

Olympic silver medalist Frances Dafoe dies at 86

Competitor, judge, designer had lifelong passion for sport of figure skating
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When her illustrious competitive career was over, Frances Dafoe became an accomplished costume designer. -courtesy of Skate Canada Archives

Frances Dafoe, a two-time world pairs champion and Olympic silver medalist who went on to be a world and Olympic judge as well as a designer of some of the most iconic costumes in skating, died last Friday at the age of 86.

Dafoe's life in skating crossed decades and touched nearly every corner of the sport. For her contributions, she was inducted into the Skate Canada Hall of Fame, Canadian Olympic Hall of Fame, Canada's Sports Hall of Fame and the World Figure Skating Hall of Fame.

"True pioneers in their sport, Dafoe and [Norris] Bowden (Dafoe's pairs partner) brought figure skating to a new level of sophistication with their imaginative lifts and jumps," said Mario Siciliano, president and CEO of Canada's Sports Hall of Fame.

Olympic pairs gold medalists Barbara Wagner and Bob Paul referred to Dafoe and Bowden as their mentors. Both teams trained with coach Sheldon Galbraith at the old Toronto Skating Club, and watching Dafoe and Bowden helped the younger pair mature.

"Their presence and always verbally encouraging us made an impact," Paul said. "Frannie did all her own costumes and probably inspired my partner, who started designing costumes also. She and Norrie were our inspiration because they were the leaders."

"We emulated them," Wagner said. "Everything she touched, she had talent. ... She just loved skating. She gave everything."

After her competitive career, Dafoe attended the Parsons School of Design in New York City. In addition to designing skating costumes for many individual skaters, she also designed the costumes for the first

few seasons of *Stars on Ice* as well as the closing ceremony at the 1988 Olympic Winter Games in Calgary. She worked for the Canadian television network CBC for almost four decades, designing costumes for various shows, including Toller Cranston's *Strawberry Ice*. She even designed the Canada Day presentation at Festival Plaza at Expo 1970.

"Frannie did all of my costumes from the Olympics and pro career, and did all the costuming for my *Dear Elizabeth*, *Back to the Beanstalk* and *The Trial of Red Riding Hood* television specials," said Elizabeth Manley, whose unforgettable pink dress at the 1988 Calgary Olympics was a Dafoe creation. "She was always there for me, and her passion during my TV specials was amazing."

Dafoe designed Elvis Stojko's short program and free skate costumes for the 1994 Olympic Winter Games as well as several other costumes in the skater's career. The music Stojko used for his short in that Olympic year -- a medley of techno songs -- was edgy for skating, but Dafoe knew it suited his style.

"She was such a great designer," he said. "Even with me being young at the time, she wasn't afraid to explore. For the short program she said, 'I know about this new, leather-like material -- I think it will be perfect for this number.' She came up with the design of all the studs on the side. This is the short program costume in 1994.

"Even though she was older, she was connected to what was hip and current. She was not afraid to go out on a limb. The whole thing was perfect."

As a judge, Dafoe prided herself on being fair and honest -- even accepting audience boos when she made an unpopular decision.

"She put a large emphasis on being able to maintain objectivity to judge fairly and wisely," Siciliano said.

"She was a very knowledgeable lady, and whatever she went into it was never partly done," said lifelong friend Joyce Hisey, also a former world judge and official. "She went into great detail, studied everything and made sure she was totally up to date to do the best for the skaters.

"Having been there herself, she understood what it was to be a competitor," she added. "She was an excellent judge."

A determination to document skating's rich artistic history led to the publication of her book *Figure Skating and the Arts: Eight Centuries of Sport and Inspiration*, which came out in 2012. Hisey accompanied Dafoe on extensive travels to photograph and detail skating-related art.

"Her ideas were absolutely tremendous," Hisey said. "It was a wonderful experience. She chose the items she was interested in. She did the photography, and I did the descriptions and measurements."

Dafoe is survived by sons Adrian and Blake. The funeral will be private, but there will be a celebration of her life at the Toronto Cricket, Skating and Curling Club on Oct. 12.

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