

Bianchetti SPEAKS OUT

By James Cowling

For 25 years, Sonia Bianchetti of Italy

served figure skating at the highest levels. She was the chairman of the ISU Figure Skating Committee for two decades and the first woman elected to the ISU Council. Over the years, she played a key role facilitating many important changes in the sport, including the abandonment of compulsory figures.

Since she was ousted from the Council in 1994, Bianchetti has remained active in figure skating, most recently as the Acting Vice President of the World Skating Federation (WSF) until her resignation in early 2004. James Cowling talked to Bianchetti in Italy just 30 minutes after the ISU passed the “Code of Points” judging system, now referred to as the “ISU Judging System.” Bianchetti hopes to publish her book, “The Inner World of Figure Skating,” in the next few months.

The ISU just passed its new judging system. What is your initial reaction?

Well, I must say that I was disappointed, because I thought the members would have considered more seriously the problems connected with this system. At the moment, in my opinion, it has not been tested enough. The judges are not ready for the European or World Championships with the new system. Besides, there are technical problems that should be improved. So my hope was that the members would have decided to have the system tested for a couple of years more to make sure it would work well.

Before the meeting you contacted many organizations and they were prepared to vote no. What happened?

At the moment I cannot say. One thing which I imagine influenced the decision of some member countries was the motion approved by the Congress that the ISU would financially help its members to implement the system nationally. I know that many members were very concerned about the cost of the system and the fact



that it would not be possible to adopt it for national competitions. The idea that the ISU would help them with this problem might have changed their opinion, but this is just a guess.

You've been vocal against the new system even though you do see some good things in it.

I think the good things have been developed in the wrong way. In my opinion it is ill conceived. The idea of adding so many restrictions to a free program, for instance, is not good for skating. It will prevent creativity. And also the fact that the elements have been given well-defined factors of difficulty, in my opinion, doesn't correspond with reality because there are no two jumps that are the same. A double Axel can be good, another double Axel can be good, but they can be completely different in the value, in their quality, and this is not reflected in giving fixed factors in each element.

What are some of the things that could go wrong?

First of all, I don't know if the computer system has been tested enough. According to experts in computers, it takes years to make sure that a computerized system is really working. It takes years for an error to come out. It takes hundreds of trials and they have had only five or six trials so far.

This new system came about because of the scandal at Salt Lake City. Now, you weren't there, but you are pretty close to some of the players. What's your take on what happened?

My take is what we've seen in all the newspapers: France did not have a judge in the dance event where they were competing for the gold medal. And unfortunately in ice dance it has been known for years that the results are more or less decided beforehand by a group of judges.

To not to have a judge in that competition was kind of a trauma for France. They were lucky enough to have a judge drawn in the pairs and Marie Reign Le Gougne was that judge – even though they had no pair in the event, since the draw of the judges is done months in advance, she had been drawn and she had the right to be there. (Sarah Abitbol and Stephane Bernadis of France had been entered in the pairs' event, but withdrew due to injury.) Probably, Marie was a pawn to be used to make a kind of deal with the Russians so that she would support the Russian pair, and the Russians would in exchange support the French couple. This is, I think, is what happened.

Marie Reign Le Gougne is, I know, an honest, confident judge. Maybe inclined to national bias as many French judges have been in the past, but not a dishonest person. I was surprised that she accepted this situation. But there are reasons behind that.

Would you like to elaborate on those reasons?

Marie Reign wanted to become a member of the ISU Technical Committee. She had declared that the whole year, and probably Didier Gailhaguet (then President of the French Skating Federation) promised her that if she agreed to the deal he would obtain the support of all the former Soviet countries for her election. This was an ambitious person and probably she accepted that. But after she did it, she couldn't bear this terrible burden of doing this terrible thing. And then she broke down in tears in front of Sally Stapleford (then Chairwoman of the ISU Technical Committee). Just a guess, but this is what I think.

You must have known Didier Gailhaguet for years. What is he like?

I have known Didier for many, many years. We had a very, very good connection. He was a coach. He came to me so often to seek my advice for his students. We very often had exchanges in opinion. He's a bright man, open minded, and had a modern view of skating. Then he decided to run for the ISU Council.

He called me before announcing his decision and he asked me for my advice. I told him that, first of all, he had to seek the support of (ISU President) Ottavio Cinquanta. He told me that would be no problem. Then I told him, "Didier, there is a problem with you. As a coach and as a general director of the French Federation, you have always tried to get favors or support for your competitors, and this you know is wrong." And he told me, "I had to do it because otherwise the French team would not get the marks, but I promise that this will be my pledge, to fight against corruption." I thought he would keep to that. But unfortunately, he did what he did.

Gailhaguet is not the president of the French Federation anymore. Does this open the way for him to get back on the ISU Council?

So he said, apparently, in an interview, that his good connections with the ISU will allow him to go back. I wonder if even Ottavio Cinquanta, who has always been a good friend of his, would like to have him back after the harm he did to figure skating. Really, his behavior as the president of the French Federation, as a Council member, is much, much worse than that of Marie Reign La Gougne because he was supposed to ensure that everything went well, and he did just the opposite.

You've known Ottavio Cinquanta for many years. You probably know him better than anyone in figure skating. Do you think he is leading the sport in the right direction?

From a business point of view, yes, because he is a businessman. He's very clever in that. He was lucky to become the president after the famous Olympic Games in Norway where there was the big scandal between Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan and figure skating became the most popular sport in the world. So after that he could sign unbelievable, fantastic television contracts, and we have to recognize his merit in having brought a lot of money into the ISU.

I don't think he is running the sport of figure skating well, because he's interfering very heavily in all the decisions concerning figure skating. In my opinion, it's clear (the ISU Judging System) has come from a speed skater for the way it is conceived, and also for the way he has dealt with the matter of ethics and of corruption in judging. What he did these 10 years, his laxness in dealing with the judges caught cheating, was so bad that in my opinion it led to the scandal in Salt Lake City.

You've written a book about the inner workings of figure skating. What is the premise of the book?

The book tells the history of 40 years of skating from 1963, when I first attended an ISU Congress in Helsinki, until today more or less. I think it is the first book that tells really what is happening in the back stage, behind the scenes. This I could do it because I lived through it personally.

It is the history of skating from a technical point of view, from the time we had six compulsory figures and all the steps that were made in 17 or 18 years to get rid of them completely. I tell about the problems with block judging, especially during the time of the cold war, which ended with the suspension of the whole Soviet association in 1977. I speak of all the activity that we did to improve judging throughout the

world through seminars. So it is, I hope, a pleasurable read.

Why did you feel the need to write a book?

I thought of writing a book for many, many years, but I felt that I had some obligation to the ISU, and I did not want to bring out some of the things that would not give a good light on some people, especially on some presidents and some council members. So I refrained. But seeing how things have been developing, and seeing that things are not improving at all, I thought that after 10 years I could look back (and write about) the facts with a cool mind.

When I finished the book, I sent it to some friends to read and they said, "Sonia, you have to publish this book, because it is very interesting for all of us who know the facts but didn't know the innermost details." But then I was also advised I should cover the last 10 years, when I was not directly involved. I still had some friends in the ISU who told me what went on, so I added the last 10 years. The book was finished September of last year, then it was revised and revised. I hope it will be a success. I hope people will like it.

Did you write the book to get some revenge?

No, not at all. The book is not intended to be a scandal or to be revenge. I only try to analyze the facts that happened and analyze, let's say in the past 10 years, all the activity that was made by the ISU council under Cinquanta in regards to the matter on these judges. We had several scandals over the past 10 years. And all these judges, more or less, got away with it; with very small sanctions. I think this is bad for the skaters. How can they trust a judge who was caught cheating a couple of years before?

After the scandal, you appeared at the World Figure Skating Federations' press conference in Washington. What made you want to be apart of that organization?

The first time I heard of this project was in December, 2002. I was in the mountains for Christmas. Ron Pfenning called me and asked me if I could help prepare the WSF constitution because he thought that my experience would be a great help. So I asked him what the objective was, and he said the main objective was to separate figure skating from speed skating; as you know, both sports are controlled by the ISU. I fully agreed to this idea. I still think that the only good thing that can happen to both sports is that they are each covered by competent people who know what they are talking about.

Take the situation now. We have had presidents coming from speed skating for the past 24 years. This is not correct; the two sports have nothing to do with one another. So, when I heard that this was the main objective, I said it is worthwhile trying, and I said to Ron, "I'll help you with the constitution," which I did with Donald McKnight (President of the Australian Figure Skating Association) and some other people.

You've resigned as the acting vice president of the WSF. What does the future hold for the Federation?

I'm afraid there is not much future. The ISU immediately made all of its members, judges, and the skaters aware that they would lose their eligibility status, if they even endorsed some of the ideas of the WSF. Obviously nobody dared to join this Federation, which doesn't exist yet anyhow, nor was it in the interest of the WSF to do anything that would harm the skaters. So, you see there was no possibility at all that the WSF could start working, because without the

skaters, without the judges, what could it do? It could have organized some professional competitions, because they are not under the control of the ISU. But as far as (eligible) competitions, I don't think there is much that can be done.

The last couple of years, a lot of people are shaking their heads about the ISU. Is it autocratic?

I think it is a dictatorship. There is no democracy at all. There cannot be any dissent on any matter, even with the new judging system. Nobody in the ISU, among the ISU office holders, has been allowed to express any kind of an opinion against the system. This is something that has been installed, I think, especially by Olympic Committee. There was already this tendency with (former ISU President) Olaf Paulson; he didn't allow anybody to say anything outside the Council meeting about what was going on. But now, I think there is a total lack of democracy.

You've seen a lot of changes over the years. This new judging system must be the most radical. Where do you see the sport going in five years time?

It will depend on what happens with the new (judging) system. It may influence the way the skaters compose their programs, in view of getting as many points as possible and maybe neglecting the artistic part, the musicality, the creativity. The invention of new movements I'm afraid will not happen. Surely Sasha Cohen, Michelle Kwan and Evgeny Plushenko will continue to do what they do, but probably the future coaches and new skaters will be trained in such a way just to earn as many points as possible, and not take any kind of a risk.

I wonder if anyone in the ISU has sat around a table and discussed what kind of influence or impact this new way of judging on figure skating. I doubt it. They were all so busy in trying to find a way for the computer to judge figure skating. For me a sport like figure skating cannot be judged by a computer. It would be the same as a computer judging an artist playing the piano or a painting. You look at a painting or a statue, or listen to a piece of music, as it is — a work of art. You cannot cut it into pieces and say this piece is worth this, this piece is worth that. It is the art piece in itself that has value, and it can only be valued by a human being, in my opinion.

On a positive note, when you look back at your career, what's the most memorable performance you've seen in skating?

There have been many. Each time has its own stars. Probably if you see Robin Cousins skating today he would look mediocre, because his jumps were not as good as those we see now, but in that moment he had some fantastic performances. The same goes for John Curry. He gave me such an unbelievable artistic emotion. To see him was like seeing a ballet dancer on the ice. Then there were some programs of Katarina Witt that were fantastic.

In recent times, Yagudin was marvelous, because he had such natural talent. He was able to do the most unbelievable difficult moves on the ice in such an easy way, while still feeling the music. The same was true of Kurt Browning; he was fantastic, full of life. The Chinese couple (Xue Shen and Hongbo Zhao), when I saw them skate recently, at the end of the program I was crying because they were doing all these extremely difficult elements. She was flying through the air like a butterfly. I saw in their programs the same ballet-like traits that were introduced by the Russians, which have always been fantastic. 