

TORVILL & DEAN: ONWARD!

By Edward Z. Epstein



Their Gold Medal-winning performance, at the 1984 Winter Olympic Games in Sarajevo, remains one of the most memorable in the history of figure-skating. Televised around the world, viewers, in record numbers, were captivated as, skating to Ravel's "Bolero," Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean blazed a new path and set a new standard in the field of ice dancing; a standard that the duo maintains in their lives to the present day.

Their triumph didn't happen overnight, and reaching that goal had taken practically superhuman resolve; it had been a long, hard climb.

Both were born in Nottingham, England (a city famous for its links to the legend of "Robin Hood"). They'd had other partners before coach Janet Sawbridge brought them together; Jayne was a British Junior Pairs champion, Chris and his partner had won a British Junior Ice Dance competition.

However, "Jayne and I have actually known each other since we were ten years old," notes Christopher. "We both came from working class backgrounds [Jayne was an insurance book clerk, Christopher

a police constable], neither of us led an insular life. We were working people – we had to work to finance our skating!

"When we got the opportunity to skate, it was a real treat, not something your parents forced you into!" For Jayne and Christopher, skating proved to be both an escape and a release from difficult childhoods.

Both saw sides of life that had nothing to do with an ice rink. "We were grounded," states Christopher. "This gave us real life experiences that we could draw on."

There were also fantasy life experiences that they could draw on: the movies. "Oh yes, definitely," confirms Christopher. "Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Gene Kelly and Cyd Charisse – Jayne and I used to watch a lot of those movies. Those men – and women – were always creative and trying new things all the time."

Trying new things all the time, however, would not be a welcome approach as far as the staid hierarchy dominating the amateur skating world was concerned; complying with the rules would at times prove to be a tricky proposition for Torvill

and Dean.

Their potential was obvious, and, as their competitive career blossomed, thanks to grants from the city of Nottingham, they were able to leave their jobs and concentrate full-time on their skating.

How did their unique style of skating evolve? Both recognized early-on, under the guidance of coaches Janet Sawbridge, then Betty Callaway, the vital importance of choosing just the right music and creating memorable, not run-of-the-mill, choreography: "The music must always dictate the flow of the choreography," states Chris, who has always been maestro-in-charge of the couple's choreography.

"We decide together on the music," notes Jayne, "and we go through lots of music."

Fellow ice dancers and pair skaters wondered how the couple managed so successfully to deal with the tensions that inevitably plague collaborators. As noted writing (and at times performing) team Betty Comden and Adolph Green once joked, "Sure, there are times when we want to kill each other, but that feeling passes!"



Photo: Christie Jenkins Photo



Photo: Lord Snowdon

“Well,” laughs Jayne, “we learned when to back off, and when to step up, so to speak...”

“We’ve spent all our lives together, a long time,” explains Chris. “We’ve grown to know each other, and, today, we operate differently than when we were younger. When we were younger, it was all about conquering the world. We were always passionate about things – I’d get too passionate, perhaps, and Jayne would realize those moments, and become very calm – she’d just let me fly off!...”

It was bound to happen: after their competitive career took off, media interest in the private lives of Jayne and Chris escalated. After all, they were a super talented and attractive young couple, and while they were champion skaters, the tabloid press wanted to know if they were also enjoying a love affair, reminiscent, perhaps, of an earlier pair of gifted British idols whose relationship, long

before they got married, fascinated the press: Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh.

“No one has made that comparison before,” laughs Jayne.

“We always put skating ahead of everything else,” declares Chris. “We realized that a personal relationship would have gotten in the way of anything we wanted to do. It was always skating first.” (In fact, Jayne and Chris eventually went on to marry others.)

They managed always to convey powerful, intimate feelings towards each other during their programs. How did they accomplish this?

“One gets lots of good advice from people who pass through your life,” notes Jayne. An early influence was noted skating judge Courtney Jones. “A valuable piece of advice he passed on to us was to make eye contact. Look at each other, and believe in what you’re doing.”

“That’s always been a big part of

what we do,” agrees Chris, “that connection that we have with each other, just with our eyes.”

They also boldly incorporated techniques that professional actors had long employed. “We worked with the great actor Michael Crawford [of “Phantom Of the Opera” fame]. He gave us a lot of advice on theatrics,” notes Chris, grateful that Crawford became a member of their team.

“Yes, Michael revealed to us another side of it, the acting side,” notes Jayne, “how you feel when you’re acting and performing.” Later on, there was noted Australian choreographer Graeme Murphy. “He gave us additional insight into the art of performing.”

Torvill and Dean would be entering the 1984 Olympics with unimpeachable credentials: they were already three-time World champions, European champions, and five-time British champions. But,



Photo: AP/World Wide Photos



Photo: Steve Smith

as everyone knew, in the sports world, especially when it came to the Olympic Games, there was no such thing as “a sure thing.”

Even their staunchest competitors could not deny how consistently they displayed extraordinary composure on the ice; they always appeared completely relaxed, and, therefore, like a magnet, they drew in the audience.

Their secret to appearing so relaxed was hardly a secret; painstaking, exacting preparation had been their *modus operandi* during their practice sessions. “The harder you practice, and have to deal with all the circumstances you practice under, by the time you come to the competition, you know it’s well within you,” states Chris. “The harder you work, the more you eliminate the potential errors.”

The never-to-be-forgotten day in Sarajevo finally arrived. The couple knew that the eyes of the world, along with the

steely gaze of the judges, and a stadium full of on-edge spectators, were focused, laser-like, on them and them alone.

What thoughts were racing through their minds? “We had that nervous energy inside, but, hopefully, a calm exterior,” recalls Chris. “We were confident we could do it. Of course, you never know what’s going to happen. But we knew what we had to do, and we knew how we were going to do it.”

A six-year-old skater, oblivious to the fact that she was holding up the start of Torvill and Dean’s program, was slowly, methodically clearing remaining flowers off the ice, tossed there by fans of the previous competitors. There was a flurry of nervous laughter, offering momentary relief from the pent-up tension.

The opening bars of “Bolero” finally began, and skating history was made. One report compared the couple’s impact on the crowd to the response received

by Judy Garland singing “Over The Rainbow” on her closing night at the London Palladium.

Flash Forward thirty years. “We went back to Sarajevo to recreate our ‘Bolero’ routine,” recalls Chris, “and we met that little flower girl, who was now thirty-six years old! And she introduced us to her young daughter, who, as you might have guessed, is now a skater herself.”

Torvill and Dean turned professional after the ’84 Olympics, and highlights of their amazing career would include their famed “Face The Music” tour, their groundbreaking ice show, “Ice Adventures,” which included a “flying ice ballet,” a filmed fairy tale, “Fire on Ice,” and a myriad of other accomplishments.

There were disappointments, of course. In 1994, a decade after their Olympic victory, and in the midst of their thriving professional career, they



Photo: Christie Jenkins Photo

announced that they would re-enter the amateur arena, and would compete in the Olympic Games in Lillehammer, Norway. It was the year of the Tonya Harding-Nancy Kerrigan scandal, but, to quote one report, “the real excitement in Lillehammer took place every time Torvill and Dean stepped on the ice.”

Rumors, however, were circulating behind-the-scenes that unfriendly skating world politics were in play; to the dismay of many, Jayne and Chris went on to place third. But congratulatory telegrams on their performance poured in from fans, including one from a celebrated fan whose work Torvill and Dean were particularly familiar with: Gene Kelly.

The couple’s “image” remained intact.

Over the years, they have had to deal with the burden that weighs down all renowned performing artists: the pressure always to be perfect, to meet audience

expectations. After all, Torvill and Dean are famous for the staggering number of perfect scores they’ve received during the course of their competitive career.

“We always expected [perfection] of ourselves,” Chris states today, “and we always performed – and continue to perform – to the best of our abilities. That’s been the theme of our career, I would say – do the very best you can. It’s always about wanting to do your best.”

Chris continues to push the envelope when it comes to creative ideas. Not long ago, when a routine he choreographed for himself and Jayne was broadcast on television – photographed from a drone! – the effect on some viewers was, one might say, controversial. According to reports, it was, literally, “dizzying...”

They’ve written a joint autobiography, “Facing the Music.” In 2018, a biographical film, “Torvill and Dean,” was released. In addition to their partner-

ship, over the years they have enjoyed, and continue to enjoy, highly successful individual careers as coaches and choreographers. Their unique saga continues to unfold – what further surprises are in store?

“Expect the unexpected from Torvill and Dean, and you’ll never be disappointed,” notes ITNY founder Moira North. “Who better typifies the ideals and goals of Ice Theatre than Jayne and Chris? We’re thrilled to have them as this year’s honorees!”

Edward Z. Epstein’s forthcoming book is “FRANK & MARILYN: The Lives, the Loves, and the Fascinating Relationship of Frank Sinatra and Marilyn Monroe,” to be published by Post Hill Press, distributed by Simon & Schuster.