

GLOBALISM, MARKETING AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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Entrepreneurs and the Rise of Professional Figure Skating

In the late twentieth century, figure skating underwent an enormous growth in popularity in the United States. As the sport became attractive to audiences, television networks, and sponsors, new opportunities arose for entrepreneurs who were able to capitalize on the sport's growth. Shrewd producers created a variety of professional competitions, ice shows evolved from flashy, theatrical productions into Broadway-style showcases of stars, and made-for-television skating events appealed to audiences with insatiable appetites for the sport.

Scholarly work on both amateur and professional figure skating has been minimal and tends to focus on the sociological effects of participation and commercialization. Researchers have discussed the pitfalls of the sport in relation to how athletes, particularly young girls, are exploited and damaged physically and psychologically by excessive participation. Authors of popular literature have capitalized on the interest for stories on celebrities and the politics of skating, but few writers have focused on the business implications of the sport's popularity. While it is accepted that figure skating has increased in popularity in the last decade, scholars have not analyzed why the sudden boom occurred. There is a great lack of recognition for the entrepreneurs who created this new form of professional competition and entertainment.

Professional skating became a popular spectator and television sport in the 1990s because entrepreneurs recognized the demand for more competitions, ice shows, and productions. While the amateur realm of figure skating has always been responsible for establishing the sport's stars by crowning Olympic and World Champions, the professional circuit has turned skating into the entertainment form it is today. Innovations in promotions, rules, scoring, and event forms have created various opportunities for athletes, promoters, and sponsors to earn tremendous profits.

This paper will analyze the forces that led to the growth and popularity of figure skating in the 1990s and trace the ways in which entrepreneurs influenced its development. Three questions will serve to guide the narrative: how did the history of innovations and rule changes contribute to the modern sport form; what role did skaters and promoters have in establishing the sport as a form of entertainment; and what challenges lie ahead for maintaining the sport's popularity. The success of skating on television and in live performances lends credibility to the study of the entrepreneurs who made the sport what it is today. Athletes including Dick Button and Scott Hamilton, choreographer Sandra Bezic, International Management Group agent Robert Kain, and producer Tom Collins worked to establish ice shows and professional competitions that would draw audiences as well as sponsorship dollars. The business practices behind professional skating provide a framework for analyzing the rise of a new sport form and the relationship between amateur and professional sport.

By comparing figure skating to other sports that have experienced the process of professionalization, several clear suggestions for the future of the sport emerge. Perhaps the biggest hindrance to professional skating's development is its dependence upon and endless political relationship with the amateur realm of the sport. The athletes and business people involved with professional figure skating must continue to develop new methods for promoting and sustaining their ventures.

Throughout the history of figure skating, new forms of the sport have emerged as a result of creative and entrepreneurial individuals whose ideas expanded the traditions of the sport. The entrepreneurs were often the athletes themselves; most of the sport's stars became successful through innovation and invention. In the 1980s and 1990s the idea of professional skating became a reality as a result of individuals who recognized the opportunity to capitalize on the popularity of the amateur sport.
