Angel of the Silver Skates

Debi Thomas — National Senior Figure Skating Champion

Debi Thomas, despite being a figure skating champion, is a student on the campus of Stanford University.

By Racine S. Winborne

An air of expectancy floated in the atmosphere inside the Nassau Coliseum in Uniondale, N.Y. Tiffany Chin, the 1985 U.S. Ladies Senior Champion, had just finished an error-free program.

Due up next was the dazzling Debi Thomas who waited anxiously in the wings for her appointment with destiny.

Millions of television viewers sat in front of their sets on that Saturday afternoon while another 7,000 waited breathlessly inside the Coliseum for the woman who would soon become the first black to ever win a national seniors figure skating championship.

And then she appeared.

Bedeckled in a chic black costume, trimmed in blue-gray and lavendar with splatterings of glowing rhinestones, an attractive 5'6", 116-pound Debi Thomas mounted the ice and flashed her famous ear-to-ear smile revealing her teeth, replete with braces.

The crowd sucked in its breath, the arena lights dimmed, up came the music, and off flew Thomas skating her way into amateur sports history.

Twelve spectacular leaps later, including five triple Salchows, the most difficult jump attempted by female skaters today, she completed a near flawless free-skating program to rounds of thunderous applause.

In a matter of minutes, this bright and poised young star had clinched the gold medal, the championship and a slice of U.S. figure skating history.

But Thomas was not the first black to ever mount the ice and win acclaim. Exactly two decades earlier in 1966, Atoy Wilson became the first black to win a novice men's title. He would later become the first black, to qualify for the senior competition level.

Four years later, in 1970, Richard Ewell won the national junior men's championship. He teamed up with black female skater Michelle McCladdie to win the junior pairs competition in 1972.

Reggie Stanley followed next, winning the novice men's title in 1975 and Jean Campbell captured the novice ladies competition in 1980.

Surprisingly, Thomas almost missed the championships in Uniondale, N.Y.

The demands of a full academic schedule, as a freshman pre-med student at Stanford University in California, coupled with the rigors of hours of practicing on the ice, had taken their toll. She had taken a two month hiatus from skating and was in a state of depression.

It was her coach of eight years, Alex McGowan, and her mother, Janice Thomas, who stepped in to convince her that she should enter the competition.

To get in shape she went on a 500-calorie-per day diet, consuming mostly soups, in order to trim off the 15-odd pounds she had gained during those eight weeks off the ice. She would also have to resume a six hour-a-day, six-days-a-week practice schedule.

The application which she had ripped up days earlier was mended and pressed and rushed off to the U.S. Figure Skating Association in Colorado Springs.

Thomas would later go on to beat Chin and another skater, 18-year-old Caryn Kadavy, whose feats on the ice are already being compared to the elegant, legendary skating diva, Peggy Flemming.

Her rise to the top of the U.S. skating world is no fluke. It has been a carefully orchestrated climb from the novice, junior and senior ranks, a climb which began at the age of 5.

Thomas has proven her staying power too. Beginning in 1983 with the Criterium Du Sucre International Skating Competition. She has clinched five first-place berths in international meets, more than any U.S. female skater in recent memory.

Last year she became the first black ever to win a spot on the World Figure Skating Team, an event in which she finished fifth in her first appearance.

In December, the U.S. Olympic Committee honored Thomas by awarding her its "Athlete of the Year in the Sport of Figure Skating" award. The Women's Sports Foundaton bestowed upon her its "Most Promising Athlete Award in Artistic Sports" honor in 1985.

At 18, the San Jose, California resident (she was born in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. on March 25, 1967) lives a crazy almost hectic life bouncing from school and dorm life to her practice session with Coach McGowan at the Redwood City Ice Lodge.

Add to her accomplishments yet another first, becoming the first American female skating champion in 30 years to attend college while competing at the national and international levels, and you get a sense of the pressure under which she labors with little signs of fatigue.

When she's done skating as an amateur and tired of the professional skating circuit she will enter medical school and eventually become an orthopedic surgeon.

Does she seem driven by an insatiable will to succeed in two worlds? Yes! It is a determination and a self-will familiar to her mother, Janice Thomas, a twice-divorced computer programmer/analyst who is her staunchest supporter and her role model.

Debi in action during a practice session.

"Debi has said sometimes that skating is flaky...flaky in that as a sport you could have an accident and its over. Its a judgement sport too.

"You can't be a black female and not have something to fall back on, that's why we always broke our backs to see that she got a good education. Its a judgement sport, whether you're black or not," Mrs. Thomas explains.

She has always insisted that both her children get good educations. That advice has apparently paid off. A son Richard is a graduate student at UCLA working on a Masters' Degree in Education with a specialty in mathematics and science education.

In the meantime, Debi was accepted by two Ivy League schools (Harvard and Princeton) and the University of California at Berkeley.

She chose Stanford, her mother says, because "she wanted to stay close to her coach."

Life on the figure skating circuit can get lonesome sometimes, especially if you're the lone black at your particular level. But Debi's mom says she's learned to adjust over the years.

"You never get totally isolated from blacks. There are black schoolmates and other blacks in skating. Debi treats everybody the same. She knows what I have lived through.

"I haven't said this in a long time but I used to say to Debi 'you have to fix so and so in your program" and she'd say 'but so and so doen't do it that way.' And I'd say 'yes but so and so has blonde hair and blue eyes and you don't', Debi would say 'that's not fair' but she'd fix it and that is why she has done so well...she's worked hard to be the best.

"She's always known that just because you're black doesn't mean anything is given to you . . . you have to work for it and if you screw up its going to be taken from you."

She's landed an anonymous corporate sponsor who is said to be preparing to donate $25,000 in her name to the U.S. Figure Skating Memorial Fund to be used to off-set some of her expenses.

Debi Thomas thrives on hard work and its doubtful that anybody will be taking anything away from her anytime soon.

Championship form as she spins her way to the title.