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In Memoriam: Sergei Grinkov

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Graceful and sure with youth, the skaters glide
Upon the frozen pond. Unending rings
Expand upon the ice, contract, divide,
Till motion seems the shape that movement brings,
And shape is constant in the moving blade.

These words of poet John Williams in "The Skaters" came to mind while contemplating the loss of beauty in the world that will result from the death of Sergei Grinkov. At age 28 his death came as a shock not only to those closest to him, but to anyone who has ever watched him and his skating partner perform their routines to near perfection. His partner, Yekaterina Gordeeva was with him on the ice at Lake Placid when he collapsed and died during a practice session some ten days ago.

Gordeeva and Grinkov, gold medallists at Calgary in 1988 and again six years later at Lillehammer, were in the Russian tradition of great pairs skaters and they will be remembered in the same class as the Protopopov's and Rodnina and Zeitsev.

Who will ever forget the two of them in Calgary. Gordeeva a slight and delicate teenager, and Grinkov a 21 year-old athlete of muscle and grace. They seemed ideally paired visually as Grinkov towered over his partner by nearly a foot. The size differential added to the aesthetic appeal of the talented duo, whose speed and power was displayed in unbelievable lifts and throws. Always performed with grace and beauty.

When they returned to Olympic competition at Lillehammer in 1994 they had matured. Now married with a daughter, they skated with the same skill, the same power, only with added tenderness and emotion. They were now clearly the top pairs skaters in the world.

Pairs figure skating has almost always been dominated by Russians. They bring a passion to the ice that displays a particular expression of Russian culture. It is that same passion one finds in the plays of Chekov, the novels of Dostoyevsky, and music of Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev or Shostakovich. It is a passion for life in all its glory and tragedy, and it is displayed magnificently in the artistry of this beautiful sport. The Russians who perfected the ballet have been able to translate the ballet to ice, and Gordeeva and

Grinkov are among a long line of Russian pairs skaters to bring that style in all its beauty to the world sporting scene.

There are those who do not think that figure skating is a sport because of its aesthetic elements, its show business qualities, and the subjective nature of the judging. Anyone who has ever laced up a pair of skates, knows better. The athleticism required to make the most elementary of moves is daunting, and the strength and stamina required stretches the limits of human capacity.

Sergei Grinkov perfected the athletic elements necessary to perform the male role in pairs skating. He was in tremendous physical condition, his body perfectly sculpted. At age 28 he was in his athletic prime. Then in the twinkling of an eye it was over.

With no history of heart problems, no previous medical indications that anything was wrong, Sergei Grinkov was the victim of a massive heart attack. What was revealed in the autopsy was the fact that he had an enlarged heart, not that of an athlete, but a diseased heart enlarged by the effects of severe high blood pressure. Two of his arteries were nearly closed, including the left anterior descending artery, known in medical circles as the "widow maker." There was clear evidence that Grinkov had suffered a heart attack twenty-four hours earlier, which had caused no pain or other symptoms, but led inevitably to the fatal event.

In addition Grinkov had been treated for the effects of the severe osteoarthritis which affected the length of his spine, and had caused him severe lower back pain for which he was treated in October.

It is truly remarkable that with all these problems he could perform at such a high level, but like many great athletes Grinkov overcame the pain and ignored whatever other warning signs his body offered. The quest for perfection in sport is a driving force that is difficult to overestimate. The cliché "no pain, no gain" is a cliché precisely because of the strong element of truth it embodies.

Yekaterina Gordeeva has suffered a double loss, both her husband and her skating partner. The public has lost one of the great pairs to ever perform on the ice.

There is an added sense of loss when the athlete dies young, because there is a knowledge that much more might have been accomplished. Those who saw them perform are thankful for having had the privilege of seeing this combination of beauty and athletic perfection. It is what makes sport at its best, one of the highest of human pursuits.

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