

Unexpected Opportunity:

A Silver Lining for Coaches During the Age of Corona

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The full reach of the COVID-19 crisis will be debated and decided for generations to come. Choosing to build careers in the rink and on the ice, coaches now find themselves scrambling to innovate and restructure the only teaching model they have ever employed. With shifting timetables and guidelines that remain in flux, getting back to business as usual may not be possible without massive renovation.

In 2017, I was approached by a small group of skating parents from the Steamboat Springs Figure Skating Club. After 20+ years, their small town skating club was on the brink of closure; with only nine skaters left, the club was desperate to find an instructor, fearing the club would not survive another year without one. I had moved to Steamboat for other reasons, taking a job as the Resource Development Director for the Boys & Girls Clubs of NWCO. I had never formally coached figure skating despite my competitive background and professional career. From 1998-2017, I had devoted my life to my family, education and a

burgeoning career in marketing and non-profit management. Life in a small ski town is expensive. Trying to build a skating program in the best of areas is a challenge, but building one in a town with an abnormally high cost of living is a near impossibility. What led me to help is still up for debate. After a month of brainstorming, I had devised a plan, a radically unorthodox plan for the world of figure skating. In order to save the program, I would need to do more than simply teach private lessons. Two and a half hours per week is simply not enough time for nine skaters. Lacking the resources and staff to run the club in a typical fashion, I chose to restructure the club using tools typically employed by ballet companies and gymnastics centers.

Our first step was to create a training schedule that had kids taking more classes off ice than on ice. We taught ballet, pilates, acting, and youth development classes every week. Next, I divided the skaters into teams, so that I could ensure no child was left behind. I called the best coaches I knew personally and spent time studying their training methods.



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I sent my skaters to work with them and brought their students to our rink any chance I could. I called my friends in the nonprofit world and started applying for grants that were available to organizations that provided positive youth development. I worked with my local Boys & Girls Club to provide low or no cost instruction for children in need, and I started a shared skating equipment library using a grant from my Rotary Club.

By the fall of 2017, we had a product. Overnight, our membership doubled, and when it was time to begin registration for our Spring Show, we turned to the Hockey Club and invited their kids to participate. With routines designed just for hockey kids, we were able to add 21 skaters to our cast. In March of 2018, we produced our first children’s musical on ice. Both shows sold out, and the Club made enough money to cover their ice bill for the coming season. Seeing the need for expansion, my husband flew to NYC to study ballet technique at the American Ballet Theatre while I worked to find a studio that could accommodate our off-ice needs. The following summer, we opened the Steamboat Arts Academy, a private

studio that would allow us to provide even more ballet training to our skating teams. By December of the same year, we were serving over 150 young skaters, dancers, actors, and singers. Necessity being the mother of invention, we never imagined that we would own a performing arts studio or that our training model would be on the forefront of a new movement in figure skating.

With over 60 club members and multiple performing arts partnerships, the Steamboat Skating Club and Piknik Theatre have successfully produced two full length musicals on ice, drawing crowds in excess of 500 people each night. Working with dedicated parents, we have moved the club’s operating budget from \$25,000 in 2017 to just under \$100k in 2019. This is thanks in part to our

expanding list of community partnerships which provided over \$30k in operating grants this year. While that is truly an accomplishment, the biggest factor in our success was and is our programming model that employs a team teaching and youth development model. Every skater in our Club is trained in ballet and off ice technical alignment. I cannot stress enough how much our skaters need classical ballet. While all forms of dance are beneficial, the discipline and functionality required by classical ballet is the single most beneficial “add-on” for skaters, ranking above conditioning and pilates in my opinion. If we want to know why the Russian skating model is so effective, look no further than the ballet studio. Our skaters wear club issued uniforms on the ice and black leotards and buns in ballet class. As they say





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at ABT, the studio (and the ice) are a great equalizer. Vanity is for the weak. Our skaters are responsible for one another, and no skater is allowed to leave a training session until the team has completed a “final lap,” the session’s last display of unity that concludes with a bow to show gratitude to their coaches and to each other. It is an act we require of all skaters, even those in our Learn to Skate program. As coaches and directors, we are responsible to provide a platform for growth and development, a place where young artists and athletes feel supported and challenged. Most of the children we work with won’t go on to competitive glory, but that isn’t the reason we do this job. At least it shouldn’t be. We have been given a chance to change the world by positively impacting the lives of young people. If the rinks are closed, then we must find a new way to train.

Recently, coaching friends from all over the country have been reaching out to us eager to learn how we teach everything from snowplow stops to moves in the field off ice. While it is possible to train off ice, it is important

to note that my husband and I have invested a fair amount of time and resources studying with dancers and instructors from the American Ballet Theatre, Joffrey and the Bolshoi Ballet in NYC. We have sought guidance and instruction from skating legends, Broadway stars, national heads of nonprofits and marketing consultants. In order to grow, we first had to admit that we didn’t have all the answers, then we asked for advice and re-imagined what it means to be a skating coach. We have made a ton of mistakes and enjoyed a few small victories. Our program is not competitively prestigious by any stretch of the imagination, but it is a thriving organization with a healthy atmosphere anchored by a sense of community and inclusion.

The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to end the careers of many, but it doesn’t have to end yours provided you have the grit and humility to partner with people and organizations you never would have considered just one month ago. Now more than ever, we must find the grace and confidence to support each other and the institu-

tions that govern our majestic sport. Respecting SafeSport, we must find ways to connect with our students and their parents in meaningful ways, proving to them that they mean more to us than a paycheck. The time to rest on our accolades as athletes and notoriety as career coaches is over. Industries, including our own, have been fundamentally changed overnight; those who will weather this storm are the innovators, the creators and the collaborators. May we all find the courage and humility to renovate our reality and serve the children in our care. ❖



Taylor grew up skating in Detroit, MI at the Detroit Skating Club. With a diverse background that includes Disney On Ice and a degree in Religious and Medieval Studies from UNC Chapel Hill, she recently served as the Marketing & Development Director for the Boys & Girls Clubs of NWCO until 2019. In 2018, Taylor was awarded CREATIVE LEADER of the YEAR

by the Arts Council for her artistic pursuits both on and off the ice. She and husband, Jeremiah Jackson, teach skaters, dancers, and artists in Denver and Steamboat respectively.