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English 1050

29 September 2009

The Unexpected Partner

Figure skating is my dream and passion. It’s been a part of my life since I was two and a half years old. My mother signed me up for lessons as soon as I could walk hoping one day I would be a star. She was an aspiring figure skater, however was never given the opportunity to take lessons and peruse skating. We commuted daily from Rochester Hills to Birmingham, Michigan for the best training. Everyone loved me at the Birmingham Ice Arena, and invited me on synchronized skating teams, special programs, and even ice shows because they saw huge potential in me at such a young age. I was so young to actually know what was going on, except that being a girly-girl I adored the sparkly dresses, intricate moves, and spins ice skaters did.

Training at such a prestige and elite ice rink, I was surrounded by amazing ice skaters who competed nationally and some went to the Olympics. Every time I walked into the Birmingham Ice Arena I thought to myself how I wanted to be just like them. Tara Lipinski, and Todd Eldridge were my role models at the time. Tara Lipinski was a young solo freestyle ice skater that gave me great advice, I admired her energy and courage while ice skating. She had an astounding appearance on the ice by using arm movements and facial expressions.

In the second grade my father came home with bad news, his job was being transferred to Sao Paulo, Brazil. I was devastated, this meant I would have to give up my passion for a few years because there were clearly no ice rinks in Brazil. Moving to Sao Paulo was a huge culture shock. I lived in the heart of the city where there were beggars and homeless people on every street corner. However, outside the grimy city lay gorgeous beaches where my family and I spent several weekends. Brazil’s dominant sport is soccer, which isn’t graceful and girly like figure skating. While living in Sao Paulo I constantly watched ice skating on television and mimicked the skaters every move on my living room floor.

I spent three and a half to four years in Sao Paulo and when we moved back to Rochester Hills, Michigan the first thing I wanted to do was get back on the ice. Right away my mother signed me up with lessons with the best coaches at Detroit Skating Club, and soon I found out that I wanted to take up Ice Dance instead of freestyle like Tara Lipinski did. Freestyle is more popular because it involves all the jumps and spins. Ice Dance requires a partner of the opposite sex where one basically does ballroom dancing on ice. Being older it was wiser to get into Ice Dance due to the fact that it’s easier on the body, as oppose to jumping and falling on the ice constantly. Not many people do Ice Dance until they’re older, kids like to jump so this was a perfect opportunity to get ahead and really good at something.

Training in Ice Dancing for four years becomes tedious without a partner. Male figure skaters are very hard to come across. There are not many guys who are interested in ice skating, and when a female finds a potential partner every girl at the ice rink is jealous. Finding a partner means one is serious about competing and is more likely to compete nationally because there are few Ice Dance teams. On the contrary the competition for single skaters, especially females, is incredibly hard due to the large number of competitors.

One day after my lesson my mom was sarcastically talking to my Ice Dance coach, Richard Brown, about my brother being my partner since he’s a good hockey player. Richard without any hesitation says, “That’s it!”

My mother very confused responds, “What? There’s no way we could convince Adam to figure skate! He’s the captain of the hockey team, he would be made-fun of forever for doing a “girly” sport.”

Richard has been my coach since I was 11 and saw my brother grow up. He’s close to my family and knows Adam’s skating potential. My coach wouldn’t put his career on the line if he didn’t see potential in my younger brother. Richard was trying to convince my mom to at least have Adam come to the ice rink, try on a pair of figure skates, and get on the ice to see how he’d like figure skating. That night my mom and I approached Adam about this topic.

“Hey Adam… what are your thoughts about figure skating?” My mother asked nervously.

Adam was confused as to why she asked that question. As my loving brother he’s always supported my sport and didn’t want to offend me in saying that he thought figure skating was lame. He responds, “It’s ok why do you ask?”

I step in and say, “Adam, Richard, mom, and I were talking today after practice and are wondering if you would give figure skating a shot.”

Adam was silent for a few minutes and didn’t know what to say. He looks over at me in confusion and sees it in my eyes that I wanted him to say yes so badly. Finally he says, “Fine Allison, I’ll try it. But I’m doing this for you, and not because I’m interested in picking up the sport.”

I couldn’t wait to call Richard on the phone and tell him the good news. I was extremely excited.

Going from hockey skates to figure skates is a huge difference. First off, hockey skates are wider the blades are rounded and don’t have a toe pick in front. After my brother did a trial session he thought he fulfilled my favor. However, Richard was persistent in getting him back on the ice. My coach kept dragging my brother back to the ice rink for lessons. Adam reluctantly kept taking lessons until he started making friends at the rink and began enjoying it. Adam is a person who likes to try new things and be the best at them. He loves to overcome new obstacles in life. The next week my brother was still taking lessons from Richard and was introduced to the rest of the rink as my new Ice Dance partner. Since hockey is completely different from figure skating Adam was starting from scratch. He looked like a person trying to ice skate for the very first time. He was wobbling and had a hard time standing up. At times he would trip over the toe picks and fall flat onto his face. This made him very frustrated because he’s use to being the best at hockey. It took a lot of patience from all of us to teach him the basics and hopefully get him to a high level in a short amount of time.

Adam and I were on the ice every day for hours on end. It took about a month and a half for him to get the hang of figure skates. Now we were able to start training as a team in hope to be the next champions. Training consisted of off-ice workouts, on ice stroking exercises, compulsory dances, and creating a program for our free dance. I remember feeling so anxious, nervous, and accomplished for getting my younger brother who is a hockey star to figure skate. At 17 years old, Adam was going to fulfill my dream of competing and traveling all over the USA to compete in Ice Dance.

Adam was a very quick learner; he picked up quickly on the figure skating technique. My mom was so proud seeing us bond as a team and becoming closer to accomplish one mutual goal. Training was hard and very frustrating because at first it seemed almost impossible to take a new ice skater to nationals. In the beginning yelling and bickering at each other on the ice was normal, however with hard work, dedication, and private lessons Adams edges, postures, and all-around skating improved drastically. After getting the basics down, it was time to start teaching him Ice Dance. We started off with the basic compulsory dances: The Dutch Waltz, Fiesta Tango, and the Rhythm Blues. In no time he mastered these and had to test them in order to advance to the next level. At the test session Adam was surrounded by 7-year-old girls that came up to his waist.

Adam pulls me aside and whispers, “You owe me big time. I can’t believe I have to skate with little girls in tutus!”

I look at him and say “Adam it’s ok it’s not like we’re going to compete or practice with little girls you just need to pass these tests in order to get to a higher level. Everyone has to go though them. However most of us figure skaters passed them a long time ago since they’re the first tests and we started skating at such a young age.”

Adam felt better about getting on the ice and testing after I said that. He mutters, “ Fine Allison…”

I convincingly said, “You can do this!”

He tested out of the lower level dances and we started learning the compulsory dances that we were going to compete in.

Everyday after school my mom drove Adam and I to Detroit Skating Club, we skated from 4-6pm then we workout from 6:30- 7:30 after that we would have Adam practice picking me up for on ice lifts. Adam is strong and built from all the sports he plays so picking up a 105-pound girl wasn’t the issue. We were concerned that he would drop me on the ice. We tried various lifts until we found one that worked. Adam glided fast on two feet and picked me up to lay me across his legs. While lying across his legs I was holding my right leg behind my head. It was a very difficult lift and we fell trying it several times until it was perfected. I was never severely hurt, nevertheless I did have several bruises on my knees and palms.

By the time summer rolled around we were in great shape and ready to compete in the Skate Detroit Competition hosted by Detroit Skating Club. The nerves in both Adam and I were building up considering this was going to be our first competition. This was a test to see how well our hard work paid off, and to see how well we compared to other teams of our level. Each team we competed against had been skating and training together for years, whereas Adam and I trained together for three months before our first competition. Just being there and skating a clean successful program was impressive, however scoring third place out of the whole club was amazing and very rewarding. After competing as partners my brother saw that he was good at figure skating. His attitude became more positive and was willing to work harder at practice.

By placing third place in Skate Detroit it motivated us to work even harder to potentially earn a first or second place medal at the next competition. Continuing to train every day Adam and I had to get ready for sectionals. This was a huge competition, it was the deciding factor to whether or not we would make it to nationals in Salt Lake City, Utah. Once we arrived at sectionals the nerves built up once again. Pacing back and forth in front of the locker rooms questions raced though my mind: Was this really happening? What if I mess up? We worked so hard to get to this place… what if we don’t place in the top three? My coach and trainer calmed me down by talking to me, which helped me take my mind off things. Even though the sectional competition this year was ten minutes from my house, it was overwhelming seeing skaters from other sates warming up and doing drills in the lobby in their perfectly rhinestoned costumes. It wasn’t the typical atmosphere I was use to. Now it was time to get on the ice, Adam and I skated and were a little off time in the music, however we performed another clean program. The program was full of great extension and emotion; the judges could see it in our expression how much we wanted this. After exiting the ice we were all sweaty waited anxiously for the results, we placed third at sectionals! We were going to nationals in February at Salt Lake City after all. The look in my coaches’ eye was priceless. He looked like he just accomplished the most important thing in his life. He was so proud of us.

After sectionals it was time to get back in the rink to practice for Salt Lake City. Adam and I tried our hardest to perfect the program, and correct the timing issue we had at sectionals. At last, it was mid February time to travel to Utah and put all our hard work to use at nationals. Arriving at the practice ice a few days before the actual competition was very overwhelming. There were several impressive teams from all over the United States. Adam and I stood there in awe just watching breathtaking programs with such grace and flow. We were worried that our program wouldn’t match up. When we stepped onto the ice we were shaking from all the emotions and tension built up in our body. It was one of our worst practices ever. Adam dropped me on the lift and we fell numerous times due to stupid mistakes such as not curving a deep enough edge. Richard knew that it was just the stress from the competition, so he told us to take the day off and return to the ice the next morning with a clear mind and ready to practice.

Finally it was time to compete in the same ice rink where the Olympics took place. The ice rink looked like a football stadium with the bleachers going all the way up to the ceiling surrounding the patch of ice. The bleachers were packed; TV broadcasters were everywhere, photographers taking pictures of the skaters every moment, and little ice skating dress shops lined up in the lobby. It’s not the exact environment Adam and I were accustomed to skating in. The announcer called our names to enter the ice. We took our warm-ups off and did some small strokes to get our body warmed up for the program we were about to present to the judges, no one else mattered at this point. We skated to the center of the ice together holding hands, we get into the starting position waiting for the music to begin. Before we knew it the program was over and people were throwing flowers and stuffed animals onto the ice to congratulate us. We bowed to the standing ovation the huge crowed gave us. Smiling from ear to ear Adam and I exited the ice, took our skates, and sparkly costumes off to watch the other teams perform. After all the teams were done competing the judges revealed our scores, Adam and I placed 6th in the nation out of over 30 teams.

Not many teams make it to nationals, and if they do they’ve usually been training for several years before competing. We took a risky chance on Adam, and it paid off. Adam and I trained together for a little over six months and placed 6th in the nation. Life is about taking risks and living with no regrets.