

# PERFECTLY FRANK: THE AMAZING MR. CARROLL

By Edward Z. Epstein

A great coach is a lot like a great film director: they must know how to get results by being aware of exactly who they are working with. Some skaters, like some actors, require a light and careful touch; others need considerably more coaching. The coach must be aware of what throws his skater off, and be able to judge exactly how a performance is going to look. The

art of coaching demands many skills.

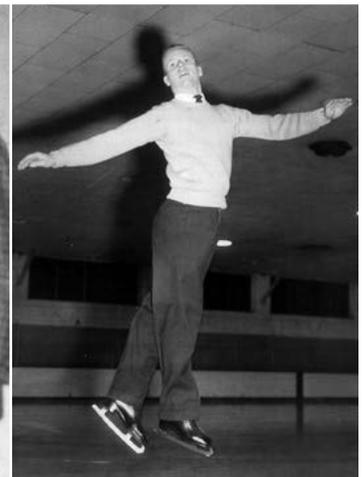
Obviously, Frank Carroll – nee Francis M. Carroll – has always had what it takes.

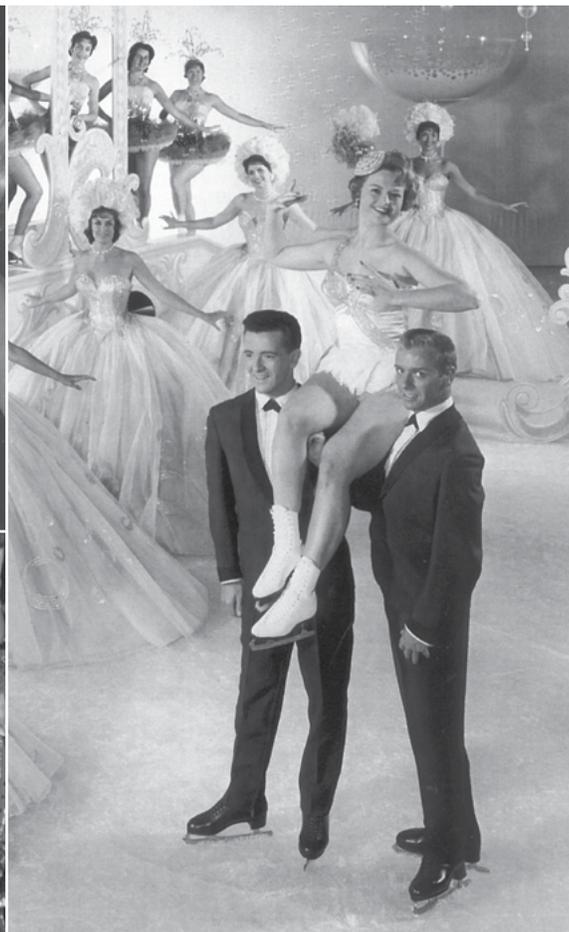
He is noted for being friendly, disciplined, unpretentious, quietly intense and non-intimidating. But he gets results by being honest, even when it hurts. He's a man who keeps pace not only with the skating world but the world around him. He doesn't try to impose his personal style, but has always worked to bring out the individual style expressed by the skater.

His passion for the sport ignited, one afternoon, at his neighborhood movie theatre (Frank has always been a film buff). "There would be newsreels shown between features, highlighting current stories of the day," recalls Frank. "This was long

before TV news covered everything 24/7. One day, on that big theatre screen, when news footage of Dick Button winning the Olympics flashed on, that did it for me! Watching him jump and spin, the athleticism, the power, I wanted to do that!"

Previously, he had only skated outdoors, in his hometown of Worcester, Mass., "in freezing, freezing cold weather, complete with howling winds, on natural ice. And when I told my father I wanted skates with teeth on them, figure skates, like Dick Button's, Dad's reply left nothing to the imagination: No! Definitely not! Hockey skates were acceptable, but the thought that I would seriously pursue figure skating was a prospect he discouraged from the start."





In all fairness to Mr. Carroll, a father could hardly foresee, back then, any kind of a future for a son as a figure skater. In the movies there had only been two highly visible and successful skaters, both women: Sonja Henie, who was totally in a league of her own, and the artistically brilliant, but far less commercial, Belita. In ice shows, women were the featured headliners, and Dick Button seemed to be the only man who would be functioning in that league (and, as events would prove, beyond).

Furthermore, be it a figure skater or a football player, athletes careers' held out only as long as their bodies did. Mr. Carroll, a professor, wanted his son to seek out a career with a future. Frank did attend, and graduated from the College of the Holy Cross in 1960, with a B.S. in Sociology. "I was a good student," he recalls. "And the Jesuit training taught me to challenge everything."

But his passion for figure skating was undiminished. He remained focused on pursuing a competitive career.

It was hardly magic time when he began lessons with Cecilia Colledge, a renowned champion from Sonja Henie's competitive days. Figures accounted for

sixty-percent of a skater's score towards a championship, and Ms. Colledge's approach towards figures – and she was, after all, a six-time British national champion, a former world champion, and Olympic Silver medalist – was that a skater "should feel the ice," recalls Frank. It was not a concept that worked for him: "I never, ever felt those figures."

A life-changing event occurred for Frank when renowned nine-time American champion-turned-coach, Maribel Vinson-Owen, entered his life. At the time, "I had no idea who she was," recalls Frank.

Her influence on his future coaching career cannot be underestimated. She came from a family of figure skaters, was a Radcliffe graduate, and had enjoyed a stellar competitive career, winning enough gold, silver and bronze medals, as both a singles and pairs skater, to stock a small store. During her competitive days, she was the only female sportswriter hired by *The New York Times*!

She first met Frank through her young daughters, Maribel and Laurence, both gifted skaters, whom Frank had become friends with. He became, in effect, an unofficial member of the family.

Vinson-Owen was unique; she was an

outspoken individualist in an era when the strait-laced skating community didn't take kindly to anyone who was in any way a nonconformist. She had her own style, on and off the ice, and Frank had found, at last, a person with whom he could connect.

"I remember, when there was talk of getting rid of school figures, Maribel's opinion proved to be prescient: 'If they ever get rid of school figures,' she said, 'it will be acrobats on ice.' Talk about predicting the future!"

Vinson's approach to skating "became the very basis of my teaching career," states Frank. "She explained movement to me, how the body works, how to feel your weight on the blades, the flow that defines true skating – flashbulbs went off for me. I didn't have to feel the ice, I could take an intellectual approach to skating."

Training at the Skating Club of Boston, Frank became friendly with one of Vinson's star pupils, Tenley Albright [ITNY's 2014 Honoree]. "She was very kind to me," recalls Frank, during this time when he needed all the moral support he could get.

Frank had shown great promise as a competitor, winning the Bronze medal on the junior level at the 1959 U.S.



Championships, and the Silver medal in the same category the following year. Had he continued competing, and not turned professional – he joined the Ice Follies – it’s likely that he would have been a member of the 1961 U.S. Figure Skating Team.

The entire team – eighteen members, plus sixteen others in the contingent -- perished aboard Sabena Flight 548 enroute from New York City to Brussels, Belgium, for the World Championships. Aboard were Maribel and her two daughters.

“I received a phone call, from Nancy Ludington, at 3:30 AM, with the terrible news,” remembers Frank, the haunting memory as vivid today as when it happened. “I tried to make sense of it all...”

In 1964, Carroll quit the Ice Follies, and was accepted at the law school at the University of San Francisco. Earning a decent income, after all, was necessary. But, once again, his artistic ambitions prevailed. He decided to give the acting profession a try. He became good friends with perhaps the only male movie star who was a proficient figure skater: Tab Hunter. Their friendship stood the test of time. “He was a lovely, dear, kind person,” says Frank.

Carroll’s transition to coach began around this time, and he’d finally plugged into the career that would propel him to the very top of his profession. There was a Carroll trademark: all the skaters he worked with were as good as they could possibly be. Frank always responded to great skating. He was the audience the skater had to trust; someone they knew was aware of all that was right in a program, what wasn’t, and what had to be corrected.

And, of almost equal importance, he proved to be a master at dealing with the skating world hierarchy – the complex, often inscrutable world of officials, judges, et. al., not to mention the press. Reporters liked and respected him, he was forthcoming and candid.

He has explained that one of the secrets of sustaining his career was that coaching was his business, and “hanging out with my pupils, or members of their families, isn’t smart. I never did that. I think there’s got to be a line there, a certain distance.” As far as he was concerned, it hardly made sense to leave the rink and take the problems of the day home. “That’s a no-go situation. I need peace. That’s why I bought my house in Palm Springs.”

When queried about the many prominent skaters he has worked with, he answers with the finesse of a diplomat, yet one can read between the lines.

Carroll had great success with both male and female skaters, and no reading between the lines is necessary regarding Michelle Kwan: “The best all-around skater ever,” states Frank. “A great jumper, spinner, and untouchable when it came to connecting with an audience.” Under Carroll’s tutelage, she became the most decorated figure skater in U.S. history, winning nine U.S. Championships, tying the record of none other than Maribel Vinson-Owen; and she won five World Championships, and an Olympic Silver medal. Fans all over the world became accustomed to watching Michelle in the Kiss-and-Cry area, waiting for her scores, Frank by her side.

Timothy Goebel (co-chair of tonight’s event honoring Frank): “Well,” smiles Frank, “I’d describe Tim, in his competitive days, as scrappy – if you got him angry, you were in for a fight.” Goebel landed three quads in one program at 1999’s Skate America, and, in 2002, was the first to land a quad salchow in Olympic competition.



*Congratulations, Frank!*

*I feel blessed to have called you my friend since the Ice Follies days.*

*Congratulations on your performing,  
and on your stellar coaching career.*

*You're an inspiration to us all.*

*With gratitude,*

*Richard Dwyer*



Evan Lysacek: “A Boeing 747,” states Frank. “He would skate his programs six times a day! I was a stickler for a skater always doing a program, in practice, from beginning to end, never stopping. ‘If you do stop,’ I would say, ‘I’ll walk out of here.’ No danger of that with Evan. He was the most passionate skater I ever taught.” And, at six-foot-two, the tallest. Working with Frank, he won two U.S. National Championships, a World Championship, and in 2010, in a blaze of glory, Olympic Gold.

Carroll pupil Christopher Bowman became known as “Bowman the Showman.” “The talent was there, in abundance, but not the discipline,” states Frank, describing both Bowman and fellow skater Nicole Bobek as “co-conspirators. I’ve never known two naughtier people in my life.” Controversy swirled around both

skaters, and, for Bowman, there was a tragic final act: at age forty, he died from an accidental drug overdose.

Earlier in the game, Carroll’s star pupil was Linda Fratianne: “She was the best student. When I told her what she was doing wrong, there would be no arguments – she’d simply fix it!” She won two World Championships, four U.S. Championships, and an Olympic Silver Medal.

Frank has always told his students: “Don’t blame anyone if things don’t work out, move on.” And, echoing lessons learned from Maribel Vinson-Owen, “Take responsibility for your life. If a performance doesn’t go right, don’t say the ice was too rough, the blades not right, that’s nonsense.”

Frank has won many awards himself. In 1996, he was inducted into the U.S. Figure Skating Association’s Hall of Fame

and, the following year, was the first person to be named Olympic Coach of the Year. In 2017, he was elected to the World Figure Skating Hall of Fame.

Dick Button has concisely described the amazing Mr. Carroll: “Frank is an Olympic champion of teaching. It’s a God-given gift to be a great teacher! And he has proven many times that he is.”

“Could anyone be a more worthy ITNY Lifetime Achievement Award recipient?” notes company founder Moira North. “Frank Carroll is one-of-a-kind, and we are – pardon my being redundant – honored to be honoring him!”

Edward Z. Epstein’s current book, “AUDREY and BILL: A Romantic Biography of Audrey Hepburn and William Holden” (Running Press) is currently under option for a film.