

Chapter 11

A Daughter's Promise – The Women's Figure Skating Competition on February 20-23

Figure skating derives its name from the tradition of inscribing “figures” on ice using skates. For many years, executing these figures was a compulsory part of figure skating competition along with a free or artistic skating performance. Figure skating in its earliest form first appeared in the 1908 Summer Olympics. It has been a permanent part of the Olympics since the first Winter Games in 1924. Both men and women have participated since its acceptance into the Olympics.

In 1960, a majority ranking by a panel of nine judges determined scoring for the compulsory figures and the free skating program on a scale of 0 to 6 points. Using their scores, the judges ranked the competitors with the winner receiving the highest composite ranking among all judges. The judges used a complex system of voting that assigned ranks or ordinals to each competitor.

Twenty-six women from 13 countries skate over the four-day competition in Blyth Arena. American Carol Heiss, four-time world champion and Olympic silver medalist in 1956 at Cortina, is highly favored to win. Her exceptional proficiency in the compulsory figures and their 60 percent weighting in the final score gives her a decisive advantage that few can challenge.



Figure 66. Women figure skaters practice on the West Rink as spectators look on (Photo by Bill Briner)

Compulsory Figures

For the first three days, the skaters perform the difficult “school figures” under the critical eye of the judges. At the end of this phase of competition, three top tier competitors emerge. Heiss establishes a decisive lead with 837.8 points; her next closest competitor is Sjoukje Dijkstra of the Netherlands with 45.8 points less, followed closely by American Barbara Roles, 20 points below Dijkstra. In fourth place, but much farther away point-wise, is Jana Mrazkova of Czechoslovakia, who trails Roles by nearly 40 points. A wide spread among the rest of the field follows these four leaders.



Figure 67. Silver medalist Sjoukje Dijkstra of the Netherlands completes her free skating program before an appreciative crowd in Blyth Arena (Photo by Bill Briner)

Free Skating Program

Although Heiss holds a strong lead, the outcome of the free program could radically change the rankings. The pressure is excruciating as she waits to start her free skating program. Following her silver medal victory in 1956 at age 16, Heiss promised her terminally ill mother that she would win the gold medal four years later at Squaw Valley. Her mother died in October 1956 leaving the grieving teenager with an irrevocable commitment to a rigorous regimen of daily training under her firm handed coach, Pierre Brunet, himself a two-time gold medalist in pairs skating. Barbara Roles is first of the three top contenders to appear on the ice and executes a stunning performance in the free skate. The judges are suitably impressed and award her scores from 5.6 to 5.8 for content and 5.4 to 5.8 for performance. Next on the ice among the top three is Heiss's closest rival, Dijkstra. Fresh from her first European

championship the week before, her program is exceptional and brings the largely American audience to its feet in a standing ovation. The judges are not so impressed, rendering scores of 5.3 to 5.7 for content and 5.4 to 5.8 for performance. Even so and despite Roles' higher score in the free skating, Dijkstra's stronger showing in the more heavily weighted compulsory figures is enough to maintain her slim lead over Roles.

As Heiss steps onto the ice, the competition is hers to lose. Only a catastrophic misstep could stop the four-time world champion from capturing the gold. Performing to classical music, perhaps as a nod to the Eastern European judges who favor this genre over pop accompaniment, she skates an extremely difficult routine that includes double Salchow jump, double Axel, layback spin, complex footwork on inside and outside edges, and spiral. Observers characterize her style as formal and classic with a more rigid posture in comparison to her light and free interpretation four years earlier at Cortina. Her execution is nearly flawless and far superior according to the judges who award her scores ranging from 5.7 to 5.9 for content and 5.6 to 5.8 for performance. In the final analysis, she ranks number one by all nine judges.

At the end of the day it is: gold - Carol Heiss (United States), 1,490.1 points, nine ordinals (nine unanimous first place rankings); silver - Sjoukje Dijkstra (Netherlands), 1,424.8 points, 20 ordinals (seven second place rankings and two third place rankings); and bronze - Barbara Roles (United States), 1,414.9 points, 26 ordinals (two second place rankings, six third place rankings and one fourth place ranking). Americans are breathing a collective sigh of relief over Heiss' gold, as it is the United States' first gold of the VIII Winter Games, coming after more than half the competitions conclude.

Epilogue

After winning gold at the Olympics, Carol Heiss won her fifth consecutive world championship in Vancouver the following week. She then retired from competitive skating and became the first Winter Olympian to receive a tickertape parade in New York City. She attempted a career in Hollywood, starring as the female

lead in the movie “Snow White and the Three Stooges.” Afterward, she became disillusioned with Hollywood, and she returned home to marry Hayes Alan Jenkins, the men’s figure skating gold medalist at the 1956 Winter Games. She later turned to coaching figure skaters.

Sjoukje Dijkstra continued her competitive skating career, taking five consecutive European championships beginning in 1960. She realized her goal of winning the gold medal in women’s figure skating at the 1964 Olympic Winter Games in Innsbruck.

Barbara Roles retired after the Olympics. She came out of retirement to resume competition after a tragic plane crash in 1961 killed the entire U.S. Figure Skating Team, including five who had represented the U.S. at the 1960 Olympic Winter Games. She became the U.S. Figure Skating Champion in 1962 and later coached the sport.

Following a scoring scandal at the 2002 Olympic Winter Games, figure skating officials abandoned the 6.0 and ordinal system. In 2004, the governing body of figure skating, the International Skating Union, replaced it with an equally complicated but less error-prone system. The new system awards points more objectively for skating program elements and program components, a rough equivalent to style.

