

Historica Canada Education Portal

Canada's Other Ice Show

Overview

This lesson plan is based on viewing the Footprint videos for [Barbara Ann Scott](#), [the Jelineks](#), and [Petra Burka](#). Artistry or athleticism? The one has been the doppelganger of the other throughout the history of figure skating. Can a sport that judges athletic performance as a creative expression be a sport at all?

Aims

To increase student consciousness of the history of Canadian success in figure skating; to increase student appreciation for the pioneers of figure skating in Canada; to examine their accomplishments in their historical context; to explore how Canadian figure skaters have defined themselves on the international stage; and, to critically investigate the subjectivity of a sport partially based on artistic markers.

Background

CBC sports commentator Brian Wilson explains how the controversy surrounding figure skating and the sport's intrinsic subjectivity is what makes it popular: "Figure skating has captured people's imaginations. It's

a sport I believe that is almost made for television. You can capture the artistry and athleticism of it up close. In a football game, you don't see their faces. Figure skating is big-league."

Hockey may be king in Canada, but at the 1948 Olympics in St. Moritz, the nation crowned its queen - of figure skating at least. In fact, when nineteen-year-old Barbara Ann Scott won Canada's first ever gold medal in singles figure skating, her performance rose above the gold medal performance by the Ottawa RCAF Flyers hockey team – after her victory, two forwards from the hockey team hoisted Canada's Sweetheart on their shoulders and the triumphant photo was seen around the globe.

In the wake of the Second World War, the nation needed a heroine, and Scott, with her China-blue eyes, on-ice grace, and lightning-fast spins made people forget the horrors of war. Upon her return to Canada, Prime Minister Mackenzie King congratulated Canada's new champion, explaining how she had given the country the courage to persevere through the era's post-war gloom.

But for all the sweetness projected by the 45-kilogram, 158-centimetre skater from Ottawa, Scott had had to overcome her own depredations on her way to national fame. Wounds suffered during the First World War had brought on death prematurely for Scott's father, leaving her and her mother to make do on a very modest pension. In the midst of these difficult times, Scott began skating at the age of seven and at the age of ten, she was already in New York being fitted for her first pair of Gustav Stanzione boots. At \$25 a pair, they were the best boots money could buy. Scott explained later, "I also had a pair of Wilson blades from England and they cost \$15. I wore them all through my amateur and professional skating careers."

Her skating boots certainly served her well and often. When training, Scott was up every morning at 7:00AM to practice for eight hours; she skated nearly eighteen kilometres per day just to complete her figures. She studied under a tutor in the late afternoon and was in bed by 8:30 each evening. Her discipline paid off. Scott won the Canadian Junior Championship at age eleven and by 1947 she was on the world's stage. Four dozen Ottawa friends raised enough money to send Scott, her mother, and coach to the European championships in Davos, Switzerland and the World championships in Stockholm, Sweden. She won both, and then repeated the back-to-back wins again in 1948.

But for Scott, "my greatest moment in sport was at the Olympics in St. Moritz in 1948. I was on the dais in a blinding snowstorm. It was between periods in a hockey game." On that 6 February winter day, hockey became Canada's other ice show.

In her autobiography, *Skate With Me*, Scott recounts how her fame brought certain pressures:

"Tourists were beginning to visit me as though I were one of Ottawa's institutions. They were likely to come at curious hours and it was not much good refusing to go to the door. Some of them called in the middle of the night, explaining that they didn't really want anything, all they were calling for was to say hello."

Forty years later, atop St. John's historic Signal Hill, Scott was once more on the Olympic stage and saying hello to a nation that had not forgotten her. Canada's sweetheart shared the honours as the first torchbearer to begin the Olympic flame's 88-day odyssey across Canada to Calgary for the 1988 Winter Games.

In 1960, a figure skating pair clad in the indigo, green, red, and yellow stripes of the Hudson's Bay Company carried the torch for Canada at the Squaw Valley Winter Olympics in California. As Robert Paul later admitted, "I almost turned ... down," the offer to carry the flag. "Our competition was the next day and I had to lift a girl...."

The girl Paul was to carry was Barbara Wagner; the Toronto natives, who arrived at the Games with four world titles under their belts, were the favourites for Olympic gold. Recalls Wagner, "If we had not won, I don't know whether I could have gone home." The pair prevailed, standing atop the podium in their HBC distinctive jackets and becoming the first North American pair ever to win an Olympic gold medal.

Two years later, Prague, Czechoslovakia was host to the 1962 world championships, and for Otto and Maria Jelinek it was a competition fraught with anxiety and providence. The anxiety was brought about because the pair was venturing once again behind the Iron Curtain. In 1948, the siblings had escaped with their parents from Czechoslovakia and fled to Canada under cover of darkness, after the Communist regime took over their homeland. In response to this history, the Czech government had initially denied the Jelineks their entry visas for the world championships. Only when the international Skating Union intervened, threatening to withdraw the event from Prague, did the host country agree not to detain any of the skaters after the competition. Still, for Otto Jelinek, the trip was "doubly nerve-wracking because I didn't know if I would be thrown into the army."

The providence had come a year earlier. On 15 February 1961, Sabena Flight 548, travelling from New York to Brussels, crashed in Berg-Kamphenhout, Belgium, claiming the lives of all seventy-two passengers on board. Included were all eighteen members of the 1961 United States

World Figure Skating Team plus sixteen of their friends, family and coaches. They had been en route to the 1961 World Figure Skating Championships in Prague. The Jelineks had been invited to join the team on flight 548, but their coach refused to let them out of his sight prior to the competition.

Prague got a delayed opportunity to host the Championship the following year, and Otto and Maria Jelinek recorded one of the most poignant triumphs in figure skating history. Dressed in the indigenous garb of their birthplace for their free skating program, they captivated an audience that officially had regarded them as non-persons for more than a decade. In the end, the Jelineks returned from their former homeland as world champions for their adopted home.

While the Jelineks retired from amateur competition after the 1962 World's, one of their fellow Canadian competitors in Prague was just beginning her dazzling career. Fifteen-year-old Petra Burka from Toronto placed fourth in Prague, and in two short years she earned a bronze medal at the 1964 Olympic Games in Innsbruck, Austria. But it would be 1965 that would be her year. She won the triple Champion crown (i.e., the Canadian, North American, and the World's) and at the World Championships in Colorado Springs that year she became the first woman to complete a triple Salchow in competition. Canadian coach Louis Strong said of the world champion, "She was a dynamo. She had lots of energy. She started all the triple jumping among the women."

In achieving her incredible success, Burka was initially coached by her mother, former Dutch champion, Ellen Burka. Following her daughter's career, the elder Burka would also guide the career of a Canadian skater who helped to fundamentally change the world of men's figure skating. While Toller Cranston did not rewrite the record books over his career,

his flamboyant style and incredible artistry on the ice would bring an entirely new dimension to his sport.

Born at Hamilton General Hospital on 20 April 1948, Cranston grew up in the northern Ontario mining town of Kirkland Lake, which is perhaps best known for producing tough hockey stars. But when Cranston told his mother that he wanted to be a ballet dancer, she took him to a studio at the rather tender age of six. It wasn't until he glided around an outdoor rink on his first (and only) pair of hockey skates and watched his sister in the Kirkland Lake ice skating carnival, however, that he found his true calling. Unable to find a pair of male figure skates for a child, his mother bought him a pair of girl's white skates, which his father promptly painted black.

From then on, Cranston was the black sheep of the skating establishment, upsetting its stiff mores and stiffer skating. Until the late 1960s, male figure skaters suffered from the "penguin syndrome." That is, they held their heads erect and their backs rigid and never used their arms in an expressive fashion.

Cranston would change all this, initially in opposition to the judges at figure skating events. In 1968, for instance, when Cranston went to the Canadian championships in Vancouver, seeking a spot on the Olympic team, he failed to make the team as a result of some rather suspect judging. Unlike the audience at the tournament, who seemed to love Cranston's inventiveness, the judges did not understand the pioneer before them.

But the Europeans did. As Ellen Burka explained, "He had problems being accepted in Canada. It was only after he went to Europe, and they went overboard about him, they raved about him, that it was okay at

home." From 1971 to 1976 Cranston was six-time Canadian champion, and at the 1976 Olympic Games in Innsbruck, Austria, the 26 year-old captured the bronze. Nonetheless, for Cranston, the Olympics were a political quagmire he longed to escape. He later wrote in his book, *Zero Tolerance*:

"I didn't want to be there. Every time I looked at the judges, they metamorphosed into grimacing Tolkienesque characters. I did not wish to be judged by them. I did not wish to have my destiny determined by such silly and superficial people. Incidentally, many of those silly people are still around, because the judging world is an eternal Jurassic Park. There are always the same dinosaurs out there. They're immune to the aging process. As old as they appeared to be in 1976, they're identical (in my mind) 20 years later. They simply refuse to die."

When Cranston returned to Canada he made a decision: "My amateur career was over, and I was ready to dance." So while a gold medal and a world championship are not listed in Cranston's biography, his influence on men's figure skating is incalculable. No story better explains this than when he was selected by *Holiday on Ice* to be the star of their Paris show. Described as "a skater with a painter's eye" (not surprising considering he was a student of the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Montréal), Cranston was also asked to design the poster for the show. To his shock, his poster was splashed in cities across Europe, on colossal 12 by 12-metre billboards. There, larger-than-life, along with his painting and his name, were the words *Patineur du Siècle* – the *Skater of the Century*. It was a monumental tribute to someone who has been a monumental influence on the figure skating world.

If Canada is in part a history of the disconnect between east and west, then one of its more harmonious chapters is the story of Rob McCall from

Dartmouth, Nova Scotia and Tracy Wilson from Port Moody, British Columbia. Opposites attracted when the two teamed up in the summer of 1981 to compete in pairs ice dancing. He was the stunning artist while she was a precise technician. Together they were on-ice fire. The pair took six consecutive national titles from 1983-1988, and with their characteristic athleticism and humour, they quickly charmed judges and audiences alike. World bronze medalists in 1987 and 1988, their crowning moment came at home in Calgary. At the 1988 Winter Olympics, they became the first Canadian ice dancers to win an Olympic medal. Coming from opposite ends of the country, they met somewhere in the middle to delight Canadians with a bronze medal performance.

Step up one level on the podium and you have the surprising silver sparkle of twenty-two year old Elizabeth Manley. From the time she first laced up her brother's hand-me-down skates at age five, the Trenton, Ontario native was an array of speed, flying footwork and jumping power. But coming from a broken military family with few financial resources, Manley's mother went \$26,000 into debt to finance her daughter's skating career.

Although she placed fourth at the 1987 World Championships, Manley entered Calgary playing a second if not third fiddle to Katarina Witt of East Germany and American Debi Thomas. Manley was hoping to finish in the top six. Instead, to the music of Irma La Douce, she electrified the audience with a free skate that included five triple jumps. When Manley bit into her silver medal, she was Canada's golden Stradivarius. Retiring from amateur competition following the 1988 season, she signed with the "Ice Capades." With her \$50,000 signing bonus, she promptly paid off her mother's debt.

Where Manley's podium performance in Calgary in 1988 was a welcome

surprise, Kurt Browning's sixth-place performance at the 1992 Olympics in Albertville, France was a disappointing shock. The "Kid From Caroline" in Alberta entered the Games the odds-on favourite to medal, most likely gold. Browning was a doubly blessed skater, a rare blend of strong, yet graceful jumps with creativity and charismatic appeal. On the ice, audiences, judges, and the media shared in his sheer joy. The year Manley won her medal, Browning entered the record books by becoming the first athlete ever to complete a quadruple jump in a World competition. And with Canadian and World Senior Men's Championships in 1989, 1990 and 1991, he looked good-to-go for gold in Albertville.

But in the short program, Browning fell on a triple Axel, and he never fully recovered during the competition. Still, the three-time world champion was not one to brood. As he explained later, after his long program in Albertville, he put the experience behind him: "I went out that night, partied with my family and friends, went skiing the next day, went to a hockey game the next night."

One year later in 1993, performing his memorable "Casablanca" routine, he added to his accomplishments with his fourth Canadian and World crowns, the most World titles won by a Canadian singles skater.

Canadian ice skaters have broken new ground on the ice throughout the twentieth century. As Olympic champions, world champions and unforgettable innovators, Canadians who have entertained us in that other ice show have provided ample evidence that other does not mean lesser.

Activities

1. Time for Time.

Former President Richard Nixon currently holds the record for the most cover appearances in *Time* magazine, with fifty-five covers. The holder for women is Hillary Clinton, with thirteen. To look at the cover of *Time* since its first issue on 3 March 1923 is to look at the American public's interest in an issue or person. Not surprisingly, the 4 February 1948 cover portrayed a smiling Barbara Ann Scott.

Jump ahead more than fifty years to 25 February 2002, and Canadian figure skaters Jamie Salé and David Pelletier grace the cover following their gold medal performance (and a judging fiasco) at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Students are to design their own cover for a *Time* magazine. The cover must showcase a Canadian figure skater from 3 March 1923 to the present. After looking at various [covers](#), students should decide on a figure skater they wish to place on the cover. The image chosen and design should reflect the time in which the edition would have appeared. For example, though photographs are the usual way of documenting persons now, older editions of *Time* were largely hand drawn. In fact, the four top rated covers of all time are all artistic renditions. The cover should include the date and a headline. Finally, the cover can include a subheading or side story identifying another event of historical importance from the same era.

2. All Dolled Up

In 1948, the Reliable Toy Company made the Barbara Ann Scott doll to honour the Olympic gold medalist that year. Designed by well-known American doll stylist Bernard Lipfert, it wore a lace skating costume

trimmed with marabou. A new costume was created each year and was always trimmed with marabou. The doll sold well until 1954 and it has since become something of a Canadian cultural icon.

The 1972 Olympic silver medalist in Sapporo, Japan and 1973 women's world champion, Canadian Karen Magnusson also has a doll in her image. The Magnusson dolls fetch up to \$500 each, especially if they're still in the box.

Students are to design their own doll or dolls of a Canadian individual figure skater or a pair. The design should include the following:

- Specific accoutrements that can be identified with the skater(s)
- A listing of accomplishments
- Biographical information
- A recorded voice message appropriate to the skater.

4. Scripting Skating

It was made for television, even if Toller Cranston did call it a “pathetic charade.” Whatever the specifics of the Tonya Harding-Nancy Kerrigan saga in the 1990s, it had a stellar storyline with larger than life characters to match. A swirl of media attention hovered over the 1994 Olympics in Lillehammer, Norway. The pugilistic, single-minded Tonya Harding versus the angelic and innocent Nancy Kerrigan. The media seized hold of a tale that featured ambition over fair play and included heart-on-your-sleeve emotional drama and high entertainment value. It was a soap opera played on and off the ice.

In groups of two or three, students are to script a scene from a soap opera that is based on figure skating. The same way some soap operas

are based around a hospital or fashion agency, students are to frame their soap opera around the sport of figure skating. The script should be approximately one minute in length.

Although emotional drama is important, the script should also be honest to the sport. Finally, each group is to present their scene to the rest of the class.

5. Ice Skating Night in Canada

Ice hockey is Canada's official winter sport. Nonetheless, consider the accomplishments and contributions to the sport of figure skating by Canadian athletes. Between 1987 and 1997, Canadian men won the World Championships eight times. Donald Jackson gave the world its first triple Lutz in 1962, while Brian Orser and Vern Taylor share the honours for introducing the triple Axel. Kurt Browning landed the first triple toe loop and Elvis Stojko landed the first quadruple-double combination in 1991 and the first quadruple-triple combination in 1997. Toller Cranston is an icon of artistic innovation. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, iconic stars like Patrick Chan and Tessa & Scott have captured the nation's heart.

On the other hand, it took fifty years for Canada's men's hockey team to end its gold drought at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake, Utah.

In groups of two or three, students are to produce a campaign arguing for the replacement of ice hockey for figure skating as Canada's official winter sport. The campaign should include the following:

- One hundred word letter to the editor of the school newspaper
- Five minute speech to be delivered to the student body

- Proposal for a new television show based on Hockey Night in Canada. The new name could be Ice Skating Night in Canada.

Resources

[Footprints - The Jelineks](#)

[Footprints - Barbara Ann Scott](#)

[Footprints - Petra Burka](#)

[Petra Burka - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Toller Cranson - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Patrick Chan - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Figure Skating - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Barbara Ann Scott - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Barbara Aileen Wagner - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Elvis Stojko - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Kurt Browning - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Ice Skating - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Canadian Women at the Olympic Winter Games - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Canada at the Winter Olympics - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Skate Canada](#)

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