

## The trials of judging

Even the chilly temperatures in the rink didn't stop the ice skaters from feeling the heat at the Singapore National Championships held last month. The relentless pressure of competing at Nationals had all the skaters—and it seems their parents—perspiring in a collective state of high anxiety.

When the music was finished and the curtsies were done, some skaters left the ice, shaking their heads in wordless disappointment. Other skaters flew off with brilliant smiles and exuberant hi-fives for their coaches.

"Nationals is not an easy competition. I doubt that most adults here today would have the courage to compete under these conditions," said Andrea Derby, director of training & development for Singapore Ice Skating Association (SISA). "You're alone out there. People are watching. The jumps are hard. The ice is harder—and you're being judged, not just by the officials but by your peers and your parents."

Unfortunately most fans, and not just in Singapore, do not know enough about figure skating to judge an event. "I applaud the effort of the parents who want to learn more about the sport," says Ms Derby. The better educated the population, the faster the standards can rise, she adds. "However, I do believe that a lot of people watching the sport do not understand all the aspects."

A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, especially in a sport such as figure skating which has both stringent technical rules and more subjective presentation requirements. On the technical side, each jump, step and spin must be executed according to precise requirements. The average spectator often can't distinguish the technical errors being noted by the judges to adjust the scores.

At the same time, skating is also defined by more ephemeral requirements such as 'harmonious composition', 'interpretation', 'style' and 'flow', to name a few elements. For a skating judge, this second mark is far more difficult to decide. Inevitably, an official's scoring is going to be influenced by his or her actual experience, his cultural background and perhaps his or her age. The reality is that different judges can value and reward different qualities. Whereas one judge may reward an imperfect program with higher difficulty, another judge may prefer an easier but clean program.

The situation is highly sensitive. Competitors in skating often are very young and, consequently, the parents are very protective. In a sport that is both technical and subjective, it is easy to cry foul.

In 2002, eight year old Nicola Ang won her event, despite falling on a double loop jump. Her nearest competitor had not fallen, so many people were surprised when the results were posted. "I know that some people concluded that Niki won because she was my daughter," says Ailynn Knox-Collins, who was president of the skating association at the time. There was even some spurious talk that "a Singaporean had to win because the event was sponsored by the Sports Council," says Ms Knox-Collins, who is now active in figure skating in Seattle where Nicola trains.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. Ms Derby, who did not officiate at the event, uses this example to illustrate that the average spectator might not have appreciated the greater degree of difficulty in Nicola's program. "If you know what to look for, you can tell when a program has higher quality," said Ms Derby. "You come to understand that a fall on a jump doesn't necessarily undercut the overall higher value of a programme. A fall doesn't necessarily mean you lose."

"the calibre of skating seen at the 4<sup>th</sup> National Figure Skating Championships..."

