



Sparking Excellence

By Philip Hersh

Not long after Ben Agosto switched from singles skating to ice dance at age 10, he faced up to the reality that winning medals on a global stage might be impossible for a U.S. ice dancer.

Why wouldn't he think that way, given the evidence? After all, one of his first coaches, Susie Wynne, had retired from competition after finishing fourth at the 1990 World Championships with Joe Druar, having decided, as she puts it, "We had topped out. That was the best we could do."

That fourth place would, in fact, be the best finish for a U.S. team at worlds over nearly two decades since Judy Blumberg and Michael Seibert won their third straight world bronze in 1985, a span in which Soviet and Russian teams won 15 of 18 world titles, four of five Olympic titles and nine of 15 Olympic medals.

Until Agosto and Tanith Belbin ended that drought in 2005.

After partnering with Belbin and moving to Detroit in 1998, Agosto became perplexed about why the two obviously talented ice dance teams with whom they would share training ice, Elizabeth Punsalan - Jerod Swallow and Naomi Lang - Peter Tchernyshev (both five-time U.S. champions), never placed higher than sixth on a global podium.

Fortunately, the apparently Sisyphean (or quixotic?) quest to reach such a

podium did not discourage either Belbin, a native Canadian, or Agosto, a native Chicagoan.

"In hindsight, I've wondered how we managed dealing with that reality," Belbin said. "But in the moment, it never occurred to us. It was always just a matter of keep working and see how far you can go. In some ways, that benefitted us, because there were no expectations."

That still was the case as Belbin and Agosto prepared for the 2005 World Championships in Moscow. "I thought it would be great if we finished in the top five," Agosto said.

Ice dance for years had been a discipline where movement in the standings was glacial. Belbin and Agosto had finished fifth in 2004, so few would have dared foresee what happened in 2005: they won the silver medal, matching the best world finish ever by a U.S. team, which had happened most recently in 1975.

"I was shocked," Agosto said.

What has happened since is even more shocking for a country whose ice dance results once had suggested the athletes had two left feet.

When Madison Chock and Evan Bates won their second straight world title in Montreal this March, it was the 17th time at least one U.S. ice dance team had won a medal in the last 19 world meets.

"It seems surreal," Belbin said.

Belbin and Agosto started those two decades of winning not only at worlds but at the Olympics. A Winter Games silver in 2006 made them the second U.S. team to win an Olympic dance medal, following Colleen O'Connor and Jim Millns in 1976.

U.S. dancers now have won medals in five straight Olympics.

Meryl Davis and Charlie White, longtime training mates of Belbin and Agosto, won two of those medals, silver in 2010 and first-ever U.S. Olympic gold in 2014. That was the culmination of a 17-year partnership in which they also were the first to win gold at worlds, doing it in 2011 and again in 2013.

At its May 6 annual gala, the Ice Theatre of New York is honoring both Belbin and Agosto and Davis and White "not only for their accomplishments as artistic Olympians and national champions but also as important role models in our 'icy' world," according to Moira North, ITNY founder and artistic director.

"In thinking about what this honor means," Davis said, "I found myself so grateful that it really gives me the chance to reflect on our competitive career as well as all of the special moments that I don't always get to remember on a daily basis - and to think about all of the people who were part of our journey that I don't get to see or speak with frequently."

"So many of the people who are



involved with Ice Theatre of New York were a part of our journey. Being honored alongside Judy Blumberg (Alumni Award) and Sandra Bezic (Choreography Award), and, of course, alongside Tanith and Ben, it almost feels like coming home. It's so special."

The impact of both teams is evident to their successors.

"I absolutely remember vividly when they (Belbin and Agosto) won that silver medal in 2005," Bates said after winning in Montreal. "It seems like that really was the catalyst for what has become a great two decades of U.S. ice dance."

"They inspired us so much. And then they were followed by Meryl and Charlie, who were our idols and role models when we trained in Michigan. The proximity to greatness is the most motivating thing in the world. They really blazed the trail."

It was a trail on which others already had posted signs of excellence, even if they fell short of medals.

"I would be remiss to not mention that we didn't start it," Belbin added. "We came to Detroit Skating Club, watched Liz and Jared finishing out their competitive career and then watched Naomi and Peter take a few more steps forward. So we were just following on that path."

When Belbin and Agosto won their Olympic medal in Turin, Italy, he said, "I

know for a fact it will not take another 30 years for the next U.S. medal."

"The success of Tanith and Ben had sparked a whole generation," said White, who married Belbin in 2015. "When they won their first (worlds medal), it was like a spark of amazement and excitement."

"It happened just as Meryl and I were about to step up to the senior level. It definitely created a sense of hope as an American ice dancer that if you worked your tail off, you would be rewarded."

Davis remembers watching the telecast of Belbin and Agosto at the 2006 Olympics and thinking, "You know, that could be us in four years."

"In seeing them on a daily basis, we realized what went into that moment," Davis said. "Seeing these two friends and role models on the TV winning their Olympic medal, it helped us to connect the dots and to understand that if that's the direction we want, we know what to do. The formula was literally laid out before us."

Belbin and Agosto finished their career with the Olympic silver followed by a fourth in 2010; four world medals (two silver, two bronze); and five U.S. titles. Their icebreaking international record owed to a number of factors, including some good timing.

"Every step of the way, it felt like

this bubble must be about to burst," Belbin said, laughing. "It was all very serendipitous."

Serendipity, 1: Belbin literally got U.S. citizenship at the 11th hour to make her eligible for the 2006 Olympics. That was in the peak phase of their career, before injuries slowed them down. Without someone opening a citizenship and immigration office on New Year's Eve 2005 to swear Belbin in as a U.S. citizen, their career would not include an Olympic medal.

Serendipity, 2: It was also their good fortune that the sport's new judging system went into place in the 2004 season and was first used at worlds in 2005 and at the Olympics in 2006.

"We felt the thrill of things changing and being a part of that," Belbin said. "It felt like the new system favored a lot of our strengths, like maximum energy and a lot of athleticism. We could actually use our enthusiasm to more effect technically, just to be able to move our feet quickly to pack in a lot of technical content - and be rewarded for that."

The International Judging System's highly mathematical approach to evaluating the most subjective discipline in figure skating eroded the time-honored stratification and (some of) the reputational judging of ice dance results.



The best example of that impact? Reigning Olympic champions Gabriella Papadakis and Guillaume Cizeron of France went from 13th at the 2014 worlds to first in 2015. And although the numbers are less striking, Davis and White went from sixth in the 2008 worlds and fourth in 2009 to Olympic silver in 2010 in Vancouver.

"Those U.S. teams before us had a giant castle door in front of them," Agosto said. "They had been banging on that door for a long time and really softening it to the point where then Tanith and I were able to push in."

"The change of the judging system helped a lot. At that early point in IJS, everything was kind of thrown into not chaos but into a little bit of flux where the old ways were harder to continue. We really benefited from a situation where, you know, the marks could be the marks you deserved."

Davis and White grew up under IJS. He feels its specificity — this many lifts worth this much, this many twizzles, this many step sequences — provided a template for young dancers to follow as they sought to grow their skating.

"It focused us and especially young dancers on training specific turns and lifts and having maybe a better understanding of, 'How do we define this as a sport?'" White said. "It gave us some metrics, and that was new and kind of fun as a young person to be able to play with the numbers and see where we could improve ourselves."

Doing the technical elements in ice dance well is one thing. Doing them with emotion, synchronicity of movement and

inventiveness is what separates "well" from exceptional. In the case of Davis and White, the length of a partnership that began when she was nine and he, eight, created the understanding to make the two kids from Michigan a cohesive pair as adults.

"Charlie and I grew up together, learned a great deal about life and who we were as people during our time together," Davis had told me in answering a question about the impact of longevity. "For many, many years, we spent most of our hours of most of our days in each other's space."

"After so much time, particularly in a creative, competitive and demanding environment, we learned to read one another quite naturally — mood, body language, little nuances in the tone of voice and emotional state. That deep understanding built over time bred a trust and comfort I found incredibly reassuring as we approached our Olympic moments, particularly in 2014."

Their 17 years together led to a 2014 Olympic free dance so physically and mentally demanding it left them looking as if they had spent 17 years of energy on the four minutes of skating that brought them victory in Sochi over their brilliant Canadian rivals, Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir, the 2010 (and 2018) Olympic champions.

Their music was from Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade," a composition White had loved for years. He debated using it because compatriot Evan Lysacek had skated to it for his title-winning Olympic free skate in 2010.

"I was like, 'There's no way we'll

be able to use it now that Evan winning with it was historic,'" White first thought before realizing he would be haunted by not using music that had become an ear worm for him.

The intensity of the "Scheherazade" sections coach Marina Zoueva chose for Davis and White suited perfectly the power and athleticism that had come to define their skating. The most striking feature of the way they performed it was a feeling for tempo, their skating changes of pace matching the shifts in the music's speed. That is an artistic understanding White said they had not developed until 14 years into their partnership.

"One of my favorite things about our career was that we got to a point where we were able to use the same music that an American Olympic champion had used, and we were really able to make it our own," White said. "The whole process, putting together the lifts, putting together the choreography, it all came together in a really natural way. And every time we performed it, I felt the music, and I felt my connection to Meryl."

Nine years earlier in Moscow, Belbin and Agosto had made it, "game on," for U.S. ice dancers.

And then here came Davis and White back in Russia, coached by Russian emigres to North America, skating to music by one of Russia's so-called "Mighty Five" composers, winning an event in which Russians once had the only game in town.

Philip Hersh, who has covered figure skating at every Winter Olympics since 1980, spent 31 years as the Olympic specialist of the Chicago Tribune.