

What Would Choeleen Loundagin Do?

By Terri Milner Tarquini



Choeleen Loundagin has dedicated her career to a lofty goal: to help skaters with their mental toughness so they can achieve their personal best on the ice. A coach for over

20 years at the famous Redwood Empire Ice Arena (a.k.a. Snoopy's Home Ice) in northern California, Loundagin has a Master's Degree in Sports Psychology, is an athletic performance enhancement consultant, authored two editions of the book, *"The Inner Champion: A Mental Toughness Training Manual for Figure Skaters"* and co-produced the CD, "Skate for the Love." The current U.S. Adult Figure Skating Championship gold medalist in pairs, Loundagin is a quadruple gold medalist who earned her gold tests in figures and freestyle in 1983, in moves in the field in 1995 and in pairs in 2012 ("At the young age of 45," Loundagin said. "Which has to be some kind of a record because who's dumb enough to do that?") In addition to one-on-one consultations, Loundagin conducts Inner Champion Mental Toughness Training Seminars around the nation. In a sport where success so often lies in a skater's mental capabilities, Loundagin speaks specifically about "the mind-body connection" and skills that coaches can help their skaters with, when she answers the question, "What Would Choeleen Loundagin Do?"

What is the thing you value most as a skating coach?

The long-term relationships you form and being able to have a positive influence on children. I've been fortunate in that I've had many of my students stay in contact with me. I've gone to their weddings, met their children, seen where their careers have taken them. It's so rewarding and gives you such confirmation when someone tells you that it was something you said or something you did or the belief you had in them that led them to face a challenge or to go in a certain

direction. It's having had a hand in developing good people.

What is your main goal for your skaters?

For them to achieve their goals that they've chosen in a positive growth-oriented way. I have a variety of students with different focuses and a big part of my job is to figure out what their purpose is and then do everything in my power to help them attain those goals.

How did you decide to delve into the mental aspect of skating? That's a big hurdle!

(Laughs) It is big! I decided on the sports psychology field after seeing a sports psychologist when I was 15 years old and a junior lady. He helped me immensely. I had no clue I could control my thoughts and how I performed. It was such a new concept to me. I was able to use that not only in skating, but in school and in the rest of my life. I realized it was life skills. The mental part is a hurdle in any sport but especially in skating where there is so much having to do with fine motor skills – and it all has to be made to look easy and performed with a big smile. The mental skills are so huge to reach your potential in skating – even if it's just recreational. The ability to stay focused, to set goals and achieve them, and to control thoughts is so important.

There have always been figures thrown around about what percentage of figure skating is mental. What do you think the percentage is?

At least 50 percent. It changes depending on what level you are. The higher the level, the higher the percentage. Take nationals – once you get there, you are physically trained. You are not learning which shoulder should be in front on a jump and you've done your program more times than you can count. At that point, it's very mental. It's about getting out of your own way and doing what you know how to do.

Your book, "The Inner Champion," focuses on the idea of the "mind-body connection." Talk about that theory.

The mind-body connection is real. Your thoughts and your emotions all affect

how your body performs. If you don't get enough rest, if you don't eat properly, your mental function is going to suffer – and so will your physical functions. When kids don't skate well, they always say, "I don't feel like myself." Well, that's true, but why? Examine it and learn from it and learn to control it. It is a skill that needs to be practiced. You can learn to do an outside edge on a double Lutz take-off. You can also learn to control your mind and body.

Do you have any tips for coaches to properly aid their skaters with setting goals so they get the most out of it?

I think with goal-setting, it should be made standard practice. Make it part of the routine that, at the beginning of each season, intentions are set and then revisit the goals at regular intervals. Goals should be written down so it's more like a contract. It's a big mistake to not look at the goals regularly and talk about where we are and where we want to be and what needs to happen to get there.

How important is visualization?

Incredibly important. It's the skill most used by Olympic athletes. If you can't imagine something even happening, then it's hard to believe it can happen. But it's not something to just pull out for the first time at competition when your skater has just come off the warm-up and they're skating eighth so you tell them to visualize their program while they're waiting. For some people it takes quite a bit of practice, but, if it's used consistently, it can be extremely effective in overcoming mental blocks, in speeding up the learning process and in the day-to-day of helping kids get back on track with a move that is off today but was on the day before.

What do you see as the most harmful thing a skater can do to negatively affect their performance?

First, by doubting themselves instead of trusting in their training. And, second, by losing control over their focus and starting to focus on things they can't control – who they're skating against, who the judges are, the skating order, etc. Skaters

must focus on what they have control over and control it.

What harmful things can a coach do to negatively affect a skater's performance?

Putting undo pressure on them. Telling them they need to make the top six or top two or whatever. That is emphasizing something that is not in their control. Also, putting doubts in their mind, like, "Remember not to fall on this," or, "Remember not to rush through that part." The skater might not even have considered those things. Focus on what you want them to do, not what they shouldn't do. Also, try and keep it light. Getting really serious right before competition or testing when it's not usually like that doesn't help anything.

On the flip side, how can a coach positively influence a skater and help with the mind-body connection?

Introduce the idea of the mind-body connection early on so they have the skills to draw on later on when they need them. Skaters learn the correct technique for elements, but they also need to learn the correct technique for their mind and their body to work together. There are lots of resources if the coach themselves needs some help with the process, like mental skills trainers and books. Mental training should be used like any other resource – like ballet or off-ice training – it is just another tool in the arsenal. If you ask a skater what percentage of their performance is mental, the answer is usually pretty high. But the amount of time spent on mental training is almost nothing. It is an unused resource.

How much time do you advise skaters to spend on their mental training?

Probably 15 minutes a day, no more than one hour. Ideally it should be integrated into on-ice training so it's not a whole other thing they have to do. Kids are time-crunched already. Coaches can work on mental skills by goal-setting and using visualization during lesson time.

Are there things a coach can look for to determine their skater needs more help when it comes to mental training and preparation?

Really inconsistent skaters that have the physical ability are a red flag. Other circum-

stances that might call for some help are skaters who run really hot or really cold; those who are more consistent in practice, then totally different or substandard in testing or competition; and skaters who only focus on being perfect or get really, really frustrated on a regular basis.

What about the skater who gets off the ice after performing badly and just wants to "go out and do it again"?

The worst feeling is getting off the ice and wanting to go right back out – not because you skated so well and you want the great feeling to continue – but because you know you didn't do your stuff and yet you know you can do it. It's a horrible feeling. It's one of the jobs of a coach to make sure that each skater has the skills to draw from so they can perform their best consistently. You need to help them pick out a routine with their mental preparation, and a combination of skills, that works for them.

As a coach, are there any specific things you do or say to your skaters as they are preparing to perform?

Every kid is so different so it's up to us as coaches to identify their pre-performance needs. Some kids need to burn off energy before they perform and some kids need to relax. Some kids bounce off the walls and some are nearly comatose. As a coach, we need to figure that out and help them with how to get to that place on their own.

If you hadn't been a figure skating coach, what would you have done?

I probably would have been more involved in sports psychology and academia. That was my original plan, but I have coaching also and I love it. I love the kids that smile at me every day and the adults still reaching for their goals. My original intention was to coach for two years, but I figured out how to do both (coaching and sports psychology). It has been so rewarding.

Do you have an overall coaching philosophy or mission statement?



It's not a specific saying, but it's the idea that I want to focus on the overall development of the person I'm working with. I just want to do my best to bring out their best.

Who or what inspires you as a coach?

The first time I ever skated I was two-and-a-half years old and I am lucky enough to have video of it. Skippy Baxter, (in photo above) took me out and I must have fallen 50 times and he kept picking me up. He was smiling and laughing and I was smiling and laughing and it really set the tone for me – you fall down, you get back up. He was my first coach and he was 93 when he died (in December 2012) and still coaching all levels of group lessons when he was 89. He was such a great inspiration. The last day he lived, I was with him as part of his care team. It was such an honor to be there with him.

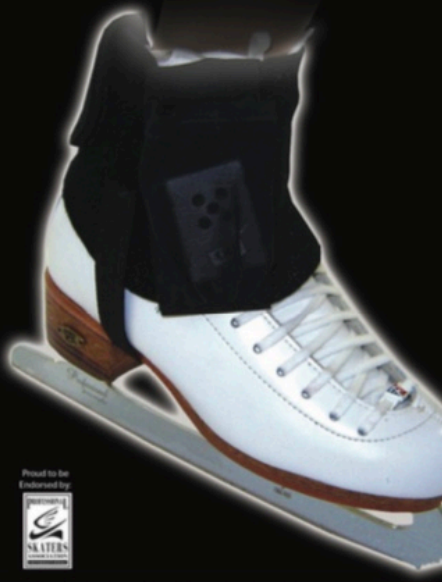
And there are so many others. Charles Schultz (the cartoonist behind the Peanuts comic strip and the original owner of the Redwood Empire Ice Arena) gave me the confidence to go ahead with "The Inner Champion." Richard Dwyer was always skating around, still doing double loops. I always thought that it seemed impossible that someone could be so incredibly positive and so high energy, but he genuinely is. Having those examples from the get-go really showed me that we were teaching more than just skating.


It seems coaches are expected to wear a multitude of hats – coach, trainer,

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motivator, babysitter, psychologist, psychiatrist, dietician, cheerleader, etc.

Have you ever thought about writing a mental toughness book for coaches?

(Laughs) I guess I kind of did. In the second edition, I include at the end of each chapter a part for parents and a part for coaches to help them with the information the skater is getting from the book. It's important to help support the mental development of your skaters, but it's also important to help yourself. It's a stressful job. Coaches also need to know how to handle the pressures they have the most effective way possible.

What do you think is most important for coaches to impart to their skaters?

Sportsmanship. Being a good role model. Being a good example. We need to always remember we work with very impressionable people – and we need to be aware of that. ❖




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