



AN ACT OF COURAGE

Skating just days after her mother's death, Joannie Rochette delivered the defining moment of the Games **BY KEN MACQUEEN**

It was late; 11 p.m. had come and gone, and Joannie Rochette, the bronze medal around her neck, was still lingering at Vancouver's Pacific Coliseum, talking about the sudden death of her mother Thérèse. "It feels good for me to talk about it," she said. An empty arena can be a chill and spooky place, but for Rochette, any rink echoes with memories of home. The audience of almost 12,000, at turns boisterous and weepy, had long since filed out, doubly blessed by two moments of Olympic magic.

First, they had witnessed four minutes of near perfection in the gold-medal skate of Korea's Yu-Na Kim, the 19-year-old prodigy coached by Brian Orser, one of the finest male skaters Canada has produced. It was fluid and strong and so self-assured that even those unschooled in the intricacies of the sport could see Kim operated at a different level. As the last strains of Gershwin's *Concerto in F* faded, and the crowd roared, Kim surprised even herself: she started to cry.

Later, the 19-year-old Kim seemed almost embarrassed by this weakness. She never cries, she said. "Watching previous figure skaters, I always wondered why they cried after their performance," she says. "I'm really happy. I don't know why I cried."

If Kim's tears were a surprise, so too was the calm, collected demeanour of 24-year-old Rochette. Many tears had been shed in the four days since Thérèse Rochette, just 55, died of a heart attack early on Sunday, Feb. 21, hours after arriving in Vancouver with her husband, Normand, to watch Joannie skate. The days since were filled with grief and turmoil and just the faintest flickers of doubt. Could she skate? Should she skate? Should she return with her father to tiny Île Dupas, Que., to bury her mother?

Neither the audience, nor, perhaps, Rochette herself knew what to expect when she took to the ice for her long program. A phe-

nominal skate in her short program put her in third place, but did she have it in her to repeat that performance? What they got was the persona she calls "Joannie the athlete." She wore a pretty turquoise costume, studded with intricate beadwork. Her blond hair was swept up tight, held with an elaborate gold-metal clasp. Somewhere deep inside, emotions were bound even tighter; she was a warrior in perfect makeup.

This is what her mother, an unrelenting perfectionist, had prepared her for. This was their "lifetime project," as Joannie later put it. This was a long program she knew so well, skated to the operatic *Samson and Delilah*

by French composer Camille Saint-Saëns. "I was so ready coming here, and thank God for that," she said. "I could rely on my training. I could rely on my instincts and let my body do what it has to do."

Joannie the athlete delivered a strong performance, though not without glitches. She stepped out of her landing on a triple flip and she dropped a second double axel. Still, it was a well-executed, challenging program, one that fell just short of the silver medal.

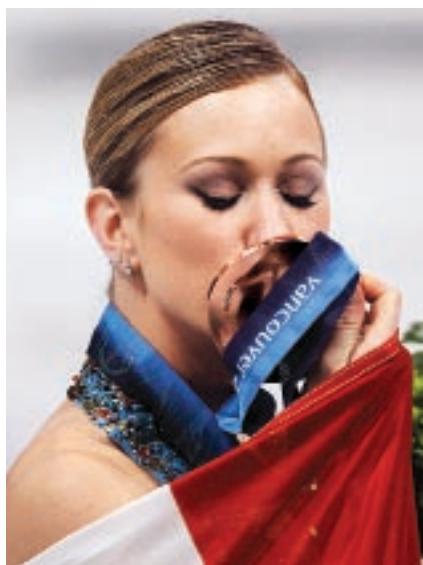
Flowers and stuffed dolls rained down. Rochette scooped up a tiny mascot, smiled and waved it to the crowd. Young girls from local skating clubs swept across the ice gathering the rest by the armful. One hopes they appreciated what they saw; that they have mothers to advise them to treasure this memory, and all the courage it represents.

Even under better circumstances it was no small achievement. She becomes only the fifth Canadian woman singles skater to win a medal, after Elizabeth Manley, Karen Magnussen, Petra Burka and Barbara Ann Scott. It came just days after the gold-medal skate of ice dancers Scott Moir and Tessa Virtue; Virtue was, until the tragedy, Rochette's roommate in the Olympic Village. Both medals were welcome morale boosts for Skate Canada after Patrick Chan, not skating his best in his first Olympics, finished fifth.

As beautiful as Rochette's bronze-medal moment was, for many it will be her short program, two days after her mother's death, that reigns as one of the defining moments of these, or any, Olympic Games. Joannie the athlete delivered a raw, unsmiling performance, all the more powerful because Joannie the person, aching with loss, struggled just beneath the facade.

There was only the program to carry her, and the music: *La Cumparsita*, a tango at points jaunty and wistful and sad. Sometimes, goes the bumper sticker, life is just about showing up. Rochette did so much more than that. She launched into her triple-Lutz-double-toe-loop combination. It was clean and solid

Brave face: When she finished her short program, Rochette's emotions broke through



JOANNIE ROCHETTE

She had Canadian Shae-Lynn Bourne, a former world ice dancing champion, choreograph her short program • She can't live without Nutella, face cream, mascara and a dishwasher • Aside from skating, her favourite sport is tennis—she's a big fan of Rafael Nadal





Flawless: Kim Yu-na of South Korea, with her coach, Canadian Olympian Brian Orser, earned a world-record score for her efforts

and brave, and if she was relieved, there was no hint of it. She carried on: flying sit spin, double axel, and on and on. There was no attempt to sell the program to the audience or to the judges. It was obvious by being here how much this meant to her.

It ended with a spin. Her composure cracked when the music stopped and the crowd exploded in applause. The real world came back into focus, and she shuddered with grief. She skated off the ice into the arms of her coach, and they wept. She composed herself in the place known as the kiss and cry zone. It's a tiny place; just room enough for a skater and a coach, and, this night, for 11,700 members of the audience. The short program was far harder on her, she admitted later. "Even though I was trying to be focused on my goals, emotions got the better of me. I didn't know if I could skate, my legs were shaking."

Anyone in that arena who had experienced loss—most people, in other words—must have wondered what they would do under similar circumstances. And most, if they are honest, don't know. It may be as simple as sticking to your routine. You do what you're good at because that gives you solace. "It was very tough for me tonight," Rochette said, "but the one thing I could do is step on the ice, put a smile on my face—and feel alive again."

She is also her mother's daughter, with all that entails. In January, a lifetime ago, Thérèse gave an interview to the *Christian Science Monitor*. She spoke with pride of Joannie's determination to confront any hurdles placed

in her way. "Joannie has always been naturally determined and persevering."

Like all families of figure skaters, the sport carried a high price for the Rochettes. Joannie effectively left home at 13 to train in Trois Rivières with her coach, Manon Perron, and then later in Montreal. It was the greatest sacrifice the family made, far more than the financial burden and the foregone vacations, her mother said. Those years were lost forever, she said, but it was Joannie's dream and they supported it.

More than supported it. Thérèse threw herself into it. "It's because we love her that we agreed to live through all the stress from the top of the stands," she said. Unlike mothers who would use practice times at the rink to slip out for dinner, Thérèse stayed and critiqued, often to her daughter's annoyance, Joannie admitted. "She was not the best skating coach; she was very [critical] but she had a good eye." And Rochette laughed at the memory: "Even though she's not here anymore, I'm not afraid to say it. Sometimes she was a pain in the ass."

The days after Thérèse's death were a blur. Rochette would cry, and Perron would prop her up. Then Perron would cry, and the cycle began anew. Unbeknownst to Rochette, Per-

ron took Thérèse's glasses from her purse. She put them in her team jacket for Joannie's short and long programs. "I wanted her with us," says Perron.

The times outside of practice and performance time were the most difficult. They'd read through the hundreds of emails flooding in offering sympathy and support.

Perron kept Rochette in a protective bubble. The media let her practise in peace. They saw few newspapers and there was no television in their level of the village. "We didn't realize the impact," Perron said, "how big this is."

As recently as the first week of the Olympics, Rochette was phoning home to her mother every day, lamenting the problems she was having in training with her triple Lutz. And her mother, in a role she enjoyed far more than the stress of competitions, offered her love and

advice. *Close your eyes*, she told her daughter. *Visualize. You've been landing them for years.*

And so she skated for herself. And for her mother, too. Because 10 years from now, "when the pain has gone away a little bit," Joannie did not want to regret throwing away all they had worked for.

And as for that triple Lutz? She nailed it to the ice, just like Maman told her. **M**

'The only thing I could do is step on the ice, put a smile on my face—and feel alive again,' says Rochette