

New blood needed in the ISU
by
Sonia Bianchetti

The ISU is in need of fresh ideas: new directions, new blood, people with excitement and energy who know how to lead innovation and creativity and whose interest is focused on what is good for the sport and the athletes rather than politics.

Figure skating, the popularity and credibility of which has been in constant decline since 2002, must be given back its popularity and its appeal.

The governance of the ISU must be updated. The quality of skating and of the participating competitors in ISU Championships must be improved to stimulate the interest of the public in the arenas as well as that of the TV networks, thus developing continuing income through new television contracts and sponsors.

There must be deep changes in the present judging system, as well as in the structure of the ISU Championships. The new system was supposed to cure the sport, but it is killing the patient. The audience is gone.

It is no longer conceivable or tenable to have World Championships with events lasting 10 hours in a row, with 40 to 50 competitors each, in which 80% of the competitors skate below any reasonable standard and produce far more failed elements than well executed ones. This is definitely not what the fans are looking for. They want beautiful and artistic programs rather than contests full of falls.

In my opinion, the ISU must improve the competitors' performance quality by limiting the entries to the World Championships.

This could be accomplished, for instance, by using the European Championships and the Four Continents as qualifying events. Not a new idea. It has been discussed for many years and always opposed by the majority of the ISU Members. Perhaps the time has come to reconsider it in view of the economic crisis in the entire world and of the deep "coma" the sport is presently living in .

It is unlikely, however, that any of these changes, so essential to revitalizing the entire ISU structure, can be effected with any success under the present leadership.

The fight for new ideas and important goals needs passionate people, full of enthusiasm who believe in what they do and are ready to fight to reach their goal.

The greatest season of figure skating, with all the changes that opened the way to the modernization of the sport, took place largely in the years between 1970 and 1988: the gradual reduction of the number and value of the compulsory figures until their total deletion in 1988; introduction of the short program (1972) and a new scoring system (1980) ; organization of ISU-sponsored Judges' seminars and examinations (1971).

The "team" that led this revolution was composed of relatively young office holders in their fifties: Jacques Favart, President, Herman Schiechtl, Vice President, Josef Dedic, Council member and myself, together with the Technical Committee of which I was chairman. Generally, in business and in politics, the trend is to have young people in the highest positions.

At present, the average age of the ISU Council members is 68. Two members are over age 75, and five members have been sitting there from 14 to 24 years. Why would any of them want to go to the root of the decline of figure skating, which goes back to the scandal in Salt Lake City, and work out new ideas or proposals that might even mean questioning the validity of some of their own decisions?

I have much respect for elderly people, I am not young myself any more, and I have great esteem for some of the present Council members, whom I have known for many years and who are good friends of mine. But I know that new ideas can only come from young people, who believe in what they do and are ready to fight to reach their goal, even if this might cost them their comfortable seats in the ISU.

How to achieve that? Simple, one could say: by electing new and younger candidates! Where is the problem? In any democratic country or organization this is the normal procedure.

But the ISU is a special world where the democratic right of any individual to run for a seat on the Council is considered as a declaration of "war", even more so in case of the election of the president.

Very telling are the following historical facts.

In the last 120 years the only presidential election in which the incumbent was defeated occurred in 1937 when Gerrit van Laer, from the Netherlands, defeated Ulrich Salchow, from Sweden.

All the others were elected either because their predecessor had resigned or had suddenly died.

In 1967 James Koch of Switzerland resigned after 14 years as ISU President. He was followed by Ernst Labin, from Austria, who suddenly passed away a few months after his election. He was replaced by Jacques Favart, of France, 49, who remained in charge for 13 years, until 1980, when he also unexpectedly died a few months after his re-election. Olaf Poulsen, from Norway, who was then the first vice president, became president and kept his position for 14 years. In 1994 he decided to resign at the age of 74. Ottavio Cinquanta was then elected President at the age of 56. Fourteen years have gone by and from what he has declared he intends to run again in 2010 for four more years. And he is entitled to do so according to the rules, which specify a retirement age of 75.

Another interesting peculiarity is that, since 1998, "to save time", Cinquanta decided that in case no other candidate is proposed, the president is elected by acclamation. With this clever move he has skipped the danger of blank ballots by any dissidents which could put him in an embarrassing position. Better to be elected by a standing ovation!

Not much different is the situation with the Council members. In the last 55 years, in only two cases has a Council member lost his seat because of the election of a candidate running against him. A momentous occurrence! It happened in 1998 when Lawrence Demmy from Great Britain, who was the Vice President, was defeated by Katsu Hisanaga from Japan, who, in turn, was defeated in 2002 by David Dore, from Canada.

Therefore, if something is to change, there is no other way than by changing the rules.

The ISU Constitution does not limit the number of terms to which a candidate may be elected for any office. Only an age limit is specified for the ISU Office Holders. In order to be elected or re-elected as an ISU Office Holder, a candidate must not have reached the age of 75 prior to being elected and if he or she reaches the age of 75 during his or her current term of office, he or she

is not disqualified by such fact from continuing to serve for the balance of the current term. Which means that if one is born the day after the elections (generally in June) he can continue to serve the current four years term, in other words until he is 79. This rule does not apply to the technical committees in figure skating, in which the retirement age of competition officials such as referees and judges is 70.

In my opinion the age limit should be decreased from 75 to 70 (as it was until 2000) and say that a candidate for election must not have reached the age of 70 by May first prior to being elected and ceases to be an Office Holder at the end of the calendar year during which he reaches the age of 70.

Furthermore, a Council member should only serve in the same position for a maximum of two consecutive terms (of four years each). This not only would permit healthy turn over, guaranteeing innovations in the Council but, hopefully, would also put an end to the unfortunate tendency to never oppose the president in order to gain his support for re-election. I personally experienced this during my four years on the Council, and it was simply depressing.

If the ISU made these changes, it would be adopting the exact same rules that the IOC Charter has for the election of the Executive Board.

Another vital change is that the Council members be elected by the appropriate federations: those for figure skating by Figure Skating Members only, and those for speed skating by the Speed Skating Members, which is the same procedure that is followed today for the elections of the members of the Technical Committees. This would better guarantee the competence of the Council members in the discipline they represent. Only the President should be elected by all the Members together and his tasks should be only administrative (TV contracts, sponsorship, relations etc). All technical matters should be left to the technical people, who must be able to propose and develop new ideas for the ISU. They must report to the appropriate Vice President but they must not be ruled every day on every decision, as it is the case to-day.

These ideas are not new either. On the contrary! They were already submitted to the Congress in 1984 by Germany and again in 1994 by Australia, Austria and Sweden. In both cases they were withdrawn before even being discussed due to the strong opposition of Olaf Poulsen and Beat Hasler, who were President and General Secretary at the time.

But times are different now and, as was clear during the last ISU Congress in Monaco, the ISU Members are becoming more conscious of their right to express and impose their ideas, rather than to submissively accept all that is proposed by the ISU leadership.

A gleam of hope.

www.soniabianchetti.com