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# 2018 WINTER OLYMPICS

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# 5

## 100 YEARS OF FIGURE SKATING IN THE OLYMPICS

WHAT IS IT ABOUT THIS  
SPORT THAT HAS CAPTIVATED  
AMERICAN AUDIENCES FOR A  
CENTURY?

BY BAILEY BASHAM

It's 2018, and Tonya Harding is on everyone's minds. It was 27 years ago that she won her first national title, becoming the first American woman to land two triple axels in competition. She went on to place fourth at the 1992 Winter Olympics and later earned a gold medal at the 1994 U.S. Figure Skating Championships. But the Harding story became one of intrigue after she was stripped of her gold medal under a plea bargain for hindering the prosecution in the assault of figure skater Nancy Kerrigan.

According to a 2014 *Reuters* article, the two nights of that 1994 competition rank amongst the 20 most-watched sporting events in U.S. television history.

The sport of figure skating, which will celebrate 100 years since it first appeared in the Olympics, is no stranger to drama. During the 2002 Salt Lake City Games, it was alleged that the pairs figure skating competition had been fixed, leaving teams from both Russia and Canada with the gold medal.

Drama was again reignited in 2014 when the results of the women's solo skate were deemed questionable after 17-year-old Adelina Sotnikova took home the gold for Russia while South Korean Yuna Kim's scores were better.

It's true that viewers love a good sports scandal. According to Laura Kipnis, a media studies professor at Northwestern University and author of *How to Become a Scandal*, it's because they allow the average person to become an armchair psychoanalyst.

"It may be others who screw up their lives on the national stage, but we're the ones in power, hurling the epithets, delivering the scrutiny like...a big collective superego," she said in a *Newsweek* interview.

Americans are enchanted by the drama, but also the sport. At the 2014 Sochi Olympics, figure skating emerged as the most-watched Winter Olympic sport in America. So, scandals and psychoanalyst hats aside, what exactly makes the sport so consistently popular?

Unlike others during the Winter Olympics, figure skating, a sport of individuals, requires each competitor be unique — "a contest of showing off," as Scott Hamilton puts it. According to *Reuters*, for those who watched Peggy Fleming win America's only gold medal of the 1968 Games, the love began there. For younger viewers, it's all about the show on the ice — many Millennials grew up watching favorites like Kristi Yamaguchi and Michelle Kwan executing perfect triple axels.

Sherry Tull, director of programs at the Nashville Skate Academy and president of the Nashville Figure Skating Club (NFSC), has a different idea. She believes the sport is consistently popular because the majority of viewers are pretty unfamiliar with it.

"I think when you watch skaters, you realize it takes so much because they're not only physically doing the skating and the jumps, but they are act-



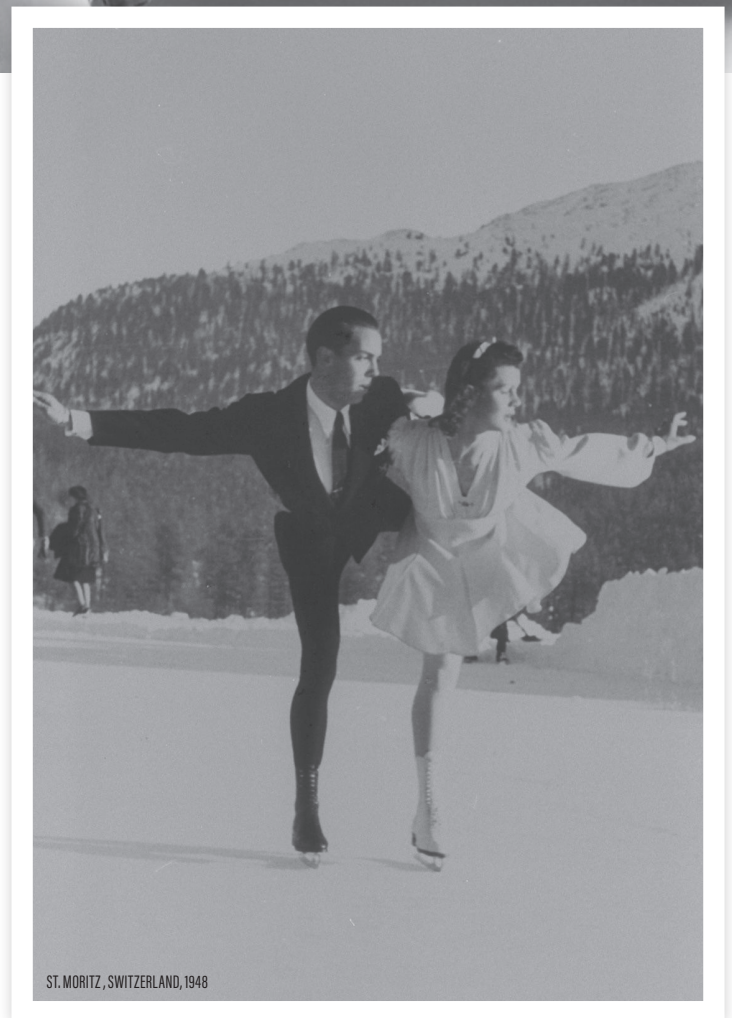
GRACIE GOLD, 2014

ing on the ice too," Tull says. "It's all these different kinds of talents rolled into one performance. It's also something that most people are just in awe of — most have problems walking in a straight line, so when you think about what they are doing on a single blade, it just blows you away."

Tull, who was a figure skater in her youth, raised two skaters of her own. Her daughters, ages 15 and 18, are both members of the NFSC and compete in regional and national competitions. It's because of dedication to the art, says Tull, that skaters are able to maintain the high level of skill and strength required to skate and captivate audiences.

"It's the kind of thing where you take a week off, it's almost two weeks to get back. You'll find skaters who are scared to take vacations because they don't want to fight to get back to where they were. To get that much time on the ice, our skaters will just do whatever they have to do."

In a sport where there's no finish line, Americans can only watch and learn and view in awe. A complete schedule of figure skating events can be found at [nbcolympics.com/full-schedule](http://nbcolympics.com/full-schedule).



ST. MORITZ, SWITZERLAND, 1948



FIGURE SKATING MADE ITS FIRST APPEARANCE AT THE SUMMER OLYMPIC GAMES IN 1908 IN LONDON. THE FIRST WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES WERE NOT UNTIL 1924.

### 23.2 MILLION

OVER THE COURSE OF 10 NIGHTS, NBC'S 2014 WINTER OLYMPICS COVERAGE AVERAGED 23.2 MILLION VIEWERS.