

KRISTI: THE ONE AND ONLY

By Edward Z. Epstein



Rarely has the art of figure skating come more alive than when practiced by the one and only Kristi Yamaguchi. Her timeless style was a perfect combination of technical expertise and dramatic flair; triple-triples, soaring double axels, beautifully positioned spirals and spins, and intricate footwork were consistent staples in her repertoire.

In addition to two World titles, a National title, and a stellar pair-skating career, she won the ultimate prize — Olympic Gold — in 1992. Then, sixteen years later, the petite star won "Dancing With the Stars" (with partner Mark Ballas), proving that her artistic virtuosity on the ground was every bit as memorable as on the ice.

DWTS required the creation of an entirely new "program," in effect, with new choreography and music, every week for an entire season. All performed live and in different styles. The focus, stamina and concentration required was daunting.

And which experience had been the more nerve-racking? The Olympics or "Dancing With the Stars"? "Both," she exclaims, her sense of humor intact. But she'd long ago developed a technique on how to handle stress: "Visualization. In my mind I would always visualize the complete performance, start to finish, that I wanted to give. I would mentally stop the performance and start over again if I made a mistake.

"You have to see yourself having success, you must allow yourself to be yourself. Also, when preparing to skate — or dance! — I did breathing exercises, which helped me relax." Her have-no-regrets philosophy was an additional asset: "That was always my motivation when training for a competition. You fall, you make mistakes, you disappoint yourself, but you leave it all on the ice, you don't take it home with you, you don't dwell on it."

The pressure simply to qualify for the Olympic team had been an incredible ordeal. "It was so competitive. But once I was actually named [to the team], it was, like, 'Okay, so the dream has come true.





I can call myself an Olympian, and whatever happens from there happens."

Even Kristi would have been hard pressed to imagine all that was in store for her in coming years.

Born in Hayward, California, her father, Jim, was a dentist. Her Mom, Carole, was a medical secretary, and Kristi and her siblings, Brett and Lori, grew up in the nearby city of Fremont. She'd begun skating and taking ballet lessons at an early age, as therapy for a correctible foot defect. Her passion for skating was apparent from the beginning, and her parents were delighted that it had ignited her enthusiasm and captured her imagination. "Yes, they were very happy about it. I don't think they were certain what I'd end up doing! I'd been a very shy child, and skating brought me out of my shell."

Things progressed at a steady pace, and, "when I was eleven, Rudy Galindo and I — up to that point, we'd been strictly singles skaters — started partnering [Galindo was thirteen]. For years, we did double duty, skated both singles and as a pair."

Both great skaters, they were an unusual duo, both able to do the most difficult moves, with side-by-side triple flips one of the highlights of their programs.



And, since they both jumped and spun in opposite directions, their "look" on the ice was unique.

To accommodate her skating schedule, Kristi was home-schooled for the first two years of high school, then attended and graduated Mission San Jose High School. At age fifteen, Kristi and Rudy won the Junior title at the 1986 U.S. championships. And, in 1989 — Kristi was eighteen, Rudy twenty — they won the Senior pairs title at the U.S. championships, a victory they repeated the following year.

It's unusual when a successful team decides — or circumstances force them to decide — to split up and pursue "single" careers, whether on ice or off. Mike Nichols and Elaine May, not to mention Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and others, experienced that potentially traumatic development.

However, in the labyrinthian world of highest level figure skating, "There was

no room for us to move up in the world rankings," notes Kristi. "It was tough, and there were other factors contributing to our break-up. But we understood that our careers would be taking a different path."

With total dedication, beginning in 1991, Kristi focused solely on singles. She relocated to Edmonton, the capital city of the Canadian province of Alberta — a far cry from sunny California — to train with coach Christy Ness. She reactivated her formal education, taking psychology courses at the University of Alberta.

Her training was intense and on-the-mark. She placed second to Tonya Harding in the U.S. championships, and the following month, in Munich, Germany, she became 1991 World Champion. It was a USA year: Harding and Nancy Kerrigan placed second and third, respectively.

In '92, Kristi became U.S. champion, securing her berth on the Winter Olympics team, along with Harding and Kerrigan. Kristi's repertoire, however,



did not include a triple axel, while two of her competitors — Harding and Japan's Midori Ito — had performed the jump consistently.

But not in Albertville, France, when the Games were held. Kristi prevailed and won Gold.

While in Albertville, she met Minnesota-born Bret Hedican, a professional hockey player, a star defenseman, who was playing for Team USA. Was it a moment from an Audrey Hepburn movie? "It was only a chance meeting," laughs Kristi. "I hardly had the time or the opportunity to pursue a relationship. I was too focused on my skating."

The couple were reintroduced three years later. "He reminded me we'd met in Albertville," she smiles, and nature took its course. They were married on July 8, 2000. She gave birth to daughter Keara Kiyomi in 2003, and Emma Yoshiko in 2005. Motherhood would prove to be a life-changer for Kristi in unexpected

ways.

In the meantime, after winning Olympic Gold, Kristi turned professional, and for years was a star attraction in Scott Hamilton's "Stars on Ice." She competed successfully on the professional circuit, winning the World Professional Figure Skating Championship four times. She appeared frequently on television, her "likability rating" always high.

And former partner Rudy Galindo also achieved success, winning the U.S. championship in '96, the Bronze medal at Worlds that year, and he too went on to enjoy a successful professional career.

In '96, Kristi established the "Always Dream Foundation for Children." "I was inspired by the Make-A-Wish foundation, to make a positive difference in children's lives." That goal was successfully reached, and the Foundation continues to have an important impact to the present day, providing, among many other services, funding for after-school

programs, computers, clothing and reading programs, "empowering children to reach their dreams through education and inspiration."

Kristi's daughters inspired her to pursue yet another career: author of children's books. "When they were very young, the girls loved it when I read to them at night, and always wanted me to read their favorite books over and over. I'd always had an interest in writing, but had never had the time or opportunity to go there. But I wanted to write a book for them! Hopefully, they'd want me to read it to them over and over."

Kristi's books include "Always Dream," "Pure Gold" and the instructional "Figure Skating for Dummies." In 2011, her children's book, "Dream Big, Little Pig," rose to number two on the New York Times bestseller list, and won the Gelett Burgess Children's Book Award. There was a sequel, "It's a Big World, Little Pig."



Her commitment to family, of course, takes precedence over all else. Are her daughters aware of her accomplishments as a skater? "They've seen clips of some of my competitive performances," says Kristi. "And they've seen me skate in shows. My older daughter is into Hula dancing and my twelve-year-old skates, she's competed in local competitions. But I'm not pushing it," she laughs. (Her daughter's coach is none other than Rudy Galindo.) "The important thing about skating is that it teaches you life lessons. That's what's important."

Her husband's family resides in Minnesota, "and, when we visit, sometimes we'll all go skating, strictly for fun, on a frozen lake in the neighbor-

hood," notes Kristi. Bret's interest in and knowledge about hockey — he's a former Stanley Cup winner — has made him one of San Jose's most popular TV and radio commentators (he covers The San Jose Sharks, a professional ice hockey team).

Kristi's list of awards and accomplishments, over the years, right up to the present day, could literally fill a book. They have included being inducted into the U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame, the U.S. Figure Skating Hall of Fame and the World Skating Hall of Fame. She has won the Asian Excellence Award and even the Sonja Henie Award from the Professional Skaters Association.

"Kristi is a totally amazing woman," notes ITNY founder Moira North. "And

now, I'm proud to say, she's won a well-deserved award from Ice Theatre of New York! Kristi's name has been synonymous with excellence in everything she's done, and continues to do. Her efforts reach beyond the worlds of skating and entertainment. I can't think of anyone more worthy of being this year's ITNY honoree."

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