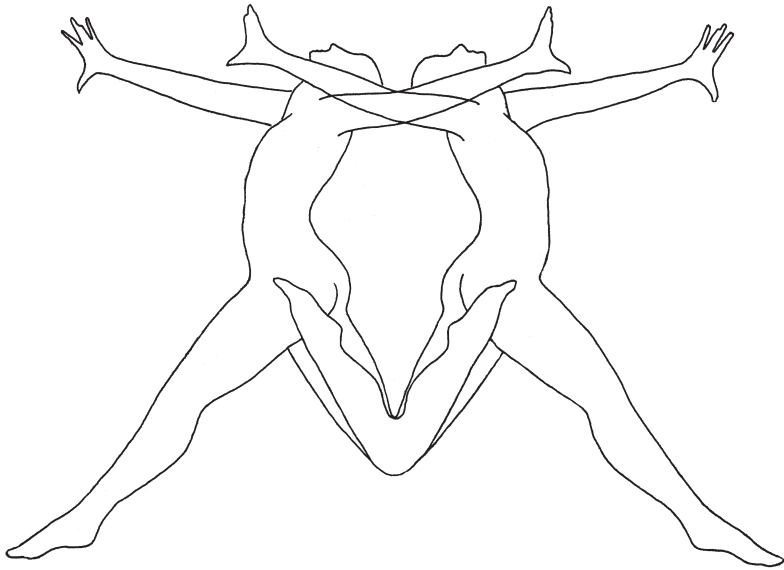


Coach's Manual:
Choreography & Style
for Skaters

Ricky Harris
with a foreword by Frank Carroll

**Coach's Manual:
Choreography and Style for Skaters**



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Contents

Foreword	vi
Acknowledgments	viii
Introduction	ix
1. Philosophy of Choreography	1
2. Choreographic Ingredients	7
3. Analyzing Choreography	13
4. Energy Concepts	19
5. Dynamics and Qualities	27
6. Elements of Movement	33
7. Focus	41
8. Design in Space, Ice Surface, and Time	49
9. Music	57
10. Gesture	67
11. Movement as it Relates To Space	73
12. Image of Yourself as a Choreographer	83

Foreword

One of my fondest memories of Ricky Harris occurred while she was creating a program for a very young Christopher Bowman. Christopher had won the bronze medal in the U.S. Novice National Championships, was not yet 12 years old, and had chosen to skate to “Birth of the Blues” for a show. We met in a ballet room [of sorts] at the Paramount Ice Rink, home to the Arctic Blades Figure Skating Club. In no time at all we were throwing ourselves everywhere...crawling on our knees, listening to the music, experimenting with all kinds of blues and sultry movements. The program was a great success, and remains one of my favorite programs of his career. The thing that is strongest in my recollection of the event was the great fun I had that day! On the drive back to Los Angeles I kept thinking how much Ricky had drawn out of Christopher; what a wonderful positive attitude she kept throughout the process of creating the piece, and finally...how much I admired her.

Ricky Harris has been a pioneer in creating a place for choreographers on ice, and in educating the public that the choreographer’s place in the sport is not just to fluff arms and embellish mediocre programs. She was instrumental in establishing the Professional Skaters Association rating in choreography. She was one of the first master-rated coaches in that discipline and helped set the criteria, and much of the direction that the oral examination should take.

The list of legendary skaters she has worked with is incredible...Scott Hamilton, Michele Kwan, Linda Fratianne, Christopher Bowman, and Brian Boitano is just a few. The famous Canadian choreographer, Lori Nichol, credits Ricky with giving her the inspiration and the early basic theory of how to create and teach choreography, and often draws on these principles in her work.

In any field it is possible to acquire great knowledge, but to be able to pass on that knowledge and be a great teacher is an entirely different matter. This is where Ricky Harris excels. Her approach to teaching is organized,

academic, and inspiring! She is open to all new ideas, music, movement, color, literature, etc. She is a learner, as are all great teachers!

I am so lucky to know Ricky Harris and to have her as a friend. My life is richer for it. I do wish she would disclose the location of the fountain of youth she so obviously visits.

Frank Carroll
Olympic Coach of the Year
USFSA Hall of Fame
Coaches Hall of Fame

Introduction

My primary motivation in life has always been the original approach. After years of experimentation, this resulted in new teaching concepts for competitive and professional skaters that helped to develop their artistic and athletic skills simultaneously.

Having been trained as both a skater and a dancer, I began teaching academic dance classes to skaters in ballet studios inside skating rinks, indoctrinating into their schedules classes in drama techniques. This culminated in workshops for skaters that I conducted internationally. I feel that skating is also an artistic endeavor; therefore, skaters should be trained as dancers and actors as well.

Composer Philip Glass, writing about changes in the music world in the latter part of the 20th century, talks about the radical ideas of John Cage that helped make those changes:

“Cage wrote eloquently (if at times obliquely) about a larger shift in the relationship between performer and listener. Music, he argued, could no longer be seen as something separate and detached from its listeners and from its context. Rather, creating music was a process that was initiated by the composer or performer, but completed by the audience. The listeners’ experience of the work was essential to the music itself.”

I believe the same thing can be applied to figure skating. A program should not be separate and detached from the audience but completed by them. The audience’s experience of the program is essential.

I was inspired to conceive an academic approach to teaching skaters how they can develop movement styles suitable to their individual bodies and needs. This resulted in writing my first book, *Choreography and Style for Ice Skaters*, so I could reach skaters throughout the world with these techniques. I am happy to note that many competitive roller skaters are also using my book.

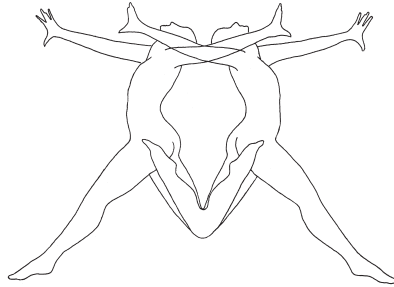
It is important to me that coaches become more knowledgeable about the choreographic process, in order to help their skaters develop original

and individual styles. My intention in writing the music chapter was to use musical terms in ways that could be related to the choreography, knowing that many of the readers may not have a technical musical background. I borrowed the musical ideas that work well in creating a relationship between music and movement.

I recently began conducting workshops for coaches who requested written material to go along with the workshops. This inspired me to write *Coach's Manual on Choreography and Style for Skaters*.

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Philosophy of Choreography



Skating should be considered a fine art. It is not simple velocity or agility that constitutes the perfection of it, but grace.

—John Adams (1781)

Skating is an art form as well as an athletic event. Art is a precious gift that enriches our lives forever and reaffirms beauty and creativity. If we become knowledgeable in the principles of art, then instruction won't simply be a matter of passing on our personal styles and idiosyncrasies to our students, but encouraging them to develop their own styles.

I believe the greatest proof of success for skating coaches who want to be choreographers is that not one of their students is remotely imitative of their style, or any two of their students' styles remotely resemble each other. To accomplish this you want to know how each skater works—their assets and liabilities—and create work that suits their abilities. As your skater matures you can help them to develop an “artistic eye” by allowing them to voice opinions about some of the choreography.

How else can we develop artistic qualities in our skaters? One way

is introducing drama and expression in skater's programs, just as in the dance world. To use these tools effectively, the instrument of the body must be disciplined and prepared, so naturally I endorse training in dance in conjunction with skating.

All dance techniques have these objectives:

1. To stretch
2. To strengthen
3. To coordinate
4. To define line and form in space

A skater should be versatile and able to express any form: ballet, modern, jazz, ethnic, dramatic, and athletic. Skaters are less apt to work on expression, which dancers take for granted. This has to do with an *attitude* and wanting to express through movement what you are feeling and thinking. To choreograph effectively, all types of movement should be experienced. It is extremely valuable to know about total control of the body.

The word dance is derived from an old German root word *danson*, meaning "to stretch." It should also be the goal of all skaters to metaphorically "stretch" the audience out of their seats into space; that each person in the audience, and each judge, would be absorbed by the experience and feel like a participant, experiencing the program themselves. In essence they would be skating too.

Creative artists in any of the performing arts with the proper background and knowledge of what they want to express can more powerfully communicate the inner essence to their audience, and through empathy cause the audience to share in the experience, not merely witness the performance as a detached spectator.

Why else is dance important?

Dance training produces a responsive and coordinated body, able to perform anything the mind of the performer desires to express. When mastered, the principles of movement can be applied instantly and without conscious thought to any problem of expression or abstract movement.

We know that there is a need for more expression. What are we talking about? We are talking about turning skaters into actors. To do that, skaters must become less inhibited. Some skaters are natural actors. But when they are not, it has to be a learned process.

There is no quick way to learn this, and ideally one should start at the earliest possible age. First, one must learn to feel movement both inside and outside the body and to enjoy the way movement flows through the body, or darts from one place to another, with large amounts of energy. It is important that you learn to enjoy improvising movement, as that is where your first expression is born.

Coach's Manual: Choreography and Style for Skaters

From the Foreword by Frank Carroll:

"Ricky Harris has been a pioneer in creating a place for choreographers on ice, and in educating the public that the choreographer's place in the sport is not just to fluff arms and embellish mediocre programs. She was instrumental in establishing the Professional Skaters Association rating in choreography. She was one of the first master-rated coaches in that discipline and helped set the criteria, and much of the direction that the oral examination should take. In any field it is possible to acquire great knowledge, but to be able to pass on that knowledge and be a great teacher is an entirely different matter. This is where Ricky Harris excels. Her approach to teaching is organized, academic, and inspiring!"

~ Frank Carroll
Olympic Coach of the Year, USFSA Hall of Fame



Ricky Harris is an internationally renowned choreographer and artistic coach for skaters. A former professional skater herself, she holds a BA in Drama, a MFA in Dance, and a Ph.D in Choreography. Following her education, she pursued a successful career as a dancer and actress.

Dr. Harris was a columnist for *Skating Magazine* for ten years, and also created and starred in a PBS Television series "Dancethenics." Skaters she has choreographed for read like a list of the "Who's Who" in skating. Since 1974, she has conducted workshops internationally. Her book, *Choreography and Style for Ice Skaters* is used throughout the world.

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