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Life at the Top: The Experiences of U.S. National Champion Figure Skaters

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This study was designed to better understand the positive and negative aspects of being a national champion athlete, to uncover difficulties encountered in defending a championship title, and to solicit recommendations for achieving and maintaining national champion status. Seventeen U.S. national champion figure skaters who held titles between 1985 and 1990 participated in in-depth interviews. A number of positive and negative experiences were identified. Difficulties encountered in defending a championship were associated with increased expectations and responsibilities, a shift in motivational orientation from chasing to being chased where arousal was increased and interpreted negatively, and athletic injuries and the stress related to those injuries. Recommendations focused on such things as not being afraid to grow and take risks, filtering feedback and advice, not falling into the trap of feeling one has to be perfect, and seeking and utilizing social support.

Identifying psychological characteristics associated with athletic success has been a topic of considerable interest to sport psychology researchers in recent years, and much has been learned about the psychological characteristics of more versus less successful elite athletes. It is surprising, then, that with all the focus placed on better understanding psychological factors associated with athletic excellence, little attention has been given to understanding what it takes to be the very best in one's sport, the experience of being a national champion. What are the positive and negative aspects of being a national champion? What does it take psychologically to achieve national champion status? And what factors

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influence an athlete's ability to successfully defend a title? This investigation was designed to examine these issues.

From a historical perspective, two research paradigms have been used to examine psychological factors associated with athletic success. The first involves a quantitative approach in which athletes complete a psychological skills and attributes assessment, and then subgroups of athletes (successful vs. unsuccessful) are statistically compared on these measures. Williams (1986) has reviewed much of the research utilizing the quantitative self-report paradigm. Studies included in her review focused on comparisons of more versus less successful athletes in a variety of sports including gymnastics (Mahoney & Avenier, 1977), wrestling (Gould, Weiss, & Weinberg, 1981; Highlen & Bennett, 1979, 1983), diving (Highlen & Bennett, 1983), and racquetball (Meyers, Cooke, Cullen, & Liles, 1986). Based on her review, Williams (1986) concluded that more successful athletes were characterized by higher levels of self-confidence, better concentration, and more task-oriented thoughts. In addition, these more successful athletes exhibited more positive thoughts in general and more often used imagery, specifically positive imagery. Successful athletes also tended to be more determined and committed. Lastly, in some of the studies there was a trend for the successful athletes to exhibit less anxiety than their less successful counterparts, although this result was not as consistent as previous findings.

In a search for a deeper understanding of psychological factors associated with athletic excellence, recent investigations have turned to a qualitative interview paradigm. One of the first investigations to do this was Orlick and Partington's (1988) "Mental Links to Excellence" study of 235 Canadian Olympic athletes. One hundred sixty athletes were surveyed on mental readiness and psychological factors hypothesized to influence Olympic performance, and 75 athletes participated in in-depth interviews. Results revealed that common psychological elements of the more successful athletes included the ability to focus attention and to control performance imagery. These athletes also differed from their less successful counterparts in their mental preparation, having and adhering to more refined precompetitive, competitive, and postcompetitive plans and routines.

Qualitative research methodology and analyses were also employed in a recent study of psychological factors associated with Olympic wrestling excellence. In this study, Gould, Eklund, and Jackson (1992a, 1992b) interviewed all 20 members of the 1988 U.S. Olympic wrestling teams regarding mental preparation strategies and precompetitive and competitive cognition and affect. Findings revealed that before and during best matches wrestlers followed mental preparation plans and routines and were extremely confident, totally focused, and optimally aroused. They also had clear tactical strategies upon which they focused. In contrast, prior to worst matches the wrestlers were not confident, had inappropriate feeling states, deviated from their plans, and experienced a large number of task irrelevant and negative thoughts.

When examined collectively, studies investigating psychological characteristics and strategies associated with superior athletic performance reveal that more successful performers are better able to concentrate, focus attention on the task at hand, exhibit higher levels of confidence, and are more committed and motivated. They also have more refined mental preparation plans and routines and adhere to these routines on a consistent basis. Lastly, these athletes *may*

exhibit more positive imagery and less anxiety. Hence, a psychological profile of the successful elite athlete has begun to emerge, thus facilitating our understanding of what it takes to be successful in the highly competitive environment of elite sport.

As previously stated, considerable attention has been paid to identifying characteristics of athletes who are successful in their sport; however, little or no attention has been paid to understanding the experience of being a champion and what it takes to stay on top. This is ironic because the ability to successfully defend a national championship is often viewed as the mark of a true champion. However, the number of athletes or teams who are actually able to defend titles is small. For many athletes, then, defending a title appears to be more difficult than initially achieving it.

Ogilvie (1990) proposed several possible explanations for the rare occurrence of repeat championship teams: increased parity between athletes at the top; a shift of motivational intensity such that last year's champions find it more difficult to get motivated, whereas their opponents are highly motivated; a denial of recognition or reward for the sacrifices made on the way to the top; a reluctance to pay the physical price of success, a price that may have included competing while injured or in pain; the responsibility of success, which often entails enormous pressures to match or exceed previous expectations; and a lack of nonmonetary feedback and respect for their accomplishments.

Ogilvie (1990) forwarded these explanations based on personal experience and observation and not on any scientific support. The sports Ogilvie drew his experience from were professional team sports, such as those in the NFL and the NBA. Moreover, he focused much of his attention on nonstarting players who may have felt that their contributions to the team were devalued. Thus, they may suffer more from the stresses facing national champions than star players, who are accorded more rewards and recognition for their accomplishments.

What about the star players, and for that matter, the individual sport athletes who work their way to a national championship and are then faced with the challenge of defending their title? There is a dearth of research on the experience of national champion athletes, but an obvious need exists to better understand their experience, because repeating national champions do not appear to be the norm.

To better understand life at the top of elite competitive sport and the possible difficulties associated with being a national champion, we conducted an investigation into the national champion experience of U.S. figure skaters. Our goals were to gain a better understanding of the positive and negative aspects of holding national champion status and to uncover factors that might be associated with the difficulty in defending a championship title. The purposes of this article are to report the positive and negative experiences associated with being national champion figure skaters, to identify factors associated with difficulties encountered in defending a championship, and to report the skaters' recommendations for coping with life at the top of one's sport.

Method

Subjects

Seventeen of a possible 20 U.S. national champion figure skaters who held titles between the years 1985 and 1990 were participants in this investigation.¹ The

sample consisted of 10 females and 7 males. The skaters ranged from 18 to 33 years with a mean age of 25 years, averaging 13 years of skating experience. Eleven skaters successfully defended their title on one or more occasions, whereas 6 of the skaters could not or did not (retired) repeat as champion. Three world champions were included in the sample and 7 skaters had earned medals at either world championships or Olympics.

Procedure

All subjects volunteered to participate in a confidential telephone interview that lasted between 90 and 180 minutes. Each participant was asked the identical sequence of open-ended questions, which appeared in an interview guide. The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim, resulting in 673 pages of transcribed text.

Interview Guide and Questions

The interview guide consisted of a series of preplanned questions organized into a number of interrelated sections: (a) introductory remarks and demographics, (b) involvement of significant others in the skater's life, (c) experience as a national champion, (d) experience at successive nationals, (e) sources of stress, (f) comparison of stress sources, (g) coping strategies, (h) comparison of coping strategies, and (i) advice for future skaters. Because of space limitations, it was impossible to present the findings relative to all nine sections in a single article. Hence, this manuscript focuses on the experience as a national champion, experience at successive nationals, and advice for future skaters. Other articles in the series focus on stress sources and a comparison of stress sources (Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993) and coping strategies and comparison of coping strategies (Gould, Finch, & Jackson, in press).

At the start of the interview the skaters were informed that the interviewer was interested in their overall experience as an elite senior skater, both on and off the ice. In addition, they were told the following:

Since you may have to think back in time, you might not be able to immediately remember some things. Take your time to recall; pauses are fine. If you still can't remember after thinking back, then let me know, but please don't guess.

The specific questions from the interview guide and general follow-up probes used for the data presented in this article are listed in Figure 1. Each participant was asked the identical sequence of questions that appeared in the interview guide and a priori probing rules were used to ensure that responses from all participants were equal in complexity and depth. In particular, in accordance with the recommendations of Scanlan, Stein, and Ravizza (1991), when the interviewer did not fully understand what was said, clarification probes were used to have the skater repeat and clarify the idea mentioned. In addition, elaboration probes (see Figure 1) were used after the participants had discussed an experience to ensure that the interviewer fully understood what the skater was saying and to elicit further ideas. These predetermined, general probes were an attempt to minimize bias in the interview by ensuring that follow-up questions were asked in a similar manner.

I. Experience as a National Champion

The primary focus of this study is to understand what it is like to be a national champion skater. Could you describe to me what this experience was like for you?

Probes:

1. Was there anything else in your experience that was significant, either positive or negative?
2. I need to fully understand what it was about each thing you mentioned that made it significant for you. So, thinking back, what was it about . . . that made it a significant experience for you?

II. Experience at Successive Nationals

We are interested to know whether your experience as a national champion differed from the first year to any subsequent years you remained national champion.

1. Could you describe to me your experience at nationals the year you first won? Was your experience at nationals the next year (and subsequent years as applicable) different? In what ways?
2. Could you tell me about your experience preparing to defend your title? How was it similar to or different from preparing from nationals when you won for the first time?

III. Advice for Future Skaters

I would like to end our discussion by asking what advice, if any, you would offer upcoming skaters striving to become and/or remain national champions. First, what advice would you give to skaters on how to deal with the stress associated with trying to become a national champion? Second, what advice would you give to skaters who have made it to national champion and are trying to remain on top?

Figure 1 — Interview guide questions.

Data Preparation and Analysis Procedures

The transcribed interviews were content analyzed using the procedures recommended by Patton (1990) and successfully adapted to sport by Scanlan, Ravizza, and Stein (1989). Specifically, three trained researchers (a) independently familiarized themselves with all the data by reading the transcriptions repeatedly and listening to the interview tapes, (b) identified as raw data themes specific skater quotations or paraphrased quotations on particular topics of interest (e.g., positive experiences), and (c) organized raw data themes into interpretable and meaningful themes employing both inductive and deductive procedures. In all cases, consensus between the three investigators was necessary when identifying themes that arose from the interview data.

A six-step procedure was utilized to prepare and analyze the qualitative data generated in this investigation. Each of these steps is outlined and described below:

1. All 17 tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. This resulted

in 673 pages of interview data.

2. The three investigators, each having an extensive background in qualitative research methodology and having conducted previous qualitative research, read and reread all 17 transcripts until they became completely familiar with them. Investigators also listened to the tapes of the interviews to glean additional insight such as voice tone, pauses, or use of humor or sarcasm.
3. Ideographic profiles, or summary abstracts, of each skater were developed independently by each investigator. The investigators then extensively discussed each independent profile until consensus was reached.
4. Concurrent with developing the profile, each investigator independently identified raw data themes (quotations or paraphrased quotations that captured the major ideas conveyed in the interview) characterizing each skater's responses within each subsection of the interview. Similarly, the investigators discussed the raw data themes they identified in each subsection (e.g., positive experiences associated with being national champion) until consensus was reached and a list of subsection raw data themes characterizing each participant was identified. Agreement or triangular consensus had to be reached for all 17 ideographic profiles and raw data themes. When disagreements between investigators arose, the investigators would reexamine the transcripts and confer until points of dispute were clarified.
5. Following the general procedures outlined by Scanlan et al. (1989), an inductive analysis was used to identify common themes of greater generality using the list of raw data subsection themes generated in Step 4. Higher level themes were labeled "first order themes" or "second order themes" accordingly with the highest level themes labeled "general dimensions." The general dimensions represented common themes of greatest abstraction or generality. That is, no higher themes were uncovered. Triangular consensus was reached on all identified themes. When analyzing the experience themes, a decision was made to not expand the negative experience themes out to a general dimension level. This was due to two reasons. First, each of the 12 higher order themes appeared salient and further categorization did not seem to add to understanding of the results. Second, these negative experiences tended to be closely linked with the sources of stress. These were examined in depth following the experience section of the interview, and the results are reported in another article in the series (Gould et al., 1993).
6. After all raw data themes, higher order themes, and general dimensions were identified, the investigators reread all descriptors used to identify the themes. This step ensured that the descriptors made intuitive sense and could be easily understood by readers. It also served as a check to ensure that all raw data themes had been placed in lucid higher order themes and that general dimensions made coherent sense.

Results

This investigation was designed (a) to examine the positive and negative experiences associated with being a national champion figure skater, and (b) to solicit the skaters' recommendations for coping with life at the top of one's sport. The

results regarding positive aspects accompanying national champion status will first be presented, followed by the skaters' responses concerning negative aspects accompanying national champion status. These findings resulted from inductive analyses conducted on the skaters' responses regarding the questions requesting that they describe their experiences as a national champion and whether that experience differed from the first year a title was won to any subsequent years during which the skater defended his or her title. Following the positive and negative experience results, the findings regarding advice for future skaters will be presented.

Positive Aspects Accompanying National Champion Status

Four general positive dimensions were arrived at from the inductive analyses of the skaters' responses to the experience as national champion questions.² As can be seen in Figure 2, these dimensions were derived from the 62 raw data themes describing positive experiences. Each of these dimensions is delineated below.

Positive Emotional Experience at National Championships. This dimension combined three higher order themes, all relating to the positive aspects of the experience at national championships. Twenty-five raw data themes were included in this dimension and were mentioned by 12 skaters (71% of total sample). The higher order themes were entitled (a) personal positive emotional high, (b) positive and exciting experience at title defense, and (c) vicarious pleasure from supportive others. "Personal positive emotional high associated with winning title" encompassed the positive emotional reactions of 8 skaters to winning a national championship. Being announced as national champion was described as "the best feeling in the world" by one skater. Other ways in which this time was remembered included terms such as "awesome," "an indescribable feeling," and "a dream come true." "Positive and exciting experience at title defense" described the emotional experience of 9 skaters who successfully defended their title. For one skater, "defending the title was even more exciting than winning the first time." For others, being able to repeat was perceived as required evidence that they were in fact a true national champion, as this comment suggests: "We were very satisfied with our performance at our defense—we showed them we were champions." "Vicarious pleasure for supportive others" reflected the beliefs of three of the skaters that winning was important not only for self but also for the people who were involved in some sort of supportive role during the skaters' climb to the top.

Positive Effects on Self-Esteem From Winning/Defending. Twenty raw data themes, mentioned by 13 skaters (76%), came together to form this dimension involving the positive effects on one's self-esteem that winning or defending a national title brought. The four higher order themes that made up this dimension were (a) sense of goal accomplishment, (b) feeling of honor, (c) increased confidence from being national champion, and (d) satisfaction from working hard and improving to maintain title.

"Sense of goal accomplishment" expressed the satisfaction from achieving a long-term and a hard worked-for goal. It was "my sweetest long-term goal" for one skater, and a "great feeling—culmination of all my efforts and hard work" for another. Understandably, the skaters experienced great joy in the realization that they were the best in the country, as reflected in this skater's words: "Wonderful—proud to achieve goal of being the best at what I do."

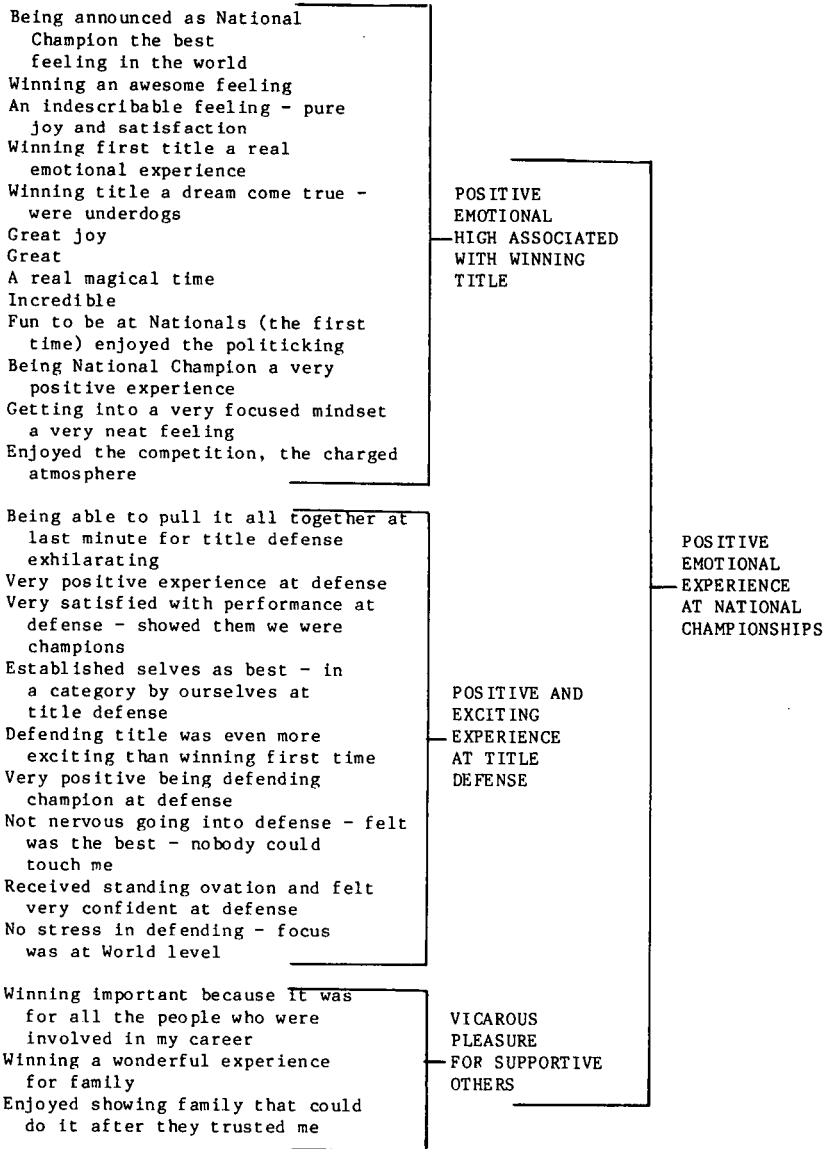


Figure 2 — Positive experiences as a national champion. (continued on next 2 pages)

“Feeling of honor” to be national champion was another higher order theme, expressed by 3 skaters. The honor of being champion of one’s country and being able to say to people that you are national champion were the main ideas expressed under this theme. “Increased confidence from being national champion” was expressed in ideas such as, “My skating improved after I won because I believed

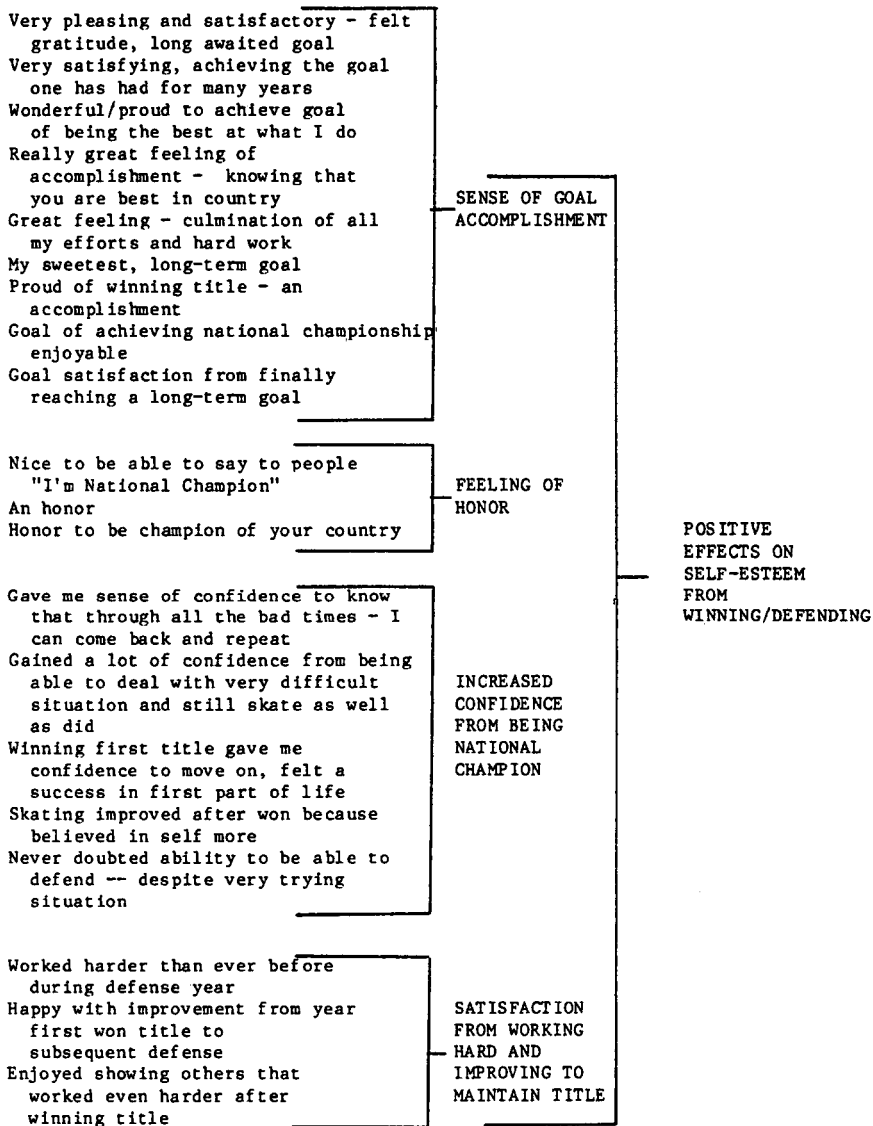


Figure 2 — (continued)

in myself more," and, as one skater put it, "I felt like such a success at that time that I could move on and do anything else and feel like I had been a success in the first part of my life." "Satisfaction from working hard and improving to maintain title," capturing the thoughts of three skaters, had an underlying theme of satisfaction from working harder than the previous year, as if to refute any ideas that because they were national champion, they no longer had to work as hard.

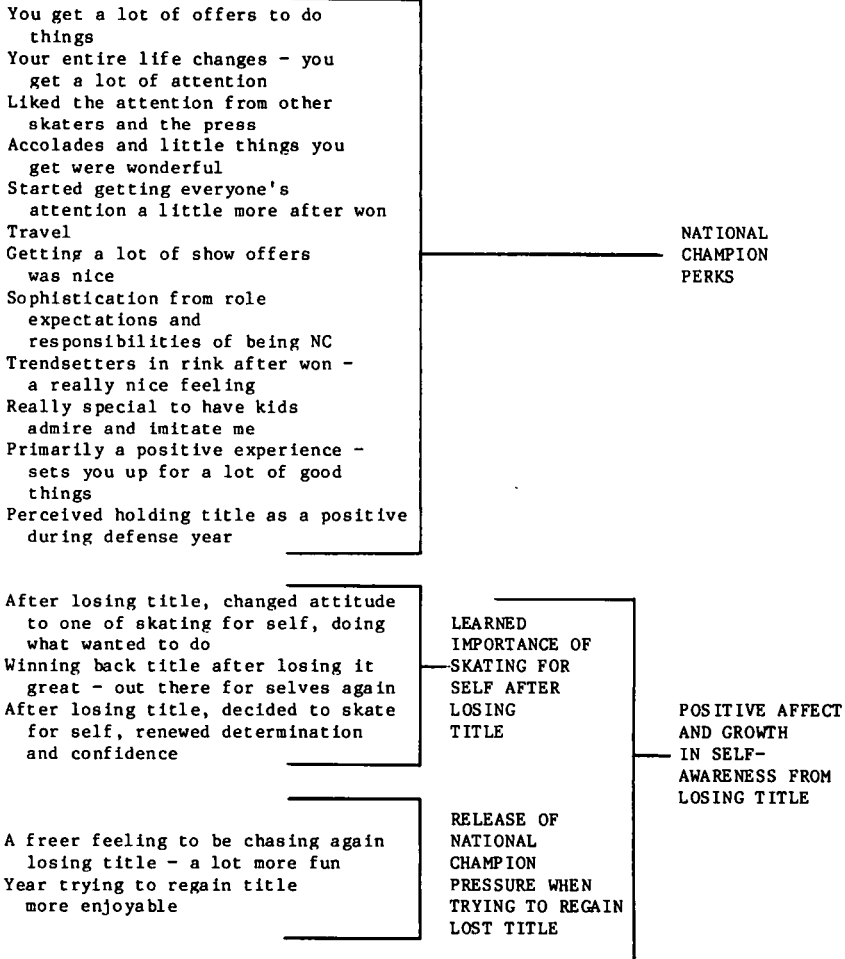


Figure 2 — (continued)

National Champion Perks. This dimension was somewhat unique, and the 12 raw data themes that it included seemed to stand alone, resulting in their being brought out independently to the dimension level. Increase in attention, travel opportunities, show offers, and other accolades made the skaters realize the benefits that accrued from their title. As one skater said, "Your entire life changes—you get a lot of attention." For another it was the realization that suddenly "we were trendsetters in the rink after we won—a really nice feeling." Seven (41%) of the skaters mentioned themes that fell into this dimension.

Positive Affect and Growth in Self-Awareness From Losing Title. This dimension, involving two higher order themes and five raw data themes, described the positive personal growth that resulted from losing one's title. The

two higher order themes were (a) learned importance of skating for self after losing title, and (b) release of national champion pressure when trying to regain lost title. Four (24%) of the skaters expressed ideas that were categorized into this dimension.

"Learned importance of skating for self after losing title" was how three skaters described the experience of losing their title. Losing was an impetus to start skating for themselves again, indicating that there was perceived pressure to be meeting others' expectations once becoming national champion. "Release of national champion pressure when trying to regain lost title" expressed the freer feeling that was perceived by two skaters once a title was lost, putting them back into the chasing role again.

Negative Aspects Accompanying National Champion Status

Eleven independent negative categories of experiences were delineated from the skaters' descriptions of the pressures associated with being national champion. Eighty-eight raw data themes describing negative experiences were drawn from the transcripts. These themes, with their category label, are shown in Figure 3 and described below.

Top Dog Pressures. This category title came from one skater describing the pressure that came with being "top dog." Ten of the 17 skaters cited themes relative to being top dog as a major negative factor accompanying their title, making this the most frequently cited (59%) category representing negative aspects of being national champion. Being on top involved expectations (both own and others) to always skate flawlessly, to never have a bad day, and to produce a higher standard of performance than the previous year. People expecting bigger and better things than before, and a questioning attitude that, if the skater cannot remain on top, is he or she really a champion, also contributed to the negative impact of being national champion.

Pressure From Self or Partner Injury. Six of the 17 skaters (35%) had to deal with a major injury, either to themselves or to their partner. This created additional stress, interfering with preparations to defend and leading to decreased confidence about one's ability to do so.

Skating Politics. The skaters were aware of the need to remain in the judges' favor and of the difficulty of being able to do this. Six of the skaters (35%) mentioned feeling they could not please judges as national champion and/or blamed politics for unfavorable results at successive nationals. Nearly all of the skaters acknowledged that the skating politics existed; some perceived it as a given, whereas others expressed their dissatisfaction openly.

External Obligations. More demands on one's time, stress from major life changes, and the many obligations that came with the role of national champion were perceived as negatives by 5 of the skaters (29%). Again, nearly all of the skaters acknowledged the extra demands, but some chose to perceive this as a given, as with the skating politics.

Insecurity and Uncertainty About Being National Champion. Insecurities about one's worth as national champion emanated from various sources, for example, the feeling that one hadn't made a big enough impression in winning the championship, doubts because of negative comments from other skaters or judges, and questioning whether one would be able to do it again next year. Four (24%) of the skaters expressed these insecurities.

Pressure from up and coming skaters
 Pressure from knowing top dog
 Pressure from people looking at me -
 all know if I have a bad day
 Everything to lose, nothing to gain
 As National Champion, looked at closer
 When on top, expected to win
 A little more concern because people
 (especially judges) compare
 performance to previous year
 Instantly after the first title,
 the pressures doubled and tripled
 Put a lot of pressure on ourselves
 Unbelievable amount of pressure
 A lot harder to repeat
 Start feeling National Champion
 pressure in November - try to
 believe in yourself, can't doubt
 self
 Put some pressure on us getting ready
 for next year (people expected us
 to be better than year before)
 Increase in expectations
 If you can't defend and stay on top,
 are you a true champion? (attitude
 of others)
 Have to prove you can do it - makes
 defense year most difficult
 Feel like everytime you perform,
 you have to prove it
 Had to prove self to audience instead
 of skating for self
 It's like "how can I live up to the
 expectations?"
 A little bit of expectations
 Had to skate like National Champion
 every single time
 Hard to have everyone look up to you
 Few days leading up to defense most
 stressful experience in life
 (expectations of others)

TOP-DOG PRESSURES

Figure 3 — Negative experiences as a national champion. (continued on next 4 pages)

Year of Defense as Negative. Often expressed was the idea that it was more fun to be chasing than to be the chased. The reason? One would not have to skate cautiously when there is nothing to lose. Contained within this theme was the perception held by 4 of the skaters (24%) that the defense year was basically a negative experience, in one skater's words, "pure hell."

Pressure to Continually Produce a Better Performance. The raw data themes that formed this dimension seemed to indicate that the pressure to continually produce a better performance sometimes came from the skaters themselves. Four (24%) of the skaters mentioned themes within this category. For example, one skater said, "There was greater stress because we were always wanting to do better each time we skated." Another commented, "There was pressure tied into knowing we wanted something bigger and better for the following year."

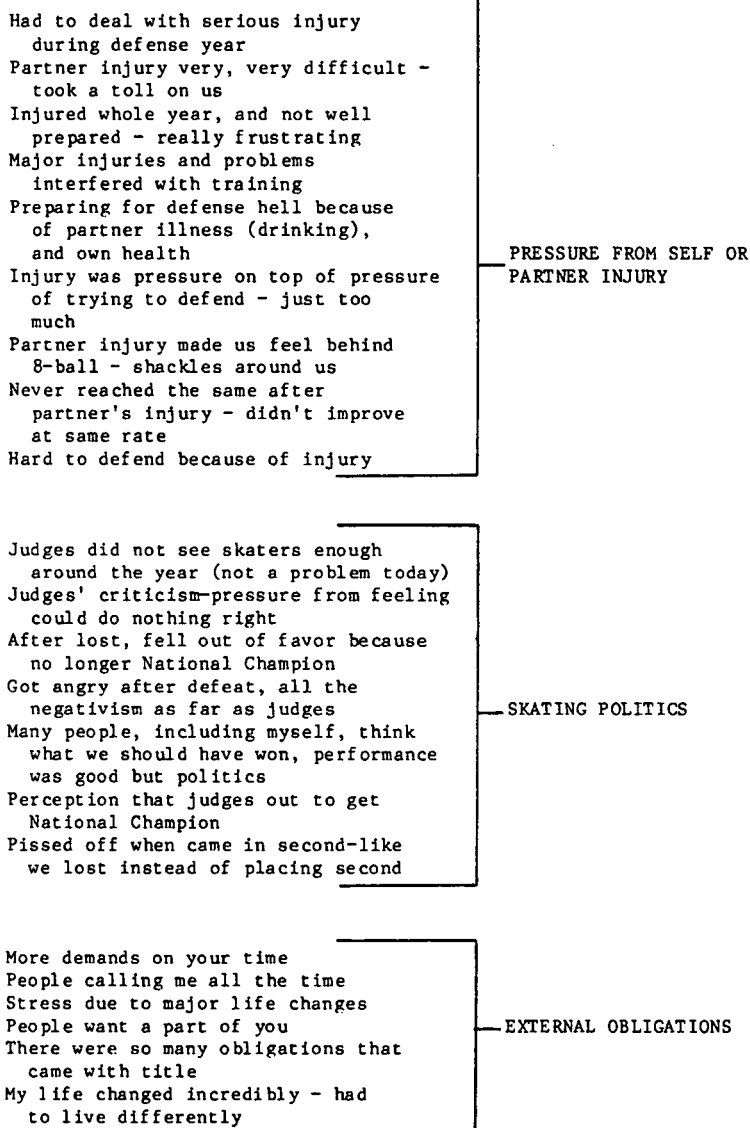


Figure 3 — (continued)

Burnout—Lack of Motivation. The accumulating stress, both leading up to and after winning a championship, led to feelings of burnout and loss of competitive desire in 3 skaters (18%), thus lending support to one of the hypothesized stress factors mentioned by Ogilvie (1990). The following responses to questions of how they felt at a national championship are illustrative of the ideas contained within this theme: "Burned out in a big way," and "Glad national championship's over—tired and stressed and wanted to go home."

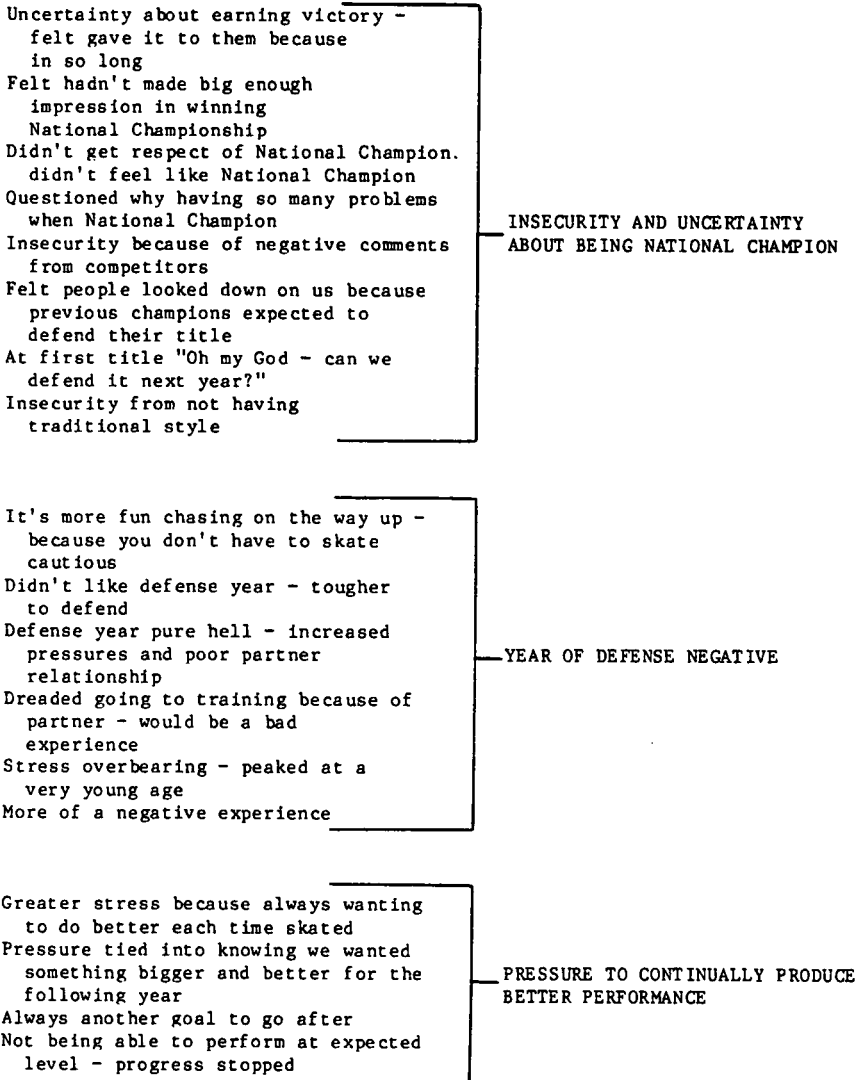


Figure 3 — (continued)

Anticlimactic Feelings Accompanying Title. It was disappointing for 3 of the skaters (18%) that winning a national championship was somewhat anticlimactic and not what they thought it would be. For one skater, becoming national champion was expected: "I was supposed to be national champion by that time, and a surprise would only have been a bad one."

Uncertainty Relative to National Champion Role and Responsibility. For 3 skaters (18%), there was much anxiety associated with living up to the role

Glad National Championships over -
tired and stressed and wanted
to go home
Everything began to pile up after
winning first championship
Burnout at defense - not hungry and
hard to train
Burned out in a big way
Did not have competitive hunger

BURNOUT - LACK OF MOTIVATION

Slightly disappointed because not
what expected (not state of elation)
At moment - kind of anticlimactic
Slightly disappointed - was supposed
to be National Champion by then
(only surprise would be a bad one)
Disappointing first title - thought
would feel like could jump over
moon, but feeling never came
Enjoyed winning title for short time
only since had to prepare for Worlds
Expected to win - but not as expected
it to be

ANTICLIMACTIC FEELINGS
ACCOMPANYING TITLE

No idea how to handle being on top -
totally scary thing - only knew
how to come from behind
Really torturous, really awful
personal pressure from unrealistic
expectations of what a National
Champion should be and act like
Pressure on top - didn't feel as
comfortable
Questioned if ready for responsibility
of being National Champion

UNCERTAINTY RELATIVE TO NATIONAL
CHAMPION ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Expectations from others relative
to type of program they expect
from you
There were always people around
telling you how you should skate

PROGRAM FEEDBACK FROM OTHERS

Figure 3 — (continued)

and responsibilities of national champion. This was not a role they were at all sure how to deal with, having always come from behind. As one skater put it, "And so, suddenly when we were on the top, I really didn't know how to handle it. It was a totally scary thing." Again, personal, unrealistic expectations about what a national champion "should be" and "act like," as well as uncertainty as to whether one was ready for this role, created role strain for some skaters. This category of responses differed from the "insecurity and uncertainty" category

Each defense year involved new trauma
 due to inconsistency in preparation
 Stress due to major decision in skating
 Guilt over putting people close to
 me through so much stress
 Nationals more pressure than worlds -
 never knew what your own judges
 were going to do
 Felt isolated due to being National
 Champion
 A lot of pressure knowing people
 expecting a fall
 Self-expectations regarding being
 #1 U.S. couple at Worlds/Olympics
 Pressure to skate well at Nationals
 to make world team

— IDIOSYNCRATIC/MISCELLANEOUS

Figure 3 — (continued)

previously mentioned in that it focused on uncertainty about fulfilling the roles and responsibilities of being a champion, whereas the insecurity and uncertainty category reflected the skaters' uncertainty as to whether they deserved to be a champion.

Program Feedback From Others. Expectations from others relative to the type of program one should be producing and people always being around telling the skater how to skate were unwanted burdens faced by most of the skaters, although only 2 (12%) specifically mentioned this theme as a major negative factor to their experience.

Idiosyncratic/Miscellaneous. Eight raw data themes did not easily fit into any of the above categories and so were categorized under an idiosyncratic/miscellaneous heading. These individual sources of stress are listed in Figure 3.

Recommendations for Attaining and Maintaining a National Title

At the end of each interview, the interviewer solicited recommendations from the skaters relative to their ideas about what it takes to become a national champion and to successfully defend a title. The guidelines below are a summary of the specific skater recommendations for skaters trying to attain and maintain a championship title:

- Do not be afraid to grow and take risks as a skater.
- Learn to filter feedback and recommendations for change, as you will receive vast amounts of both good and poor advice.
- Work to keep positive, and develop a focus on performing for yourself and doing the best you can. Do not fall into the trap of feeling you have to be perfect all the time because that is what you think a national champion is supposed to be.
- Seek and utilize social support. Use family, friends, and coaches for support, rather than trying to deal with this pressure all by yourself.

- Seek and further develop mental capabilities by learning more about psychological skills training and development.
- Develop other life pursuits outside your sport, whether it be a job, education, or friends. That way, if you are struggling with your sport, you have other things to feel good about and take pride in.
- Train hard and smart by further developing time-management skills (including recognizing when to take time off from skating), and remember to train hard and not take anything for granted.

Discussion

Better Understanding Life at the Top

Interviewing 17 United States national champion figure skaters afforded much insight into the experiences these, and possibly other, national champion athletes face. The skaters shared both the good and the bad facets of the national champion role. Although none of the skaters regretted winning their title or the positive aspects of the lifestyle that came with the title, there were many negative experiences, as well as new stresses, that came with the role of national champion. These stresses made life after winning the championship much more stressful than before for the majority of the skaters. In fact, from another report from this investigation it was shown that 71% of these skaters reported experiencing more stress after winning their title than before achieving it (Gould et al., 1993). When the myriad and intensity of stress that comes with the role of national champion is explored, it is no wonder that being able to repeat is such a difficult accomplishment. From the list of themes of negative aspects associated with being national champion, it is possible to surmise what some of the major problems may be that make it so difficult for a national champion skater, and by extension other national champion athletes, to defend a title.

First, the assumption that athletes who have won a national championship are secure in their abilities and confident of being able to defend was shown to not necessarily be the case. Some of the skaters questioned their victory and seriously doubted whether they would be able to fulfill the perceived expectations of a national champion. This is a very important finding because, in reading the literature discussing psychological skills and attributes of highly successful elite athletes, it is easily assumed that these individuals seldom have problems with self-doubts, anxiety, and confidence. Our investigation, however, showed that, although these highly successful champion skaters exhibited many of the characteristics profiled in the articles by Williams (1986), Orlick and Partington (1988), and Gould et al. (1992a, 1992b), they also exhibited self-doubts, anxiety, and lapses in confidence. It is important that sport psychology consultants recognize this. Furthermore, this finding emphasizes the need for sport psychology researchers to study athletes over time and to examine such issues as how highly successful athletes cope with stress and anxiety across a season.

Ogilvie's (1990) suggested drop in motivational intensity accompanying a championship was supported by some of the skaters' comments; however, this drop in intensity was not due to complacency but to burnout. Further, a preference for chasing rather than being chased came through as an additional motivational change factor that may have affected the ability to successfully defend. Dislike

for the "being chased" phenomenon may lead to a nonoptimal arousal state that sport psychology research has shown to negatively affect performance (Gould & Krane, 1992).

An increase in responsibilities and expectations that come with being a national champion seems to be a major factor in the difficulty to repeat phenomena. Perhaps the superhuman qualities bestowed on national champions in a high-profile sport lead to unrealistic superhuman expectations by the athletes who find themselves in such a role. This certainly seems to be the perception of at least some of the skaters interviewed, who spoke of believing they could never make a mistake and of having to be constantly producing a better performance. On top of their own expectations about the type of skater they had to be were the expectations from judges, spectators, and loved ones, making for a pressure-cooker situation in which any mistakes or unmet expectations created even more stress on the already overtaxed coping skills of these athletes. An increase in criticism accompanied the national champion title, with everyone having an opinion on how to train or how to perform, leaving the skater confused and possibly in some cases contributing to a failure to repeat. That this criticism had such an impact is supported by the fact that several skaters mentioned the satisfaction from coming to the realization—often after losing their title—that the only way to perform successfully and be happy about doing so was to decide to skate for oneself again.

Although the above explanations focus on psychological factors that may influence the ability of an athlete to repeat a championship, this is not to imply that physical factors are not also involved. Several skaters, for example, experienced injuries (and subsequent stress associated with those injuries) that influenced their ability to defend. There was no mention of the idea of increased parity in the ranks of elite skaters being a factor, and so it was not possible to assess this contention put forward by Ogilvie (1990). Similarly, the lack of recognition or rewards hypothesized by Ogilvie was not mentioned directly except by one skater who perceived that he did not get the respect of a national champion. Associated insecurities about whether one was a true national champion may have sprung from a lack of recognition of one's accomplishments, although it is impossible to know this with certainty.

In conclusion, based on the responses of this sample of champion skaters, the most likely psychological explanation for the failure-to-repeat phenomenon included increased expectations and responsibilities and a shift in motivational orientation in which arousal was increased and interpreted negatively. The most probable physical explanation related to athletic injuries and stress caused by those injuries. The idea that champions trying to repeat are unwilling to pay the price of hard training or were denied recognition or rewards was not strongly supported.

Although it is important to surmise what may underlie the difficulty to repeat a national championship, it should be remembered that 11 of the athletes in this sample were able to successfully defend their title, and that even for those skaters who did not successfully defend, there were positive experiences associated with winning a first title, as well as with the process of trying to defend. Becoming national champion was the culmination of many years of hard training and sacrifices, and the time of winning was an emotional high for most of the skaters. There were perks that came with the title, for example, show

offers, travel opportunities, and being the center of attention at the rink. Confidence increased for many of the skaters after winning their title, and for some, knowing they were in the limelight motivated them to work even harder and produce an even higher standard of performance.

Methodological Issues

In interpreting the findings of this investigation, several methodological issues must be considered. Three potential limitations include (a) the telephone interview format utilized, (b) the potential for memory decay in retrospective recall, and (c) the fact that recall may have been influenced by the success these athletes experienced. Each of these is briefly addressed below.

Because of financial constraints and the varied locations throughout the country in which the skaters lived, a telephone interview format was the only viable interview option. Although this format prohibited the interviewer from detecting nonverbal respondent cues, it was felt that a high level of trust was established between the respondents and interviewer. Moreover, trust between the investigator and investigated is one of the most important features of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Potential memory decay is a limitation in any retrospective study. However, trivial or unimportant incidents have been shown to be much more receptive to memory decay than major life events like the ones that were the focus of interest in this investigation (Wagenaar, 1986). However, memory decay cannot be totally ruled out as a potential limitation in this investigation.

Finally, it is possible that, because all the skaters interviewed were national champions, the success they experienced may have in some way biased their recall of events. Unfortunately, this is an inherent limitation of this type of investigation.

Helping Elite Athletes Cope With Life at the Top

A primary purpose of this investigation was to better understand the experiences of a group of national champion athletes in order to help future aspiring national champions be more prepared to cope with this role and therefore be in a better position to defend a national championship title. The inductive analyses resulted in information relative to the nature of the experiences, both positive and negative, that the skaters faced, from which inferences can be made about behaviors that may be more likely to help an athlete successfully defend. However, the first place to start looking for implications for coping with life at the top is from the skaters themselves. To this end, we solicited recommendations from the skaters relative to what they perceived should be done to successfully defend a title. The guidelines given by the skaters are good advice for any national champion athlete to consider when trying to successfully defend a title. Because experience is often the best teacher, it is recommended that serious consideration be given to the ideas forwarded by the skaters, such as do not be afraid to grow and take risks; learn to filter feedback and recommendations for change, as a champion will receive vast amounts of both good and poor advice; work to keep positive, developing a focus on performing for oneself, and do one's best; and do not fall into the trap of feeling one must be perfect all the time because that is what a national champion is supposed to be.

To help prepare future elite skaters, and possibly other elite athletes, to cope with the demands of trying to either attain or maintain a national championship, one step that can be taken is to increase the awareness of athlete, coach, and sport science and medicine specialist relative to the amounts and types of stress experienced, as well as the coping strategies successfully employed by the skaters in this study. For example, knowing that time demands are a frequently reported stress source by national champion skaters, upon winning their first title new champions and their coaches can immediately take steps to ensure that they do not overcommit themselves. Similarly, it is very important for new champions to realize that it is normal to have doubts and concerns once national champion status is achieved, and in fact, for many skaters being chased may provoke more stress than chasing a title. Just knowing this fact should help such athletes better cope with life at the top because they can attribute these concerns to the role of being a champion and not necessarily to flaws or weaknesses in their own mental makeup.

In summary, it is hoped that the information we learned from talking to athletes who have struggled with national champion pressures and role expectations may assist future aspiring athletes to prepare for and cope successfully with life at the top. Moreover, we contend that by understanding the type and severity of stress that national champion athletes are often faced with, sports psychology specialists may be able to more effectively provide assistance to such athletes.

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Notes

¹It must be noted that in the period from 1985 to 1990, 36 individual skaters could have held national senior titles. However, due to repeat titlists, only 20 individuals held senior titles during this time period, and only these individuals were eligible for participation in this study.

²Although the skaters were asked several questions about their experiences as national champions, considerable overlap existed in their responses to these questions. Moreover, the striking feature of the responses focused on the listing of positive and negative aspects of the experience. It was deemed most appropriate to focus on these aspects.

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