Time to recapture that flying feeling

By Ismene Brown

04 February 2006 • 12:01am

Skating is blooming: rinks are full and Dancing on Ice is drawing 10 million viewers. But as the Winter Olympics approach, Ismene Brown wonders whether an obsession with technique has crushed the individuality that once turned sport into art

The first description of skating in Britain grabbed for a metaphor. In 12th-century London, when the swampy banks of the Thames froze, the monk William Fitzstephen watched young men strap cow bones under their boots and "slide as swiftly as a bird flyeth". The amazement in his tone is precisely ice-skating's golden sell.

Whatever happened to ice-skating? You have to be over 35 now to have much memory of those heady 1980s when Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean were hardly off television, turning the winning of Olympic medals into experiences of unspeakable delight. You have to be over 45 to remember the greatest ice artist of all, John Curry, and the way that the Cold War skating superpowers melted at the outburst of most unexpected British genius.

Curry, Robin Cousins and Torvill and Dean won successive Olympic golds in 1976, 1980 and 1984, their artistry defeating all the technical braggadocio that the USSR and US could muster. T&D's failure to win Olympic gold in 1994 was watched by almost 24 million viewers in Britain - one of UK television's top 20 audiences of all time. Yet, a decade later, Britain creeps into the 2006 Winter Olympics in the back row of the sport.

The word "sport" is the giveaway. With its pancaked athletes in garish clothes grinding out desperate spins and neck-breaking jumps in neon-lit arenas, in front of politically-motivated judges with protégés of their own among the competitors, ice-skating can be as offputting to watch as it seems dubious. Even the ice-dancing can be underwhelming, straining to mimic ballet or musical theatre.

It's when someone comes along who transforms skating into a uniquely icy expression of being alive, who casts spells of personal imagination that blur the eyes of even the most biased judges, and snap the dulled cameramen into sharp-focused attention, that suddenly skating justifies itself as a TV sport.

Curry made enemies when he went beyond merely demonstrating that skating could be an art, and started talking about it, incorporating routines by classical ballet choreographers into his work. Cousins and T&D were more discreet, fusing "technique" and "artistry" at a sublimely entertaining level but not claiming to be more than sportspeople. T&D won that row of perfect sixes in 1984 by spinning the illusion perfectly; when they didn't win gold 10 years later, it was a sign that skating had become insecure with its own capacity to hypnotise.

That year also witnessed a grotesque physical attack organised by the ex-husband of American skater Tonya Harding on her rival Nancy Kerrigan. It all added to the certainty that ice-skating was in a flat spin. The turmoil came to a head at the last

Winter Olympics, when the Pairs gold medal won by Russians was later re-awarded jointly with the second, Canadian pair, after a French judge said she had been coerced to put the Russians first. Radical change was at last forced on the humiliated sport, and after a century of dangling the concept of the perfect skating performance in front of competitors, the sport decided to scrap the idea of perfection.

No more will we see 6.0 flash up, that ultimate, spine-tingling, exploited accolade. The new points system aims zealously towards transparent and unemotional appraisal. Points pile up for each and every move, for their inherent difficulty and for the executor's skill. "Artistic" questions are marked in terms of whether, say, a skater is "in time" with the music or not, and costumes must be eye-catching. A step-by-step print-out proves to each skater the minutiae of the judging (including objective scoring of their dress sense, one supposes).

Whether this favours stunt-quantity or quality we can see at the Turin Olympics next week, thanks to the BBC's copious coverage. But it's certainly not simpler to understand - judges will have to be wizard arithmeticians, handling, say, 200 points in a five-minute routine, while fans can no longer make their opinions known by holding up those 6.0 cards, which will take a lot of joy out of being rinkside.

To me this system sounds practically Soviet in its ruthless suppression of individuality. As a watcher I find the nebulous "art" of skating infinitely more intriguing than its clumsy "virtuosity", which ballet and even gymnastics do with far more sophisticated grace. With Torvill and Dean, it was a given that you couldn't have such an exquisitely simple experience of romantic love or musical bliss without an exquisitely complicated technical mastery - but it would be instructive to see how the new system would score their imaginative skills.

Dean told me once: "The beautiful thing about skating is that you can take a pose and move it in space, make it endless, then turn it into something else." The modern dance choreographer Twyla Tharp, who choreographed for Curry, found that "[skating] is a different and wonderful medium in its own right. Ice can be as beautiful, moving and meaningful as you want to make it." Tell that to the Olympic judges. By looking beyond the measurable, Dean and Tharp tap into what thrills watchers about skating - not just the scary acrobatics, but the stirring of a childhood memory of escaping into nature: find a tree, you climb it; find ice, you skate on it, and maybe later you twirl in the arms of your date, too.

I guess that escapist nostalgia accounts for the huge popularity of ITV's new Saturday night reality show Dancing on Ice, in which flat-footed celebrities attempt elementary ice-dancing under the genial eye of the Golden Three. Around 10 million viewers are watching it, twice the audience for the 2002 Olympic curling final, it has spawned a weekday follow-up, and it has ignited a virtual explosion in admissions to indoor ice arenas in the past fortnight.

At Slough Ice Arena, where Torvill has been instructing David Seaman and Bonnie Langford for Dancing on Ice, manager Dave Tomlinson is presiding over an overnight trebling of ticket sales, thanks partly to the TV. But he says ice-rink managers also acknowledge gratefully the temporary outdoor rinks that have started springing up

over Christmas, generating a flood of custom indoors when they close down in mid-January.

In Kew Gardens, at London's Natural History Museum and Canary Wharf, in Windsor's Queen Alexandra Gardens, in a town near you soon, families in woolly hats and execs in suits have been strolling outdoors in the crisp air and strapping on skates to get that flying feeling, just as Fitzstephen's young men strapped on bones more than 800 years ago.

Even King Kong goes skating in Peter Jackson's film. Ice is a place of joyful, fleeting

impossibilities, and it's that key element, joy, that Olympic ice-skating must beware losing as it scrabbles to itemise every last component of achievement in a computer print-out.

- The 2006 Winter Olympics open on Friday. Television coverage begins at 6pm on BBC2.

Top tips for Olympic glory

By Sandra Stevenson

Pairs

Gold Tatiana Totmianina & Maxim Marinin, Russia

The world champions recently won their fifth straight European title and remain clear favourites for gold, but it hasn't always been plain sailing. In a contest in 2004, Marinin missed his footing while holding Totmianina over his head, sending her plunging head-first to the ice. She suffered concussion.

Silver Aliona Savchenko & Robin Szolkowy, Germany

Savchenko is a Ukrainian who was granted German citizenship by a speeded-up process on January 13. She is very much the boss of the duo. When she lost her previous partner, she pursued Szolkowy and brought him out of retirement to skate with her.

Bronze Maria Petrova & Alexei Tikhonov, Russia,

Tikhonov and Petrova have been around the top of the sport for years. But in 1993, Tikhonov was deemed so unpromising that the authorities in St Petersburg let him go to Japan in return for an ice-making machine. He returned to win the 2000 title.

Ice dance

Gold Tatiana Navka & Roman Kostomarov, Russia

The Moscow-born pair, seen on the cover of this week's Arts+Books, have won the last two world championships. However, when they retained their European title recently, Navka cut her right hand badly and missed the compulsory drug test to go straight to the hospital for stitches, an omission which is currently being investigated.

Silver Tanith Belbin & Benjamin Agosto, USA

Belbin and Agosto were second in the 2005 world championship, the best US placing since 1975. Belbin, a Canadian who has lived in the US since she was 13, was not due to receive her citizenship until 2007. A special bill was signed by President Bush in December and Belbin immediately became a dual citizen.

Bronze Rita Drobiazko & Povilas Vanagas, Lithuania

All eyes will be on the Lithuanians who have returned to the sport after a four-year absence. In an unprecedented action in 2002, two thirds of the competitors in the world championship signed a petition saying that Drobiazko and Vanagas and not the Israeli couple deserved the bronze. No action was ever taken.

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