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John Nicks

2012 PSA
COACH
OF THE
YEAR



MR. DEBONAIR HIMSELF, RICHARD DWYER, LOOKING DAPPER ON THE ICE.

OPPOSITE: RICHARD TAKES TO THE AIR IN A PROMO SHOT.

Photo courtesy World Figure Skating Museum and Hall of Fame

Mr. Debonair

RICHARD DWYER

By Terri Melner Jarquini

When the Ice Theatre of New York honors Richard Dwyer at the 2012 Annual Benefit Gala and Performance in October, it will be highlighting a man who racked up national titles at various levels and has had a 62-plus-year career as a skating show star.

But, possibly even more impressive is that, at nearly 77

years old, Dwyer can still do an Axel.

"I still skate almost every day and I love it but it doesn't always love me," laughed Dwyer, who has been known to audiences as "Mr. Debonair" for over six decades. "I have some apprehension doing the Axel now, but when I don't think about it too much and just do it I seem to be okay."

I immediately loved the challenge of skating. Nobody had to beg me to get up at 5 a.m. to go to the rink.



Dwyer's path to eventual competitive success and world recognition began early when he went to an Ice Follies show in 1943 with his family.

"My dad always loved skating," he said, "and he wanted us kids to see what the skaters in shows did."

One Ice Follies show was all it took and Dwyer ended up discovering what he would dedicate his life to doing.

"I immediately loved the challenge of skating. Nobody had to beg me to get up at 5 a.m. to go to the rink," Dwyer said.

An accomplished amateur competitor, Dwyer won the U.S. Championships as a novice and junior. After one year at the senior level, however, opportunity came knocking, wearing a tuxedo with tails.

"I had been third behind Dick Burton and Hayes Jenkins and I wanted to stay amateur but I was presented with a great opportunity," Dwyer said. "It was a tough decision, but I knew I was fortunate."

In 1950 and only 14 years old, Dwyer joined the Ice Follies when he was hand-picked by Roy Shipstad, the original "Debonair," to follow in his famous tuxedo when Shipstad retired.

"I was skating at a carnival in Chicago in 1948 and Gene Kessler, the sports reporter from the Sun-Times newspaper, suggested I wear tails and do a take-off on Roy's program," Dwyer said. "Roy encouraged me and when he retired I inherited the role."

And so the "Young Debonair" was born, to be later renamed "The Debonair" and, finally, "Mr. Debonair."

"I was so young, but Roy would get out on the ice with me and he helped me tremendously. For years after he retired, he still picked all of the music I skated to, which worked fine for me. They were all great romantic songs and I felt uncomfortable in that role," Dwyer said. "I love that kind of lyrical music and smooth skating."

Not that going into skating shows didn't present some hurdles.

"I had completed one year of high school at Loyola High, which is a Jesuit school in Los Angeles. My coach and parents said they didn't want me going on the road if I couldn't keep up so whatever city we were in, I went to the local Jesuit school," said Dwyer, who attended 26 different high schools while touring. "At some of the schools I was smart and at some I wasn't, but I graduated with my class in 1953."

In addition to skating solo, or accompanied

by several beautiful young skaters on his arm, Dwyer also skated pairs with 13 different ladies during his ice show years, including World pairs competitors, Susan Berens and Dorothy Ann Nelson, and Olympic pairs gold medalist Barbara Wagner.

"Usually whoever I was skating with was a big deal so the audience would go crazy when they'd hear her name and they'd never even hear my name when it was announced," laughed Dwyer. "But I just kept getting lucky. All of my partners were wonderful and beautiful and talented."

Debonair he may be, but sometimes even smooth skaters take a tumble.

"I think one of my most memorable performances was one night when I was doing the swing waltz with Dorothy Ann. She had just won Nationals with Pieter Kollen so she was very popular," Dwyer said. "When it came time for the audience to applaud their favorite skating couple I skated by and there was Sonia Henie and she was clapping and going wild ... for us! Next thing I knew I had fallen and was sliding across the ice," Dwyer laughed. "It was not very graceful."

But after 30 years in the Ice Follies and four years in the Ice Capades, Dwyer would love to see the good ol' days of extravagant skating shows come back in vogue.

"If I had oodles of money I'd bring back those big-show productions," Dwyer said. "That's what made skating popular. People saw skaters doing the swing waltz and they could see themselves doing it. And the ensemble acts were so exciting; it did so much for skating's popularity. Kids thought, 'I want to grow up and be a part of that. I want to

RICHARD POSES ON
THE ICE WITH COACH
MICHAEL KIBBY IN
CHICAGO

(Photo courtesy Richard Dwyer)

BELOW
MR. DEBONAIR
AND HIS GIRLS

*(Photo courtesy World Figure
Skating Museum and Hall of Fame)*



do that." That's what hooked me."

In a career that also earned him a 1993 induction into the United States Figure Skating Hall of Fame, Dwyer's trademark smooth and romantic skating has been enjoyed by audiences around the world, making him a natural fit this year's "Dare to be Debonair" award by the Ice Theatre of New York.

The annual event takes place at Chelsea Piers in New York on October 22 and features a silent auction and dinner, video and presentations, as well as performances, including one by the honoree himself.

"Richard's always been very elegant, thus the name 'Mr. Debonair,'" said Moira North, Ice Theatre of New York founder. "Grace and elegance is a quality of skating that really is important to us. Plus he has an amazing work ethic and a passion and joy for what he does."

Honorees, who have included Paul Wylie, Dorothy Hamill and Johnny Weir, are chosen carefully for the gala, which benefits the Ice Theatre of New York's educational and outreach programs. When North founded the company in 1984, her motivation was clear: to build new audiences and

teach young people the importance of figure skating's athleticism and artistry. North said it's important the honorees represent those values.

"Richard has been a great ambassador for figure skating," North said. "He embodies his own love of skating and enthusiasm for the sport. And he's such an inspiration because he's still skating."

The fact that he is still skating after all of these decades is earning him some big-time kudos: Dwyer is being recognized in the soon-to-be released latest edition of the Guinness Book of World Records as "the longest career as a professional ice skater."

And he isn't done yet.

"It's just kept going, little gigs here and there," said Dwyer of his life post-Ice Follies and Ice Capades, which has included coaching and rink management and performing both nationally and internationally. "I have my aches and pains—I can't deny that—but, overall, who could ask for more? I've had such wonderful people in my life and done what I love." +