Backtalk

Milan Trenc

Skating's Brave New Whirl

But What if It Ends Up With the Same Old Judging?

By LISA LUCIANO

Baseball, hockey, basketball and football have built-in audiences. Figure skating has a loyal core of supporters and TV ratings that leave competitors in the dust, but in order to run with the big boys it needs to convert those who, for now, believe it is merely an ice show masquerading as a valid competition.

Skating has also contributed to its own murky perception. The sport is caught in a vortex of internal strife because of the return of professionals, questionable judging and the influx of money. Yet in spite of all this, skating is primed for change.

Last month, a series of unprecedented skating events made its premiere. The events are unique because they represent a whole new style of competition — different types of judges, team scoring and an usual combination of skaters, some of them permanent professionals and others still eligible to be amateurs again.

In addition, many of these events are unsanctioned, meaning promoters have refused to seek the approval of the International Skating Union, which is trying to tighten its grip on the sport.

The most important of these renegade competitions is "Team USA vs. The World," which will pit the Americans Nancy Kerrigan, Kristi Yamaguchi, Brian Boitano and Paul Wiley against the international assemblage of Oksana Baiul, Katarina Witt, Kurt Browning and Viktor Petrenko. They form skating's version of the dream teams. The competition, dubbed the "Ice Wars," is actually a doubleheader, debuting this Wednesday in Nassau Coliseum in Uniondale, L.I., then moving to Providence, R.I., on Nov. 12.

It's hard to argue with 13 world titles and six Olympic gold medals, which is what the dream teamers have accrued. Demanding technical requirements promise an unprecedented performance standard. The "Ice Wars" payoff will be the richest in the history of the sport, with the winners guaranteed $100,000 each.

Television networks that will broadcast several of the new events are to be applauded for their part in helping skating to evolve, but the biggest kudos must go to those who had the courage to institute a new format in a sport in which changes come slowly or not at all. However, despite high expectations, the road ahead is bound to be rough. And one of the biggest potholes will be defining the standards upon which these performances should be judged.

> Entertainment has to step aside for athletics.

Skating has long battled the accusation that it is more art than sport. Professional events in particular had a bad reputation. They were considered rest stops for aging champions until the 1988 Olympic gold medalist, Brian Boitano, decided not to go gently into that good night. He brought Olympic level performances to pro competitions, and in the opinion of Carol Heiss Jenkins, the Olympic champion, amateur coach and judge, "changed the face of professional skating forever."

True, but apparently not enough. If one of the first events of this new era, the Oct. 19 North American Open, is any indication, the fledgling circuit has already hit the wall. The Oct. 19 was an individual competition. Although Boitano performed the event's most difficult technical program and skated flawlessly in the artistic portion, he lost by a tenth of a point to Petrenko, who fell once, made several other mistakes, and offered an artistic program that lacked content, but played to the crowd. When questioned, a judge declared: "This is a pro competition. This is not a sport, it's entertainment." But if this is the case, why not replace the judges with an applause meter?

Clearly, not everyone shares Boitano's love of competition, which has led to still more criticism of the new circuit. A major objection is that skaters are receiving guaranteed appearance fees, causing some to suggest that they'll have no impetus to perform well. As proof, critics cite the case of tennis players who have been accused of tanking matches in the first round of lesser tournaments, collecting appearance money and departing.

An offshoot of this problem has also caused concern. In the team competition (and Ice Wars is strictly a team affair), two skaters will perform and then their combined scores will be posted. Without seeing individual results, skaters who have an off night will be protected and their reputations will remain untarnished, thus preserving their marketability. But while this is a problem, it can be overcome. As events are added to these new competitions, losing now and then will be a reality even the best skaters will face. And ultimately, this will be liberating because occasional losses will not hold so much weight.

However, the biggest problem for figure skating is how to convince the world that skating is a viable sport. After Lillehammer, many spectators now rank skating's competitive credibility right up there with pro wrestling. Perhaps all that is required is a subtle shift in perception. Skaters must see themselves not as athletic artists, but as artistic athletes. Focus competitive events on technical ability. Leave the artistic emphasis for tour shows.

As in amateur skating, the judges remain an issue. For unknown reasons, some of the new events have resorted to using coaches of "eligible" skaters — meaning those sanctioned by the International Skating Union — as judges. This is clearly a conflict of interest. Sanctioned judges/coaches don't want unsanctioned events to succeed. The only way for the professionals to protect themselves from sabotage is to remain independent of judges who have an agenda.

Skating, through these new events, has an incredible opportunity to reinvent itself, but it has stumbled in the early going. To avoid a complete fall, the skaters must form an organization that will protect their interests. If they can find competent officials and devise a fair method of judging, then the skating can determine the victors.

In 1971, when Billie Jean King helped organize the Virginia Slims tour, she started with eight players. "Team USA vs. The World" has eight skaters. The outlawed tennis players lost their eligibility for Grand Slam tournaments as well as other tournaments. Skaters participating in unsanctioned competitions have sacrificed their amateur standing, keeping them out of national, world and Olympic championships.

Tennis is desperately trying to make itself more entertaining. For skating, the task is just the opposite. Entertainment is already built in. It must now find a way to generate respect for itself as a sport. It took tennis two decades to make the necessary improvements. Skating can grow faster and farther if it will learn from tennis. All it needs is the willingness to change. A giant first step has been made.

Lisa Luciano is a senior staff writer for International Figure Skating.