



SCOTT HAMILTON: His Incredible Journey

By EDWARD Z. EPSTEIN

Whether enroute to winning four consecutive U.S. championships, four World championships, then the ultimate prize, Olympic Gold (by that time, he recalls today, “I’d gone from novice to grizzled veteran of competitive skating”); or whether he was launching the innovative smash hit ice show, “Stars On Ice”; or establishing a thriving career in media; not to mention falling in love and becoming a devoted family man – through it all, and up to the present day, Scott Hamilton has maintained a *modus-operandi* that has served him well: an unshakable positive attitude; great courage in the face of daunting personal challenges (he is a cancer survivor); and un-wavering faith in his religious beliefs.

As he has observed, “You can’t just skate through life and expect to be happy.”

Scenario: A two-year-old child becomes seriously ill with an ailment that doctors are unable to diagnose. Ultimately, amazingly, the disease – misdiagnosed at one point as cystic fibrosis, with a prognosis that gave the child six months to live – began to recede on its own.

Fiction? Not at all. Scott Hamilton’s incredible journey had begun.

His parents, Dorothy, a professor, and Ernest, also a professor (to Scott, “they were just school teachers,” he recalls fondly) had adopted him at the age of six weeks. He wasn’t an only child –

his older sister, Susan, was his parents’ biological child, and a younger brother, Steven, was also adopted.

“My parents made me aware of the need to be kind, respectful,” remembers Scott, “that in life the way you present yourself is very important. Caring about other people is essential.”

Home was Bowling Green, Ohio, an All-American small city of 30,000. Throughout early childhood, Scott continued to experience gravely serious health issues. There were endless medical tests, all providing no answers. Desperate, his parents grabbed onto a suggestion offered by one of Scott’s doctors: some sort of supervised physical activity might help Scott’s seemingly hopeless situation.

One day they took Scott to a newly opened ice rink and, in retrospect, one can actually say that skating saved Scott’s life. Very slowly, but surely, “Everything about my physical condition began to improve, my breathing, my digestion, everything that wasn’t working the way it was supposed to, began to work.”

The youngster displayed an aptitude for skating, and his parents paid for lessons. (There would be many coaches, along the way, who would play important roles in Scott’s skating life: Pierre Brunet, Edy Scotvold, Gus Lussi, Carlo Fassi and, most importantly later on, Don Laws).

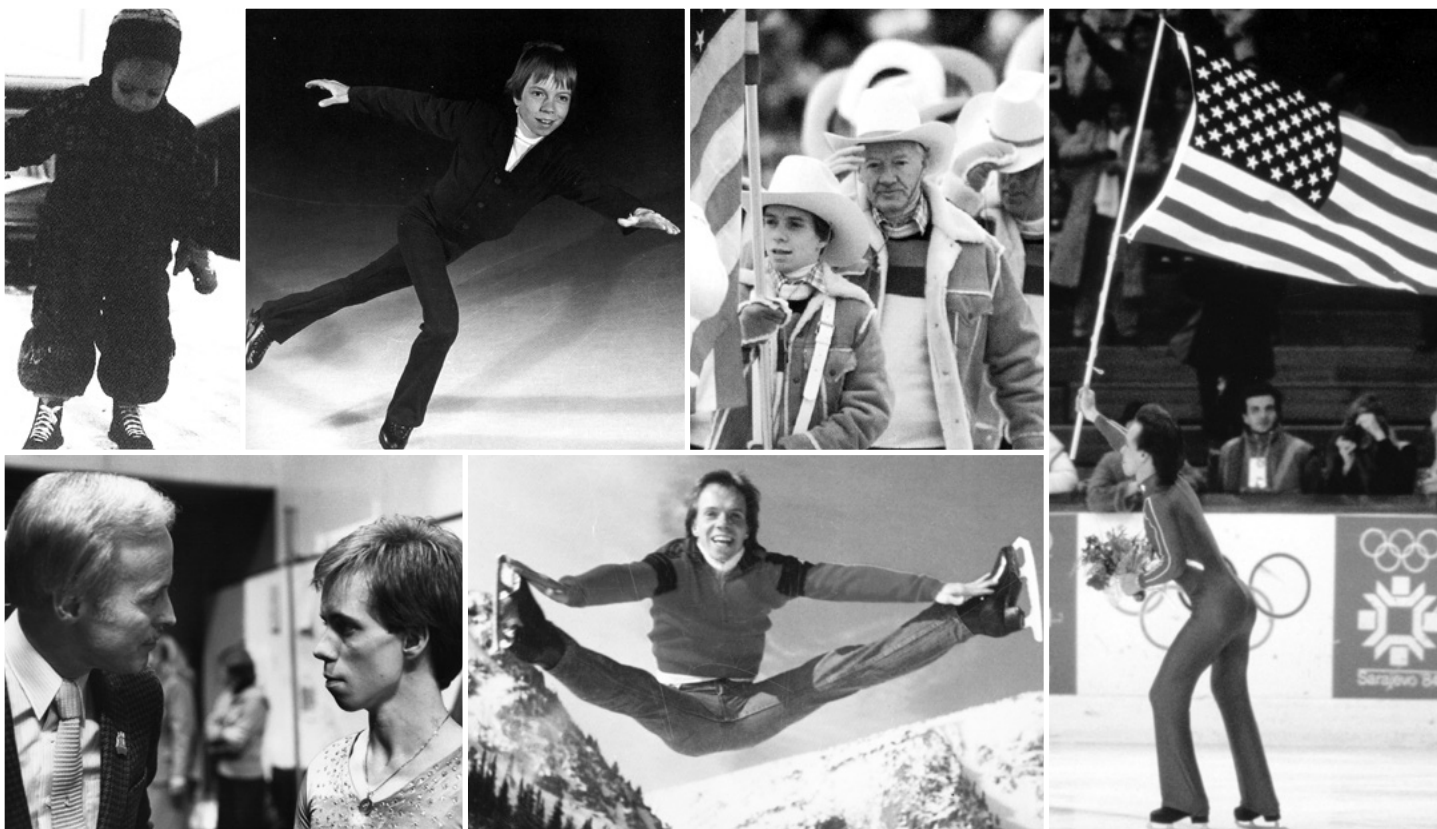
Meanwhile, the Hamiltons would

discover, as their son’s involvement in skating progressed, how expensive the sport could be. These were days when there were no official “sponsorship” opportunities for skaters whose families couldn’t afford the costs.

At one point, because of the financial situation, it looked as if Scott, in his teens, would have to quit skating and follow another path; he enrolled in Bowling Green State University. Fortunately, philanthropists Helen and Frank Lorraine came to the rescue.

There were, however, no “A Star Is Born”-like, one-after-another events that would catapult the young man to instant recognition by the skating world. Far from it. However, “Being on the ice was enough for me,” he recalls, as he remembers “coming in dead last in my first competitions.” Was he beset by nerves? “You could say that, but I just wasn’t prepared. I *hoped* I’d skate well,” he recalls, “and I was obedient – I listened, most of the time, anyway -- to what my coach told me.”

School figures, back then, were a vital, compulsory element in competitions, worth thirty-percent of the final score. “I *hated* them,” laughs Scott today, “I loved to perform. To make people laugh.” He was told he’d better catch up on figures if he hoped to ever become a serious competitor. A skater had to pass eight school figure tests to qualify for



major competitions. “I failed my third test twice,” recalls Scott. But he persevered (a lifelong trait), finally passing the eighth -- Gold -- test, “then I was off to the races.”

A traumatic event, at home, triggered a turning point in Scott’s life – the death of his mother, from cancer. “Everything, my whole attitude, changed after that,” he recalls. She had been the shining light of his life. “After Mom died, I suddenly felt I was on a mission, to be the young man she always wanted me to be. My nerves went away. She’d had such high hopes for me, after her death I became totally focused on what I had to do.”

His progress up the competitive ladder has been well-documented; on a lighter note, Scott was also making a fashion statement! It was the disco era, a time when male skaters were wearing flashy, glittering costumes for their free skating programs. Scott wore a sleek, non-sequined stretch suit in one color; it was reminiscent of a speed skating suit, and it certainly set him apart from “the pack.”

At age twenty, he placed third in the Senior Men’s division of the U.S. Championships, qualifying him for the 1980 Olympic team; he carried the American flag at the opening ceremony, a great honor. He competed in Worlds

that year, and, over the next several years, would skillfully navigate the byzantine world of highest-level competitive figure skating.

It was a world of strict rules, regulations, coaches, judges, jealousies, fierce competitors, et al., but he held his own, and his appeal to audiences was undeniable. He had a flair for generating publicity; and it was refreshing to see someone who didn’t turn into an emotional wreck in Kiss-and-Cry after skating an imperfect performance.

Scott “rolled with the punches,” as one commentator observed; if he’d skated a program he wasn’t pleased with, he would say so: “I didn’t feel into the ice,” and he’d explain, almost calmly, what went wrong, stating that he’d made mistakes and guessed he’d have to be happy with what he did.

It was an important development when the estimable Don Laws, a former skating champion himself, became Scott’s coach. “Don was a disciplinarian,” explains Scott, “he drummed into me the importance of being reliable, prepared. I was determined not to mess things up.”

He’d still get angry at himself for what he considered to be his shortcomings, but was “more determined than ever, dead determined, not only to be prepared

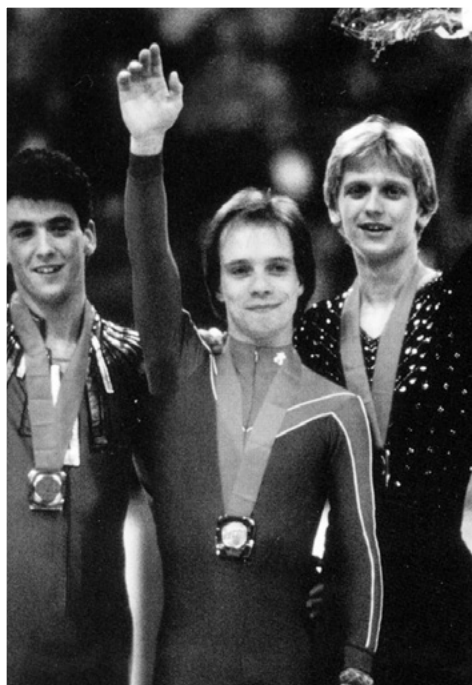
but to learn how to relax, to put myself in a frame of mind so I could accept all that would happen if I could finally get it all together.”

He never took anything for granted, trained religiously; “maybe, at times, I overtrained,” he said, because the goal was clear: to reach a point where, “if my head got clogged up, let my body do the work.”

Finally, in 1981, two breathtaking victories: he won not only the U.S. but also the World Championship! There were standing ovations on both occasions.

Media pundits speculated on whether he would now turn professional. What better time to do so?, or so it seemed. Scott had proven to be a crowd favorite, a showman, his love of performing was contagious. In exhibitions, he performed a “death-defying” back flip, forbidden in competition. Audiences were on their feet, cheering.

His boy-next-door personality and sense of humor were not only audience but media favorites. He appeared comfortable in the limelight. And just where had his comedic abilities come from? “Freddie Trenkler,” he notes, one of the great, veteran clowns-on-ice (Trenkler, learning of Scott’s praise, wrote him a fan letter). And inspiration had also come from an unexpected source: “Art Carney,



in the old Jackie Gleason TV shows.”

Scott wasn’t about to turn pro just yet; his sights were set, along with the support and encouragement of his family and Don Laws, on a greater goal: in three years, the Olympics.

A great deal could happen, of course, in three years. Scott had already suffered a back injury in competition (“those injuries never really heal,” he notes today). In the words of legendary coach Frank Carroll, “In the skating world, even for a consistent winner, winning is never, ever a sure thing. Things can – and often do – happen, nasty surprises can occur.”

Scott, however, made the journey successfully. Not only did he win three more World titles; the whole world watched as he triumphed at the 1984 Olympic Games in Sarajevo. The stunning achievement didn’t stop there: he was the first Gold medal winner for U.S. men in Olympic figure skating in twenty-four years.

A formidable new challenge loomed: “Dealing with success is a psychological battle,” he notes. “You have to rise up to the responsibilities that go with it.”

He launched and starred in his own ice show, originally titled “Scott Hamilton’s American Tour,” which became “Stars On Ice,” successfully touring the country, playing to packed houses (Scott stayed with it for fifteen years).

He entered the world of broadcasting, becoming a highly sought-after commentator covering major skating events. He possessed a particularly valuable asset

when it came to the broadcasting world: an excellent voice. It wasn’t something he had to work at and develop. It was simply there.

At CBS, renowned sportscaster Vern Lundquist, “Uncle Vern,” as Scott calls him, gave Scott a valuable suggestion: “Learn how to see skating through a non-skater’s eye.” Although Lundquist was twenty years Scott’s senior, the unlikely duo became highly successful on-air broadcasting partners.

The time came, at last, when, to quote Scott, “there was a huge upgrade in my personal life.” He met and fell in love with beautiful, blonde Tracie Robinson, and the feeling was mutual. She was an expert in nutrition and holistic medicine, and the couple were on the same wavelength regarding their strongly held religious beliefs.

They married, in California, in 2002, and have raised four children: two biological sons, Aidan and Maxx, and two adopted: Jean Paul and Evelyne, from Haiti.

Scott’s universe is constantly expanding. He has written best-selling books, the titles revealing where his heart lies: “Landing It,” “The Great Eight,” “Finish First: Winning Changes Everything.”

Over the years, Scott has successfully overcome additional, serious medical problems. He has said, recalling his mother’s terrible ordeal, “She taught me how to endure.”

He has founded The Scott Hamilton

Cares Foundation, dedicated to funding cancer research. He is deeply involved with many important charities, among them: The St. Jude’s Children’s Research Hospital, The Multiple Myeloma Research Foundation. He’s on the Board of Directors for Special Olympics International. He has filmed a powerful video for “I Am That Kid: Adoption is an Option.”

The list goes on.

Scott can accurately be described as an extraordinary survivor. A certain lyric, so eloquently sung by Frank Sinatra, whose music Scott has skated to, can perhaps perfectly sum up his philosophy: “...the best is yet to come...”

“I am so pleased that we are honoring Scott Hamilton this year,” states ITNY founder Moira North. “The year Scott won Olympic Gold – 1984 – was the year ITNY was born, and I’m happy to report that we’re all still going strong! What Scott has accomplished, and continues to accomplish, not only in the world of the Arts, but as a humanitarian, accurately reflects what a unique individual he is. I believe I speak for all of us when I say a heartfelt, Bravo Scott!”

The Audio Book version of Edward Z. Epstein’s current book, *FRANK & MARILYN: The Lives, The Loves, and the Fascinating Relationship of Frank Sinatra and Marilyn Monroe*, will soon be available. The print version was published by Post Hill Press.