

Get your skates on!

'This isn't sport, its circus!'. This was my father's irate reaction every time figure skating came on the telly. As a rugby man I think he was a bit offended by the sequins, the make up and men wearing blouses and tight trousers. I think he found it all a bit *naff* (inferior or cheap). But I didn't agree with him. For me, it was all curiously absorbing, and I found myself speculating idly whether, if all human endeavour were judged on artistic impression, the world would be a better place.

Not that I totally understood it of course; there was all that jargon for one thing: *camel spins*, *twizzles* and *triple salkos*. And then there was the judging: it was often hard to tell why one skater, or pair of skaters, was better than another, unless of course they obliged you by *coming a cropper* (falling on their backsides) which, come to think of it, was the only part my father did enjoy.

But if it was a bit like circus then the undisputed rink masters when I was growing up were Britain's own Jane Torvill and Christopher Dean. Now there were successful skaters before this legendary pair and there have been fine ones since but, for many people in the UK, the Nottingham duo will never be equalled. The highpoint of their glorious career occurred on Valentine's Day 1984 at the Winter Olympics in Sarajevo when they recorded the sport's first perfect score for artistic impression for a single programme, on their way to the gold medal. This performance was ranked no 8 in the BBC's list of 100 Great Sporting Moments.

But they were not just brilliant; they were innovative and ingenious too. Along with their artistic advisor Michael Crawford (more famous for his performance as the Phantom of the Opera in the west end) Torvill and Dean became famous for their original use of music in routines with a strong narrative thread: in one famous instance they reduced Ravel's Bolero to 4 minutes 28 seconds and were told it couldn't be made any shorter, a problem given the Olympic limit of 4:10 seconds for all accompanying music. So they spent the first 18 seconds of their routine on their knees, *seiza* style, to comply with the rules.

Torvill and Dean were not only sensationally good skaters, they also appealed to the British public as a kind of ideal couple. They were good looking (in a homely, comfortable English sort of way), and they were as modest and unassuming off the ice as they were dynamic and expressive on it. You could easily imagine them living next door, and being perfectly behaved neighbours to boot. In fact their relationship was purely professional (legend has it they did go on one date but decided to put potential romance on ice and concentrate on skating).

They retired in 1984, made a fortune on the professional circuit, got married (to other people) before sensationally returning to competition for the 1994 Olympics where they might have pulled off another gold had not the judges preferred the Russians Grishuk and Platov for reasons no one, in the UK at least, could understand.

You can still catch the ageless Torvill and Dean in their spectacular live show, but if you fancy taking to the ice yourself, the UK has plenty of options: you could follow in the grooves of Jane and Chris at the Nottingham ice centre which has been renamed in their honour. And there are lots of temporary rinks too: London's O2 arena has gone for a Narnia theme with theirs while Canary Wharf has a sizeable rink set up in the shadow of the world famous towers with a special viewing gallery where you can watch your friends gliding gracefully (or disgracefully) across the ice. Britain's largest outdoor ice rink is in Leeds - *The Ice Cube* which boasts over 1200 square metres of ice. It is open only until March 6 so if you want to visit you had better *get your skates on* (hurry up!).

<http://www.visitlondon.com/events/special/ice-rinks-winter-2010>

<http://www.leeds.gov.uk/icecube/>

<http://www.torvillanddean.com/>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8obUdxnTlc>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nznnF5GARlY&feature=related>

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