

Seeing and Getting

NOTES ON FIELDWORK

“Wow. You’re really deep into this,” my editor remarked as we talked about my skating venture earlier that day at the mall that was attached to our conference site in Dallas. I’d been thinking that myself, but for totally different reasons than his. When Ken had told me about noticing the rink, I was certain I’d never skate on it. I hadn’t packed my skates and didn’t want to skate on rentals. “Luxuries unfit us for returning to hardships easily endured before.” That’s what Hans Brinker finds in the nineteenth-century classic children’s novel bearing his name when, to raise money for his family, he sells the skates that he’d received as a gift and returns to traveling Holland’s frozen waterways on his old creaky handmade wooden runners.¹ It’s true. Though I happily rented bowling shoes, I was too accustomed to my own figure skates: worn by me alone, remolded by my use, with good boot support and a nicely sharpened blade. Besides, I needed a break. Two months before the 2008 Adult Nationals, skating-as-training dominated my ice time. I worked almost exclusively on the spins, jumps, and footwork elements in the program, doing double run-throughs to build stamina. The feeling of having to practice had started to trump loving to skate, even on days when both were true, which occurred less frequently. Sometimes I skated when I was exhausted, a little injured, kind of sick, or just not in the mood; after all, working through the bad days is part of training anyway. A few days off sounded great. When I saw the rink myself, I was doubly sure. It sat in the middle of a food court. Skating for an audience, including maybe a bunch of my colleagues, did not appeal to me.

That was then, which lasted a day. By my second day off the ice, I couldn’t look at the rink without longing to be on it. The champion skater Maribel Vinson Owen wrote in 1938 that figure skating has “siren charms.”² It does for me. I couldn’t resist.

What motivated Ken’s comment, however, was not evidence that I was in thrall, but my explanation of why blade technology made skating on

rentals so challenging. While blades may look from a distance like a flat knife on the ice, I told him, they have two edges, with a hollow in between, and a curve toward the front of the blade called a rocker, which skaters can use to rock to the front or back. Every move on skates, starting with tentative first steps, negotiates rockers, edges, and, on figure skates, toe picks. Spinning, for instance, requires finding the “sweet spot,” the part of the blade best suited to spin on. Skaters, or their coaches, often choose a blade partly for its particular rocker and toe pick. Skating on rentals offered a brutal reminder of how much skaters depend on familiarity with their blades (and boots). On my rented skates, it took me a while just to skate forward somewhat comfortably. Eventually, I could execute some basic turns from front to back and a spiral. But they felt scary rather than taken for granted (although any skater can tell you that the most rote move, even standing still, can send you sprawling one day). I wouldn’t have dared trying to jump.

Yet it wasn’t my knowledge about blade technology that I associated most with insider knowledge. Instead, it was my experiences with skate sharpening. Figure skaters do not hand their skates over to any rink employee. Instead, for two to three times the price, plus the possible extra expenses of travel or shipping, they pay an expert who sharpens skates according to a person’s type and level of skating. I get a pretty standard “.5” sharpening (here, the insider terminology) from someone in Massachusetts. He serves a substantial number of Portland area skaters despite being based at least ninety minutes farther south than the rinks we ordinarily skate at. I switched to him, several years into expensive sharpenings, from someone equally far away, after I experienced for myself something that I had skeptically heard other skaters describe: the ability to discriminate between different sharpeners’ work, and the accompanying likelihood of strongly preferring one.

Over time, I increasingly went out of my way for his sharpenings, despite having previously deemed other skaters pretentious or self-inflated for similar behavior, and despite being able to see external influences beyond the actual sharpening that feed into an “I would only let so and so sharpen my skates” mystique and market. One is that some sharpeners let you know when they recognize someone else’s work and then explain its patent inferiority. But by the time several sharpeners had made me feel like a faithless or undiscerning lover—“Who sharpened your skates?!”—I had resituated the bar for extreme measures that only top

skaters could justify: Well, it's not like I'm not overnighting my skates to California or New York. By then I also knew that my tales of reprimand, which I'd correctly judged as an ooh-aah generator for my dinner companion, held little novelty to experienced skaters. They generally responded, "Oh, yeah, they're all like that."

The essays in this section concern being deep into something: what you can, and cannot, learn; how deep you can, and cannot, get; and how hard it can be to discern, remember, or keep in focus what constitutes insider information and where you stand in relation to it. In the essay named "Seeing and Getting," I talk about the research method called participant observation in the particular context of my research on skating. The next essays, "Sandbagging, or, Grown-Ups Do This?" and "Score," discuss two topics that grabbed me once I was deep into skating in ways that both extended my thinking about participant observation and made me realize that, on some matters, I would never stop thinking, in bemusement, anger, or befuddlement, what a messaging acronym expresses so succinctly: WTF.³