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Elizabeth Punsalan
Olympic Ice Dance Skater



Last Dance: Elizabeth Punsalan and Jerod Swallow are preparing to quit amateur competitions for a professional career in ice dance.



BLADES

OF GLORY

By Rachelle Q. Ayuyang

For the U.S. ice dance team of Elizabeth Punsalan and Jerod Swallow, 1998 is a make-or-break year. As of this writing, they were gearing up for this month's Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan and the World Figure Skating Championships in Minneapolis, Minnesota in March, the last major competitions they'll enter as amateurs.

"We're competing now at a higher level for placement," says Filipina American skater Punsalan, whose tandem with Swallow is currently ranked sixth in the world among ice dance teams. A winning performance in one of the international events would be a perfect cap to a more than a decade old amateur figure skating career that will end this year.

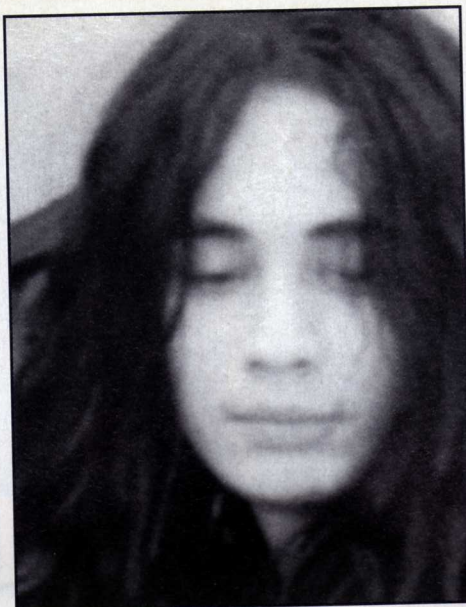
No matter what the outcome, Punsalan, 27, and Swallow, 32, would've blazed a trail for the next generation of ice dance skaters, having fought long and hard for the recognition of ice dance in the United States.

"The U.S. has so many interests that ice dance gets lost in the shuffle," Punsalan explains. "It's just like anything else that has to take root in this country. Soccer now is a big thing, and women's basketball is getting noticed. Someone has to get out there and let people know that (ice dance) exists, and the interest will be there."

Punsalan and Swallow, who are also married (the couple resides in Pontiac, Michigan), have gone through periods of professional and personal triumphs and upheavals. They're now nurturing aspects of their lives that were largely ignored because of their passionate commitment to their sport. Punsalan, the daughter of a Filipino father and an Irish American mother, in particular is becoming more acquainted with the Filipino American community.



Childhood Memory: Growing up, Winter Olympian Punsalan learned about her heritage mainly by attending Filipino gatherings.



Living with Tragedy: Punsalan's dad, Ernesto (extreme left), was killed by her brother, Ricardo.

"Just in the past few years a lot of Filipinos who know me would call me by name on the street, which is very unusual," she notes.

Last year, she was honored by the New York-based Filipino American Human Services Inc. (FAHSI) for being "an outstanding athlete of Filipino descent." "That was a great experience," beams Punsalan, who recalls attending Filipino dinners as a young girl. "I do feel more and more connected with the community. It's the first time I feel I've been recognized as a Filipino. I knew my mother and father belonged to a Filipino American society in which they went to dances every holiday, but I never realized what went on or their significance when I was growing up."

She's more conscious now of her ethnicity and the struggles of women. "When I was younger, I thought Punsalan was a household name, and I didn't realize that I was also an ethnic minority. I didn't know the problems women were having in society. Maybe, that's one of the reasons why I've gone so far as I have—not knowing the boundaries or the rules society has for minorities and women."

Unlike some athletes, Punsalan has no qualms about being a role model: "I feel I can be a role model for young Filipino American girls. It's so important for these kids to have someone to look up to. I always remember as a kid looking for role models."

She's the perfect example of discipline and diligence. Her "unholy work ethic," as described by Philippine Consul General Willy C. Gaa in New York City during the FAHSI event, includes over four hours on the ice and one hour of weight-training each day and additional sessions of ballet and ballroom dancing.

The hard work produces seamless skating. In one exhibition tour, the pair shot through the ice with Celine Dion blaring in the background. Punsalan, while supported by Swallow, glided on one knee with her back arched and head almost

touching the ice. The magic of ice dance doesn't come from the jumps, which are prohibited, but from the intricate moves closer to terra firma. As the couple skates on a surface where the less-than-graceful fear to tread, they're often telling a story, assuming dramatic personalities and evoking an emotion through their gestures, facial expressions and choreography. Whether it's a fast-paced jive or a precise yet sensual tango, the intensity of their performances sets the rink on fire.

"Repetition is the only way to do it," says Swallows.

"It's true," Punsalan interjects. "We do it so many times, it's automatic."

*Along the frozen lake she comes
In linking crescents, light and fleet;
The ice-imprisoned Undine hums
A welcome to her little feet.*

-Anonymous, "Our Skater Belle"

Sitting with Swallow for an interview at the Clift Hotel in San Francisco, the auburn-haired skater speaks softly. She's petite. On the ice, however, Punsalan is larger than life, possessing both an athletic prowess and a mental toughness that belie her 5' 5", 111-pound frame.

She grew up with four athletic, rambunctious siblings—Ellen, Ernie, Ricardo and Robert—in Sheffield Lake, Ohio. "My mom didn't have much help in the way of a nanny," Punsalan recalls. "We were driving her crazy most of the time. There would be 10 kids at any given time and sleepovers."

Older sister Ellen and brother Ernie were also introduced to skating by their mother, Theresa McGowan, who grew up with the sport in Buffalo, New York; but it was Elizabeth, then five, who persevered.

"Skating was most fun for me," she ex-

plains. "It's always changing from day to day. You feel a little bit different. The blades are a little sharper or less sharp. Or your boots are less stiff. When we're traveling around, the ice is different in each city so you have to adjust."

At 14, the aspiring skater caught the eye of Detroit, Michigan coach Sandra Hess, who paired her with David Shirk. Skating with Shirk for two years, Punsalan got invited to the Junior World competition, where they finished in eighth place.

Punsalan was hooked and discovered performing with a partner meant having a friend and motivator. "It was more rewarding," she says. "I was excelling at it faster than I was at singles."

She moved to Detroit to train and lived with a skating family. On weekends, she went home to Sheffield Lake, a two-and-a-half-hour drive away. Hess' students then moved to Colorado Springs, Colorado, where they trained at the U.S. Air Force Academy for four years. In 1988, Punsalan won the Junior National Championships with Shawn Rettstatt but then changed partners again.

At the age of 18, she began skating with Jerod Swallow, whom she had known for four years. A year later, they started dating. Their love for the sport made them virtually inseparable. "We did everything together," she recalls. "We worked out together. We ate together. We did costumes together. And for one of us to have another relationship, it just didn't work. There wasn't time. There was also a jealousy thing. If we had another boyfriend or girlfriend, they would've thought we were with each other, anyway."

Punsalan also notes: "At the time, it was unusual for American skaters to be involved with their partners because it was a curse on your skating partnership. If the relationship broke up, the skating also broke up."

On Sept. 4, 1993, Punsalan and Swallow tied the knot. "It has been great," she says. "It gives us a sense of being settled. We have a house now. We're a lot more content in our lives. It's easier to concentrate on the skating."

In 1994, Punsalan and Swallow earned a place on the U.S. Winter Olympic team. Their victory in the U.S. nationals, however, was marred by accusations that they were lobbying against 1990 Soviet defector and rival ice dance skater Gorsha Sur, who was seeking accelerated U.S. citizenship to qualify for the Olympic team.

"It was a movement started by other athletes," clarifies Punsalan, adding that she and Swallow were targeted because they were in direct

competition with Sur's team. "It wasn't personal against Gorsha. But he was setting the precedent for skaters in the future. We felt it was important for the kids starting today, who have spent 20 years of their lives (training), and (then) have someone come over and go in place of them. Jerod and I were acting on the principle of the matter. We felt we should have done it for the next generation. The way it played out in the media was that we were out for ourselves."

Keeping their spirits high wasn't always easy, especially when amateur skaters were barred from accepting money from skating exhibitions and endorsements. "Your parents were still supporting you into your twenties sometimes, or you were working as a waitress. It was difficult to continue skating. At one point Jerod and I were considering quitting because we couldn't afford it."

The couple survived the financial crunch when the rules were changed in 1992 allowing both professional and amateur skaters to earn an income from their sport. Things were looking good for Punsalan and Swallow as they headed for their first Olympics in February 1994.

Two weeks before they were to leave for Lillehammer, Norway, however, tragedy struck. Punsalan, who was having dinner with her in-laws in Michigan, received an urgent and heart-breaking call from her family. Her brother Ricardo, 23, a troubled sibling with a history of mental illness and substance abuse, had stabbed and killed her father, surgeon Ernesto Punsalan, 57, while the latter was sleeping.

Ricardo, once captain of his school's football team, had been undergoing treatment for his drug problem, which started at the age of 10 when he was diagnosed with Osgood-Schlatter disease, a knee injury that strikes young athletes and put him on crutches. Before his father's death, Ricardo was taking Prozac, which had induced a violent reaction earlier, according to Punsalan. Doctors later diagnosed Ricardo a schizophrenic.

"They never said what he had because he wasn't a threat to anyone until he killed my father," she explains, choking back tears. "Now he's getting the help he needs." Ricardo was later found not guilty of an aggravated murder charge by reason of insanity and was recommitted to a high-security hospital.

Punsalan went to Norway anyway as she believed her father would've wanted. She hoped skating would be a safe haven. Punsalan and Swallow, however, were also competing in the biggest event of their lives. A loss of concentration could be disastrous. Punsalan and Swallow, the only ice dance pair to represent the United States in the 1994 Olympics, took a spill in their free dance and finished in 15th place. Despite their

dismal showing, Punsalan didn't lose her wit, remarking, "Years from now we'll tell our kids we made it to the Olympics, we had a great time, we skated like crap."

*I praise thee while my days go
on;
I love thee while my days go on;
Through dark and dearth,
through fire and frost,
With emptied arms
and treasure lost,
I thank thee while my days go on.*

*-Elizabeth Barrett Browning,
"De Profundis"*

It's evident where Punsalan got her drive and dedication to her sport. "When my father wasn't working, he was napping. He was on emergency call all the time," she recalls. "When he was with us, he always had the beeper and had to leave in the middle of mass or when we were at dinner in a restaurant."

"(Ernesto) was dedicated to his profession as Liz was to her skating," Swallow once told a reporter in 1994. "That's why he understood why

"You always wonder why," she adds. "You can't go back at this point, and it's not so much *why* but *how* you go on. You now realize how important the people around you are. You're not bothered about the little things anymore. It's really the first death I had to deal with. And to die in a violent way is difficult."

But Punsalan keeps plugging away, as is her habit. "The more productive you are," she says, "the easier it is."

Skating has helped Punsalan work out her grief, and partner-husband Swallow has been part of the salve that has eased her pain. "Jerod had a tougher go of it than I had," she said in 1994, "because he had to be there to hold me up, my family and our skating."

As the sun sets on her amateur career, her sights are now on the future, perhaps skating with Swallow professionally for two years and having a family. Punsalan also plans to complete an engineering degree in industrial design, while Swallow hopes to finish up an art history degree. "For the upcoming season, I'd like to make it more upbeat and not dwell so much on the tragedy but on the recovery," she declares. "I feel I've come a long way toward that." ■

VICTORY! In January, Elizabeth Punsalan and Jerod Swallow won the U.S. National title in ice dance, earning a spot on the U.S. Olympic team for the second time.

she was doing what she was doing."

He was also modest about his daughter's accomplishments. When staff members at the hospital where he worked told him they saw Punsalan on television, her father just smiled.

She regrets, though, that their busy schedules had kept them from having a closer relationship. "I probably wasn't as close as I would've been had I not been skating, and he, working," she says sadly.

The rest of her family are coming to terms with Ernesto's death. Her mother, Theresa, now takes more trips with her friends and tends to the family home in Sheffield Lake. When the going gets tough, she and her children find comfort talking to one another. As for her brother Ricardo, Punsalan hasn't seen him since Christmas in 1993 but has recently written to him.

