

Having the Wherewithal

INTRODUCTION *Up from the Bottom*

In May 2006, annual maintenance at my home rink, the Portland Ice Arena (PIA), revealed a problem under the ice surface that required shutting down for the summer. Coordinators for prebooked hockey camps and such had to scramble for ice time at other rinks in the area, which had already, in the days before the “economic downturn,” been heavily booked. As a result, public skating was largely squeezed out to accommodate displaced, more lucrative, programs.

So if I wanted to skate locally, I had to skate at the Family Ice Center in Falmouth on “club ice,” the freestyle sessions sponsored by the USFS branch based there, the North Atlantic Figure Skating Club (NAFSC). That meant joining the club, which I was disinclined to do. To me, “skating club” sounded like country club, and some do function like them. The Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society—so-named because its original nineteenth-century members used to rescue people who fell through the ice on the Schuylkill River—requires references from three current members to join. Letters should “tell whether you believe, to the best of your knowledge, that the candidate’s friends would be comfortable at the Club.”¹ Eek—that rings of every exclusionary practice phrased in the patently bogus concern for the comfort of minority intruders.

Anyone with the membership fee, not minor but exponentially cheaper than some other clubs, may join NAFSC. But I still I associated the “club” concept with unsavory elitism. A bit of class-based insecurity amped up my reluctance. Probably there’d be skating corollaries of not knowing which fork to use. I belonged at PIA, the nice municipal rink down the road. I didn’t belong on club ice alongside young, advanced skaters that I was fearful and embarrassed to skate with anyway.

The prospect scared me enough that for a while I avoided it by driving seventy-five miles each way to public skating in Newburyport, Massachusetts. But I didn’t really have free five-hour chunks of time, the gas and tolls made the venture expensive, and the Gay Games were imminent.

Eventually I just had to deal: skate with kids zipping around me; get up the courage to hand my program music to the monitor as if I believed that my solos deserved run-through time; and try not to feel like the clumsy, delusional poser I presumed the others rightly saw me to be. On club ice, as during figure skating practice ice at PIA, a skater doing a run-through to music also had put on a pinnie, one of those sleeveless tops that gym teachers and coaches distribute during practices or scrimmages to organize a subset of the players into a visible team when everyone is wearing the same (or no) uniform. Wearing a pinnie, by itself, transported me into gym-class humiliation mode.

Keys to the Kingdom

I'm glad I did it, for two reasons. First, eventually I got over myself. I came to see, even to feel, that I had every right to skate on that ice. I also developed enough confidence, facility, and speed both to participate in sharing responsibility for crash avoidance—a collective endeavor that has baffled almost every nonskater I've brought to a practice—and to refuse to scurry away from that actually small subset of kids whose hostile glare does scream “get off my ice.” I glare back. Second, frequenting freestyle ice brought a connection between talent and money before my eyes that might otherwise have taken me longer to figure out. The most advanced kids on the ice—the polished dancers, the double or triple jumpers—and the kids on their way to those accomplishments skated on that expensive ice every day, on at least two sessions, with daily private lessons, too. That wasn't the difference precisely between club skaters and PIA skaters, as I came to learn when I started frequenting PIA freestyle ice, which had some similarly invested regulars, some of whom were also members of clubs. But time and money were absolutely the difference between those kids and the kids they had started with in group lessons who might now get, at most, one short private lesson and a few hours of practice a week.

The links among training time, coaching, and results did not seem like new information. What did was the virtually inescapable correlation of amounts: the way that x skill set and y competitive potential cost roughly z time and money. In fact, as I learned over the next half decade on the ice, I was also seeing what ten hours of ice and two or three hours of coaching a week couldn't buy. Malcolm Gladwell writes in *Outliers* about the “10,000-hour rule”: the amalgam of research showing that

from musical prodigies to technological visionaries to chess masters to world-class athletes, no matter how much popular narratives define them through genius or talent, none get to the top of their field without 10,000 hours of practice.² I can easily see how that minimum, which works out to about 20 hours a week over 10 years, would apply to figure skating. The very top skaters on the ice with me generally also trained elsewhere: on routine trips to skating centers in Boston or Delaware, or at least for a few intensive weeks of summer training. Even with those extras, and extensive off-ice training, hardly any were heading to national, Senior-level competition although a handful medaled nationally several levels below that.

Nonetheless, they were clearly serious skaters—serious in the sense of dedicated as well as in the slang sense of excellent—and easily visible as such partly because the extent of their training was visible, too. One possible effect of that visibility became apparent to me only toward the end of this project when I described the book to a high-school friend, Michelle Stacey, as we reconnected on Facebook. One thing I love about figure skating at PIA, and one reason, I believe, that people praise the environment there as friendly, is that skaters are taken seriously if they want to be, regardless of what they spend or accomplish. The extensive program for adults is part of that. So is the relatively low bar, completing Freestyle I, for performing a solo in the annual show, a privilege not restricted to skaters who have private coaches to choreograph a solo program for them. Skaters who take group lessons only, with, perhaps, a very modest supplement of private lessons, are welcome to perform the program they learned in group lessons. Those skaters have resources that correspond to what I had as a child. Nonetheless, I must have internalized the criteria for “serious” that I discerned through watching advanced skaters. I was surprised when Michelle said that of course she remembered how much my skating mattered to me back then; I had misremembered my own past, including the depths of my own passions.

Have Sex in April if You Want to Grow a Pro Hockey Player

I wish Gladwell had dwelled more on who can acquire such training and how definitions of “the best” develop. Standards of excellence do not evolve independent of social forces. As I discussed earlier, for instance, the balletic posture and extension that count so heavily in figure skating

and ballroom dance have a raced history. But he does identify key requirements for the 10,000-hour track, which include the virtually inevitable component of money in acquiring time. “You can’t be poor,” Gladwell puts it bluntly, because if you need a paying job to contribute to your own sustenance you won’t have enough time left over.³

You also need recognition, support, maybe special programs, and occasionally some odd leg-ups. One fascinating example that Gladwell discusses concerns a phenomenon publicized in the 1980s after Paula Barnsley, looking at player stats during a boy’s hockey game in Canada, noticed that most players in this advanced league for teens had been born in January, February, or March. The clear explanation was that hockey programs in Canada group kids by age using the calendar year, so kids who were deemed gifted at four years old may actually have been demonstrating developmental advantages, including size, that come from being up to 364 days older than kids born in December. Then, early attention brings advantages that continue to accrue, eventually leading to more games, more practice time, more challenging competitions, and higher-level training.⁴ As Gladwell points out, relatively simple remedies could be designed for this unfair, inefficient approach of identifying talent by full-year age groupings, which occurs in various other sports and countries, as well as in nonsporting pursuits, including tracking children by apparent intellectual gifts. Remedies haven’t been designed, Gladwell thinks, because we “so profoundly personalize success.” We attribute it to talent or genius, not, or far more than, systems that confer advantages and the resources required to benefit from them.⁵

What’s Up with the Wherewithal?

The essays in this section look at paths, and representations of paths, from talent to success. Who has talent? Who has success? How do you get from one to the other? “Buy-In: Some Notes on Cost” circles around the question “how much does it cost to figure skate?” and puts some actual figures into the contexts of various dynamics, including shifting concepts of need and entanglements of truth and hype. “So You Think You Can Train, or Why Can Joshua Dance?” turns to one of the most popular recent sources for narratives about training: television talent contests. Beginning with a manufactured scandal on *So You Think You Can Dance*,

I consider how prejudice and practices affect notions—which affect outcomes—about whom training and success legitimately belong to. Finally, “Gifts of Nature, Freaks of Culture” takes on prejudice and practices concerning the allegedly raw ingredients, looking at whispers, screams, and regulations about perceived natural and unnatural advantages.