

December 19, 1999

## A Different Strategy For Going for the Gold

By MARY ANN CASTRONOVO FUSCO

TO say that ice has been a leitmotif in the life of Elaine Zayak is to state the obvious. More than a shimmering stage on which to spin and jump before cheering spectators and poker-faced judges, the ice is, and has been for more than 20 years, a workplace for this champion figure skater, who is now a skating coach at the Ice House here.

For starters, there was ice as physical rehab. When not yet 3, Ms. Zayak lost three toes in a lawn mower accident, and her doctors prescribed skating to prevent her from developing a limp. By the time she was six, it was obvious that ice skating would be more than a therapeutic hobby, recalls her mother, Jeri Zayak of Toms River.

As a preteen, Ms. Zayak executed triple jumps in an era when only men performed such feats in competition. The ice served as backdrop to exhilarating victories -- a junior world championship in 1979, a national championship in 1981, a senior world championship in 1982 -- and painful defeats, most notably her failure to place in the top five at the 1984 Olympics in Sarajevo. Rinkside at her former training site, Sport-o-Rama in Monsey, N.Y., she met John Berg, now a microturbine developer for PSE&G in Edison, whom she married in April 1998. Besides love, she has found a new channel for her energy and enthusiasm, all on the ice.

On a recent Saturday morning at the Ice House, as "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" tinkled over the sound system, Ms. Zayak, 34, was putting a group of figure skaters age 9 to 16 through their paces.

Ice of another kind sparkles in the form of the diamond earrings she wears, a wedding gift from her husband. More ice -- diamonds happen to be her birthstone -- glitters at her fingers and on the gold skate blade charm at her neck, a souvenir of her national title, which she fingers as she talks. Her goal now, she says, "is producing a world champion some day," and her fair eyes sparkle at the notion.

"Figure skating is a star-driven sport, on both the training and the coaching side," said Craig Maurizi, the Ice House's director of figure skating. "I'm proud to have such an elite member of the skating community teaching in our rink. Elaine can provide insight into the big picture of ice skating. They see that she's real, and think that maybe they can do it, too."

Ms. Zayak says being off the ice is far more complicated than being on it. "I have seen a lot from the inside and on the ice," she said. "But standing on the other side of the boards and looking into the ice for these skaters is very different. You're dealing with the public and so many different people. When I'm out there by myself skating, I don't have to deal with anybody, just myself. Now I have to deal with what the skaters are going to do. Whether they do it or not is going to be because of me. I put a lot of pressure on myself."

On this particular Saturday, however, she is all smiles as she watches her students prepare to perform at Rockefeller Center on Jan. 16. "They each have their own personality," she said, pointing out her most artistic and fearless skaters. She admits being a demanding coach, but asks nothing that she hasn't ever expected of herself.

"She's very adaptable to the mood and the character of the people with whom she works," said Tamara Moskvina, a 1969 world silver medalist in pairs skating who also trains skaters at the Ice House. "She's very kind and loving of the students."

Some of Ms. Zayak's students, who usually practice on the ice two hours a day, six days a week, live in South Jersey and Long Island. Referring to her own 90-minute commute to work from her home in Toms River, she said, "I tell them, if they're tired, 'Don't tell me about it.'"

As a youngster Ms. Zayak skated both before and after school, traveling from her home in Paramus to rinks in Long Island and Monsey, where she trained with Peter Burrows. Many of her current students followed her from Sport-o-Rama in Monsey, where she used to coach. When she left Monsey, she took not only her skaters, but also two coaches, Sara and Neil Rubin, with her. As a result, relations between Ms. Zayak and her former teacher have chilled.

"At Sport-o-Rama I could never establish my own students and identity because Peter Burrows always felt he was my coach," she said. "This is a great opportunity for me to be able to be on my own and pursue my own world champions. I had to leave the nest. When I decided to form my own school, it was competition for him, so we are kind of on the outs."

That relationship is not the only one that is icier than she might like. She and her father, Richard Zayak, who is divorced from her mother, don't speak. "You hate to see bitterness in any family," said Jeri Zayak. "She always had her father's support, but he had a hard time letting go."

It was Mr. Zayak who encouraged Elaine to do the kind of jumps that had never been done by a female skater before, telling her, "Just because the guys are doing them doesn't mean the girls can't do them."

His daughter recalled: "I was always a gutsy kid. I wanted to be the best. I had no fear in me."

A performance packed with seven triple jumps won her the world ladies' figure skating title in 1982 -- and a lot of criticism.

"Everybody was amazed at her ability to do those triples, but the knee-jerk reaction was, 'We can't have the sport become a jumping contest'," said Mr. Maurizi, who also skated competitively in the 1980's. "It was new and different and amazing. She was so ahead of her time that I think people didn't know what to do with it."

Now her name has been immortalized in competitive skating's "Zayak Rule," which says skaters can repeat only two triple or quadruple jumps, and only if at least one of the attempts at each repeated jump is in a jump combination.

Many people expected her to skate off with a gold medal at the Sarajevo Games; for example, Time magazine titled an article about her "Triple Threat." But she was in 13th place at the end of the compulsory school figures round -- a tedious off-camera test of skaters' ability to trace over figures etched in the ice, which has since been dropped from competitive skating. She ultimately placed sixth.

"The reason I didn't win a medal was all politics," said Ms. Zayak, noting that before detente, judges from the East and West rarely agreed on who performed best. "That started me off on the wrong track. How could I win a medal from that point on? They knew. They put me low enough that I could not win a medal."

Like many skaters, Ms. Zayak turned professional after the Olympics, performing with the Ice Capades. "I hated Ice Capades," she said. "I can say that now because they're no longer really in existence. I was just off the Olympic team and then I went right into being on the road by myself without anybody, any guidance. I didn't know anything about living on your own."

At the same time, her parents were divorcing. Her sole motivation, she admits, was money. "Everybody said, 'How could you pass up this money?' I didn't want to do it." But she took the \$4,000 a week and skated with the troupe from 1984 to 1986.

Turned off by professional skating, she dabbled in a restaurant venture, then sought reinstatement as an amateur. An alternate on the 1994 Olympic team, which was noted for the Tonya Harding-Nancy Kerrigan melodrama, she skated to a disappointing 11th place at the 1993 World Competition in Vienna and a satisfying 4th at the 1994 National Championship in Detroit, where she received two standing ovations.

"I wasn't going to stop, but I was offered a large sum of money from Dick Button to do two pro competitions," she said. According to the skating world rules, this time there could be no turning back to amateur competition.

An operation in October 1997 to remove a potentially cancerous fibroid tumor led her to pursue a different path. Although the tumor turned out to be benign, recovery from the operation was difficult. "I thought if I'm going to be successful in my teaching, then I've got to start now," she remembers thinking. "I don't like to see some of those older skaters out there that I skated with. I would rather see the young up-and-coming ice skaters. Bring in the new."

Although she hasn't done a triple jump since, she feels her life is on an upswing. For the first time, she has been nominated for the Figure Skating Hall of Fame. She remains close to her mother, who is in the midst of her own skating circuit comeback, occasionally attending her daughter's students' competitions and encouraging the parents in the audience with her own special perspective. At the mention of her husband's name, Ms. Zayak's eyes glitter like the beadwork that decorates her skating ensemble, part of a line of clothing being licensed under her name -- "something simple and sharp-looking, but with some sparkle," she said with a laugh. And she obviously relishes the company of the young skaters whom she guides through their leaps and spins, ups and downs.

"I get enjoyment out of being successful in what I'm doing out on the ice," she said. "I can't get more enjoyment than that."

Photo: Elaine Zayak putting her skaters through their paces at the Ice House in Hackensack. (Norman Y. Lono for The New York Times)