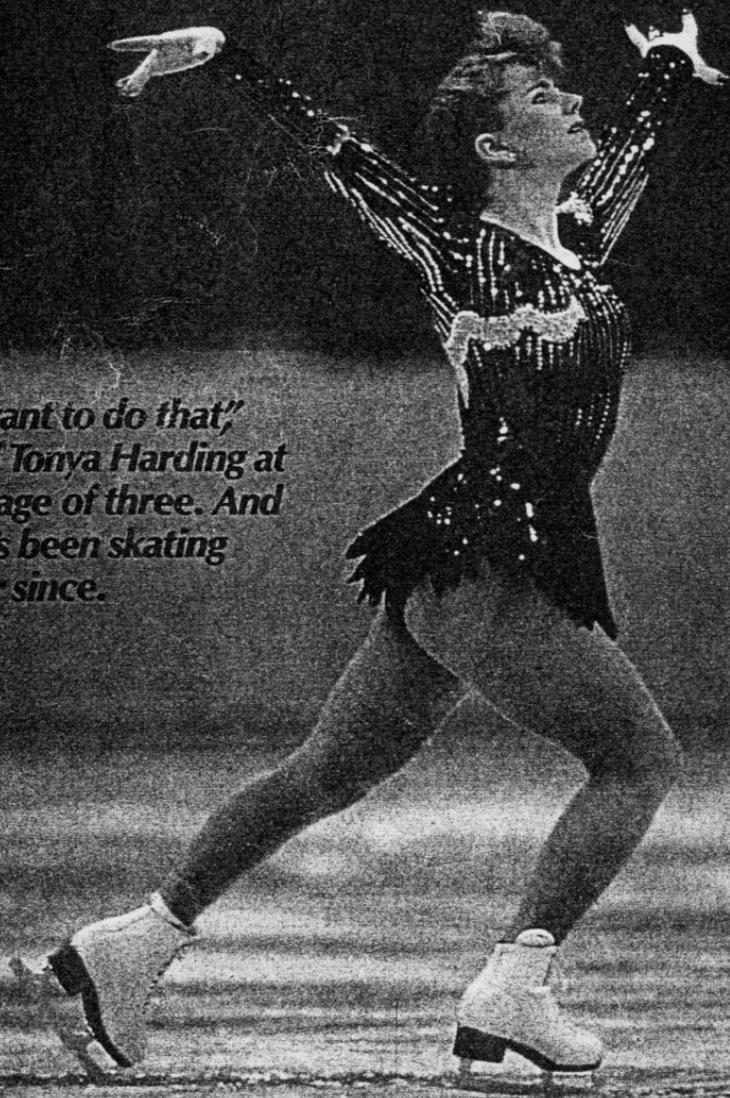


Pride of Portland

by Nora Joan Kilbourne, Portland, Oregon

*"I want to do that,"
said Tonya Harding at
the age of three. And
she's been skating
ever since.*



When the athletes gather this month for the Winter Olympics in Albertville, France, a lot of us here in Portland, Oregon, are hoping to see a figure skater named Tonya Harding on the ice. She's our hometown heroine, the local girl we're all rooting for. I've talked with Tonya, and like other Portlanders, I've followed her closely over the years in her long struggle to the top. Some say that at 21 she might be too old to go to the Olympics. Well, if so, age is just one more challenge she's faced in a path strewn with obstacles.

At the age of three, Tonya was standing on the pedestrian bridge over the Lloyd Center Ice Pavilion in northeast Portland, watching the skaters below when she said to her mom, "I want to do that." It wasn't a childish whim; she meant it. When Tonya was four years old she was taking classes, and by the time she was five she was entering the competitions that even then tested her championship mettle.

At an outdoor competition in Sun Valley, Idaho, it started to snow and the temperatures plunged to 12 degrees. Wearing a backless dress sewed by her mother, Tonya looked at the driving snow and burst into tears. "I hate the cold," she declared. "I'm not going to skate."

"Oh, good," said one of her competitors, a girl from Toronto. "I'm going to win."

Tonya quickly forgot about the weather. "Oh no you're not," she said. She skated out on the ice in a fury and won first place in her division.

Skating can be an expensive sport, especially if you have your eye on championship competition. I've driven by the arenas where Tonya trained, and you're more likely to see

new Volvos and Mercedes parked there than subcompacts or second-hand trucks.

Tonya's father worked in the lumber mills and was often out of work. Her mother raised the children and they made ends meet by drawing on the natural bounty of our northwest region. The family hunted for deer and elk in the mountains and fished in the waters of our rivers. Tonya's former coach, Diane Rawlinson, told me about a time when Tonya insisted they stop practice long enough to take a look at the family's morning catch. There at the family home, stretched out on the kitchen's linoleum floor, was a six-foot-long sturgeon. "Tonya was very proud of it," Diane said.

Of course, even by hunting and fishing and picking up cans along the side of the road for pocket change, Tonya's family couldn't begin to supply the funds necessary for her training. Today coaches charge up to \$100 an hour, boots cost nearly \$500 a pair, blades go up to \$300, and a skater can go through three sets of blades a year.

Fortunately, Tonya had a phalanx of friends looking out for her. More than once Diane Rawlinson found herself raising funds at the last minute to enable Tonya to enter some distant event. A wealthy married couple, both lawyers in Portland, stepped in at one point, underwriting the cost. Diane herself contributed countless hours of free lessons, and she and her husband often paid for Tonya's ice time out-of-pocket. Still, Tonya had to manage on half the ice time most girls used.

"I learned to focus all my energy on the two hours a day I had," she told me.

In those short, intense workouts

she made amazing progress. She was eight years old when she landed her first double Axel. At the age of nine she landed her first triple Salchow, and at ten her first triple toe loop. The Axel, Salchow and toe loop are types of jumps, each defined by a particular takeoff, landing and foot position. All the jumps require tremendous speed and strength as the skater launches into air by jabbing or "picking" a toe in the ice. And this is where Tonya excelled, with enough speed to add dizzying turns to each type of jump.

One day Tonya came off the ice after a hard workout, barely able to breathe. A doctor diagnosed asthma, induced by the cold and the exhausting exercise of skating. She was only eight years old then and she has been plagued by asthma ever since. Several times at key moments in her career, it has acted up and she's

slipped from a dominant position in a competition.

And she's had her share of victories and defeats. Back in 1987, she landed triple Axels at two nonqualifying summer events, becoming the first woman in the world to do so. That same year she beat world-champion Katarina Witt in the short program at the NHK competition in Japan. But that same year she placed only fifth at the US Figure Skating Championships—the nationals—in Denver, not good enough to go to the Winter Games in Calgary. In 1989 at the nationals, she took third, which wasn't good enough to qualify her for the World Figure Skating Championships. In 1990 at the nationals in Salt Lake City, she was in second place going into the freestyle final when she began having serious problems with her breathing. Her old enemy, asthma. She came off the ice coughing and wheezing, placing seventh in the event.

That was about the darkest period of her whole career. She'd sacrificed the life of a normal high school girl to be a skater. No proms, no Saturdays at the mall, no long summer afternoons at the beach. Up every morning at the crack of dawn to get on the ice before school. And for what? By then she was 19 and her goal of someday competing in the Olympics looked increasingly elusive. By 1992 she'd be 21, and people said that was too old for a skater.

"Did you ever think of giving up?" I asked her.

"I moped around for about two weeks after losing the nationals. I didn't want to do anything. But then I decided I couldn't quit. I'd put too much into it."

Back to training, back to the ice, back to the two one-hour workouts



Tonya after winning the US Figure Skating Championship in 1991.

per day that had been her regimen from the beginning. Back to weight lifting to improve her upper-body strength and her balance.

By the time of the 1991 nationals in Minneapolis, she was in top shape. She had a challenging program planned and had every reason to expect she'd be at her best. But there was one more thing she had to do before the competition, something you can see her doing before every competition.

"You'll see me off to one side warming up my knees," she says. "And while I'm down I always say a prayer." That day in the rink, as she knelt in her turquoise outfit, her blond ponytail bobbing behind her, she prayed, "Lord, be with me."

That day she made history. In the freestyle competition she became the first American woman to land a triple Axel in a qualifying event. It was a brilliant performance, full of spirit and spunk. She came away from the nationals with a first place and a solid berth at the worlds, where she placed second.

And so it is that we Portlanders have good reason to believe that we'll be seeing Tonya whipping through her patented triple Axels and making those bounding leaps across Albertville's ice. We're proud of her, just as we're proud of all the Olympic athletes hailing from hometowns everywhere. I'm sure that each of them has a story of incredible struggle and determination to tell.

I've learned through Tonya Harding that when we see those skaters going through their programs, we're seeing more than a display of grace and beauty and athletic virtuosity. We're seeing a crowning demonstration of the God-given drive that fires the human spirit. ◀

A Prayer For February

*Send forth, O God,
Thy light and truth,
And let them
lead me still,
Undaunted,
in the paths of right,
Up to Thy holy hill.*

—John Quincy Adams
(1767–1848)

This prayer is taken from a hymn written by the only son of a president to become a president. John Quincy Adams received his early education from his father, John Adams, and his gifted mother, Abigail. After graduating from Harvard and studying law, he served the United States in many diplomatic posts before becoming James Monroe's secretary of state in 1817 and the country's sixth president in 1824. Adams also wrote a funeral hymn, "Sure to the Mansions of the Blest," and "Alas! How Swift the Moments Fly," which was composed in 1859 for the 200th anniversary of the Congregational Church of Quincy, Massachusetts.