



Tom Collins and Jinx Clark perform during a Holiday on Ice show.



'LIVING A DREAM'

TOM COLLINS CREATED A PHENOMENON WITH CHAMPIONS ON ICE

by AMY ROSEWATER

Growing up in Kirkland Lake, Ontario, known also as “the town that made the NHL famous,” for being the birthplace of so many NHL stars, Tom Collins naturally thought his career would end up on the ice.

And it did. Just not on hockey skates.

“I was just a little kid from Canada,” Collins said. “I was born in Toronto but grew up in the gold-mining town of Kirkland Lake, about 500 miles north of Toronto. There were only about 17,000 people who lived there and all I ever wanted to do was play for the Toronto Maple Leafs.

“One day, I was playing hockey and this big, black piece of rubber came right to me. I was so excited that I had the puck and I started skating down the ice and I scored. The only problem was that it was our own goal. One of the players said, ‘Maybe you should try figure skating.’”

That proved to be the best advice Collins ever received. Not only did he fall in love with figure skating, but also he was quite good at it. His older sister, Marty, was a skater, and began performing in ice shows. She would mail young Tommy postcards from all the tour stops. He would marvel at all the postcard locales and hoped one day he would just meet some famous skaters and be a part in their world.

“I was a 16-year-old kid and I would lie in the snow and just dream about figure skating on tour,” Collins said. “All I ever wanted to do was skate. I never graduated from eighth grade. I’d be in my classroom just dreaming about skating and touring with an ice show like my sister.”

Not only did Collins become an accomplished figure skater, touring with Holiday on

Ice, but also — and more importantly — he became the preeminent skating tour owner/producer of Champions on Ice. Over the years (from 1969-2006), Collins signed everyone from Dorothy Hamill to Brian Boitano to Michelle Kwan, to skate in his tour, and in its heyday, it was stopping in 20,000-seat arenas in 90-plus cities a year.

He became the largest individual donor of U.S. Figure Skating, and the organization’s headquarters and U.S. Figure Skating Hall of Fame in Colorado Springs, Colorado, are housed in the Tom Collins Building.

Inducted into the U.S. Figure Skating Hall of Fame, the Canadian Hall of Fame and the World Figure Skating Hall of Fame, Collins will receive one of the most meaningful honors of his career as the U.S. Figure Skating Athletes Advisory Committee celebrates him in Saint Paul, Minnesota, at the 2016 Prudential U.S. Figure Skating Championships. The fact that a who’s who of America’s greatest skaters will toast him is a remarkable twist for a man who spent the bulk of his career marketing the top skaters in the world and working behind the scenes.

“The skaters have made me,” Collins once said. “That’s why I take care of them. They’re like my children.”

Collins, known simply as “Tommy,” is no longer involved in the touring business (he sold Champions on Ice in 2006) but he still has close connections in figure skating. So it’s appropriate that a man of his magnitude is honored and that he is celebrated in a place where he has called home since 1970.

As much as Collins has achieved over the years, he continues to be amazed that he was able to do it.

When he was younger, Collins would work with his dad in the gold mines to help pay for his skating expenses. The mines were dangerous, and Collins said people would die in the mines. But he took chances so he could skate.

“Tom Collins isn’t just the most successful skating entrepreneur and promoter in history. He’s also skating’s nicest guy. Tom not only paid the salaries of countless skaters for decades, he also made sure that they and their families had food, clothing and supplies — especially those from other countries who came to America with nothing. Tom Collins’ generosity, insight and enthusiasm forever changed the sport of figure skating for the better.”

— Christine Brennan

USA Today national sports columnist; ABC News, CNN and PBS commentator; Author of three books about figure skating: the best-selling *Inside Edge*, *Edge of Glory* and *Champions on Ice*



“Every skater was his child and he wanted to care for them. And it wasn’t just on the tour, but throughout the competitive season he would stay in touch with everyone. I was 13 when I started on the tour. I was the baby, the rookie. He and the whole Collins family took me under their wing. They made sure I had friends to hang out with and they took care of my mom, who was traveling with me. Tommy loves figure skating and he treated the tour as a passion, but he made sure we had fun, too. It was a labor of love for him.”

— Michelle Kwan

Nine-time U.S. champion
Five-time World champion
Two-time Olympic medalist



“Why do we love Tommy? One of the many reasons is that Tommy is a skater first and foremost and he never forgot what it was like to be one.”

— Brian Boitano

1988 Olympic champion
Two-time World champion
Four-time U.S. champion



MATTHEW STOCKMAN/GETTY IMAGES



Collins with longtime friend and Olympic champion Kristi Yamaguchi

“Tom Collins has been many things in his life. Skater, entertainer, comedian, Holiday on Ice tour manager, brother, husband, father, grandfather and a visionary entrepreneur. My favorite description of Tom Collins is *friend*. I love Tommy and always will. And I know I’m not the only one who feels that way. Simply, every person that has crossed paths with Tom has been blessed by it. He’s probably best known as the founder, owner and producer of *The Tour of World and Olympic Figure Skating Champions that evolved into Champions on Ice*. He built it the old-fashioned way. He borrowed a lot of money and worked hard to make it successful. Through his vision and tenacity he changed the trajectory of the business of figure skating for a very long period of time. I never go to Minneapolis without reaching out to Tom. And he always makes time for me. We reminisce about the old days and how much fun we had touring the country. I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone that loved figure skating as much as Tom.”

— Scott Hamilton
1984 Olympic champion
Four-time World champion
Four-time U.S. champion



He was so passionate about skating that he would go to Union Station in downtown Toronto just for glimpses of the skaters when they came to town.

He sent letters to all the big tours and finally received a reply from Holiday on Ice, which at the time was a rag-tag touring troupe. On Aug. 28, 1949, he was asked to report to Toledo as a chorus skater.

“For a kid from Kirkland Lake, Toledo was like a metropolis,” Collins said.

He traveled all over the United States, not only skating, but helping set up the ice and even selling cotton candy and snow cones on tour. He would perform in small towns in Tennessee and South Dakota, and he loved every minute of showbiz.

After about a decade of skating in the tour, Collins went into tour management, first as an auditor and later as a manager and vice president. Then he met music producer Bill Graham and decided to try his hand at promoting rock ‘n’ roll shows.

“I didn’t do well at it at first,” Collins said. “I lost everything I made in skating. Within three years, I was broke.”

But he proved himself when he got an offer to promote the Minneapolis tour stop for Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. Soon, he was handling Neil Diamond’s merchandising. Collins ended up flying in private jets and working with Diamond, Bob Dylan, the Moody Blues, The Cars, Alice Cooper and John Denver. He continued to work in figure skating, handling a tour any time Worlds were held on North American soil, which was every three years.

“I learned a lot from rock ‘n’ roll,” Collins said. “I learned about all the hotels. I learned a lot of things, like having dinner in the building for the skaters because that’s what they did for the rock shows. I learned about advertising. Jerry Weintraub, Diamond’s manager at the time, always would take out full-page ads in newspapers when he came to a city. Jerry would say, ‘I do that because then people know it’s an attraction. It’s a main event.’”

As much as Collins loved rock ‘n’ roll, skating was always his true love. In 1994, he stopped working in the music industry and focused strictly on skating.

“Thank God I did that when I did,” Collins said. “Remember 1994 was the year of Tonya-Nancy, and skating just dominated my time.”

In the aftermath of Tonya-Nancy (much-publicized scandal), skating was everywhere, and the tours became a huge phenomenon. Every skater

wanted to be seen by Tommy, and he became known for elaborate parties he would host for skaters every year at the U.S. Championships.

Even Collins, who thought he had seen it all in skating, could not have imagined the sport’s explosion in popularity.

He continued as owner-producer of *Champions on Ice* until 2006, when he sold it to AEG. Although he admitted that he hasn’t kept up with the nitty-gritty of the sport the way he once he did, he has traveled to a few skating competitions over the years, including the 2014 U.S. Championships in Boston. And he continues to keep up with many of his skating (and rock ‘n’ roll) friends. He last saw Diamond in April.

“Every time he’d come to town I’d have a party at my house, and he would come to my house,” Collins said. “He would take a bus and he would talk to my neighbors. He’d be the first one to arrive and the last one to leave. Once it snowed and we didn’t have power, and he still came.”

He does miss the old days with all the skaters and novelty acts he had throughout the almost 40 years of *Champions on Ice*, but he said he would only make one major change.

“If I could do it again, I would’ve put in my dear friend Richard Dwyer, Mr. Debonair, on the tour,” Collins said. “That is one thing I’d do differently.”

Collins has kept himself busy promoting shows for the likes of Andrea Bocelli and comedians Steve Martin and Martin Short, and even worked *Diana: The Legacy of a Princess* exhibit, but he mainly likes being home in Minnesota, staying away from the hustle and bustle of travel, and spending time with his six grandchildren.

And he’s looking forward to reuniting with his skating friends this week in Saint Paul.

For a guy who spent much of his life on the road, he will enjoy welcoming the skating world to his hometown for a change.



Collins and the 2003 cast from *Champions on Ice*