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### **St Petersburg Traditions on Ice**

From its earliest days figure skating has been immensely popular in Russia. More than just a sport, figure skating has been a source of national pride for Russians. Indeed, Russian figure skaters have dominated international competitions for generations. Moreover, figure skating requires many characteristics Russians view as virtues, including discipline, hard work, and artistry. Russian figure skating is a beautiful pursuit that combines grace and athleticism to create an entrancing performance that cannot be found in any other sport. Over time, figure skating has become a symbol of Russian culture, much like baseball and apple pie represent America.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Peter the Great brought back ice skates to Russia from his European travels. The first skates, made of leather straps and whalebones, were a far cry from the sturdy boots of today. The ice was rough and pitted, unlike the smooth surfaces of modern ice rinks. Nevertheless, Russia soon became the leading competitor in figure skating. At the first Winter Olympics in 1924, figure skating was introduced as a major sport. By the 1976 Innsbruck Winter Olympics, Russia had become a powerhouse of skating. In Innsbruck, Irina Rodnina and Aleksandr Zaitsev performed a famous routine to the traditional song “Kalinka,” which remains one of the most well known routines in the history of figure skating. From the 1960s to the 1980s, when the Soviet Union was at the height of its dominance in ice skating, Soviet figure skaters were the most famous athletes in the country. During this time, the U.S. and Soviet Union competed fiercely in all athletic

disciplines, but the Soviets consistently performed far better than the Americans. As a matter of fact, Soviet skaters were hailed as the best in the world.

Figure skating owes its popularity in Russia in large part to the discipline and artistry required to master the sport. However, figure skating reached its apex of popularity in Russia during the Cold War, from the 1950s to the 1980s. During that period, sports were a common arena for “proxy wars”—battles between the U.S. and the Soviet Union on non-traditional battlefields. Since a military conflict would likely result in mutual destruction, the overwhelming sentiment was that the Soviet Union and the U.S. had to prove their superiority in other ways. Nowhere was this more evident than in figure skating. The Soviet Union dominated the figure skating scene, winning gold medals in nearly every international competition from 1965-1996 and taking all the gold medals in those Olympics. This thirty-year period was known as the Russian Gold Rush due to the excellence of the Russian athletes.

One prominent element of the athletic proxy war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War on the ice was what was known as “bloc judging,” when judges from NATO countries awarded higher scores to skaters from other NATO countries, while judges from Warsaw Pact countries favored skaters from other Warsaw Pact countries. More prevalent in figure skating than in any other sport, this practice skewed the point system so that the best skater did not necessarily receive the most points. The politics of figure skating were widely accepted during the Cold War, and even as recently as the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics. A French judge was accused of favoring Russian pairs skaters over the Canadian team in exchange for higher scores for French skaters from the

Russian bloc of judges. After this controversy, bloc judging was abandoned and now is heavily frowned upon.

However, even with—or despite—bloc judging, the Russians still maintained superiority for over three decades due to their passion on the ice. While Western skaters may have had better mechanics and precision, Russian skaters were consistently scoring higher due to the passion and emotion they brought to the ice, making them stand out to judges.

There is much debate over why Russian skaters are routinely better than their competitors. One popular theory is bloc judging, but since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, this theory has less validity. Another theory is that Eastern European judges favor Russian skaters, even if they do not agree with bloc judging. This theory may have some legitimacy, partly because Eastern European judges are more familiar with Russian skaters and their overall performance outside of competition, which can influence their judging during competition.

In fact, the most likely reason for Russian dominance in figure skating is the effectiveness of Russian training methods. Russian trainers focus much of their attention on the basics, such as how to stroke the ice in order to go faster, while US skaters gloss over the basics and try to master flashier tricks before they have a solid foundation. Since Russians build up their foundations before trying the more difficult spins and jumps, they perform better. Russian skaters are consistently more technically advanced and faster on the ice, giving them an edge against their American counterparts.

Another likely reason for the dominance of Russian skaters is that many of them come from difficult socio-economic backgrounds. Due to the weak Russian economy, the government subsidizes only the best and most devoted skaters. U.S. skaters tend to come from the upper middle class and can afford the costs associated with skating. Thus Russian skaters are under greater pressure to perform well, because if they do not, then they will lose their grants and not be able to continue skating. Russian skaters also put tremendous effort into their performances, because those performances determine whether they can travel, buy a television, and help support their parents (Michaelis). American skaters do not have that sort of motivation; therefore they do not face the same challenges and subsequently do not have the same level and type of motivation.

Another key difference between the training of Russian and American skaters is that most Russian skaters train in groups, even after they are competing internationally, while most American skaters train in private lessons (or with their partner for pairs skating). Again, this is mostly due to the difficult economic situation most Russian skaters face. By training in groups, there is more competition and motivation in their training. When one skater in a lesson improves, the others all feel the need to improve as well, to prove that they are just as good or better than their classmate. American skaters, on the other hand, tend to have private lessons once they begin competing nationally. This decreases the amount of competition among American skaters, thus they do not have the same motivation to improve. Whatever the reason, it is undeniable that Russian skaters consistently dominate the sport.

Russian skaters first demonstrated their dominance in men's singles events. Until the 1970s, female skaters from the U.S. dominated most international competitions. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, East Germany produced the best female skaters in the world. But Russian female skaters rose to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, Russia is regularly at the top of the rankings in both women's and men's skating. The passion and emotion that Russians bring to the ice never fail to impress the judges. American skaters have historically been more meticulous, but the Russians have brought more life to their performances, drawing both the judges and the audience into the performance.

However, Russian skaters have consistently performed better in pairs skating. Pairs skating is not only the most popular form of figure skating in Russia and before that the Soviet Union, but it is where the Soviets first found international success. In 1958, the Russians took the silver medal when Nina and Stanislav Zhuk skated at the European championships in Bratislava, and the couple placed again in 1959 and 1960, eventually winning sixth place at the 1960 Olympics. At the 1964 Olympics, Russian skaters were again successful. This time, Liudmila and Oleg Protopopov took the gold medal.

Pairs skating is very similar to ballet, which is one of Russia's most popular art forms. Many believe that it is the relation of pairs skating to ballet that led to Russian excellence in the competitions. Similarly, Russian skaters have also dominated ice dancing, introduced as an Olympic sport in 1948 and which also

shares many similarities to ballet.<sup>1</sup> The similarities that both pairs and ice dancing have to ballet allow athletes to cross-train; those trained in one discipline can move to the other with more ease than in most sports. In fact, pairs skating, ice dancing, and ballet are so interrelated that some of the more recent ice dancing or pairs skating choreography has been done by ballroom dancers rather than other skaters.

Russian figure skating is overseen by two official organizations: the Figure Skating Federation of Russia and the Russian Skating Union. Founded in 1947, both are located at Luzhnetskaia naberezhnaia 8 in Moscow. Aleksandr Gorshkov heads the Figure Skating Federation of Russia, while Aleksei Kravtsov is president of the Russian Skating Union. The Figure Skating Federation is the agency acknowledged by the International Olympic Committee and the International Skating Union, and is the national governing agency for the sport. The Federation is in charge of creating the calendar of events for skating in Russia, forming national teams, negotiating contracts between skaters and coaches, and managing international relations with other figure skating organizations. The Russian Skating Union is actually a subset of the Federation, which is why it is located in the same building. To have a career in figure skating, one must be a member of the Figure Skating Federation in order to have access to the best trainers and national and international competitions.

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<sup>1</sup> The difference between ice dancing and pairs skating is in the mechanics. Pairs skating is very similar to singles skating and incorporates throws, high lifts, and synchronized skating. Ice dancing does not allow throws, requires that the lifts be below the male's head, and does not allow skaters to be more than two arms lengths apart. Ice dancing also requires much more intricate footwork than pairs skating, as it is closer to ballroom dance than singles skating. Ice dancing is about the synchronization of the partners, while pairs skating is about the mechanics of the routine. Ice dancing is conducted as if the couple are on a dance floor rather than an ice rink, emphasizing footwork and coordination, while pairs skating centers around jumps, spins, and high lifts that are not acceptable in ice dancing.

Although the headquarters of the Figure Skating Federation is in Moscow, St. Petersburg is the hotbed of figure skating. The best skaters in Russia are trained in St. Petersburg. Russia's first Olympic gold medalist in figure skating, Nikolai Panin, was trained in St. Petersburg, as was one of modern Russia's superstars, Yevgenii Pliushchenko. In a recent interview about his return to skating after an injury prevented him from competing, Pliushchenko was asked if he was returning for himself. He replied that it was not for himself, but "for St. Petersburg" (Dolgoplov). Pliushchenko moved to St. Petersburg when he was only eleven years old because the best coaches were there. The move clearly paid off, considering the number of medals that Pliushchenko has accumulated over the years. When asked about the prominence of St. Petersburg in Russian skating, renowned coach Natalia Pavlova said that "it's tradition" and that "[f]igure skating competition in St. Petersburg goes back well before the Bolshevik Revolution" (Gray). Pavlova trained some of the best Russian skaters in St. Petersburg, as did coaches Aleksei Mishin, who trained Pliushchenko, and Tamara Moskvina.

After the Cold War Russians no longer looked to figure skating as means of demonstrating geopolitical importance. However, figure skating has recently undergone resurgence in popularity in Russia. The public has paid a great deal of attention to skaters because of the popular TV show "Lednikovyi period"/"The Ice Age". This show is similar to America's "Dancing With the Stars," except that it is performed on ice with Olympic skaters. "Lednikovyi period" is broadcast in prime time and is the most popular television show right now. The show's producer is Il'ia

Averbukh, who was a silver medalist at the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics and who has won many medals at European competitions.

The popularity of figure skating in Russia received a further boost as a result of the tremendous success of Russian skaters at the Sochi Olympics in 2014. Russian skaters won three gold medals, a silver medal, and a bronze medal. Most notably, Adelina Sotnikova, Tat'iana Volosozhar, and Maksim Trankov won gold medals in women's individual and pairs mixed respectively.

All of this has renewed interest not only in watching figure skating, but also in learning how to skate. "[F]ans [of "Lednikovyi period"] have come to realize that figure skating is not only a sport for Olympic athletes, but for anyone who possesses the coordination and will to try" (Weiner). At just one school adult skating classes have increased turnout by over 400% in the last four years. This is a particularly noticeable development for the Leader Figure Skating School, which traditionally caters to children. In addition, public skating rinks have opened all over St. Petersburg. They can be either indoors, like professional rinks, or outdoors. One notable outdoor rink is set up in Palace Square, in front of the Winter Palace. These rinks are open 24 hours a day, so that everyone can enjoy time on the ice. For those who do not take lessons, these rinks provide a chance to skate without a trainer. The rise of "Lednikovyi period" has sparked a renewal of interest in figure skating in St. Petersburg.

The popularity of "Lednikovyi period" has shown that Russians are still true to their cultural roots, despite the turmoil of the past century. Figure skating has been a large part of Russian culture since Peter the Great introduced it two hundred



years ago, and the Russian people have kept that tradition of excellence through a turbulent and unstable time. While a show like “Lednikovyi period” would be moderately popular in the U.S., it would not have the same following that it does in Russia. This is due to the cultural differences between Russia and the U.S. America does not have the same tradition of excellence in figure skating that Russia does, and therefore it would not have the same draw and cultural significance as it does in Russia. The show is unique to Russia in its popularity and influence.

Figure skating has long been one of Russia’s beloved sports. It has held a special place in Russian culture and has been a source of national pride. Russian skaters are some of the best in the world and Russia gains much prestige from the success of their athletes. Since the introduction of the sport to the international arena, Russia has excelled on the ice. Despite prejudice from Western judges during the Cold War, Russia still brought home gold in every competition for over thirty years. The beauty and passion that the skaters bring to their performances is awe-inspiring and the artistry is magnificent. Figure skating is an important part of Russian history because of the battle fought on ice during the Cold War. And with Vladimir Putin’s efforts to return Russia to international prominence, it is likely that Russia will make every effort to continue its dominance in figure skating. But regardless of politics, figure skating is a beautiful sport that combines the grace and beauty of dance with the thrill of the ice.

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