

JASON BROWN: THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES

By Edward Z. Epstein



Multi-talented Jason Brown has always had that something extra that thrills audiences; it was never more evident than at this year's World Championships, where he won prolonged, well-deserved standing ovations for his programs.

His short was a tour-de-force, both an artistic and athletic achievement. The

choreography, by Rohene Ward [recipient of this year's ITNY Choreography Award] was superb, as one element flowed seamlessly into another, while Jason's interpretation of the music, an element so often lacking in skaters' programs as they race from one jump to another, was memorable. His jumps and

spins were flawlessly executed, his form throughout perfect.

If one were to make a comparison between Brown and skaters of an earlier generation, John Curry and Toller Cranston come to mind. Another description: on the ice, he is a combination of Mikhail Baryshnikov and Fred Astaire! And, unlike many of his peers, he effortlessly radiates the joy of skating.

Born in Los Angeles on December 15, 1994, raised in Highland Park, Illinois, Jason has an older sister, Jordan, a younger brother, Dylan, and "they have always been my best cheerleaders," smiles Jason. His entrance into the world of skating began at age three-and-a-half, when his mother enrolled him and his sister in Learn to Skate classes.

He learned fast. A proper education, of course, was tops on the list, and piano lessons were eventually begun as well. "My piano teacher, in due course, came to the conclusion that 'piano' was not the kind of thing I was going to pursue," recalls Jason. "But those lessons brought music into my life, and I knew that would help me tremendously as far as my skating was concerned."





Balancing an education with a skating career was far from a carefree undertaking. Slowly but surely, Jason made enormous progress on the ice, eventually becoming a two-time World Junior medalist, Junior Grand Prix Final champion, Junior National champion, a nine-time Grand Prix medalist, and, in 2015, he won the U.S. National championship.

Jason's was an "A Star is Born" saga, or so it seemed. In reality, however, as in all high-powered, high-level competitive fields — "You try being a 'legend,' see how easy it is to live up to that," Judy Garland once said — there were pitfalls in store. "You're in a constant state of comparing yourself to others," Jason would later note, "being the best that you can be, and maybe even using other people as motivation, but there's always a tipping point..."

Jason's tipping point was reached as he was eagerly anticipating the 2018 Olympic Games. "My goal was to medal

at Nationals," he said, "and then find myself part of the Olympic team!"

He was focused, laser-like, on achieving that goal, to the degree that "It really ate away at me, instead of fueling me."

The goal became an obsession.

And then the dream shattered — "It took the wind out of me" — when he ended up placing sixth at Nationals. "It's so hard to be out there alone," he later recalled. "My self-worth was fully and completely wrapped around what my skating was at that moment. I was exhausted. I went out there and I have never really bombed in an event, and I bombed."

It was, for Jason, a surreal experience. Literally. "I couldn't get that word out of my head. I kept doing well enough that people assumed I was fine. But it was a really difficult time. I ended up first alternate to that Olympic team — it was an all-consuming disappointment."

And he felt trapped. The stress of

hyper-training had taken a heavy toll.

"Those were the dark days," remembered his mother, Marla. "It was hard, because it went on for a long time."

Jason was well aware that changes had to be made. Drastic changes. It would take courage and will-power; de-coupling one's self-worth from the all-consuming desire to win — and then, after all the effort, not winning! — presented a daunting challenge.

As famed coach Frank Carroll has said, after his star pupil, Michelle Kwan, to the shock of skating fans throughout the world, failed to win gold at two Olympic Games: "Things happen in life, in sport..."

As Michelle herself has said, "You have to learn to cope and be happy and enjoy life. A lot of things aren't going to go your way."

Jason began intensive sessions with a sports psychologist. He held noth-



ing back. "I was not shy about talking through all of it with her," he said, and it was the beginning of his "climbing out of the hole that I had dug myself in."

Self-confidence slowly returned, along with the knowledge that it was essential to disconnect from skating when away from the ice. After his ordeal, when with friends and family, skating was not a topic for discussion. "My family was incredible," says Jason, "their support never wavered. It was so nice to come home and disconnect rather than come home and then continue on with my training day!"

With the passage of time, the desire to compete returned, and Jason, just as Sinatra sings in "That's Life," picked himself up and got back in the race!

"It was a blast to come back to competition, rejuvenated," he says.

His performances at this year's National championships, and, most

recently, the World Championships, under the tutelage of coaches Brian Orser [a former ITNY honoree] and Tracy Wilson, represent a personal triumph. His long program, appropriately enough, was skated to "The Impossible Dream," from "Man of La Mancha." And he delivered a show-stopping exhibition performance, with rock star impact, skating to music by The Backstreet Boys.

Does he have plans to continue competing? "I do, but you never know! After the '22 season, I really thought I was done, thought I was going to retire after that. I took the summer and spring to dive into shows – 'Stars on Ice,' the skating events in Japan, and suddenly I was more energized, more passionate about the sport. I love performing, the interaction with the audiences, I love all of it."

Acclaim notwithstanding, Jason remains a realist: "After skating is all done, there's a lot of different directions

that I can go in, areas that I really want to explore."

His mother is a TV producer – will she perhaps be producing something about Jason? He smiles. "Who knows? Never say never!"

As the old saying goes, "Life is an adventure." For Jason, the future is sure to offer many new and fascinating adventures.

"Jason Brown exemplifies what ITNY is all about," states company founder Moira North. "Pursuing creative and artistic excellence in the sport of figure skating is obviously our mutual goal, and we are delighted that Jason is the recipient of our 2023 Award."

Edward Z. Epstein's latest book is "FRANK & MARILYN: The fascinating Lives and Loves of Frank Sinatra and Marilyn Monroe," published by Post Hill Press, distributed by Simon & Schuster.