

SportsLetter Interviews

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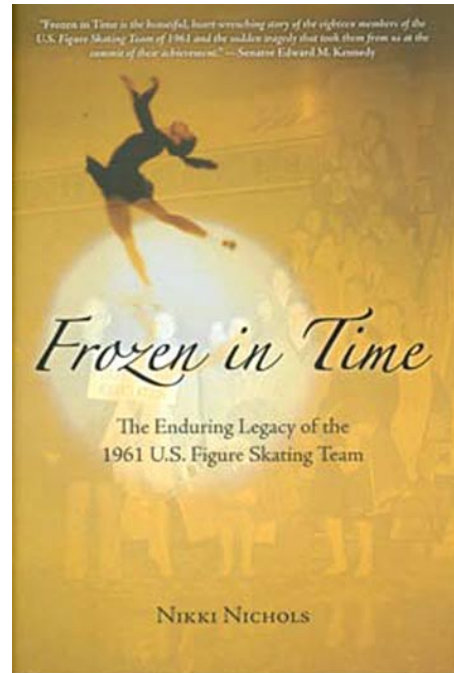
Nikki Nichols

On February 15, 1961, Sabena Flight 548 crashed in a Belgian field near the Brussels airport, killing all 73 passengers on board. Among those who perished were the 18 members of the United States Figure Skating team en route to the world championships in Prague, as well as the 16 coaches, officials, and family members who were accompanying them.

The crash remains one of the most tragic episodes in American sports history: never before had the U.S. lost an entire national team in any sport. Among the victims were Maribel Vinson Owen, the nine-time national champion and the 1932 Lake Placid Olympic Winter Games bronze medallist, and her two daughters, 16-year-old Laurence (the singles champ), and 20-year-old Maribel, Jr. (one half of the pairs champs).

Many top coaches also passed away, and the incident left the national skating program in temporary ruins. American women had won the previous two Olympic gold medals (Tenley Albright in 1956 and Carol Heiss in 1960), while American men had captured the previous four Olympic gold medals (Dick Button in 1948 and 1952, Hayes Alan Jenkins in 1956, and David Jenkins in 1960). At the 1964 Olympic Winter Games, the U.S. managed only a bronze.

Now, with the 45th anniversary of the crash fast approaching, Nikki



Nichols revisits this story and details how the U.S. Figure Skating program recovered in “Frozen in Time: The Enduring Legacy of the 1961 U.S. Figure Skating Team” (Emmis Books). Trained as a television reporter-producer, Nichols is a part-time journalist whose work has appeared in *Skating Magazine* and the *Indianapolis Star*. She also trains as a competitive skater, having won a state title and competed as a finalist (in singles) at the 2005 U.S. Adult National Championships.

SportsLetter spoke by telephone with Nichols from her office in Indianapolis.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: What got you interested in this story and why did you decide to write a book about it?

Nikki Nichols: I read about the crash on the U.S. Figure Skating Association website — they had links to all these articles that were done for the 40th anniversary of the crash. Being a TV person, I talked to one of my bosses and said, “I would really love to do a documentary about this.” He said, “Why don’t you write a book?” So, I was very intrigued by that idea, and I decided to figure out who was out there who would talk to me.

SL: Was it difficult to locate surviving family members and friends and to get them to talk about this incident? How did you research this?

NN: I called the U.S. Figure Skating Association, and I was told that the archivist at the World Skating Museum [in Colorado Springs] was in charge of the material [about the crash]. She told me that I needed to fly out there and spend some time in the archives. Which I did — and there were binders and baskets and crates full of letters from family members to the Association, newspaper clippings, the crash report, and letters from the victims to the Association just before they departed. Looking through those articles, I got a sense that there were a lot of people around who were still willing to talk about it. I was interested in talking to the family members, but it was impossible to get a complete list of family members.

SL: What primary sources were most helpful in writing the book?

NN: Because I skate, I had a lot of connections in the skating world. My coach — Natalie Seybold — is a 1988 Olympian in pairs, and her coach was Ron Ludington, who was a 1960 bronze medallist. He was supposed to be on the plane because he had coached a team in the dance. Back then, they just didn't fund their excursions the way they do now, so he was left behind. One person led to another person, but there was a long list of people who I wanted to talk to but was unable to locate or approach. There were people who just came right out and said they didn't want to talk about it. And that's totally understandable. My biggest regret about that is there are certain people in the book who aren't given as much attention, and that's because their family members either didn't want to talk or there just weren't any surviving family members to talk to.

SL: You write that these were the first U.S. Figure Skating Championships to be televised (by CBS for its "Sports Spectacular" show, although it aired several weeks later) and that the year before, the 1960 Squaw Valley Games were the first Winter Games to receive U.S. television coverage. What has changed in figure skating — and the television broadcasting of figure skating — from 1961 to the present?

NN: Looking at the 1961 broadcast, a lot was different. First, it was in black and white. The first Winter Olympics to be televised in color was in 1968. That was the first time Americans could watch a long program in color, and they saw Peggy Fleming. Her blazing green dress against her dark hair and white skin was very dramatic.

In 1961, television didn't go out of its way to make the competition dramatic or compelling. It was a very basic and bare-bones broadcast. The human side of skating was totally de-emphasized. I don't think it was deliberate. I just don't think they realized how dramatic it could be. The two most compelling stories to me were what was happening in the pairs event and the ladies event. You had the two daughters of Maribel Vinson Owen both vying for national titles once owned by their mother. I mean, this is outstanding television, and they barely mentioned it.

Back then, they didn't save the ladies competition for last. Instead, the

men's event came last. The men were put on an equal billing with the women, which is not what happens today. Today, they call the ladies free skate "the biggie." Now, the ladies close the event.

What was also funny were the commercials. In terms of the demographics for skating, the understanding didn't seem to be in place. There were mostly cigarette, beer and car commercials. The one for cigarettes shows these two skaters — they're pairs skaters — and the announcer says, "Looks like you could use a re-charge." They come over to the side of the rink, and the guy lights up a cigarette, and they actually start skating around the rink smoking.

SL: : Why do you think the marriage of figure skating and television has been so successful?

NN: I think that it's hard not to watch. It's such a unique and elegant art form. It's this rare combination of artistry and athleticism. And, in some of the disciplines, it's a combination of Hollywood and dance coming together. I think that it's very television-friendly — you've got all the make-up and the dresses and the sparkles — and I think helping it along was getting rid of the "school figures."

SL: Why were the compulsories eliminated and do you think that the elimination of compulsories has been good for the sport?

NN: Skating purists will argue that they never should have gotten rid of figures, but the audience would watch a competition and be completely perplexed as to how the person who skated the most beautifully in the long program was not able to win. And that's because, until a certain point in time, figures were worth 60 percent of the final score. Then they added the short program, to lessen the impact of figures, while also giving good free-style skaters another chance to shine. By 1992, figures were eliminated from international competition.

Once the TV producers got involved in the sport, it became clear that figures were not an audience-friendly art. It's impossible for the audience to see what's actually being performed on the ice. The judges are looking for very specific tracings on the ice, which the camera doesn't pick up

too well. You have to be well-trained to understand what exactly they're looking for.

Whether or not it was good for the sport, the jury is still out on that. I think figures were really valuable for skaters to master the edging and blade work that you need to have a certain polish. I loved watching that with the 1961 skaters — they had such a great quality to their skating.

SL: You write that, in 1961, the skaters were very different physically than today's athletes. Why is that and how have the changes in physique affected the sport?

NN: Back then, because the skaters were doing compulsory figures and emphasizing that over jumps, they weren't putting as much practice into the jumps as today. In 1961, they were doing double jumps, as opposed to the more demanding triple jumps of today. The athletic quality of the jumps was different back then. So, their bodies were curvier then — they looked like real girls for their age. They weren't these waifs that are around today.

But, today, skating has transformed into such an athletic endeavor that you have to be in peak performance shape in order to do these jumps. Skaters have to supplement their training with weight training, endurance training, and stretching. A lot of skaters do yoga or ballet. You have to be more lean to get into the air and do those revolutions. Somebody like Michelle Kwan — she's a lean pocket of muscle mass.

SL: In 1961, the Owen family was a figure skating dynasty. How would you describe the influence of "Big Maribel" in the sport?

NN: Maribel was a single mother, ahead of her times, and she was the first female sportswriter for the New York Times. She was blazing trails all over the place. She was an extremely outspoken, incredibly charming, loving woman — and also very, very tough. She never took a break. She was always working on something.

One story I relate in the book was that, at the end of the school figures at the 1960 Olympics, Carol Heiss was marked second. Maribel went out on the ice and looked at the tracings, and she went ballistic and called it "rank

ignorance.” Somebody who heard her outburst came to her and said, “If you make a stink out of this, your daughters might not do so well.” Her response was, “I don’t care. We need to clean up our act in the judging.” She was willing to put her neck and her daughters’ necks on the line to stand up for what was right. That’s what I admired about her. She had an incredible sense of decency. She was known for sneaking a little black girl into the rink at Boston after the cashier had told her that “No blacks are allowed here.” That skater’s name was Mabel Fairbanks, who went on to coach Tai Babilonia and Randy Gardiner.

As a coach, her legacy lives on in a lot of people. She coached Ron Ludington, who goes on to coach Kitty and Peter Carruthers. She coached Frank Carroll, who coached Linda Fratianne and Michelle Kwan. Last year, when Michelle Kwan won her ninth U.S. title, she tied Maribel Vinson Owen. There was a big deal made about it, and Michelle said that she had a “cosmic connection” with Maribel. I think that says a lot. She died 45 years ago, but her coaching techniques are very much alive today.

SL: Maribel had an intense rivalry with Norway’s Sonja Henie — and Henie won every time and became the first great star of figure skating, with gold medals in 1928 (St. Mortiz), 1932 (Lake Placid) and 1936 (Garmisch and Partenkirchen). How would you describe Henie, on and off the ice?

NN: Her impact on the sport was incredible. She brought glamour to the sport, which was not an area that Maribel excelled in. Sonja Henie was very flirtatious and engaging on the ice. She had a charisma that translated well onto the big screen — she was one of the first Hollywood female millionaires. There was always a lot of fuss around her — what is she wearing?— and I think some of the other skaters didn’t like that.

SL: In 1961, Laurence Owen was considered the future of U.S. figure skating. You describe her as “like a Picasso — bold unpredictable patterns, strong colors, very abstract.” What made her so different on the ice?

NN: I don’t want to slight the other skaters because the bronze medallist [at the 1961 U.S. Nationals] that year, Rhode Michelson, was the clear

athlete in the field. She was very reminiscent of Midori Ito of Japan in the way she went for the jumps. Extremely muscular. The silver medallist, Steffi Westerfield, was very dainty and had a lot of polish to her skating, but didn't do so well on the jumps. But what made Laurence stand out was this wide grin — this joy — that spilled out of her on the ice. She didn't skate a technically clean program — she had a couple of bobbles on jumps — but it was easy to overlook because the rest was so joyous.

A lot of people talked about how her mother pushed her, but watching her skate you knew that she wanted to be there, that she was most at home on the ice. She had the air of a champion from the minute she took the ice. The excitement of her program kept building and building and building, and at the end you wanted to explode because she had put her whole soul out on the ice. It was the kind of performance that you remember for a long time, and it worked very well on television. She was made to be on television, and it's sad that her life was cut short right as she was about to become this break-out celebrity. She would have been huge.

SL: A photograph of Laurence appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* the week of the crash. Was she one of the first “victims” of the SI jinx?

NN: They boarded the plane on February 14th, and the issue of the magazine was dated February 13th. It's coincidental — and I don't believe in those things — but unfortunately there had been others.

SL: You write that there have been several airplane crashes that have affected sports teams, from the University of Evansville to the infamous Uruguayan soccer team in the Andes. Should sports teams not travel together?

NN: I don't know if that's practical. But this wasn't the normal procedure for the skaters. The team had competed all together in Philadelphia [at the North American Championships]. It just ended up being convenient that they take the same flight together [to Europe] from New York City a few days later, instead of them all returning home and then flying to Europe separately. The U.S figure skating team no longer travels together now.

SL: How did the crash affect the U.S. figure skating team for the 1964

Olympic Winter Games?

NN: Back then, you had a system where there weren't the scores of competitors like you have today. It was an egalitarian sport with a lucky few competing on the national level. So, it was way scaled down in numbers.

When we lost those top champions of that year, we didn't have a deep field to turn to. It wasn't as easy as saying, "Okay, the fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-place finishers are going to be next in line." That wasn't how it worked out. The following year, you had all these people who were in the novice and junior levels, who hadn't yet gotten to that point technically in their skating, who were asked to step up to the plate. Otherwise, it would have been an empty field.

The immediate impact on the sport was that you had a lot of young people all of sudden on the world stage with no experience. The first couple of years, nobody won any medals at the world championships. At the 1964 Olympics, there were two surprises: Scott Ethan Allen won a bronze in men's [at age 14], and the junior pairs champions of 1961, Vivian and Ronald Joseph, won a bronze medal. They actually placed fourth at the Olympics, but they were later given bronze medals because it turned out that the silver medallists had signed a professional contract before the Olympics.

The full recovery didn't really happen until Peggy Fleming showed up on the scene and won the worlds in 1966 and 1967 and then the gold medal in the 1968 Olympics.

SL: How did the crash affect the coaching system in U.S. figure skating?

NN: It's interesting because Peggy Fleming lost her coach on the plane — Bill Kipp — and many of the nation's top coaches were on the plane. All of a sudden, there were vacancies at all these rinks where coaches were needed, and the top coaches available had a lot of skaters competing for their attention. So, there were a lot of coaches brought in to fill the gap, including Carlo Fassi [from Italy], who ended up coaching Peggy Fleming to her victory. There was also [British-born] John Nicks, who now coaches

Sasha Cohen. He told me, “Guys like me may not have been given that chance had the crash not happened, and we were all very aware of it.”

SL: What is the legacy of the 1961 team?

NN: I think the crash itself caused people to learn more about skating, but the lasting legacy is the Memorial Fund. Basically, people just started sending in money and money was collected at several ice shows. And, the president of the U.S. Figure Skating Association [F. Ritter Shumway] decided instead of building some big statue to remember the team, he wanted to use the money that made a difference. By creating the Memorial Fund, it created opportunities outside of the usual skating hubs of Boston, Philadelphia and New York City. It helped to promulgate the sport in other areas of the country where people couldn’t afford to skate or where there were few opportunities to train. Now, there was a stipend available for them to pursue various training routes, and I think that helped spread the sport.

SL: What did it mean to the U.S. figure skating community when Peggy Fleming won the gold medal at the 1968 Grenoble Games?

NN: I think a lot of people were relieved because they expected the recovery was going to take a lot longer. Her winning sent a message: “Hey, we’re back.” It was the delayed catharsis that everybody needed. I think she completed the journey. There was something so elegant and graceful — in some ways, very simple — about her skating. It was such a delight to watch her skate.

But, I don’t think the pairs and dance teams ever really came back to the same level. Back then, our pairs were a lot more competitive on the world level, and we had a lot of dance teams on the podium at worlds. This year, with Tanith Belbin and Ben Agosto [in ice dancing], we have a real shot for the podium [at Torino].

SL: You attended the most recent U.S. Nationals competition. There was some controversy about Michelle Kwan’s situation: do you think she should be allowed to compete in Torino?

NN: Michelle has done a lot for the sport, and I think the broadcasters would be very concerned if she wasn't there. Not that that should be how you select your team, but I think she's earned it. It's not her fault that she had two different injuries this season. Even if Michelle went out and doubled all of her planned triple jumps, there would be something so special in her skating at the Olympics, her swan song. Is it disappointing for Emily Hughes, who won the bronze medal. Yes, but she's young and she'll be around. What makes it a hard deal to pass up is that Michelle is willing to audition for the committee. She's not saying: "Give me the spot, no questions asked." She's saying: "Give it to me and I'll prove to you that I deserve it."

What I took away from the Nationals is that we have a lot of growing to do in the ladies division. I didn't get that gripping emotional moment from watching the ladies this year. In the free skate, Sasha Cohen was the only girl who didn't fall.

SL: As you mentioned, Maribel Vinson Owen was outspoken about the judging system in figure skating — and controversy over judging is something that hasn't changed in 45 years. How do you think the current system will work at the 2006 Torino Games?

NN: People who are not die-hard figure skating fans might struggle to understand what those big numbers mean. I think what's positive about it is that people are being rewarded for everything they do in their programs, not just their jumps. Now, a really nice spin combination gets a lot of credit. I love the fact that the results are very unpredictable. Look at the results of the world championships last year: if you had told me that an Italian girl would be standing on the podium ahead of Michelle Kwan, I would have said you're crazy. Under the old judging system, I think Michelle would have probably ended up with a medal. In the old judging system, if you had a fall during the short program, you could pretty much kiss a medal good-bye. Now, you can really launch a comeback and win, like Canada's Emanuel Sandhu has done. I like the fact that, going into this Olympics, it's anybody's game to win.