Body English

Wagener teaches skaters ‘artistry in motion’

BY MICKEY BROWN

I’m not at Wal-Mart buying oranges right now!”

Paula Wagener is trying to show a group of girls, most of whom are in their early teens, how to gracefully sweep their arms through the increasingly humid air that fills the Toyota Sports Center’s inline arena (While technically inside the Toyota Center in El Segundo, Calif. – the location of the first U.S. Figure Skating Synchronized Skating Training Festival – the inline arena is really outside.). But the way the girls are positioning their arms, it looks if they’re carrying a large bundle of, well, oranges.

Wagener is wearing a form-fitting brown velvet jumpsuit. She looks fit, no doubt a byproduct of being an “unprofessional professional” ballet dancer for a number of years. She is holding a large Styrofoam cup of coffee. Her blonde hair – and I do mean blonde – is cut above the shoulder. She claims to be “the worst skater you’ve ever seen in your life.” Since she’s working on dry land, there’s no way to ascertain if she’s telling the truth or if she’s just being modest, but if I had to guess, I’d say the latter.

Wagener is on the bill as “Figure skating choreographer, author of U.S. Figure Skating’s Artistry in Motion curriculum,” which doesn’t tell you much. Allow me to fill in some of the holes.

She’s from Albany, N.Y. She studied at The American Ballet Theater School and Evanston School of Ballet but had to give up dance at 16 because of an injury. She graduated from Marquette University and has been involved in figure skating as a choreographer (among other things) since 1979.

She started ‘Artistry in Motion’ in 1992 after noticing that many world-class coaches were having difficulty with the PSA exams. The reason, she realized, was that the test was designed for ballet dancers who were entering the sport.

“I developed this program so coaches would have somewhere to go,” Wagener said.

When asked what exactly “artistry in motion” means, she says, “It’s dance movement pertinent to figure skating.”

Simple enough.

The curriculum operates on the belief that there are five levels of figure skating: ground or ice, knees, hips, shoulders and a place she terms “above” or “infinity,” the area a skater fills when he or she jumps.

Standing in front of the class, Wagener demonstrates some of those levels. She raises one arm over her head, then the other. Then she brings both arms over her head. Next, she lifts one arm in front of her, followed by the other arm. She leans to one side, then leans to the other.

Now it’s the class’ turn. They do it too lackadaisically for her liking, and she’s not afraid to tell them.

“I want to see forward crossovers, not walking down the aisle at the mall!”

When they’re through with that portion, she asks them, “What’s the point of what we’ve been doing?”

“Good posture,” one girl says.

“Good posture, yes,” Wagener replies, pleased but wanting more.

“Good movement,” says another.

“Core strength.”

“Timing.”

“Feeling emotion.”

She is getting through to them.

“Some people are more emotional than others, more demonstrative,” Wagener explains. “I guess I’m a very emotional person. I don’t think so. My husband thinks I’m emotional. My friends think I’m emotional. I think I react to things normally.”

“Normally” is a relative term. It would be erroneous to say she reacts to things abnormally, but she does have deeper responses to things most people take for granted, like, say, music.

She plays the song “Papa, Can You Hear Me?” from the movie “Yentl” for the class. When it’s finished, she tells them she
Paula Wagener admits she can't skate, but she knows all about how to develop a skater's expression on the ice.

could listen to the piece for hours on end, it's so beautiful.
She rhapsodizes about how soothing the motion and velocity of the ocean's waves are.
Not abnormal, just unique.
One of the most important points she tries to get across is how skaters have to feel everything they do on the ice.
“There's a difference between someone putting their head up because their coach tells them to and someone putting their head up because they feel it,” she says.

She comes over to change the music. While fiddling with the CD player, a team leader tells her she's wonderful. She smiles and says, “Thank you,” but you can tell she's thinking, “Yeah, I kind of am.” Not in an egotistical way, but more to say, “I have so much to offer these girls.”

She leaves them with one last thought.
“Skating’s up to your coaches, but expression is up to you.”
After the class has dispersed, she talks about what she hopes the girls get out of it.
“I'm trying to get them to emote. The artistic aspect of skating is so important.”

The next class comes in. It's an older crowd. Wagener lines them up and leads them in an exercise. She kicks her leg forward. Her arms shoot out to the side. Then, all at once, her body contracts downward, like she's experiencing severe stomach cramps. Just as quickly, she springs up into “infinity,” like someone has pulled invisible strings attached to her limbs.

The class follows her in these movements.
“Linger, linger, linger, linger!” she bellows as she pivots around a fixed leg, meaning she doesn't want them to drift through each quarter-turn but instead hesitate momentarily. This makes them look more focused and controlled.
“Pivot, pivot, pivot, side to side, and reach!”

Enigma’s “Sadeness Part I” blares throughout the arena. The girls whip into action. Within seconds, they are moving like a single unit.

With Paula Wagener running the show, you would expect nothing less.