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***From the Creative Branches of
Open River Speed Skating:
Baseball-on-Ice, Gymnastics-on-Ice,
and other Realities, 1861-1917***

This paper argues that creative tensions between sport and art, science and art, and work and play, should be allowed to evolve into life-giving forces rather than destructive forces which lead to decadence, entropy and the decay of useful energy (useful work). It argues that there is a need to shift the balance over to life-giving creative forces in sport as one of the choices humans need to make in the maturation process of our species.

During the 19th century some people grew restless with the science of speed and fancy skating and they saw other possibilities. So began the endless, feckless, unresolved debate about sport and art from which fancy skating has yet to emerge. During the 19th century speed skaters, who because of their restlessness and creativity, fought back against the worldwide effort to standardize and confine their activities, which in effect led to a partial death of their sport and a chopping off of their creative life.

Utilitarian open river skating would eventually evolve into more creative forms of ice-skating such as baseball-on-ice and gymnastics-on-ice. Baseball-on-ice endured from 1861 to 1884, and gymnastics-on-ice, later to be called ice-dancing, and freestyle skating prospered well into the 20th century. Although football, cricket, tennis and badminton were also played on ice, 'ice-hockey' adapted the best. Baseball-on-ice failed to endure because it was a clumsy game lacking in form, balance, and flow and required skills in two incompatible space dimensions: air and ice. It must be looked at as a model of reality infinitely more complex than any human mind can encompass.

Alfred North Whitehead felt that the evil of monotony prevented creative novelty from allowing the possibility of more relationships. Since reality is a whole process of movement and not a static state, healthy relationships between disciplines must be developed, for without relationships, each discipline fails to have any actuality. To have actuality is to be related. The adventure to find more ordered reality in a constantly restless world requires that we create more ordered novelty in our role as co-creators. In our constantly restless activity we are unsatisfied with triviality and seek out more intense versions of reality-known as beauty.

While speed skating has gained moderate worldwide popularity, the gymnastics of fancy skating continues to attract worldwide audiences. The monotony of speed skating contests around and around the artificial oval track has not engendered worldwide popular appeal for the sport, since the fun and variety of speed skating contests (for examples, backwards races, hurdle races and couple races) were lost in the late 19th century effort to standardize the sport. The first international celebrity speed skater, Axel Paulsen from Norway, was the same individual who made famous the 1&1/2 revolution Axel jump performed today. The diversified and creative talents of some speed skaters created career longevity for a few, yet most speed-specialists were weeded out as performance skating became more popular prior to 1917.

While 'flying over ice' has for many been the closest humankind has come to flying, the 'scientification' of speed skating caused the sport to lose its original flair for creative adventure and variety. The late 19th century sport sculptor/artist R. Tait McKenzie was instrumental in the scientification of speed skating. Although he received artistic inspiration for his well known frieze 'Brothers of the Wind' by watching the graceful form of professional skaters from that era at a race in Montreal, his frieze highlights the primary aesthetic form of speed skating that could never match the energetic and artistic appeal of ice-dancing and freestyle skating.

This research identifies the flowering of speed skating creativity with a variety of character personalities in the late 19th century, a time of labor strikes, chaos, humor, folly, and fraud.