

STEVE DISSON — NEGOTIATOR & DEALMAKER

By Dorothy Knoell

With a successful franchise of televised skating shows going strong, you'd think Steve Disson would be satisfied just go with the flow and keep the status quo.

Think again. Disson Skating, which last season was executive producer of seven original live shows that were broadcast on NBC (*McCormick Presents Burt Bacharach Tribute on Ice*, *McCormick Presents Kristi Yamaguchi Salute to American Music*, *Scott Hamilton and Friends*, *Smuckers Presents Kurt Browning's Gotta Skate*, *Alberto VO5 Katarina & Friends — Real Beauty on Ice*, *CapitalOne Holiday Celebration on Ice* and *AllState Presents Brian Boitano Skating Spectacular*), and packaged the Stars On Ice broadcast for NBC, will again package eight shows for NBC this fall, including seven live shows that follow the same successful format that the company has used over the past decade or more to bring skating to TV, and the Stars On Ice NBC broadcast..

"We've got eight shows this year," Disson said while watching one of those 2003 fall shows, *McCormick Present Burt Bacharach Tribute on Ice*, come together in rehearsals at the HP Pavilion in San Jose, "and we figure on eight shows again next year, and really, indefinitely, unless something happens."

This fall, expect to see the live presentations of *Browning's Gotta Skate on Oct. 16* (Hamilton, Ontario), *Witt & Friends on Oct. 20* (Trenton, NJ), *Yamaguchi's Salute to American Music on Nov. 5* (Hershey, PA), *Andrea Bocelli Tribute on Ice on Nov. 12* (Bridgeport, CT), *Holiday Celebration on Ice on Dec. 3* (Norfolk, VA), *Kenny Loggins on Ice on Dec. 8* (Loveland, CO), and the *Brian Boitano Skating Spectacular on Dec. 18* (Las Vegas), and then catch them (and *Stars On Ice*) on TV from November 2004 through January 2005.

But while that schedule certainly fulfills Disson's stated aim, his goals don't end there. There are more — and different types of — projects on the horizon.

"We always want to improve and find new ways to present skating," he said. And he thinks he's found a new direction in a project with composer/lyricist/producer Frank Wildhorn, who composed the music for such Broadway hits as *Jekyll & Hyde*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, and *The Civil War*, as well as Billboard hits such as *Where Do Broken Hearts Go?* (Whitney Houston), *Don't Look In My Eyes* (Kenny Rogers) and *Something To Believe In* (Linda Eder, who is Wildhorn's wife).

"We want to get involved in new arenas, commit ourselves to new projects," Disson said in May of this

Disson with
choreographer
Lea Ann Miller



PHOTO BY SHIRLEY MCLAUGHLIN

year. "We are working with Broadway writer Frank Wildhorn. He was going to do a modernized version of *Alice in Wonderland* for Broadway, but has committed to do it instead for us — *Alice on Ice*."

That project, Disson said, would include all original music, Broadway singers and top skaters "who we've already talked to and want to do it."

They aren't the only ones. "NBC wants it, and we've locked in on a site that wants to do it, and Frank is ready to do it. We're just working on getting a sponsor-partner for it," Disson said. "We're aiming at having it ready for the 2005 season, to give Frank time to compose the music and get everything into place."

And this show, unlike most of the shows Disson Skating has worked with, isn't slated to be a one-time event. "We eventually would hope to tour it, not a big, major tour, but take it to selected cities as a family-oriented show," he said. "We would tape it at one site, then take it on the road. It's really something new for us."

And that's not the only road trip he's aiming for in 2005. "We're also talking about bringing one of our shows — Brian's show — to Japan, doing it not just once, but for a week's run or so in Japan," he said.

“We’ve talked of expanding some into Europe, too, but that would have to be more country-wide than Europe-wide. It has to be sponsor-generated, and every country is so different.”

While Disson Skating is working hard on these projects and others, it isn’t skimping on its usual cadre of shows that have proven successful over time. Last season, there were improvements in how Disson Skating shows were presented on TV — “We spent a lot of money on an additional camera to shoot the shows, so we could get the singer and skater in the same shot more often” — upgrades in how the skating was integrated with the singers/off-ice performers — “We had Burt Bacharach’s and Michael Feinstein’s bands doing the entire show last year, and this year, Kenny Loggins will do the entire show, Michael McDonald will do four songs live (in the Holiday show), Andrea Bocelli will do six sets live ...” — and a foray into new territory with the producing of DVD of one of the shows for the first time ever — “We did our first DVD with Scott’s shows last year with Michael Feinstein, Concorde records stepped up to help us.”

There’s more along those lines this year.

“We’re always looking at different ways of doing this — the formula of including live entertainers with the skating is good, the skaters enjoy skating to live singers and working with other artists, but we’re always trying to refine it, do new things with it,” he said.

“And we’re working with new ideas in rebroadcasting, too. We already have a rebroadcast agreement with ESPN for Kurt’s, Kristi’s and Brian’s shows, and we’re working with PBS to perhaps rebroadcast the Andrea Bocelli show this year as part of their pledge drive, adding some things that weren’t in the original broadcast and packaging it for PBS.”

Disson said this year’s schedule of original show will again feature the ideas and individuality of his “creative partners” — Boitano, Yamaguchi, Browning, Witt and Hamilton, each of whom usually headlines his or her own show, and then appears in one or two others — and the team of directors, choreographers, lighting designers and project managers with whom the company has contracted. “We think we’ve pulled together a great team of people, and that is what makes these shows so successful,” he said. “We have people who are not a part of Disson Skating, but who contract to work with us, so they become our team. It helps us have consistency, but the fact that each of our creative partners are given the opportunity to come up with ideas and themes for their shows, so each show has a different looks and different concepts.”

Over the years, that team has come to include Lea Ann Miller (artistic director, choreographer), Mimi Exler and Scott Harvey (production managers), David Finley and Todd Randall of David Finley and Associates (lighting, set design, etc.), Doug McKinley (audio), Yvonne Gomez of TWI (TV director), Jennie Silverstein of TWI (TV producer) and Gary Critchlow and Joe McCarthy of TWI (TV technical coordinators). From Disson Skating, Jean Ryan (VP, sales), Pete Bockelman (operations manager) and Alyssa Shane (assistant operations manager) join Disson to work on the skating projects.

“It’s a team effort. For example, Lea Ann, who does most of the directing and choreography, also gets help from different people, like Renee Roca, who will be doing one of the shows this year. Steven Cousins and Brian Orser help out with some of the shows — that’s really nice, when we have them performing in the show and also helping with choreography. We think we have a great group of people.”

With all those people working on the shows, what, exactly, is Disson’s job?

He calls himself a negotiator and dealmaker. He took his first steps into the figure skating business in 1989 with D&F Group (with partner Alan Furst), bringing together Sudafed with a unique skating and gymnastics show called *Symphony of Sports*. Since that time, D&F Group evolved into Disson, Furst & Partners and finally, Disson & Associates.

Disson & Associates was acquired as a wholly owned subsidiary of IMG in January of 2001, and is a company that works with “corporate consulting in sports, the arts, entertainment, music, cultural activities and other areas,” according to the press release detailing the acquisition.

But Disson was so successful in working within the skating world — and enjoyed it so much — that there is an independent arm of Disson & Associates called Disson Skating, which deals exclusively with bringing sponsors together with skating shows and tours.

“The skating side of our business is separate from IMG, other than I use TWI (IMG’s TV production arm) to do the productions because that is just the best there is available,” Disson said.

Over the years, Disson matched Chrysler with the third Boitano/Witt tour (*Chrysler Skating 92*), negotiated a deal between USA Network and Boitano for a series of skating shows (*Skating Romance I, II and III, Skating Kicks Back, Country Music and More*) and with TBS and Boitano for one show (*Three Masters*

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of the Ice), brought Robin Cousins' *StarSkates* series to NBC and the *Skaters Tribute to (Hollywood, Broadway, Carlo Fassì)* to ESPN, along with *Improv Ice* to USA, and brought the *Nutcracker on Ice* tour to television in 1995, 96 and 97. He also worked with U.S. Figure Skating to create the first pro-am events, matching them with sponsors and TV.

In addition, of course, he's worked with his creative partners on their own, headlined shows — this fall will mark the eighth *Boitano Skating Spectacular*, the sixth *Katarina and Friends* (originally *Divas on Ice*), the fourth "salute" show with Yamaguchi and the fourth *Gotta Skate* with Browning. The Bocelli show is the fifth *Tribute on Ice* show and *Hamilton and Friends* would have had its third outing had the skater not chosen to pull back for a season.

"We feel like we have a good thing going with our creative partners and with our sponsor partners, who are a very big part of this, too," Disson said.

For the show that aren't the responsibility of one of his creative partner, Disson said he has a bit more say in the themes and creative process, and he tries to make sure the sponsors are a part of the process.

"With Brian, Katarina, Kristi, Kurt, and Scott, they come up with their own themes and ideas and casts. I try to stay out of the creative side of it in those cases. I'll help them secure the (musical/entertainment) artists they want — they'll keep me posted on what they are looking at and I'll usually do the (deal) with the entertainer, with the creative partner's approval, and the sponsor's approval. In cases like *Kristi's Salute to American Music*, I'll usually come up with some talent ideas and work with those, unless there is someone specific they have in mind.

"But In the case of the *Tribute* show or, say, the *Holiday* show, the title sponsors have some input into the entertainment selections. Of course, we feel we have to make it marketable.

"For example, in the *Tribute* show, we are looking for something very specific — for one thing, the entertainer has to have enough music to come up with 16-20 numbers that have some variety in style and music. And we obviously look for someone who is hot at the time. This year, well, we've been wanting to get with Bocelli for a long time, and he's coming out with a romance album. McCormick had some input into that choice — and when they came onboard as the title sponsor of the *Tribute* shows three years ago, they made an agreement with Brian (Boitano) that he'd be the featured skater in those shows. And Brian likes to look for a cast that will be different than, say, he has in his own show, so there

will be a different look and feel to each show.

"For the *Holiday Show*, we've rotated the (skating) stars, we had Kristi (Yamaguchi) one year, then Scott (Hamilton) last year, and we'll have Kristi again this year. A lot depends on who the artists are — we had Scott last year because we had a female lead singer, and we wanted a male skating star. This year, we'll have a female lead skaters because we have a male lead singer (McDonald) — but we'll also feature Todd (Eldredge), he's a great fit. For the Loggins show, we're looking for skaters who have good names and are a good fit with the music — I get input from Lea Ann and we look for what will make a good show. For Kurt's show, of course we look for Canadian skaters, since it's in Canada, but also recognize it's being shown on NBC in the U.S. and make sure it will appeal to a U.S. TV audience.

"There are a lot of individual factors that go into the creation of each show."

It's one thing to come up with an idea for a great show, it's another thing to get those creations on television. In his earlier forays into skating, during the post-1994 boom, over-air and cable networks were eager to acquire skating shows. That's not the case any more, so Disson Skating changed its approach, taking a risk based on its confidence in its own product.

Disson's deal with NBC is a time-buy — that is, the company buys the time from the network and then is responsible to deliver to the network the shows to broadcast. So, Disson Skating makes the deal with the arena where the show will take place, signs all the skating and entertainment talent and pays for the television production of the shows (directors, camera operators, lighting designers, TV editors and producers), then must get that money back by matching sponsors with the shows and selling ads for the broadcast.

"My job is to make it all happen," Disson said. "I deal with the network, the celebrity talent, the skating talent, everyone. I match sponsors with shows and talent. We make the time-buy and work with our creative partners to do the shows"

Disson said the risk has more than paid off. "It's been well worth the gamble," Disson said. "I think we've got good time slots for our shows — the Boitano show has been the highest rated afternoon figure skating show on TV for years. It's got a great time slot on New Year's Day.

"We're aiming to make all our shows kind of 'appointment TV.' That's what's happened with the Boitano show, and we would like it to be that way for all our shows. We've been able to get them mostly 4-6 p.m. (ET) in the afternoons. People know to look for the

Disson with Ralph & Rory Burghart
and Caryn Kadavy



shows, they know that some of their favorite skaters are involved ... and it's working. We get the best skaters because they enjoy doing these kinds of shows, they want to work with Brian, Kristi, Scott, Katarina, and Kurt, they like events where they can show off their artistic side. We're working each year with artists who are more and more willing to think out of the box and try different things, so we think there is great growth potential."

The time slots come mostly in the holiday season between Thanksgiving and the week after New Year's. While that seems to cram a lot of skating into a short time, Disson said the schedule is not likely to change because that's when skating seems to fit best.

"The greatest interest on the part of the networks is that time," he said. "It's a seasonal thing, especially in some parts of the country where there is a lot of outdoor activity once you get out of the winter season.

"For example, we did a really good show with Katarina for CBS, *Kisses on Ice*, but it was shown in the spring and the good weather affected the ratings, people were outside doing things. We will probably keep our TV broadcasts within that (holiday/winter) time frame."

The Disson Skating Website lists projected ratings in the 2.5 to 3.5 range, with specific breakouts on women 18-54. Those ratings goals have usually been met — the Boitano show on New Year's Day has been around 3.3 — but this past season, the ratings slipped some. Disson said he wasn't particularly concerned, since they were still were among the highest-rated afternoon skating shows and pointed to an usual situation in college football — where the Rose Bowl, which runs during the

Boitano show on New Year's Day actually featured a team (Southern California) with a chance at winning a portion of the national championship due to a glitch in the Bowl Championship Series.

"Ratings are down for everything lately, but our ratings have been fairly consistent," he said. "We caught a bad break on New Year's Day this year. For five years in a row, Brian's show had that 3.3 rating, but the fluke of having USC in the Rose Bowl, going for a possibly national championship, was a hit on us. But it's not likely to happen again. And Scott's show went up against an NFL playoff game between New England and Indianapolis that was a good game — that was an unusual circumstance, too. We are confident our ratings will remain

consistent."

Advertisers like McCormick, CapitalOne, AllState, Smuckers, Metabolife, Kleenex, Campbells, Hallmark and others have found skating a good fit for their products, Disson said, and many have been pleased enough with the product to be on board for many years, some as title sponsors.

"Part of our work is to get sponsors committed to building the sport and the audience," he said. "Skating is a great fit for active adults, and we are also aware that we have a large female audience.

"So, we work within that. It's getting more and more competitive for advertisers to hit a target audience, and we feel we have a good grasp on our target audience, who that is, so we can offer a good fit to advertisers looking for this target audience. We also look for buildings that will contribute — after all, what entity is better suited to advertise the show than the building where it will be held? We look for buildings that are committed to the shows, too."

The one thing that may hold back some of that growth potential is that the creative partners Disson Skating is working with are all nearer to the end of their careers than they are to the beginning. They are familiar favorites whose body of work have created loyal followings — but they won't be skating forever. Last season Yamaguchi didn't skate in the show she headlined because she had given birth to her first child just weeks before. Hamilton is not headlining a show this season after getting married in 2002 and becoming a father last year. Browning just welcomed his first child last summer,

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Boitano marked his 40th birthday last year and Witt is nearing that landmark.

Disson said he is cognizant of that fact and is working toward introducing the U.S. television audience to new faces who will hopefully become favorites, as well. Recent Russian Olympic champions Ilia Kulik and Alexei Yagudin have been featured in several shows in the past few years. “I think Ilia’s *A House Is Not A Home* in the Bacharach show, with James Ingram, was one of the highlights of the year.” Pair co-gold medalists from the 2002 Olympics, Jamie Sale & David Pelletier of Canada and Elena Berezhnaya & Anton Sikharulidze of Russia have appeared in a few shows.

“Thank goodness Kristi is back, thank goodness Brian is hanging in there so strongly, and Kurt is there, and Kat, and we hope to work with Scott again next year — and Todd is skating really well right now,” he said.

“But of course, we also look for new stars. We are proud that Sarah (Hughes) is back in school, but she is working also as a spokesperson for Campbells, and we hope that at some point she will do our shows. We’d love to use the Chinese pair, (Xue) Shen & (Hongbo) Zhao, in a show, and we are hopeful to have (new European champion) Brian Joubert. We’re also going to have the new (ladies) world champion, Shizuka Arakawa, in Katarina’s show. We’re putting Shae-Lynn Bourne in Kurt’s show as a solo act. We’re trying to incorporate new faces, but face it, there is still just a handful of stars.”

Conspicuously lacking from that list are names of eligible U.S. skaters other than Hughes, who hasn’t competed this year. The natural “stars” for a U.S. skating audience are its own skaters, but Disson has no access to those skaters. While other federations are willing to sanction their eligible skaters to appear in Disson Skating shows, U.S. Figure Skating will not, so names such as Michelle Kwan, Sasha Cohen, Michael Weiss and Tim Goebel are not on the cast lists.

Disson said he figures the restriction is in place because USFS wants to be able to offer its TV partner, ABC, exclusive rights to its skaters. With ABC recently declining to re-sign a contract with the ISU, it may be a move USFS feels in necessary, since its contract with ABC will expire in a couple of years. But Disson thinks it isn’t the best idea..

“We are a little restricted on the U.S. side,” Disson admitted. “And I’m not sure it’s the best thing. We don’t feel like we’re competing against them — our shows are entertainment, not competition, and those are two different things, and we try not to schedule against those competitions.

“I wouldn’t expect to use a lot of U.S. eligible skaters, but it is money and exposure for the skater, and for U.S. skating in general, and I wish we could get permission for one or two of them to appear in a show each year. But, since we can’t, we don’t anticipate using any U.S. (eligible) skaters in our shows this year. We’ll just wait while they pursue their gold medal dreams. We figure they’ll turn pro eventually. We can’t wait for (Disson client) Michael Weiss to turn pro, and we figure Michelle Kwan won’t be eligible forever, and the others will turn pro, too. We’ll be around when they do.”

But don’t expect Disson Skating to stand still while it is waiting. There are always new projects on the horizon.
