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Why the world's best skaters count on Sandra Bezic

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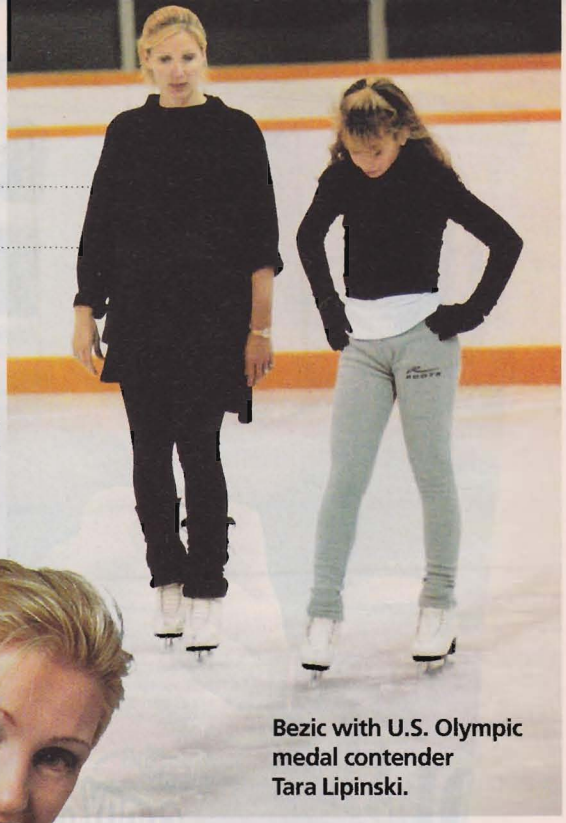
Sandra Bezic, dream weaver



Bezic with U.S. Olympic medal contender Tara Lipinski.

EVAN DION/DINO RICCI

Scores of skaters chase that Olympic star. Meet the woman most likely to help them reach it. David Hayes takes a rinkside seat to watch the magic moves of Canada's world-famous figure skating choreographer

To the tiny figure at centre ice, the arena is huge and bright, the ice hard and perfectly white, and she imagines all eyes in a hushed crowd of thousands focused on her, skates set just so, with a wide smile frozen on her delicate face. She gracefully sweeps her arms over her head as a swell of orchestral music fills the air, from the sound track for the film *The Rainbow*, based on the D. H. Lawrence novel. Let's not make too much of symbolism; the music was chosen for its potential to allow a young girl to perform an Olympic-winning program. Still, Lawrence saw the rainbow as a promise of resolution, "a pledge of unbroken faith between the universe and the innermost," which isn't a bad way of describing the overnight success of 15-year-old Tara Lipinski, who is the reigning world and former U.S. champion figure skater, the youngest in the history of the sport.

Not that Lipinski thinks these kinds of deep thoughts. Last July, in a dimly lit hockey arena in Mississauga, Ont., where the ice, set at ideal hockey-playing tem- ▷

perature, was a little too hard and where drops of condensation on the corroded metal rafters occasionally fell like a light rain, she was concentrating on a new set of movements to unfamiliar music for her long program. And when she wasn't running through her routine, she wondered whether she might get another opportunity to skate with Kurt Browning, on whom, truth be told, she has a bit of a crush, or whether the arena's vending machine had real American M&M's, not Canadian Smarties, which just don't taste the same. The deep thoughts, the grand artistic visions, are the domain of the woman leaning against the boards, Sandra Bezic, one of the world's top figure skating choreographers, whose job it is to make Lipinski's long program—four minutes of athletic spinning, gliding and jumping—transcend the sum of its parts.

Bezic, a former Canadian pair champion who skated for Canada with her brother, Val, in the 1972 Olympics in Sapporo, Japan, watches Lipinski intently. She punches the stop button on her boom box, and Lipinski, who is four foot 10 and weighs 82 pounds soaking wet, glides to the boards and stares quizzically at her. Though Lipinski's mother sits in the stands, it is the two women on the ice who could be taken for mother and daughter: Lipinski in grey tights and a black fleece jersey, her blond hair pulled into a ponytail; Bezic, 41 and athletically trim, in black tights and leg warmers, a baggy black wool sweater and a black cardigan, blond hair also pulled into a ponytail.

Smiling maternally, Bezic sweeps her arm in a graceful arc over her head and says, "I like it better if you do just one of these...." Moving with Lipinski to centre ice, Bezic demonstrates the opening moves, skating a wide arc in a flowing balletic motion. She conceived of the semicircular arm movements as suggesting a rainbow, although not as literally as that sounds. "Make it sway back and forth," Bezic says. "You're sort of going..."—she swings her arms over her head—"like this, instead of...." Her head back, Bezic swings her arms languidly, as though under water. "Think about your dreams."

Lipinski tries it, this time angling her head back, her eyes following what could be an invisible rainbow, glancing at Bezic toward the end with a shy smile. "Much better," Bezic says enthusiastically. "Let's try it again with the music."

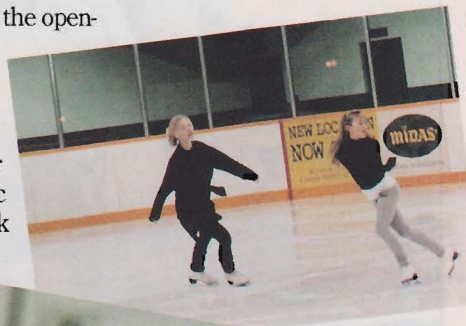
The stakes

Choreography is the act of turning extraordinary technique into artistic self-expression. But like many young skaters who are too young to have developed an artistic vision, Tara Lipinski is obsessed almost entirely with jumping. To her, choreography is little more than a map allowing her to get from jump to jump; if she had her way, she'd play it safe and skate to the same long program she'd used last year. But in figure skating, that would be a sign of artistic paralysis. Bezic knows that the Olympic judges will be watching for signs of Lipinski's development as an artist. No matter how well she skates technically, at least some of them will need to be convinced they should give a gold medal—symbolizing the very best in the world—to someone who, though 15, looks like a 12-year-old child. Bezic also knows that TV, radio and newspaper reporters around the world will be watching to see how Lipinski withstands the attention.

So she has to come up with a program that is more artistically sophisticated than last year and as demanding as those of the award-winning skaters against whom Lipinski will be skating—Michelle Kwan of the U.S., China's Lu Chen, Tanja Szewczenko of Germany and Maria Butyrskaya of Russia. At the same time, though, it must be familiar enough to make Lipinski feel comfortable as she tries to land her "tricks." In short, Bezic reflected later, "I needed to come up with more of the same, but different."

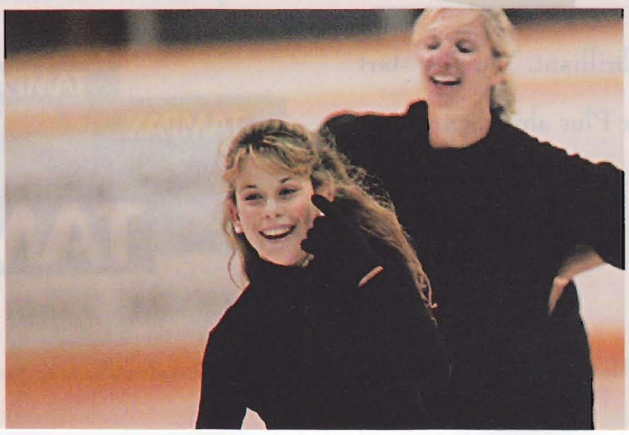
But Bezic also knew that her artistic vision would continue to evolve once Lipinski left Toronto and began honing the program with her coach in the months leading up to the Olympics. While coaches work with skaters all year round, monitoring their development, attending every competition and practice session, choreographers, like costume designers, are consultants: hired to provide one significant part of the artistic blueprint.

Despite the importance of choreography, watching it develop is a little like watching paint dry. The relationship between choreographer and skater is instinctual, often telepathic. The average onlooker would be hard-pressed to figure out what's going on because the program is worked on in discrete chunks, often out of chronological order, with an emphasis on conceptual issues that have more to do with the skater's psyche than with any literal message meant for the audience's benefit. The fan would also be disappointed; while working on choreography, skaters are concentrating on the tiniest of subtleties and ignoring their dramatic crowd-pleasing jumps.



For Bezic, Lipinski's routine is only one of many summer assignments for champion skaters. By the end of October, in addition to Lipinski, Bezic had choreographed programs for Lu Chen, Olympic and world champions Kristi Yamaguchi and Canada's Kurt Browning; Japanese world champion Yuka Sato and world and Canadian champion pair skaters Barbara Underhill and Paul Martini; and, as director of the Stars on Ice show, coordinated two hours' worth of choreography.

When Bezic works with veterans, like Yamaguchi or Browning, the choreographic process becomes more collaborative, with the skaters contributing ideas of their own. Working with very ▷



Above left: Sandra at age 9, performing with brother Val, 12. Right: artistry and athleticism—Bezic and Lipinski work on the rough spots.

DINO RICCI

young skaters, like Lipinski, is different. A bundle of raw talent, Lipinski is nonetheless a teenager whose accomplishments and apparent maturity shouldn't be confused with life experience, even though she may be the best jumper among the top female skaters competing today, and has the necessary ruthless drive, the monomania, to succeed at the competitive upper reaches of the sport.

Bezic learned about Lipinski's drive two years ago, when she designed Lipinski's long program for the 1996-97 season. At the time, Lipinski was an up-and-comer who would, skating observers thought, one day be a contender for a world title and have a good shot at a gold medal in the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. Last year, using Bezic's choreography, Lipinski unexpectedly moved the timetable up by winning the Worlds, catching her parents, coaches and the figure skating world off-guard. That doesn't mean she's assured an Olympic win, though; her competitors this month in Nagano, Japan, are older, more seasoned. The favorite, Michelle Kwan, has tasted both triumph and defeat, an experience that tends to make strong competitors stronger.

The music and the movement

For Bezic, finding the right music always comes first. She routinely spends hours going through hundreds of CDs, as she did in the spring and early summer of 1997 for Lipinski. It didn't help that Lipinski rejected dozens of suggestions, which Bezic found frustrating but nonetheless understood. Unlike most 15-year-olds, Lipinski knows her own strengths and weaknesses. When it comes to music, she can judge almost immediately whether a selection will make her feel comfortable and motivated when she's standing alone at centre ice.

Bezic wanted Lipinski to use classical music, as much for her personal growth as for its competitive value (many judges, especially those from Europe, favor the classical composers). Lipinski, whose musical tastes are still rigidly narrow, only likes movie music, filled with grandly passionate melodrama and obvious emotional hooks. *The Rainbow* was the compromise. Composer Carl Davis is associated with Beethoven as well as Broadway, and his majestic prelude and titles on the sound track straddle both worlds.

It's not the music others might have suggested: with someone as tiny as Lipinski, the expectation is that she'll play cute and perky, with compact intricate skating, but Lipinski has the long powerful movements of a much bigger skater. (Bezic describes her as "having the power and speed of many men.") And while jumping is her greatest strength, her footwork is a weaker area that Bezic needed to smooth with choreography that played to her talents. ▷

Is there a **crisis** *in* **women's skating?**

When Susan Humphreys stepped off the ice after skating her long program at the Karl Schäfer Memorial Trophy in Vienna last fall, she knew she was finished. In this last qualifying tournament before the Olympics, she had only landed one of several attempted triple jumps. The 1997 Canadian women's figure skating champion recalls, "I knew then that my Olympic dream had gone out." So had Canada's: for the first time ever, this country would not send a woman singles skater to the Olympic Games. (Under the new rules, no country's place at the Olympics is automatic.)


Humphreys

The public blamed Canada's predicament on Humphreys's disappointing performance. But the skating world had been watching the decline in Canadian women's figure skating for years. "Deplorable" is how Petra Burka, 1965 world champion and 1964 Olympic bronze medalist, describes it.

How did a country that produced Olympic skating legends such as Burka and Karen Magnussen—and continues to produce top-notch men skaters such as Elvis Stojko and Kurt Browning—end up like this? At rinks across Canada, as skating parents huddle in the stands and their daughters glide on the ice, it's the buzz.

What's the problem? It certainly isn't a lack of talent: the Canadian Figure Skating Association (CFSA) has 180,000 members, most of them female. And Canada's 4,000-odd coaches far exceed the number of *skaters* in countries such as Britain, which qualified to send a female entrant to the Nagano Olympics.

But if the talent is out there, it's not being developed. Some blame the CFSA for ignoring young up-and-comers: while it funds youth development programs, only athletes already at the novice level—midway through the competitive stream—get money directly. Meanwhile, many parents with children at lower levels spend up to $10,000 a year. Some are knocked out by the cost.

There is also a feeling that for years, Canadian judges have favored the artistry and strong stroking skills of older skaters—even when a younger skater manages more difficult jumps. That may be changing, but for now, we are stuck with the effects of not rewarding young talent for decades.

The solution, according to experts like Olympic coach Ellen Burka (mother of Petra Burka), is to start training girls early. Burka urges skating organizations to "identify talented youngsters between the ages of 7 and 10, tell their coaches and parents and give them money." It's a controversial idea. Many question, perhaps rightly, whether girls that young have the commitment to skate seriously without being driven into it by parents or coaches. Besides, even if a girl learns triple jumps at a young age, sustaining them through puberty is a challenge: the weight she gains on the chest and hips can throw off jumps. Then there's the risk of burnout.

Pressure at all levels is already a problem. Because of sheer numbers, competition is intense in women's skating: last year, 938 women competed at the prenovice level in Canada, compared with 112 men. And, 1964 Olympic silver medalist Debbi Wilkes warns, "Every one of those competitive events takes a chunk out of a woman's personality." Wilkes also blames the overemphasis on weight and appearance, which chips away at a young woman's self-esteem: whatever traumas a teenage girl experiences normally are magnified on the ice. "We have to be more supportive," she says.

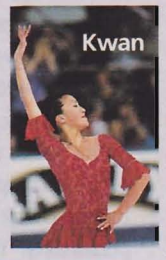
Louis Stong, former coach of Kurt Browning and Josée Chouinard, agrees young women need more support but maintains that only by testing themselves can young skaters develop the confidence to compete on the world stage. In Canada, they don't have ▷

CANADIAN SPORT IMAGES

Before Bezic can figure out specific movements, she listens to the music over and over until she "hears" a concept, which she admits is, like many aspects of the performing arts, nearly impossible to articulate. In competitive skating, music is edited and choreography designed to allow skaters to execute the required elements (jumps, spins and footwork), with equal thought given to cardiovascular considerations—high-energy bursts counterbalanced by rest periods. With this in mind, she divided *The Rainbow* structurally into four sections—slow/fast/slow/fast—both because that mirrored Lipinski's program last year and because she knew that Lipinski, unlike some skaters who prefer to start with a burst of energy, likes to begin calmly, to get warmed up. Bezic's plan involved Lipinski performing most of her difficult "tricks" in the second section, before fatigue could set in, although she decided to reserve the most difficult trick—a spectacular triple loop-triple loop combination that Lipinski alone among women competitors performs—for a big swell in the slow third section.

The process of creating and learning choreography happens simultaneously. Bezic teaches skaters short sections of a program, then watches them try it and considers whether it looks natural. If she manages to choreograph more than 20 or 30 seconds on the first day, she's happy. After that, adding a minute a day is considered a success. Bezic knew that Lipinski could be emotional but was not yet an artist who can bring characters to life, in the way that Bezic once had Kurt Browning play Humphrey Bogart or Kristi Yamaguchi portray Shakespeare's Juliet. So the concept behind *The Rainbow* was kept straightforward: Lipinski's all-consuming dream is about winning Olympic gold, and Bezic's choreography was about running toward that dream. In Bezic's words, "*The Rainbow* is a young girl with a dream. She's dancing in the rain, dreaming her dreams, still naive enough to think that all her dreams may come true and there will always be a happy ending." ▷

enough opportunity for that. "Canada has many gifted coaches at the top end, but at the entry level, coaches hold talented children back (sometimes at the insistence of parents), content to have them win medals at small competitions. By the time those skaters progress to a competitive level, they are too old or want to quit." World champs Michelle Kwan, 17, and Tara Lipinski, 15, didn't surface by being held back, he notes.



It's a tricky balance: training girls young, exposing them to high-level competition early—but not pushing them too hard, injuring them or hurting their confidence. One prominent coach strikes that balance by encouraging his skaters to compete, but not look at the results after—but he's in the minority.

Still, there is hope on the horizon for women's skating. The CFSA is scouting new talent; it has hired Louis Stong to computerize a list of the youngsters, although he stops short of handing out money to their parents, arguing that to do so would be undemocratic and costly.

The CFSA has also taken steps to make both female and male skaters more competitive with other countries. For the first time, juvenile and prenovice skaters compete nationally in Toronto in March. And the North American Challenge series gives novice skaters a chance to compete internationally.

Stong is optimistic Canada will send a woman to the next Winter Olympics, and he thinks she will likely come from today's novice ranks. Her challenge is that she *won't* have a tough act to follow: all eyes will be upon her when she goes to the Olympics for the first time. Unlike the male skaters, who for years have had someone's shadow to hide in when they hit the world stage—Jeff Langdon had Elvis Stojko, who in turn had Kurt Browning—she won't have that comfort.

But to Debbi Wilkes, it's all in the approach: "Some of the greatest champions have not been the most talented. Rather they have been the skaters who believed in themselves."

GEORGIE BINKS

***Do you believe there is a crisis in Canadian women's figure skating? Share your views with other readers. Visit* Conversations *(Passions) on our Web site, Chatelaine Connects, at* www.chatelaine.com.**

CANADIAN SPORT IMAGES

It's late August, and Bezic and Lipinski are back on the ice, this time at Erin Mills Arena, a modern sports complex in suburban Mississauga. As the music swells, Lipinski skates along an arc that takes her near the boards before unsteadily executing a sequence of footwork. Skating toward her, Bezic gently says, "Just go easy, Tara. It looks like you're trying a little too hard." Bezic skates through the sequence, demonstrating a little jump turn with Lipinski shadowing, a split second behind her, like a gosling following a mother goose.

Later, she stands with Bezic at the boards while Bezic talks to her about the nimble little steps required for the footwork. Listening carefully, a tired-looking Lipinski pulls off her grey fleece sweatshirt and prepares to try it again. Building speed, her blades making a rhythmic shhh-shhh-shhh sound, she performs a series of fluid graceful movements along a wide arc. Suddenly, while executing the tricky jump turn, she trips, sprawling across the ice. Flopping over on her back, she remains there in a heap, too tired to get up.

"I think that's it," says Bezic with a laugh. Shutting off the boom box, she skates over to Lipinski and lies down on the ice beside her. For a couple of minutes the two talk quietly, giggling like sisters. Finally, Lipinski rises and takes Bezic's hand to help her up.

"That's it, Mom," Lipinski says to her mother, Pat, who accompanies her everywhere and has spent the day sitting in the stands. "I'm done."

"We're finished," confirms Bezic. "She's tired. Her feet finally said, 'One more step? No way.'"

The judgment

Lipinski left Toronto that evening and since then Bezic has only spoken to her on the phone once or twice. Years ago, before Bezic's son, Dean, now 3, was born and she took on the demanding Stars on Ice responsibilities, she often worked closely with skaters and their coaches throughout the summer and into the skating season. In the months leading up to Brian Boitano's 1988 Olympic victory, for example, she attended every competition and worked closely with him during practice sessions to fine-tune the program. That commitment of time and energy, to say nothing of the travel, is impossible today, however, so she has had to learn to watch her creation leave with the skaters, who take it back to their homes where, with input from their coaches, they make it their own.

"I think of Tara as a force flying by me, and I'm one stop along the way," Bezic said last November, with the 1997-98 skating season under way. "While she's with me, I give her everything I've got. Then, when she goes, I have to move on to my next project. I think about her and care for her very deeply, but I don't eat, breathe and sleep any individual skater's program the way I used to when I was more of a choreographer-coach and involved in everything."

The artistic core of Lipinski's program grew out of the 12 days Bezic spent with her last summer. But as with all skaters, Bezic knew that integrating the jumps, footwork and the rest of figure skating's required elements into the program could squeeze out some, or even most, of her original vision.

"It's really up to Tara," Bezic explained. "The vision, the concept of the choreography, is something we discuss before she goes away, but then it's up to her. That's why I don't take all the responsibility if skaters do poorly and I certainly don't take all the credit when they do well. It's in Tara's hands now, and it's her dream." □