

# The Secret Sauce for Competition Confidence Has Many Ingredients

*Coaches and Skaters Who Have Mastered the Art©2014*



By Merry Neitlich, Director of the Coach's Edge

*The Coach's Edge*  
Landing learning theory on ice.



## Acknowledgements

If you are fortunate enough to be involved in the skating community you have come in contact with many wonderful individuals that have a never ending heart and soul for giving back. To that end, I would like to thank all of the coaches and the PSA's own Jimmie Santee for helping to create this article about what it takes to be successful in competition.

You can find information about the specifics of competition readiness from the following articulate and generous coaches, choreographers, and sports psychologists. I'd like to thank each and every one of them for their time, energy, intelligence and ability to share their personal experiences.

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# The Secret Sauce for Competition Confidence Has Many Ingredients

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## By Merry Neitlich, Director of the Coach's Edge

What makes one skater be able to stand up to the pressure while others struggle with nerves and consistency? Is it the athlete's make-up? Is it the coach who knows how to help create confidence for their skaters? How much confidence is gained working with a sports psychologist?

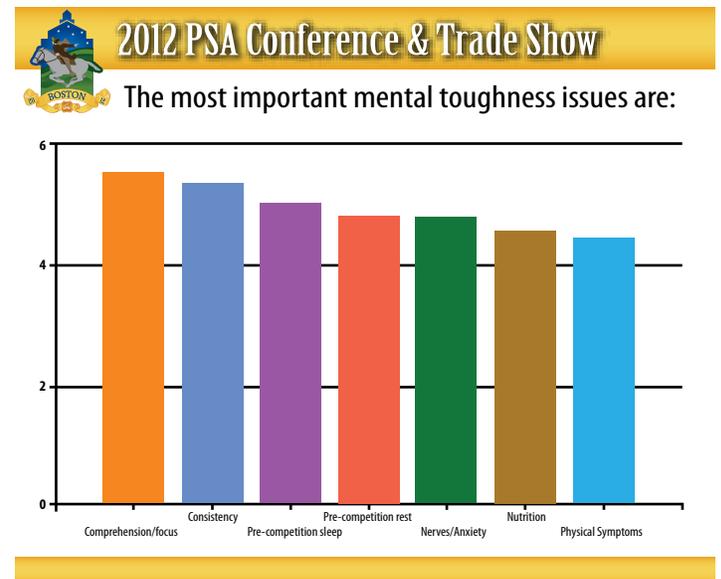
The 2013 –2014 competitive season leading up to the Sochi Olympic Games was packed with great skating, coaching changes, the expected drama and more than a few disappointing moments. One highlight of the season was watching Gracie Gold's journey to becoming our national champion. When we witness this type of success we know many factors are involved. Gracie had years of stellar coaching and some great competition successes along the way. Her transformation to achieving the kind of national and international success she had this past season was wonderful and fascinating. However, more than a few coaches, skaters and skating enthusiasts wondered how much of this success was due to the ability of her new coach, Frank Carroll, to steady her nerves and get her to focus.

## The Professional Skaters Association Survey on Competition Best Practices

In 2012 the Coach's Edge worked with Jimmie

Santee, Executive Director of the Professional Skaters Association (PSA), to prepare and analyze a national coaches' survey on Best Competition Practices. We reported on many best practices from Periodization for training in the months and weeks leading up to competition, what happens the week prior to an event, nutrition, individualized competition plans for athletes, dealing with the families, and what to do on competition day.

Some of the highlights of the survey included tactics to create mental toughness in their skaters and also what coaches do to stay calm and focused on the skater's



learning/competitive style in order to provide each athlete what he/she needs on competition day. We learned that athlete nutrition is a key component for most PSA coaches as was visualization of successful run-throughs. We even explored the debrief process. It was interesting to learn that 1/3 of the coaches debriefed immediately after the event, 1/3 debriefed after the results were posted, and 1/3 waited to debrief until back at the rink. The detailed survey results can be found here: [www.coachsedge.biz](http://www.coachsedge.biz)

At the 2012 PSA Conference we rolled out the results of the survey. In addition, part of the agenda at the conference included a panel of elite coaches and two Olympians discussing their best competition strategies. Sarah Hughes won Gold at the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics. Todd Sand, along with partner Jenny Meno, won three World medals, was a three-time U.S. national champion and skated in two Olympic Games (1994, 1998). Sarah and Todd both shared the belief that their best ally to combat competition nerves was to feel completely prepared. They stockpiled many clean programs creating muscle memory and confidence to compete cleanly and strongly.

Coaches from all over the country shared informative and successful tips in the survey results that they use to get their skaters to be their best at competition. There were, however, many requests to find out more details and specifics of highly successful coaches. This article is the result of these requests and based upon personal interviews conducted with a number of elite skaters and coaches who have had great success on the national and international field. It is by no means an exhaustive list of effective competition strategies but rather a look into what these individuals have done that has created top competition results at the highest levels.

## What PSA Elite Coaches Say About Competition Success

We asked seven elite coaches to share their strategies. You may be surprised to see what some of them had to say.

### Kori Ade Sings TAPS



Kori Ade

Last season highlighted Kori's warm and long-term relationship with Jason Brown. Many commented on the success this team had which was based on over 15 years of working together as a team.

Kori self-professes that her strongest asset is the intuitive side of her coaching. She connects with each student by coaching and training based on where they are on a given day. "By tuning into each athletes' head space in the moment I can reach them and connect on a deeper level maximizing what will happen for that lesson." She added, "I become a chameleon for each skater tuning into where that athlete is at that particular time.

"Learning to teach the very technical side of skating is something I continue to focus and improve on as I go. I constantly strive to learn from the experts. The learning is never over."

The Total Athlete Performance Seminars or TAPS program was created by Kori years ago as an integrated and comprehensive on-ice and off-ice endeavor. This most unusual curriculum offers various components which Kori uses to get to know each skater better and better over time. The activities include lessons on the ice, of course, but you might find Kori with her skaters at an outing to a theater where each student goes on the stage and improvises, or perhaps on a different day they are writing poetry or making an art project. She uses these activities along with participating in off-ice physical training with her skaters and engaging them in ongoing sports psychology strategies to help them grow as individuals. All of these efforts help her get to know exactly what each individual student needs to achieve their potential as a human being on this planet.

Jason Brown had an amazing break-out year during this past Olympic season. He has been participating in Kori's

TAPS program since he was 7-years old. Kori suggested I speak with Jason to get his take on the TAPS program. This is what Jason had to say, "Through the program we all learned that everyone has feelings. It's what we learned about those feelings and how to deal with them that really counted. We were our true selves and got to confront our fears, anxieties, disappointments, successes and competition challenges. We all supported each other in a way that made things special."

Kori commented, "Many of my skaters credit their skating success to the program. TAPS allows me to get to the core of each athlete incorporating creative activities along the way. Through the program I learn how each child ticks in life and at competition. I grew up in an artistic environment with both parents and a grandmother that taught art at high-levels. Creativity was the norm in how our house ran. I am thankful I am able to use those experiences in my coaching every day."

"The most important aspect of competition is the preparation we did beforehand and realizing that the unexpected will happen during competition from time to time. Part of the TAPS program is surprising each skater with the unexpected. They have to cope with this sudden change and overcome them. I might, for example, go into the rink lobby and grab one of my students who had been sitting for 30-minutes doing homework and tell her that her 5-minute warm-up is about to begin and she should get her boots on NOW to run her program. Another time I cut one of my skaters laces and told her that the warm-up for her event was about to start. She was the second skater and had better get that lace replaced right away. They all learn to adapt to control the things they can and to adapt to those situations they can't control."

This year Kori worked with Ryan Jahnke to develop "Game On: A Creative Approach to Coaching." This is a manual filled with 24 games to provide fresh excitement for coach's lessons, to get their skaters out of emotional ruts, and to build a sense of team among a coach's skaters. It is offered on the PSA website here: <http://ow.ly/zZDY4>

While at competition Kori has to think on her feet, like all coaches do, to help calm and focus any skater who needs it. She relies on solid training principles such as teaching her athletes that not all jumps are perfect but those skaters on the podium have a wide range of landability.

While training her skaters, Kori insists that all of the transitions and the integrity of the choreography are always incorporated into every run through. She gradually adds doubles to their programs and folds in triples as they are ready. She insists, "I tell my skaters to put their egos aside and to be rational about what they can do early on and into the season."

"I am quite proud of my skaters for what they are willing to do to become the best that they can be both on and off of the ice."

### **Marina Zoueva Tells Us Skaters are Like Fine Wine — They Need Time to Develop**

Marina said during a recent conversation, "When I think of having skaters be confident for competition the most important issue for me is having consistent and stable practice. Every skater is different and every dance team has their own special needs. It is the coach's job to figure this out early on and develop a plan for them for the long haul as well as to create short-term goals"

Marina is the only one of two coaches in PSA history to win both the Coach of the Year and Paul McGrath Choreographer of the Year awards in the same year. This was a well-deserved honor as she had two teams in the 2014 Sochi Olympics whom each earned an Olympic medal: Meryl Davis & Charlie White achieving the Gold and Tessa Virtue & Scott Moir earning Silver. Marina's awards were not a big surprise to the 500 coaches at the 2014 PSA Awards Ceremony. Her great feat in training these two spectacular teams in the same facility side-by-side was nothing short of amazing.

"One of my strategies for helping skaters achieve competition consistency", Marina said, "is to make them feel successful along the way. Every day there is a little



Marina Zoueva with Meryl Davis and Charlie White

progress and a bit more each team can depend on. It is the coach's job to make sure the skaters can see this slow improvement along the way. This helps to create confidence.

"Ice dancing has its own complexities for preparing the members of each team. Even selecting the proper music for the programs is very involved. Input must be gathered from the skaters and the coaches. And of course there is off-ice strength conditioning and many dance lessons to be folded into the training program."

Marina prides herself in having numerous conversations with her athletes discussing their philosophy in life. "I try to teach them that skating is only a part of life and that the qualities of a successful skater are the same qualities of a successful human being. We must all be positive people and consistently strive to improve ourselves. We should never forget that skating is about developing life skills as well [as] it is about skating."

Marina acknowledges that every athlete has difficult training days. She uses a set schedule and written

weekly plans to advance the short-term and long-term goals for each skater. Her coaching philosophy looks at creating a slow and steady progression for each student. This philosophy's success is clearly evident given the fact that she worked with Meryl and Charlie for over a decade.

She noted, "I work with my teams to have them experience the pleasure and love of what they are doing. The enjoyment seems to far outweigh the difficulties and this process instills a sense of confidence and achievement."

While skaters are developing, Marina involves the families early on setting clear expectations and defining everyone's roles: the skaters, the coaches and the parents. She reinforces these expectations and guidelines consistently.

As competition becomes closer, Marina chats with each skater to identify what is going on in their heads as they prepare. Marina says, "It's important to be close and really know every skater in order to guide them to confidence. Any concerns that arise must be dealt with head on. I find that as we prepare, I experiment with each athlete to see what will work best for them in their current way of thinking. If I suspect there are any nerves, we talk about things and I try to make them feel secure. I remind them that we are all a team and we all work together to reach our goals.

"Starting two weeks out from competition day, we like to see our kids performing exactly how they train. They should be competing at least 75% of their 100% best," she remarked.

"As far as competition day, I feel that if a skater is not somewhat nervous they ought to see a doctor," Marina laughs. "On some occasions certain skaters may fall apart during an event. We know it can take patience and time to develop a positive competition mindset. It is the coach's job to be strong and calm and to be saying the right things to each skater at the right time. For some skaters, it can take their lifetime of skating for them to reach their best of competition performances.

"I make it my job to love and respect the parents and the kids. Together we make the team work. None of us are soldiers — we are all human. I am so lucky and so proud to have the students who have chosen me to coach them," Marina opined.

### Tom Zakrajsek Continues His Passion for Life-Long Learning



Tom Zakrajsek

Many know Tom Zakrajsek for the successful development and accomplishments of many elite skaters including Max Aaron, Rachael Flatt and Jeremy Abbott, to name a few. Mirai Nigasu recently moved to Colorado Springs to train with Tom for the 2014 — 2015 season.

Tom has a strong desire to give back to skating by sharing his knowledge. With an advanced degree in Sports Medicine, Tom applies the nuances of that education to his own athletes' Periodization and training. He recently launched a new website with the purpose of sharing his coaching tips and strategies at [www.coachtomz.com](http://www.coachtomz.com).

Tom is always seeking new ways to enhance his skaters' successes on the ice and in life. Last August, right before the season got into full swing, he had 30 skaters participate in a communication skills program called I-SPEAK Your Language taught by me from the Coach's Edge learning theory models. The skaters had great fun interacting with each other while learning their primary communication style and also how to more effectively communicate with those who have different styles than their own.

The skaters left the training with an understanding that strong communication skills will not only help their progress on the ice but also apply to every facet of life both in the rink and outside of it.

Tom and team coach Becky Calvin even demonstrated a hilarious role-play of a skater giving up on a program run-through after a fall. The skaters broke into groups

of the four different communication styles and provided examples of how a coach might talk with a skater in their own style preference to help overcome this problem. The joy felt by the skaters was infectious.

Tom analyzed his skaters' primary and backup communication styles to plan on how to best work with them in the competition setting. Although already an accomplished World and Olympic coach, Tom's philosophy encompasses seeking new ways to help his skaters achieve success.

Zakrajsek said, "In addition to learning valuable life lessons and improving their communication skills the skaters experienced a natural team building camaraderie that happened during the training. Days later my skaters were still talking about what they learned and sharing stories of how they have successfully applied this knowledge into their lives. We all had a great time. We can all definitely learn something new and unique to help our athletes succeed."

As far as competition preparedness, Tom 'has an app for that!' Tom trains his skaters throughout the year with his well-known Periodization program which incorporates a continuous component of competition readiness.

Tom builds competition success into his Periodization planning with each athlete just like every other aspect of goal setting, such as learning new elements, increasing speed and flow and internalizing the nuances of programs. "Competition is practice and practice is competition. My goal with every athlete is to normalize them for competition. Daily training can be as intense as competition. It's great practice to ramp up the training periodically. It builds competition resiliency", Tom said.

Tom expects his skaters to try as hard as they can each day at the rink. Performance expectations start to ramp up in July as new elements and transitions are secured and become part of program run-throughs. By mid-to late-August all new elements should be getting consistent and ready for competition.

Local competitive events occur on Saturdays during high training season in what Tom calls Sport Concept Classes. His skaters are divided into competitive teams. Perhaps one week they are representing various countries while the next they become team members of the various houses from the Harry Potter books. According to Tom, "These competitions develop a strong sense of team work while the skaters have fun and compete their best. This is the time to learn, take risks and develop as technicians and performers while developing competitive strategies."

Tom works hard to get to know each skater so he is as prepared as possible to support them in competition. As the season approaches he increases his communication with the skaters' parents and coaching team wanting to be updated on how the skaters are doing on all fronts.

Before going to major events Tom and Becky have a fun ritual providing facts about the competition city, country (if it is an international event), and the competition venue. Upon arrival they take the skaters on short jaunts to learn to feel and appreciate the location. According to Tom, "This helps our skaters engage in the present moment and experience a bit of tension releasing fun."

On the day of competition if any skaters are showing any jitters he calmly chats with the skater using warm smiles and playing little games such as I Spy or reflex games. This is not a time for long technical discussions. He just keeps the mood light.

To focus his athletes he reminds them of their accomplishments and why they have chosen to be there and taken this exciting path. Using lots of eye contact, Tom reminds them of his adage that competition is just like practice since every practice is like competition.

To Tom competition readiness starts with a long-term plan and goal setting. The competition is just one part of the plan and his Periodization model.

## Phillip Mills Uses Creative Choreography With His Own Competitive Experiences



Phillip Mills

We all know the expression that the only thing constant is change. Well for those in the skating world this is truer than ever since the International Judging System (IJS) came into being in 2006. And because there are constant updates to the IJS a choreographer's job is at the mercy of these changes in the same way a passenger is

at an airline's mercy as they change the departure gate from A32 to D14. It is the choreographer's responsibility to track, implement, and monitor their works of art to be in a constant state of compliance with the evolving IJS rules.

As a master rated choreographer, Phillip Mills has been creating programs for World and Olympic competitors for 26 years. He has seen his share of changes in skating but one thing remains constant: his dedication to his skaters, his craft and his process for instilling competition excellence. Phillip has choreographed programs for some of the world's finest skaters including the 2014 World Silver Medalist Tatsuki Machida, two-time national champion Ashley Wagner, Michelle Kwan and Sasha Cohen, to name a few.

Mills shared, "Ultimately the choreography is for the judges and audience to partake in the experience. It is the job of the choreographer to develop a program which tells a story for the audience to enjoy. It should be one that the skater is comfortable [with] and one in which they can interpret with ease and confidence. Once the program is learned and the details internalized, competition day should just be another experience of expressing that program on the ice for all to see."

Perhaps unusual in some choreographic situations, Phillip has had the opportunity to put many elite

skaters on the ice for major events. His athletes are competition ready when they know their uniquely crafted program fits their individual style, personality and skills. He and the coaches he works with review and practice the intricacies of the program with their skaters running complete run-throughs every day. Over time he makes small positive changes tweaking things to make the skater feel completely comfortable and ready to skate clean and beautifully.

For over ten years, Phillip worked as an integral member of a team based in Colorado Springs with Carlo and Christa Fassi. Among the many successful skaters this team worked with was World Champion Jill Trenary. In 1989 there was a lot of anticipation; many thinking Jill would win the World title. Ultimately she came in third that year winning the bronze medal. In 1990 in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Jill went again with her team to try her hand at topping the podium. She doubled her triple flip placing her third after the short program.

Carlo Fassi had a firm belief that athletes, in a similar fashion to many animals, could sense tension and nervousness on the part of those around them. In fact, he confided in Phillip telling him that he and Christa were both nervous and didn't think it best for either of them to lead the 20-minute long program warm-up for event. They asked Phillip to do so.

Because of his many years receiving sports psychology training as a national competitive gymnast combined with the fact that he performed for 13-years as a principal dancer with an international ballet company, Phillip simply does not get nervous at competitions and the Fassi's knew this to be true. Phillip led the warm-up using his competition game plan for Jill and it went very well.

Afterwards, the team returned to their hotel to get some rest and stay calm. They returned to the venue in plenty of time for a physical off-ice-warm up and for

Jill to get ready with costume and make-up. The timing was just right putting the team in the hallway outside the entry to the arena with just enough time to feel the atmosphere and focus on the program at hand. Jill had an amazing performance and became the World Champion in 1990.

In general, on competition day, Phillip turns his focus to each skater honing in on their mood or state of mind with laser-like precision. He is all business, yet at the same time he is light and fun according

to successful Olympic pair coach Jim Peterson. "Phillip offers sound advice sharing strategies that have and continue to work well to bring out an athlete's best performance. He prides himself on his calm focus throughout the competition which transfers to his skaters."

Like many coaches, Phillip starts the pre-event warm-up with some cardio, stretching and running through the various elements in the program. He may select one or two moves that are most challenging for that competitor having them conjure up one word to concentrate on to make that element a success. Next he tells his skaters to point on the ice to the various locations of each spin, jump and footwork sequence. "Once we get to this point I have the skater visually

skate the program imaging where they will be on the ice for each element. I always ask how the program went. I remember one time working with a senior man at nationals," he said. "He told me that as he visualized his program he missed his triple lutz. I had him concentrate on his technique and visually skate it again several times successfully. He nailed it in the event. There is great power in visualization."

Once while at the boards at the U.S. National Championship with a pair team, he noticed that they, along with their coach, were getting tense and the

*"Phillip offers sound advice sharing strategies that have and continue to work well to bring out an athlete's best performance."*

— Jim Peterson

tone of everyone's voice was getting tighter. Phillip knew he had to break the mood. He quickly pulled something out of his pocket and turned to the group of three saying, "Chapstick, anyone?" This made them all laugh at the silliness of the question and the mood relaxed instantly.

Phillip continues to learn and refine his technique for getting the best out of each skater, especially on competition day. He also preaches the notion of treating every practice like competition so that competition is just another practice. Every lesson he teaches has a plan for each individual skater and their particular goals. To learn more about his skaters and methods you can check out his website at [www.phillipmillschoreographer.com](http://www.phillipmillschoreographer.com).

When asked what Phillip might recommend to young coaches to maximize their effectiveness at competitions he said they should follow their heart and find their own way. He added that they might invest wisely in the many PSA courses available. He suggested that having a subscription to Psychology Today can help advance their ability to keep their athletes in the moment at competitions. Phillip suggests that the teaching is done once you reach the event location. Offering a series of technical commands close to the event can make doubt and fear creep in at a critical time.

What would Phillip do if his skater was close to taking the ice at a competition but all of a sudden the athlete exhibited a huge uptick in their nervousness? He commented that he might say, "Look, a little bit of nervousness is OK, in fact it's normal. But if you want to be petrified, you're pretty much finished anyway. Would you prefer not to skate?" He added, "The skaters usually knock it off at that point."

### **Jim Peterson's Fun Training Environment Creates Consistency and Competition Readiness**

Jim Peterson's firm yet laid back personality creates a fun training environment for his team of skaters. Jim



Jim Peterson

coaches at the Ellenton Ice & Sports Complex in Ellenton, Florida, where he continues to build a strong team environment for his skaters.

Jim was PSA Developmental Coach of the Year in 2009 and 2010 — it is a rare accomplishment to win this award two years in a row. Some

of Jim's most notable former skaters include U.S. Pairs Champions Amanda Evora and Mark Ladwig, Olympians Caydee Denney and Jeremy Barrett and, most recently, 2014 Sochi Olympians Felicia Zhang and Nathan Bartholomay.

Jim commented, "We were all very proud of Felicia and Nat's performance at the Olympics in Sochi. They were relaxed and hanging back skating at their first Olympics. They prepared correctly and they got their work done. They knew they did everything they possibly could in that moment. Felicia and Nate were able to skate just like they trained at home. They kept a very relaxed environment and stuck to a normal schedule as much as possible and it paid off."

Jim's easy style includes a lot of competition readiness and practice. His strategies include lots of team building efforts among all of his seven pair teams and singles skaters. His skaters all take ballet class together, participate in the same off-ice training classes, work with the same jumping coach, and have team meetings where they all sign up for competitions or chat about the newest IJS rule changes. Jim stated that he is also quite fortunate to have had the same off-ice trainer training his athletes for 12 years.

"As far as our pair teams, we work as a team to understand that each team is only as good as their weakest element. We work on those skills and continually build up the pair relationship. It takes commitment and lots of time from both members of the team," Jim remarked.

Teaching the mental aspect of skating is very important as well. "You are only as good as your weakest element," says Jim. Coaches must teach their students to be aggressive and strong so that they will feel confident and ready when they take the ice for competition. Jim says, "I speak to my skaters to empower them with strong and inspiring words. I never speak down to them. A coach must continually build up the male and female dynamic of a partnership on the ice. Every team needs to have a positive outlook.

"I work with my skaters to get them to tell me what they need at competition. I need to support each skater in their own way. The most important aspect of competition is to expect the unexpected and plan for everything. They must be prepared to persevere through any challenge that might come up."

It is critical to Jim that his skaters have a lot of competition practices to build consistency. He plans a whole day of competition including official warm-up times. He fills the stands with other skaters, parents, judges and coaches to try and simulate competition as much as possible. The skaters get critiques from the judges and use Dartfish to review the elements after the event as part of their debrief. The Dartfish program has the ability to review each element in slow motion in order to specify what needs to be improved. All videos are kept on file for further review as well.

"My skaters also visualize their programs about an hour and a half before competition. This allows your body and mind to remain in the moment, focused and relaxed so that the moment your feet touch the ice, you know you are ready to conquer. Before each skater takes the ice, it is essential that they go through a proper off-ice warm up. Skaters can go through their program, take some nice deep breaths, and talk about what they are feeling," Jim explained. "By saying you are nervous, it helps to relieve nervousness. It is just your body's way of saying you're ready."

Jim notes, "I teach with an aggressive, strong viewpoint

to help each skater learn that they are trained, ready, strong and beautiful skaters. I learned to speak to my skaters in a way that empowers them from my former coach Rod Luddington and from Frank Carroll's firm yet supportive style with a little wink.

"I love this quote from Kurt Browning, 'Once you step on the plane I know I've done everything I can do to prepare.' I know that once we leave for an event my work is done. Micromanaging skaters at competitions is the worst thing a coach can do. By this time coaches just be should be supportive and caring and ready to help take on those last minute unexpected challenges."

### Audrey Weisiger Continues to Amuse and Amaze



Audrey Weisiger with Jordan Moeller

Audrey's light-hearted personality and amazing experiences combine to make her a renowned, unusual and dedicated member of the skating community. She is a two-time Olympic Team coach and a frequent presenter at the PSA Conferences and Canadian Coaches Conferences. In 1999, Audrey was selected as the Coach of the Year for the PSA and USFSA. She has worked with numerous skaters, most notably Michael Weiss and Timothy Goebel.

In 2003 Audrey started the wonderful Grassroots to

Champions program (<http://grassrootstochampions.com/>) to help give serious competitors advanced skill refinement and competition readiness training. The program has grown significantly in numbers and popularity over the years. This work, with its many well-known coaches who help teach the program with Audrey, gave rise to the amazing Young Artists Showcase (<http://youngartistsshowcase.net/>) — a place for young choreographers to enhance their skills and talent while obtaining positive feedback and training.

Audrey says her best strategy to connecting with her skaters is to keep it simple. She thinks very methodically about competition readiness, although you won't find her crafting a formal 4-year plan. She always works her skaters with the long-term in mind but she lives by the philosophy that long-term goals morph. Like planning any big event, such as a wedding, she was always ready to embrace change.

A mainstay of Audrey's plans includes a six- to eight-week Battle Plan for each skater leading up to the start of the competitive season. She said, "Preparation is key, pressure is a privilege and it takes a lot of heart to accomplish greatness."

A strong advocate for practicing how you compete and going out to competition as if it was just another day at practice, Audrey commented, "The only person you are competing with is yourself and it is how you deal with your demons and nerves at competition that will set you apart from the rest and the best."

Audrey's unique training methods cultivate an environment of preparedness and readiness for the times when her skaters are in the spotlight. "I was very meticulous in my training. I would throw change at them such as turning out the lights when they were on the ice. I might take my students to unfamiliar rinks to run their programs while other people were deliberately getting in their way. Michael Weiss liked to prepare for competition by training in isolation but I mixed things up for him too. It is very important to create changes in the athlete's routine in order to stay

motivated and always expect the unexpected.

"You must know your athlete and ask them, what is the mission of this run-through and/or this competition? Why did we come here? Will you do your job as if we are practicing at home? Respect yourself and remember it is a privilege to have accomplished what you have.

"One summer I had a skater competing at the Liberty [Summer] competition. One of the rinks caught fire shortly before her event. But she handled it like a champ taking the Gold because she was used to the various changes that came her way during training."

Michael Weiss was one skater Audrey worked with long term. In 1993 they began to discuss ideas for the 1998 Olympics but those ideas were never a firm multi-year plan. Rather Audrey incorporated space and time in every plan to accommodate options in skills, goals, and even unexpected program changes. "Things change and skaters must be able to take on new personas and act the part," she said.

"I remember one day as we approached the height of the season and Michael, a man at that point, told me he wanted to be outside playing golf, not inside at the rink. I made a deal with him that after he accomplished specific goals that we mutually agreed upon we would go golfing. He had a great session that day!

"It was always important for me to have a strong knowledge base of each athlete. I had to know what motivated them and what would keep them focused and calm. Some skaters are motivated 100% of the time but most are not. I always had an arsenal of ideas I could call upon to help each individual skater.

"I had the privilege to work with Tim Goebel during the inception of the new IJS system in 2006. Tim told me that he knew he had to adapt or die in order to succeed. We worked very hard at learning these new rules and changes. One of the biggest challenges Tim ever faced took place the year before the new IJS at the 2005 U.S. National Figure Skating Championships in Portland. Tim's good friend, Angela Nikodinov, lost her

mother in a tragic car accident in Portland just before the competition began. Tim was devastated by the loss. In fact he was so upset he could hardly stay composed and thought of withdrawing, which I would have supported if that indeed was his decision. We discussed things and decided that Mrs. Nikodinov would have wanted him to skate.

“Even while waiting for his 5-minute warm up for his short program Tim could not compose himself and kept breaking down. I knew I needed to do something to snap him out of it. I hit him in his right arm reminding him that he needed to pull in on his jumps; Angela’s mother would have wanted him to get it together. He went on to skate a beautiful clean program. This was one difficult accomplishment for Tim but one he remains proud of.”

Audrey always encourages her skaters to look at the bigger picture and repeat words like ‘I can and I will.’ At times, skaters can become extremely nervous at the boards, so she finds small ways to interact with each student in order to keep them calm and focused. She noted, “Fear is universal. Each skater has a different way to cope with their nerves. Leading up to the event, I frequently encourage my skaters to read an inspiring story or watch an inspiring movie. Sometimes we play a hand slapping game or a card game before taking the ice. When my skaters make that first step onto the ice under the spotlight they can be confident that they are fully prepared and it’s their time to shine.”

### **Yuka Sato’s Team With Jason Dungjen Helps Prepare Their Skaters for Competition Readiness**

Yuka Sato and Jason Dungjen are beautifully decorated skaters that have had many successes in their own right. As they have made the transition into coaching they have codified many unique training options to prepare each and every student to be ready for competition. Yuka shared some of the strategies she and Jason use with their skaters to get them to be their best at competition.

“Getting ready for the competitive season is a work in progress”, Yuka suggested. “We work with each skater to clarify their expectations and goals for the season. We want to know what they plan to accomplish. To achieve these long-term goals we set interim or progress goals. We work to build each skater’s confidence and to help them feel in control of their technique and ability to execute clean elements.”



Yuka Sato

Yuka and Jason strive for balanced training focusing, separately at first, on artistry, performance and technique. By the time their skaters are ready for competition they should be on auto pilot. “We work to sharpen the skater’s ability to deal with the unknowns, the what-ifs that always seem to happen at competitions. I

remember in 1994 competing against Tanya Harding and having to wait while she showed the judges her broken skate lace. It seemed like a long time until I got to take the ice. We all have our own interesting competition stories.

“After Jeremy Abbott hit the boards during his short program at the Sochi Olympics he got up and was able to complete his short program because he was well-trained. During his long program he showed such determination and perseverance. To me that was something truly beautiful that came out of that Olympic experience. He managed to be proud of all of his accomplishments and that performance proved how strong Jeremy really is. We were very proud of him too.”

Yuka and Jason develop a specific program for competition readiness with individual aspects built in for each skater. Certain training programs may be conducive for one group of skaters, such as Jeremy Abbott or Alissa Czisny, but not for other skaters. Yuka says, “Each stage of training for competition is a step-by-step process. We believe this process helps our

skaters build confidence.

“Skating is a personal journey. Some competition nervousness will always be there but each competitor has to manage it in their own way. Even after a less than stellar event we work with our skaters to find the positives and learning experiences that occurred in that competition. None of us can be perfect all the time so we need to celebrate the positive outcomes and embrace the mistakes.”

Yuka continued, “I think the key to performing up to a skater’s potential is to treat each training session as if it was competition. There will be so many different circumstances and physical conditions a skater may experience throughout the training day that the performance at competition should just become another program run-through.”

Like many coaches, some of Yuka and Jason’s skaters work with a sports psychologist to assist with increased mental resiliency. Yuka commented, “There is pressure coming from many directions — from the skaters themselves, media, associations, coaches, and family. Working with a sports psychologist can help skaters deal with great pressure as well as gain mental toughness.

“I’ve had great experiences as a competitor, a professional skater, a choreographer and a coach. I was lucky enough to be successful. The past few years of experiences with both Alissa overcoming her hip injury and Jeremy’s accident at the Sochi Olympics have taught Jason and I something very important. Alissa and Jeremy have dedicated their lives to becoming the kind of the skaters they are; yet things didn’t always turn out as they had hoped. It is truly heartbreaking to witness your skaters having to accept the disappointments in the way that they did. However, the hard work they put in and the courage to stand up when they fell down just shows how they value themselves as individuals.

As we train our skaters to compete well, I realize it’s important to make sure that every angle has been covered. This includes what happens in a range of

possible outcomes from having a skater win to coming in last. We try to prepare them for all outcomes so when they take the ice they can be as confident as possible.”



Paul Wylie

## One Skater’s Vantage Point

### Paul Wylie’s 1992 Olympic Journey

Paul Wylie is a skater of rare accomplishment and one that many of us look up to and respect. While teaching with him at the PSA Nationals Seminars in 2012 we had the chance to discuss how he learned to calm his nerves and focus on the task at hand in competition — especially for the Olympics. He laughed saying, “I was the poster child for head cases!”

Along the way Paul learned he needed a stronger plan to approach the competition season to be ready for each day of his events. He learned that building a higher and more complete level of consistency was the first thing he and his coaches needed to attack. Paul knew his learning style was very kinesthetic so he needed to repeat elements many times to get them to become automatic. This became a primary focus while training for the Albertville 1992 Olympic Winter Games.

As he prepped that season Paul also worked with a sports psychologist who helped him master the art of lowering his heart rate while under pressure. He was instructed, after placing third in the short program in Albertville, to go into his room and concentrate for 30 minutes and think of blue skies and what life would be like if he won an Olympic medal.

Paul shared lightheartedly that he spent the entire week walking around the Olympic village lowering his heart rate. During the 5-minute warm-up for his long program Paul missed both of his triple axel attempts. Evy and Mary Scotvold were with him at the boards. Evy reminded Paul, "This has happened to you in the past and you pulled it off in your program. Pass your free leg closer to your knee and do it. Let's lower your heart rate."

According to Paul, he had learned to master the 'arousal zone' where a skater needs to be. For him it was a combination of noticing the adrenaline, lowering his heart rate and using that adrenaline to activate positive energy. While prepping during the week, Mary was skilled at listening to Paul talk about how he felt with absolutely no judgment. This helped lower his stress levels as the week progressed.

Paul's ultimate success in the 1992 Olympics earned him a Silver medal which he attributes to a combination of tactics which led to one of his best performances.

Olympian Sarah Hughes won Gold at the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics. Todd Sand, along with partner Jenny Meno, won three World medals, was a three-time U.S. national champion and skated in two Olympic Games (1994, 1998). Sarah and Todd both share the belief that their best ally to combat competition nerves was to feel completely prepared. They stockpiled many clean programs creating muscle memory and confidence to compete cleanly and strongly.

*"The crux of what I learned was that the smartest way, as a coach, to achieve this reliability in performance is to first understand the athlete on a mental and emotional level as well as on a personal level."*

— Dave Diggle

## Sports Psychology Coaching Is Part of the Sauce

### Dave Diggle From the Smart Mind Institute

With more than 25 years' experience as a coach to athletes across the globe and in many athletic disciplines, Dave wishes he had known then what he knows now about pushing the right buttons — his buttons — at the right time.

As a young athlete he was completely consumed with doing more: more hours in the gym, more technical research, more conditioning — simply doing more than anyone else. And, all this "more" was an attempt to achieve his Olympic goals and beat more talented competitors to the top. Yes, he was focused, but he reports that he was also narrow-minded and, if he were to be completely honest, a little obsessed.

As his coach told him, and he grew to believe, just training harder and longer would give him the best chance of success as an athlete. And even though he did achieve many of his goals, including becoming an Olympic gymnast, he did so at an extreme physical cost.

Dave didn't realize until he became an elite coach himself that by buying into the myth of 'more physical equals more rewards' he was missing the mental toughness aspect of his training which might have catapulted his success to an even higher level. Living and training with this myth as his guide merely resulted in him physically burning out and breaking down from overtraining and not learning how to manage his emotional state.

"There is unpredictability in training and competing that surfaces randomly at times of duress — namely competitions — rendering competitions as something to be feared. What I gleaned from my rollercoaster



Dave Diggle

career was there had to be a smarter way of creating replicable performance success. I learned that our emotions can be our best friend or they can be our arch nemesis. So we best learn to get along with them," Dave reports.

Dave states, "Everything we do is a combination of cognitive patterns and triggers, with the right pattern and wrong trigger we can become unstable and unable to perform. However, with the right pattern and right trigger combination we can replicate a performance anywhere, anytime — the holy grail of every competitive athlete.

"The crux of what I learned was that the smartest way, as a coach, to achieve this reliability in performance is to first understand the athlete on a mental and emotional level as well as on a personal level. Learn to recognize what makes each competitor tick. Once a coach truly understands the athlete he/she can build the athlete's performance pattern around them personally — uncovering the right pattern and right trigger combination."

Dave believes that part of this process is about building familiarity in performance, bringing the competition environment into the training environment in a controlled and supportive format. Dave says, "This allows coaches and their students to see competitions just like another training session and training just like another competition. We train the way we want to compete and compete the way we train.

"I believe competition shouldn't be a highly emotional situation that either makes or breaks an athlete; it should be just part of the journey." Dave continues, "When we think of what makes us confident it is knowing we have control over our outcomes, knowing that we

have been there before. This feeling of familiarity to the environment helps create the emotion of confidence that tells us to relax, that we have this. Confidence is merely a recognized history of success."

Dave, along with the underlying principles of the Smart Mind Institute (<http://www.smartmind.com.au/>), teaches the beliefs that an athlete can achieve this level of controlled confidence by:

- Taking the time to recognize and acknowledge what is working and what they have achieved,
- Having a reliable tailored process,
- Creating a balance between the off time and on time, and
- Having perspective.

We can become consumed by 'skills' and never really own our performance, however, if we understand how to trigger the right sequence of behaviors we can truly own our performance," Dave explains.

### David Benzel Adds in the Parents' Piece of Performance

David Benzel, of Growing Champions for Life ([www.growingchampionsforlife.com](http://www.growingchampionsforlife.com)), was a big hit when he spoke at the 2012 and 2013 PSA Conferences. His clear advice and deep knowledge of how athletes become and stay self-motivated provided PSA coaches with ready-to-use take-home knowledge. David shared great information about motivation telling us that it is an inside job for the athlete to create. During my conversation with him, David shared strategies and tips to maximize the coach/parent relationship.

David suggests that no one ever performs consistently at a level higher than what they believe is true about them. He expounds that this is true of doctors, lawyers, janitors, lovers, and especially athletes. David said, "What we believe about ourselves is the final filter through which all performances pass before they can become reality. It can be the reason talented athletes underperform and less talented athletes over-perform.

For this reason the credible adults in a young skater's life have a responsibility to help him or her improve what is believed to be true about one's self."



David Benzel

Through David's many years of research and practical coaching he tells us that the primary influencers in this quest for confidence are coaches and parents, and while they all have honorable intentions, the skills for doing so vary greatly. He feels that more than anyone, parents have available to them the most potent opportunities

for stimulating the growth of self-confidence in a child as a fundamental character strength. He says, "The occasions for leveraging their parental credibility in a positive way are unmatched simply because of who they are and the time spent with their children in the early years of development. Parents hold a special place in a child's 'quality world' because no one else on the planet can ever meet the true biological criteria of being Mom or Dad. They are unique relationally and therefore extremely powerful influencers in a child's view of themselves. A parent's opinion matters on the deepest emotional level. Coaches, on the other hand, are plentiful, often focused on one area of life (skating), and most importantly they arrive on the scene part way through an unfolding story.

"In spite of their apparent advantage, most parents face the greater challenge when it comes to instilling confidence in their own children. As ironic as it sounds, today's performance-obsessed parents are inadvertently undermining the self-confidence of their children. This is happening in spite of their sincere intentions to help their young athletes reach their full potential. This may be the greatest paradox in parenting. As parents witness the rewards of athletic

success in others — Olympic fame, financial prosperity, social recognition, etc. — it becomes more and more tempting to focus on today's outcomes. 'What elements have been learned?' 'What scores are being received?' 'What trophies have been won?' "

David tells us that as parents become more focused on results, and less focused on the process of joyful skating for its own sake, the tendency to convey the following messages increases:

- Concern about progress being inadequate
- Criticalness about effort or time not being sufficient
- Analysis of what could and should have happened
- Disappointment in today's results

*What we believe  
about ourselves  
is the final filter  
through which all  
performances pass  
before they can  
become reality.*

— David Benzel

"If it's true that the opinion that matters most to a child is what they think their parents think of them, it's no wonder that these subtle messages of dissatisfaction from parents gradually chip away at the very fabric of self-confidence. The deepest essence of confidence in one's self comes from the absolute certainty that unconditional love and total acceptance exists regardless of performance levels or accomplishments on any given day," David rejoins.

"What can coaches do when they suspect that their own efforts of building self-confidence on and off the ice are being subtly countered — even sabotaged — by well-meaning and loving parents who want success for their children? For starters, here's what doesn't work: ignoring the parents!

They are too powerful to ignore if you truly care about your athlete," said David.

David believes that the answer lies in building a trusting relationship with parents to whatever degree they will participate. Coaches who recognize that they are also in the parent education business will reap huge benefits from their efforts to get parents on the same philosophical page with them. David believes

that this requires coaches to be three things:

1. A CREDIBLE example of high moral character: Are you the kind of person a parent wants their child to admire and one day emulate to others? Can parents sense that you sincerely care about their child and that you can be trusted?
2. A CLEAR communicator of good information and a valuable resource: Can parents count on you to communicate clearly and empathically about their child's skating journey? Are you enthusiastically optimistic about their child's learning process and their physical, emotional and intellectual growth under your guidance?
3. A CREATIVE problem solver capable of customizing solutions to fit each skating family's needs: To what degree are you effective at identifying the individual needs of a young athlete and the corresponding family dynamics so that you can help parents understand the best way for them to create a positive skating family environment?

Coaches who strive to be the three things above behave differently. They walk their talk and live by their values...all the time. They welcome conversations with parents, although they may set boundaries about the appropriate time and place to have those conversations. They don't assume that every question from a parent is challenging their knowledge or authority. They understand that a parent has a right to know what's going on with their child. Lastly, due to the trust they have established with parents, they are able to compassionately, but directly, advise parents of more effective ways for parents to interact with their child over skating issues in an effort to lessen a child's anxiety or pressure.

David tells us, "The ideal tapestry of genuine

confidence for any athlete will be the sum total of coordinated and cooperative efforts of coaches, parents and the athlete toward the goal. The cornerstone for that confidence will be an athlete's deep belief that they are worthy, and that the most important people in their life believe in them, no matter what...so they can too."

### Conclusion by Jimmie Santee



Jimmie Santee

As a final word on "The Secret Sauce for Competition Confidence", it really comes down to determination and the total preparation of the "team", with team meaning skater, coach, and supporting professionals. In order for the skater to feel confident, the coach must nurture both the physical and emotional

needs. One common thread throughout this series is that these successful coaches are extremely good understanding each individual skater's current and future needs. As the model goes, it's athlete centered, coach driven. A second common thread is training as you would compete to compete like you train. There are no shortcuts. To achieve and sustain competitive excellence it takes constant focus, effort, and desire by all involved.







Merry Neitlich  
Director of the Coach's Edge

**Merry Neitlich** brings over 25-years of experience as a certified teacher, business trainer, and consultant. In 2009, Merry combined her skills and experiences to create the Coach's Edge. This program was developed to help coaches apply researched-based proven learning theory to the teaching of figure skating.

In a 2010 survey Merry conducted by the PSA, it was discovered that over 90% of all PSA members have never received formal teaching or learning theory training in how to apply sound education principles to the teaching of figure skating. Merry does not profess to teach technical skills. Rather she works with coaches and skaters to help them turn learning theory into practical techniques to increase the rate and degree of learning and to decrease the amount of time it takes skaters to learn new skills.

Merry also enhances communication skills as a certified trainer in the I-SPEAK Your Language program. The I-SPEAK model teaches skaters and coaches what their primary style of communication is and how to spot the styles of others. This makes teaching and learning more efficient, fun, and streamlined when coaches can teach to each skater's primary style.

Helping coaches develop and own their personal brand and then applying it to customized websites is a process Merry helps implement for many coaches.

As a nationally ranked adult competitive skater, Merry has earned 5 national Gold medals and garnered 17 podium finishes at the United States Figure Skating Adult Championships.



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