

A Lasting Legacy

A documentary on U.S. Figure Skating's darkest day reveals the hope that emerged from tragedy



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Among the many milestones recognized in 2011, the 50th anniversary of the loss of the entire United States figure skating team in a plane crash near Brussels in February 1961 was one of the most heart-wrenching. And as 2011 came to a close, the U.S. Figure Skating Association made available on DVD the film it commissioned to

recognize the occasion, "Rise," which not only mourns and celebrates the lives of those lost in the crash but also illuminates the legacy the USFSA created to honor them.

One of the challenges that any national governing body of sport faces is connecting one generation to another—crafting a legacy and creating a sort of NGB DNA that can be passed on to future generations. And what "Rise" reinforces is that the DNA of the USFSA may be as strong as that of any national governing body in the business, though we can only hope that no other NGB has a similar catalyst for its legacy.

The USFSA acted with great dispatch and foresight when only eight days after the 1961 crash it established a fund that would support future generations of budding U.S. skaters. The film skillfully weaves between an unfacilitated discussion among some of those skaters—Scott Hamilton, Peggy Fleming, Brian Boitano, Dorothy Hamill and Michelle Kwan—and video and images of those skaters and the 1961 team. The U.S. champions are extraordinarily natural in their comments (Hamilton's eloquence and pathos are particularly noteworthy) and reveal the connection among generations of American skaters, focusing of course on those lost in the crash: Hamill identifying with the haircut of Laurence Owen and welling up while reading a haunting poem that Owen had written; Hamilton identifying with 16-year-old Doug Ramsay; and Boitano relating to the kids of one of the coaches lost in the crash, Danny Ryan. What each of these skaters has is a sense of wanting to pay it forward as much as they themselves look back.

The film quite appropriately focuses on the oft-mentioned stories associated with the crash, including the devastating loss of the Owen family—mother and coach Maribel Vinson-Owen and her two daughters, Maribel and Laurence. But there were also some less familiar aspects of the story. For instance, the 1961 U.S. Figure Skating Champi-

onships were the first to be nationally televised. (Ironically, the broadcast was sponsored by Rise instant lather.) Thus, a nation that was only recently visually introduced to these remarkably talented skaters lost them all several weeks later. The commentator for that 1961 broadcast was Dick Button, which raises the question: Was this guy ever a kid? It seems as if he was born a figure skating commentator. It was also the early days of graphics on sporting events, and the graphic introducing Laurence Owen misspelled her name "Laurance." TV graphics people would soon learn to consult programs before the competition.

One particular vignette in "Rise" highlights the extent to which contemporary U.S. skaters and support workers are so richly connected to USFSA history. Maribel Vinson-Owen was one of the most influential figures and coaches ever in U.S. figure skating, and years after she died in the

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crash, one of her protégés, Frank Carroll, became the dean of American figure skating coaches. However, it was not until the 2010 Vancouver Olympics that Carroll coached his first Olympic gold medalist in Evan Lysacek. Lysacek says in "Rise" that when they walked into a room of supporters, he wearing his just-awarded gold medal and Carroll wearing the coach's medal, the ovation for Carroll was even louder than for Lysacek—a testament to the legacy he represented.

I was in Brussels last year, two weeks after the 50th anniversary of the crash. There is a small stone memorial at the site, where the U.S. Embassy, the USFSA and others had recently laid flowers to mark the occasion. The site is agonizingly close to the runway of the Brussels airport, the target destination of the doomed flight. I was familiar enough with the stories to spend some moments there contemplating the tremendous talent that was lost that day, but also thinking about all of the American skaters I have seen in my lifetime who came out of the legacy of the 1961 team. I am very pleased that the USFSA has now made available a fitting and vivid depiction of all that I thought about that day. ■

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