

Barbara Ann Scott a skating icon with regal charm

By andrew duffy, Ottawa Citizen October 1, 2012 7:01 PM



It all began for Barbara Ann Scott on Dow's Lake.

There, like so many other Ottawa children, Scott took to the ice for the first time on double-bladed bob skates that buckled to her boots. It was one winter's day in the Depression.

But a relationship began that day, between a young girl and the ice, that would ultimately define her legend — and give to Canada its only gold medal in individual figure skating.

Barbara Ann Scott, Canada's sweetheart and a woman who inspired generations of skaters, died Sunday at her home in Florida. She was 84.

Tributes to Scott poured in Monday. She was remembered as tiny perfect figure skater, an icon with regal charm, inner steel and much humility.

"When I woke up and heard the news it broke my heart, it really did," Ottawa's Elizabeth Manley, the silver medalist in the 1988 Calgary Olympics, said in an interview.

Manley said she loved and idolized Scott.

"She was the classiest, nicest woman anyone could ever meet," said Manley. "She was so sweet and so kind and so tiny, but she was a tough woman. That's what I admired so much."

Frannie Dafoe, a Canadian pairs skater who won the silver medal at the 1956 Winter Olympics, said figure skating has lost its greatest ambassador.

“All the little girls growing up wanted to be a Barbara Ann Scott as I did,” Dafoe told the Citizen.

“She was Canada’s perfect ambassador: beautiful, gracious and charming. She always had the time and interest to encourage young skaters and fans. She took her role as part of skating’s history very seriously.”

Marcel Aubut, president of the Canadian Olympic Committee, said Scott’s grace and humility put her in a class of her own: “Her accomplishments will never be forgotten as she has paved the way for generations of figure skaters.”

Skate Canada President Benoît Lavoie said Scott’s discipline and focus established the foundation for her success. “Barbara Ann set the standard for generations of female athletes and women skaters who came after her,” he said.

Donald Jackson, the 1962 men’s world champion and former director of the Minto Skating Club, said Scott will be remembered as “the queen of skating” in Canada. “She was the one who really got people interested in skating,” he said.

From the very beginning, Barbara Ann Scott was something of a miracle.

The man who would become her father had been left for dead in the First World War. After a mortar, machine gun and chlorine gas attack at Ypres, Lieut. Clyde Rutherford Scott was piled with other corpses abandoned as the Germans advanced. A curious dog drew a German soldier’s attention to Scott, who was still alive but in desperate need of medical attention.

The German brought him to a field hospital where his wounds were treated. Scott survived the war and returned to his family in Perth, which had been told he was dead. Scott went on to marry Mary Purves with whom he had three children. Their youngest was named Barbara Ann.

The family lived in Sandy Hill. Barbara Ann studied piano as a young girl, but she dreamed of skating like Sonja Henie, the Norwegian star and three-time Olympic champion.

Her piano teacher encouraged the idea and eventually her mother relented.

Desperate to graduate from her double-bladed skates, six-year-old Barbara Ann wrote to Santa Claus with the help of her mother. She asked for “a pair of one-runner skates fastened to boots and a horse.”

She found a pair of white figure skates under the tree. Her equestrian career would have to wait.

Scott joined the Minto Skating Club, which then operated out of a rink on Waller Street, just east of today’s Rideau Centre.

Skating season began in November. The rink was a legendary icebox.

“When it was 20 below outside, it was 20 below inside,” Scott recalled in a book that commemorates the 100th anniversary of the Minto Skating Club.

“I remember my icy hands ... I remember the locker-room, too, where we used to run in and put our feet up on the radiators to try to warm them even though they told us, ‘Don’t put your feet on the rads: you’ll get chilblains!’”

Scott’s ability was quickly apparent to all of those at the club.

At the age of nine, she gave up regular schooling to devote more time to the ice. She skated for eight hours a day, tracing many kilometres of figures, which then represented the most important component of competitive skating. She studied in the late afternoon with a tutor and was in bed by 8:30 p.m.

Scott’s parents bought her \$100 Stanzioni skating boots from New York and hired a Czech émigré, Otto Gold, as her coach.

“He was very strict,” Scott once recalled, “just as a coach should be.”

Gold emphasized the importance of figures and Scott excelled at the exacting discipline. By the time she was 10, she was the youngest person ever to pass the gold medal test of the Canadian Figure Skating Association.

One year later, at the age of 11, she was crowned Canadian junior champion. She placed second in the senior competition the following year.

Scott’s father, then a colonel in the Canadian Army, would not live to see her greatest triumphs. Col. Scott died suddenly in September 1941 at the age of 49.

The family lived on Col. Scott’s small pension and had to raise money to send Barbara Ann to overseas skate competitions.

In 1944, Scott won the first of four Canadian championships. In 1947, she won the European and world championships. She was the first Canadian to win a world figure skating title, and upon her return to Ottawa, she was presented with a new Buick convertible — licence plate 47-U-1 — by Mayor Stanley Lewis.

An estimated 70,000 people were on hand to welcome her home.

But the car almost cost Scott the chance to compete in the 1948 Olympic Games which were then strictly reserved for amateur athletes. Scott had to return the car in order to qualify.

At the Olympics in St. Moritz, Switzerland, Scott skated for gold on an outdoor rink which required every ounce of her legendary concentration. During her compulsory figures, a plane buzzed low over the ice, but Scott did not wobble.

Then, for her free skate, Scott had to perform on ice that was pitted and rough from several hockey games played on the same surface. But Scott memorized its imperfections before skating and put on a flawless performance.

Two Canadian hockey players paraded the 98-pound champion around on their shoulders. That same year, she recaptured the world and European titles.

Scott was a welcome tonic for a Canadian public wearied by the war and its aftermath. Then Prime Minister Mackenzie King said she gave Canadians “courage to get through the darkness of the postwar gloom.”

“From one end of Canada to the other,” he said, “there is great rejoicing at the high honour you have brought to yourself and to our country.”

Barbara Ann Scott became Ottawa’s first truly international celebrity, appearing in Time and Life magazines. There was a doll made in her likeness. And she would appear, with her poodle, Pierre, on the popular U.S. television program, What’s My Line. (Fred Allen guessed her identity.)

Scott turned professional in 1948 — she then reclaimed the Buick convertible from the City of Ottawa — and began to tour with the Ice Capades and other shows.

In 1955, she gave up professional skating to marry a former National Basketball Association player, Tom King, who had become her publicist.

They lived in Chicago for many years before retiring to an oceanside home on Florida’s Amelia Island.

In the U.S., Scott became an accomplished equestrienne and horse trainer, but she also maintained a strong connection to Ottawa and to Canadian figure skating.

She donated all of her skating memorabilia to the City of Ottawa, which hosts an exhibit on the ground floor of city hall.

Scott has also lent her support and encouragement to many Canadian figure skaters, among them Kurt Browning and Elizabeth Manley.

Manley remembers meeting Scott, for the first time, backstage before her pressure-packed free skate at the 1988 Calgary Olympics.

“She told me to go out and have fun and to believe in myself and know I could do it.

“She told me she’d always been a fan of mine. That just kind of threw me back on my heels a bit: I never dreamt that someone like her was a fan of mine.

“It just meant so much to hear her say those things minutes before I stepped on the ice. It motivated me; it inspired me.”

Manley gave the performance of her lifetime and won the Olympic long program, narrowly missing a gold medal.

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