Button and the whole ABC Wide World of Sports family – Jim McKay, Chris Schenkel – they were all so

important in helping us get through it...”

The grace and courage both skaters displayed “won the hearts of America,” as one observer said.

In retrospect, there were things to be grateful for: no one had died; the injury wasn’t life-threatening, and Randy would skate again. But the emotional cost was staggering, and Tai and Randy paid a heavy price: the shattering of a dream they’d shared since they were kids, and had worked so hard to achieve: Olympic Gold.

They would always have the satisfaction of being World and five-times U.S. Champions, an indisputably spectacular accomplishment. But the after effects of Lake Placid would reverberate in Babilonia and Gardner’s lives, in one way or another, right down to the present day.

They went on to enjoy a highly successful professional career. Away from the sheltering bubble of the “amateur” skating world, they faced entirely new

challenges. Aja Zanova summed it up: when she turned pro – she was a two-time world champion – she was shocked to learn that audiences responded most enthusiastically to showmanship, not technical expertise. “I wasn’t skating for judges anymore, where everything received grades! Skating professionally was a tough new experience.”

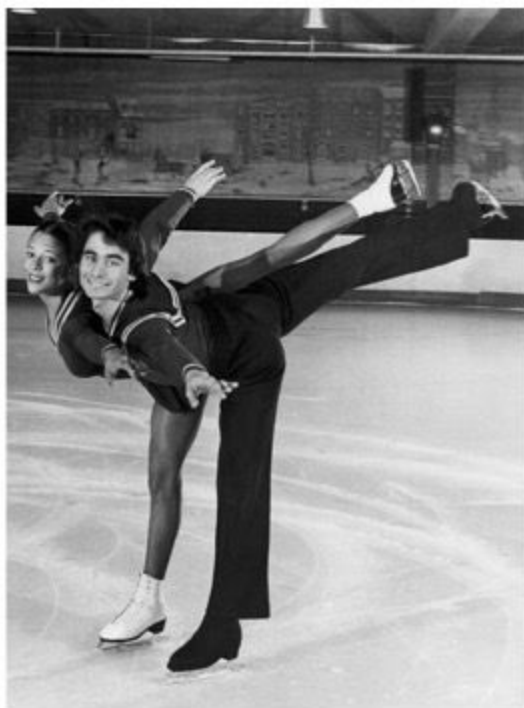
By the time Tai and Randy starred in *Ice Capades*, from 1980 through 1983, audiences were more sophisticated – they expected both technical expertise and showmanship, and Babilonia and Gardner didn’t disappoint them. “Our approach changed in good and not so good ways,” observes Randy. “But we were excited to be in a different environment, to be doing something new.”

“We rode it out together,” states Tai.

“They’ve been there for each other through thick and thin,” noted their friend Scott Hamilton.

But in their private lives there were





highly-charged emotional issues to deal with. "To the press and public we were in the same box: 'Tai and Randy.' But I had problems, for a few years, finding out who I was, and wondering if I could function without a partner," relates Tai.

"People always thought we were a couple, but we weren't," Randy explains. "Mostly because I happen to be gay."

Both faced their personal situations head-on, as they'd done with their skating. In 1990, Tai's story was presented in a motion picture made for television, "On Thin Ice: The Tai Babilonia Story" (Randy did some of the choreography). In Tai's story were echoes of troubles faced by Judy Garland and others; few are prepared to contend with the extreme stress and anxiety that accompany "making it big," as Judy once observed.

But Tai is candid: "I have no more secrets," she says today, and is relieved to "own my mistakes," and to have successfully changed her life. She is celebrating her ninth year of sobriety: "It's one of the best decisions I've ever made!"

Randy has written a play, "GO FIGURE: The Randy Gardner Story," co-authored and directed by Joshua Ravetch, who directed Carrie Fisher's "Wishful

Drinking." The play is described as Live Autobiography, and in it Randy portrays himself. It had a successful run at the NoHo Arts Center in Los Angeles, and will be presented by the Delaware Theatre Company in Wilmington on January 18, 2018.

In the play Tai and their close friend, Dorothy Hamill [former ITNY honoree], join him on stage. According to Tai, "People who think they know our story are in for a few, shall we say, surprises!" Advertisements for the play have a tag line, "May not be suitable for children under twelve."

Their saga continues.

They produced the first video to teach skating fundamentals, "HOW TO ICE SKATE with Tai and Randy." In 1992, both were inducted into the United States Figure Skating Hall of Fame, joining skating legends Scott Hamilton, Peggy Fleming, Dorothy Hamill and Michelle Kwan.

Randy is a noted director, choreographer and producer of ice shows and events. Tai, proud mother of twenty-two year old son, Scout, from her former marriage to producer Cary Butler, is a highly-sought after coach and producer

of international skating seminars and clinics. Randy is a U.S. Figure Skating and PSA (Pro Skaters Association) certified skating instructor, and on-site coach for Dorothy Hamill's Fantasy Figure Skating Camp. His Randy Gardner School of Skating is now featured at ICE at Santa Monica on an annual basis.

It's incredible that they are celebrating fifty years together! To those who remember them as the new kids on the block, this is a dizzying milestone. "Tai and Randy – not unlike ITNY, I might add – have proven to be survivors," notes company founder Moira North. "They are shining examples of the old adage, 'It's not what happens to you but how you deal with it that defines your character.' We're delighted that Babilonia and Gardner are our honorees for 2017."

Edward Z. Epstein's current book is "AUDREY & BILL: A Romantic Biography of Audrey Hepburn and William Holden" (Running Press). It is under option for a film. He has written a play, "AVA," based on the life of Ava Gardner.