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My Experiences with Body Image and Eating Disorders in Figure Skating

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the University Honors Program University of South Florida St. Petersburg

May 5, 2019

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Abstract

This is a personal reflection of my experiences with an eating disorder and body image issues that I have dealt with throughout my figure skating career. I reflect on body dysmorphia issues, my obsession with the scale, the realization that I had an eating disorder, and my journey to heal. These experiences, stories, pictures, and journal entries are used to show how relevant these issues are in the figure skating world and give hope and inspiration to other athletes that have gone through similar struggle. I discuss how these issues are prevalent throughout the sport of figure skating and discuss other people’s personal experiences with eating disorders, body image issues, and weight loss issues in the sport. I address how figure skating brings on these body issues and why they are seen more often in aesthetic sports. I also discuss what could be done to make a difference in the sport so that young teenagers can still participate without having to experience eating disorders or feeling like they need to lose weight.

Keywords: Figure skating, eating disorders, body image, binge eating
Introduction

When you lose something that defines you, something that you love, something that you’ve spent your entire life doing, you lose all sense of self and sense of direction in life. This is how I felt when I quit figure skating. Growing up, figure skating was my life. I started skating at three years old and thought that I would skate forever. From then on, I spent hours and hours at the rink practicing to be the best I could be. I was determined to succeed and I fell in love with the feeling of performing. I envisioned myself going to the Olympics or the World Championships and having incredible success in the sport.

I never could have imagined the negative effects that figure skating would have on my life. After years of participation in the sport, I developed a negative body image and an eating disorder. I struggled with binge eating disorder, obsessions with the scale, and negative thoughts about myself for years. This autoethnography will dive into the negative effects that figure skating had on my body image and the development of my eating disorder. I will show the severity of the issue of body image and eating disorders in figure skating by sharing my personal story and experiences through remembrance, photographs throughout my skating career and also through journal entries I wrote when I was younger. I hope to bring inspiration and the hope of healing to other athletes who have also struggled with a negative body image and eating disorders.
Quitting Skating

Throughout my skating career, I dreamed of traveling as a show skater after my competitive career was over. The feeling I had when I stepped on the ice to perform was irreplaceable. I was born to perform and felt more at home on the ice during a show than anywhere else. Then, one day I suddenly faced the fact that this dream that I had imagined my entire life was coming to a crushing end.

The summer before my sophomore year of high school, I rolled my ankle and was dealing with an injury. The original diagnosis was a sprained ankle, and I wore a walking cast for a few weeks. A month later, I was allowed to get back on the ice and skate, but I was still in pain. After going to the doctor again, they ordered an MRI done and found that I had three torn ligaments and a lot of scar tissue built up in my ankle that could only be repaired with surgery.

You would think that sitting in the doctor’s office and hearing that I was going to be having surgery would leave me panicked or distraught. Instead, I had a sense of relief like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. But that feeling left me terrified. Why was I relieved to be going into a surgery that would leave me off the ice for months? In the back of my mind I thought I knew why, but I was horrified to even just admit it to myself. It was an excuse for me to spend more time off the ice to figure out if I wanted to continue skating. I wasn’t quite sure yet why I had a desire to quit or why I was excited to take time off. I just knew that I couldn’t do it anymore and
that I needed a break, so I was thankful to have an injury to use as my excuse. I had the surgery and took about two more months off the ice in different casts and doing physical therapy.

While I was off the ice I struggled with feeling useless and lazy. I also knew that because I was taking time off from exercise and not really paying attention to my diet that I was gaining weight, which terrified me for when I finally did get back on the ice.

From My Journal
10/4/13 - 16 years old, junior year of high school
“[I’ve] been full of emotions for the longest time. I’m just ready to let them all out. I’m hoping that starting this journal will help. I recently had surgery on my left ankle. I haven’t jumped in at least 4 weeks and I still can’t walk. I’m at the point where I simply want to give up on skating. I haven’t had the chance to weigh myself since my surgery, but before then I was 156 (the heaviest I’ve ever been in my life!) I feel like everyone just keeps making fun of me for my weight. I miss how I used to feel. I used to feel beautiful, smart, determined. I used to be happy. I would do anything in the world to feel happy again. I used to feel beautiful. ... I finally get to walk again on Monday and I plan to begin to fix my life.... I’m also going to get back on a regular, healthy eating pattern next week. This will help me to feel better on the inside and be more energized to tackle my day! I know these seem like small things but they are the beginning of my life-changing journey. I realize that I’m going to make mistakes. I’m human; not perfect!!! I need to accept I made the mistake of
letting my life get his bad. I need to stop living in the past and start living towards my future! Life is always moving! Time isn't going to stop! So do something with your life! Go to college! Do a double axel! Heck lose 30 pounds! I promise you won't regret it!"

When I came back to skating after my surgery, I had a couple weeks to get ready and then it would be time for our annual holiday show. Even though I was still having thoughts about quitting skating and was very confused on if I wanted to continue, I knew I wanted to do the show. Shows were something that I enjoyed more than anything in skating. I loved the feeling of going out and performing for the audience and the feeling of freedom in my skating. Also, because I knew that I was a good show skater, it left me with a sense of accomplishment and pride in my abilities. I was excited to perform, but I also knew that there was a big possibility that this would be the last show that I performed in and that left me wanting to savor every moment. I was also very stressed about the fact that I had taken time off and had gained weight.

*From My Journal*

12/1/13 - 16 years old, junior year of high school

“It’s December 1st today! But at the same time the show is in a week and I am so not ready! I feel so heavy and I need to go on a major diet this week! Like massive!!!! I hope that I can at least get to 153! At least then I wouldn’t look obese.”

That year, right before I went out for the last number of the show, tears formed in my eyes thinking about how this could be my last year doing a show. I hadn’t actually said that to anyone or even admitted it to myself. But part of me knew that I really did not want to skate any longer and that my time in the skating world was coming to an end.

For the entire next year, I was skating, but not really. I was coming in to the rink a couple days a week and would get on the ice for 45 minutes or less and get off. After years of working my butt off every day in the rink, it felt like I was being lazy. There was no real reason for me to be
barely skating. I used my surgery and my injury as an excuse. Pretended that because I was injured, I wasn’t allowed to be training as much and that I wasn’t physically capable of doing all of my jumps and pushing myself. When people asked why I was skating less, I told them I was still in pain and that my ankle wasn’t fully recovered yet. However, I knew that it was because I didn’t really want to and that tore me apart. How is it that I somehow just no longer wanted to skate? This sport had been my life – everything I knew since I was a little girl. I had always loved skating, it was my passion and what I poured my heart and soul into, but somehow, I just didn’t want to? I didn’t understand why I no longer wanted to skate, but I thought that I was just giving up so that I could be lazy and not work hard anymore and those thoughts left me an emotional mess.

A year later, I skated in my last show. It was my senior year, and I was so happy that I had the opportunity to skate in another show after thinking that the previous year would have been my last. After going from training all day every day, to taking time off for my surgery, and then to only skating for 45 minutes a day, I had gained quite a bit of weight. Yet, being able to do that one last show gave me a little bit of confidence and hope that if I wanted to and if I was really determined to, that I could at least get back into shape to skate in shows after graduating college. I told myself that I wouldn’t compete anymore, but I would keep skating through college enough to stay in shape and that when I graduated college I would go into Disney on Ice which had been my dream for as long as I could remember. But a few months later, as I prepared for graduation from high school and moving into my freshman dorm at the University of
South Florida St. Petersburg, I decided to leave skating for a while and told everyone it was because I wanted to focus on school.

From the moment I quit, I beat myself up over why I left and thought of myself as a quitter. In my head, I had left the sport that had shaped who I am today and that I had loved from a very young age for no reason other than ‘I didn’t want to do it anymore.’ I was confused and angry with myself for giving up, but I still knew that I didn’t want to go back.

From My Journal
“I hate myself for allowing skating to just fall out of my life. Skating was the one place where I could just let all of my emotions out. I loved skating and now it’s one of the smallest things in my life.”

It wasn’t until I went to therapy and started healing from my eating disorder and years of body image issues that I realized the true reason that I quit skating. My therapist and I had made the decision that I was going to try skating a few mornings every once in awhile just to see how I felt and if I still liked it. I had expressed my feelings to her of regretting quitting and that I would love to get back in shape and join Disney on Ice. I wanted to try to skate again, but I was terrified of going back to our rink. I didn’t want the coaches or other skaters to ask questions or judge why I was trying to skate when I had gained so much weight. So I found an old skating outfit that somehow still fit and drove to another rink to skate a session first thing in the morning when it would be quiet. I enjoyed being on the ice, but didn’t try many jumps or spins because I knew that I was not in shape and wouldn’t be able to do them.

I was happy to be back on the ice, but it was annoying to have to drive an hour just to skate for an hour, so I decided that I would skate one morning the following week at my home rink. I had planned on going for one of the first sessions of the day so that nobody would see me or ask questions. I was very anxious about skating at my rink for the entire day before and all morning as
I was getting ready to leave. I got dressed and ready to go, I stood up and looked in the mirror and my entire body just went numb. I stared at myself and knew that I looked nothing like an athlete and had gained so much weight since I had skated. I was horrified to walk in to the rink and for someone to see me. I was terrified of what they might think. I was consumed by the idea that someone was going to think I was fat and that I had no right to be on the ice. I sobbed and sat down at my desk to put my hair up, because I was so determined to go and skate. I wanted to overcome my anxiety and get to the rink. I knew that the moment I stepped on the ice, I would be okay. But I couldn’t do it.

I physically could not bring myself to leave my house that morning; I just sat there and cried. I was so emotional and I couldn’t quite figure out why. And then a moment of realization came over me. In that moment I knew the reason that I had quit skating. It was because I never wanted to feel like this again. I didn’t want to be so consumed with what other people thought of my weight that I physically felt sick just going to the rink. I no longer wanted to be so concerned with my image or losing weight or not being thin enough or good enough to make it in the sport. I didn’t want to feel these anxieties day in and day out. My life for so long had been consumed with my weight and food – and I realized that morning that the reason I quit skating was to break out of this body controlled sport. As much as this realization was painful for me, it left me with a sense of relief. After all these years of feeling like I was just quitting and giving up for no reason other than I just didn’t feel like it or didn’t want to, I finally had a reason for why I quit. A reason that made sense and a reason that gave me the ability to forgive myself for leaving skating. This was one of the greatest moments of healing that I have experienced since I quit skating.
From My Journal
7/3/16 - 18 years old, summer between freshman and sophomore year of college
“How wonderful it felt to have the pressure of dieting lifted for a few brief moments. I didn’t like being in an environment where there was so much talk of weight, calories, and diets”

Why Autoethnography?

I chose to do an autoethnography because I feel that my story explains the pervasive issue of body image struggles in the sport of figure skating. Marilyn Lichtman defines an autoethnography as “a qualitative research approach that combines elements of ethnography and elements of personal narrative. This combination is meant to connect the personal with the cultural by placing an understanding of the self within a social context” (Lichtman, 107). I will be using my story to explain the gravity of the issue of body image issues and eating disorders in figure skating.

“Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 1). This is the perfect method of qualitative research for this topic because my goal is to tell my personal story in order to bring light to the larger issue of eating disorders and a negative body image in the sport of figure skating. I believe that this is a pressing issue in today’s society and in the sport of figure skating, which is why I feel that sharing my story is essential to help bring severity to the situation. “Autoethnographies are highly personalized accounts that draw on the experience of the researcher for sociological understanding” (Lichtman, 107). The stories and experiences that I will be sharing are extremely personal and my goal is to help other athletes
understand that they are not the only ones experiencing these feelings and to promote the necessity of further research on this subject.

As I was struggling with my eating disorder, I had been collecting data all along through my journal entries and through the photos that I was taking which help to clarify my story and support my memories. I feel my own experience best illustrates the issue of negative body image in the sport of figure skating. The rich details of my story will resonate with others because they are so personal. There is a lot of research that has been done about the increase of eating disorders seen in figure skaters; however, there is less research about people’s personal stories.

**Literature Review**

Over the last several years, body image issues and eating disorders have become a growing issue and concern especially in the sport of figure skating. For decades, figure skaters have experienced the pressures required of the sport to maintain a thin physique; however, it wasn’t until just recently that athletes in the sport actually started to open up about their issues and that researchers have taken an interest in the issue. The research done in recent years has shed light on the fact that, “female athletes in endurance or appearance sports are at an increased risk for disordered eating” (Wilmore, 104).

Recently, weight loss and dieting has become a common trend among the general population. “It is estimated that currently 40% of all American women are trying to lose weight” (Beals & Manore, 175). In this day and age, it has become difficult to meet someone who is not actively trying to lose weight or at least wishes they were a little bit thinner. Weight loss recipes are on the front page of every magazine and there are new weight loss solutions being advertised on
Facebook daily. The desire to be thinner is seen even more frequently in athletes, especially those who participate in aesthetic sports such as figure skating or gymnastics. In fact, “studies have shown that athletes are more prone to developing eating disorders than nonathletes” (Sundgot-Borden, 414). Athletes put their bodies through intense physical work day in and day out and are required to keep their bodies in the best shape possible, which includes eating healthy the majority of the time. This can be very stressful and grueling on an athlete, especially if they are involved in a sport that is artistic and focused more on aesthetics.

It is agreed among researchers that “the highest prevalence of eating disorders is in female athletes competing in sports where leanness and/or a specific weight are considered important for either performance or appearance” (Sundgot-Borden, 414). Females are more susceptible to this prevalence of eating disorders because of the pressure that is placed on their bodies. This is similarly proposed by an additional article that “suggests that participation in sports that promote leanness, such as figure skating and gymnastics, is more likely to be associated with increased risk of eating disorders and related behaviors such as increased weight concerns, body dissatisfaction, and excessive dieting” (Jonnalagadda, Ziegler, & Nelson, 395). It is common to see athletes in these types of sports experiencing eating disorders or having difficulty accepting their bodies.

The statistics of athletes participating in figure skating and other aesthetic sports that experience eating disorders, are unhappy with their body, or are participating in excessive dieting are staggering. “In female athletes in weight class and aesthetic sports, disordered eating occurs at estimates of up to 62%. Among female high school athletes in aesthetic sports like figure skating, 41.5% reported disordered eating” (Figure Skating and Eating Disorders: What You Need to Know). These large numbers of athletes experiencing eating disorders are supported by other
studies. During the 1998 competitive season, 23 male and 25 female elite skaters participated in a study. These skaters, “voluntarily completed the demographic, dieting behaviors, and body image questionnaire, and the food preference checklist” (Jonnalagadda, Ziegler, & Nelson, 596). “Of the females, 30% considered themselves overweight. Forty-four percent of males and 77% of females’ report being terrified about gaining weight” (Jonnalagadda, Ziegler, & Nelson, 599). These athletes are terrified of gaining weight. Goals of maintaining and losing weight consume these athletes’ thoughts, emotions, and feelings. Of the 26 female figure skaters who participated, 36% said they were currently dieting and 11% said they binge eat 2 times/week during the past 3 months. 15% believed they were underweight, 55% believed they were off an average weight, and 30% believed they were overweight (Jonnalagadda, Ziegler, & Nelson, 599). Additionally, females showed a higher, “body dissatisfaction score compared to their male counterparts” (Jonnalagadda, Ziegler, & Nelson, 599).

Another study of eating disorders was done with Canadian competitive figure skaters that discovered, “that 92.7% of the forty-one skaters surveyed reported pressure to lose weight. The skaters also indicated that in efforts to maintain the thin ideal encouraged by the sport, they engaged in various eating disorder behaviors in an attempt to control weight” (Figure Skating and Eating Disorders: What You Need to Know). Pressure to lose weight led these athletes to disordered eating patterns.

Rucinski did a study on 17 males and 23 female figure skaters ages 13-22 years old that utilized the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT). The EAT, “contains 26 items; the person taking the test responds to a series of statements such as, ‘I am terrified about being overweight,’ ‘I vomit after I have eaten,’ and ‘I give too much time and thought to food.’ Each item is rated on a 6-point scale
with descriptors ranging from ‘always’ to ‘never’ (Wilmore, 108). This study found that the, “mean caloric intake for female skaters was only 1,174 kcal/day vs. 2,897 kcal/day for male skaters” (Beals & Manore, 181). “48% of females and none of males had EAT scores in the range of anorexia nervosa (>30)” (Wilmore, 110).

In a 2002 study on 425 female college athletes, “43% said they were terrified of being or becoming too heavy, and 55% reported experiencing pressure to achieve or maintain a certain weight” (Hellmich, 3). In a separate study done by Borgen on 518 Norwegian female elite athletes in various sports, “47% were dieting, 25% used pathogenic weight control techniques, and 12% reported eating disorders” (Wilmore, 111). It is clear that figure skaters, especially females, are experiencing pressures to diet and lose weight and are more prone to eating disorders, but why?

Research has suggested many different reasons behind the increased risk in weight focused and artistic sports. One of the most commonly proposed reasoning is, “the intense pressure to remain thin, both for appearance as well as for ease in executing the lift and jump components of their performance. This, in turn, could promote restrictive eating behaviors, preferences for certain foods and avoidance of others, and distorted body images” (Jonnalagadda, Ziegler, & Nelson, 603). In the case of figure skating, the jumps are extremely demanding on the body. A recent study at Brigham Young University built a device “that can measure the impact when a figure skater lands a jump – and it turns out they’re absorbing forces up to eight times their own body weight” (Liszewski, 1). Figure skaters are required to be as thin and fit as possible to absorb this impact and withstand the pressure that is put on their bodies during jumps. It can also be argued that because figure skating is a sport of artistry in which athletes have to wear dresses that show a lot of their body and because they are being judged also partly based on their appearance and artistry that this
places additional pressures on them to be thinner. Research supports the statement that “athletes in sports in which additional body weight may hinder optimal performance, as well as athletes in those sports in which athletic performance is judged at least in part by the appearance of the athlete, comprise a subset of the female athletic population that would have to be considered at high risk for disordered eating” (Wilmore, 113). Figure skating falls into both of these categories. Not only is it more difficult to perform the skills required at a heavier body weight, but there is also a standard to appear more graceful and artistic rather than overweight. Both of these factors place pressures on figure skaters to lose weight or be thin.

Another possible reason for this increased pressure is “to perform for the coach, who is often a key figure in the athlete’s life” (Sundgot-Borden, 418). A clinical trial was done on this topic in which 522 responses were obtained. The athletes that responded, “represented 35 sports/events, which were divided into six different sport groups; technical, endurance, aesthetic, weight dependent, ball games and power sports” (Sundgot-Borden, 415). We will be focusing on the aesthetic category which included divers, figure skaters, gymnasts, rhythmic gymnasts, and sports dance. There were 22 athletes in this category ranging from age 12-24. Their average BMI was 18, the lowest of all the categories. The most common reasons for the development of eating disorders reported by the eating disordered athletes included, prolonged period of dieting/weight fluctuations (37%), new coach (30%), injury/illness (23%), and casual comments (19%). The two most common reasons for dieting among ED athletes was to enhance performance (100%) and because it was recommended by a coach (67%) (Sundgot-Borden, 418). This research done by Borden suggests that coaches play an influential role in an athletes’ decision to begin dieting and controlling their weight. It can be argued that certain styles of coaching can encourage, “body pre-
occupation and the idea that leanness enhances performance and provides a competitive advantage” (Figure Skating and Eating Disorders: What You Need to Know). Coaches play an influential role in an athlete’s life and can greatly influence their opinion of their bodies.

Many competitive figure skaters recognize the need or desire to lose weight based on their performance or comments from their coach. However, after attempting to lose weight, many do not succeed because, “body weight and shape are strongly influenced by biological and physiological variables that predestine women to be heavier than the current sociocultural ideal” (Beals & Manore, 175). According to Jenny Moshak, “athletes are driven personalities, completely focused people pleasers, almost obsessive-compulsive” (Hellmich, 2). These personality traits lead to obsessively counting calories, obsessively over exercising and dieting, which are often the first signs of eating disorders. “An athlete with disordered eating doesn’t see food as fuel that helps build her body but as calories and fat. In their world, food has become a four-letter word” (Hellmich, 4).

“It would be hard to find a female athlete in the aesthetic sports – gymnastics, diving, cheerleading, figure skating – who isn’t preoccupied with body image and somewhat obsessive about what she is eating” (Hellmich, 2). In fact, there are many female figure skaters who have come out in recent years to discuss their issues with obsessive dieting and body image issues. The athletes that have come out in the last several years and have spoken out about these issues have brought light to the subject and have made it easier for other athletes to seek help.

Many of the athletes that have come out in recent years have also expressed that the pressures to lose weight and push their bodies to the extreme started from their coaches. “If a skater loses lift on their jumps, the first instinct is for a coach to encourage weight loss, instead of
addressing strength or technique” (Grandstand Central, 2). Jenny Kirk explains that, “when [she] competed, [she] was frequently told by coaches, and judges that [she] should focus on ‘making [her] legs skinnier’. [She] remembers being six years old, grabbing [her] thighs, wishing that they would shrink. Now, 20 years later, [she] still struggles to like how [her] thighs look” (Grandstand Central, 3). She goes on to explain how casual comments that people may think aren’t a big deal actually affect an athlete quite a bit. “Comments about female athletes’ bodies in the sport have a dramatic impact on the competitive expectations and encourage athletes to continue to fit into a limited box that is not representative of the vast diversity of bodies in the world” (Grandstand Central, 3).

“Former American skater Jenny Kirk estimates that 85% of skaters have suffered, or are suffering from various forms of disordered eating... I don’t know of a skater who doesn’t think about their weight. When I was at the height of my competitive career, I was eating one meal a day after training for hours. I was often exhausted and irritated, but my focus was attaining the lean body that we see in those who grace the world stage.” (Grandstand Central, 2).

Yulia Lipnitskaya, the 2014 Winter Olympic champion, recently announced her retirement from figure skating due to her battle with anorexia. Lipnitskaya was Russia’s golden girl, but when she retired and entered a residential treatment center for anorexia, the Russian media went into a frenzy. Lipnitskaya now says that she only, “wishes she’d spoken out about her illness earlier” (The Associated Press, 2).

Hannah Miller posted a picture on Instagram on March 31, 2018, and said, “this is 2 years ago. I look happy but the smile is only a cover-up. The truth is, I hated my body. I know... it seems foolish. For a year I let someone constantly tell me I wasn’t thin enough and as a result I began to believe it. When this picture was taken, I truly thought I was too large and too weak to be a great
athlete because that was what I was constantly told. My negative body image was the start of a downward spiral of self-destruction. After making a change and spending time rebuilding my confidence, I now love my body again. I view myself as strong, beautiful, and perfectly me. We are all unique and perfect in our own way. DO NOT let anyone tell you otherwise.” Hannah Miller’s words brought light to the the issues in the figure skating world around body image and how often these athletes hate their bodies. Miller’s discussion also discussed the fact that athletes do not have to have full fledged serious eating disorders to still struggle with these types of issues. There are several athletes in the sport that struggle with accepting their bodies and over dieting, but do not have eating disorders. Many of these athletes end up believing that they don’t actually have an issue and that there is always someone worse off than they are and that they have nothing to complain about, which can be just as bad as an eating disorder.

Additionally, Canada’s Gabrielle Daleman, 2017 World bronze medalist and two-time Olympian, has taken time off from skating in the current 2018-2019 season to focus on her mental health. “Prior to the 2018 Olympics, Daleman opened up about how people would comment on her body. ‘I was always too muscular or too fat, so there would be times when I wouldn’t eat, or when I did eat I wrote down the calories and then would burn that off, and then burn double it” (Grandstand Central, 3).

Megan Duhamel of Canada also recently spoke out about how she sees these issues in the sport in a different way now that she is no longer a competitor. “Figure skating has always been a judged sport so often obsessed with appearance and aesthetics. I am now seeing this obsession from a bit of a different perspective as I reside outside the competitive skating bubble... and it’s honestly scary” (Duhamel, 1). “I am finding the number of figure skaters that are fixated on
calories, not eating properly, and not hydrating properly a deeply concerning trend. What’s more is how public it has become in the social media era” (Duhamel, 1). “I was told that I was too big many times in my skating career. I remember the stress I felt getting my skating dresses made every year. Not because I didn’t want someone measuring my body. I was stressed knowing I had spent thousands of dollars I DIDN’T HAVE on dresses over the years only for coaches, judges and officials to tell me that it made me look too big and I needed a new one” (Duhamel, 2).

It is clear from the research and from the stories of other figure skaters that eating disorders and body image in figure skating is a growing issue that should be addressed. My experiences are similar and help to show the necessity of continuing research on this topic.

How did my issues with food develop?

Growing up in a competitive pairs skating environment placed a lot of pressure on me to excel in skating and to do so, I believed that I needed to be as thin as possible. When I was going into fifth grade my family and I decided that my brother and I were going to do online school in order to pursue our pairs skating together and train all day. The rink that I grew up training in was a pairs oriented environment and still is. Our coaches have sent several pairs teams to the Olympics, the World Championships, and many
other international competitions. In order to have a competitive pairs team there needs to be a considerable difference in size, both in height and weight, so that the men are able to lift and throw the women with ease. I started skating pairs with my brother at a young age and at that time we had this size differentiation.

As time went on and I was growing, we were practically the same height and size. We struggled with our lifts quite a bit and I was often told that I was probably going to be too big for pairs skating. The coaches and other athletes who said this to me meant that I was too tall and was just going to keep growing so it would be difficult for me to find a partner that was tall enough to skate with. However, I took these comments mostly to mean that I was too heavy and needed to be skinnier if I was going to be a pairs skater.

With high level pairs skaters around me, I was in an environment where many of the girls were both short and skinny. Through my two years of doing online school in fifth and sixth grade, I trained with these high level athletes all day every day. There were high expectations for pair girls to stay fit and as skinny as possible. These were the years where I started to feel like I needed to lose weight in order to follow my dreams, especially because my brother and I were practically the same size and struggled in certain pair elements. This was also the time that I was going through puberty and starting to get curves. I began attempting to restrict my food intake as much as possible to lose weight. I would wake up in the morning and go as long as possible without eating. I would eat my first meal
at lunchtime and by then I was starving. Then almost every day, when I got home from skating, I would sneak into the kitchen at night to grab snacks to bring to my room. And when I say sneak, I literally mean tip toe and try to be as quiet as possible so that nobody would hear me. This is when the habits and patterns of restricting and binge eating began.

One of the athletes I trained with used to talk about how she had a “competition weight” which was typically between 98 to 105 pounds. Hearing her talk about how she was frustrated with weighing 108 pounds and needing to lose weight before her next competition was difficult for me. I remember the moment that I found out she and her partner placed at Nationals and I knew that two pair teams from our rink would be going to the Olympics to represent the United States. It was inspiring to grow up with such a high caliber of coaches and athletes surrounding me and motivating me to be better. However, it also pushed me to want to lose weight even more. The morning after we found out they would be going to the Olympics, I sat in my first period Algebra class in seventh grade and wrote in my journal about how excited I was for them to have made it to the Olympics and how inspired I was to work even harder for my dreams. I remember weighing 112 pounds that morning and wanting to lose more weight in order to be a better skater.

These feelings continued through middle school and the pattern of restricting and binge eating just got worse. At the time, I thought I just had a lack of self-control around food, but it is clear now that I was dealing with a larger issue. At this point in middle school I skated in the morning before school, so I wouldn’t eat breakfast because it was so early. Then I would go to school and eat maybe a small cup of chicken salad for lunch. And then by the time I got back to the rink around three or four in the afternoon I would be starving and would buy unhealthy
snacks from the rink snack bar. This pattern just continued and got harder and harder to break throughout the years.

I was also experiencing intense body dysmorphia around this time. I was only around 110 to 125 pounds throughout middle school, however I thought I was incredibly fat. I look back at pictures of myself at that time, and wonder how in the world I could have possibly thought that I was overweight.

By the time I was in high school, my binge eating was in full force. I remember hiding my food intake as much as possible because I was so embarrassed. I avoided eating around people. I used to pick up food from the gas station or a fast food restaurant on the way home and then go
straight to my room to watch TV and binge. I hid these patterns from everyone. I felt out of control and wanted nothing more than to be able to break this eating pattern and eat a healthy diet. I was convinced that I just liked food too much and had no self-control.

From My Journal
7/3/14 - 16 years old, summer between junior and senior year of high school
“Angry at myself for letting myself get so heavy. I literally hate myself. I look in the mirror and all I can feel is pure hatred. Hatred toward my looks, my weight, and even my characteristics... The only things that can make me happy anymore is food. Food is secretly ruining my life. I just keep asking myself why I keep letting myself get this bad. I need to find the strength and the courage to say, "enough is enough" and turn my life around. I’m tired of hating myself every time I look into the mirror and I’m tired of feeling like I have to hide every time I walk into a room. I need to realize that change isn’t going to happen overnight. It’s going to take a lot of hard work and commitment. I need to stick with it to make myself an overall happier person.”

Although I felt as though I was gaining a crazy amount of weight, I look back now and realize that this was only the beginning of my weight gain. As I was still restricting my diet throughout the day and working out and skating at night, I wasn’t gaining a ridiculous amount of weight yet. However, I was starting to gain a little bit of weight and this made me doubt my abilities to be a competitive athlete even more.
My freshman year of college is when my weight spiked outrageously. I was continuing to binge, but I was no longer restricting what I ate during the day and I was no longer working out.
Because of these patterns, I gained 60 pounds my first year of college. I was eating nonstop and without any control. This is when I realized that I needed help. I moved back home at the end of my freshman year and began going to therapy. I told everyone that I was moving home because it was closer to work and financially it made more sense, but one of the biggest reasons is I knew I needed to heal and that was going to take a lot of time, energy, and focus on myself.

**Struggling to find costumes**

As I was going through puberty and was growing into my body, I experienced a lot of struggles with finding costumes that I felt looked decent on my body. I thought that I looked fat in everything that I put on. I specifically remember trying this costume on, looking in the mirror, and feeling horrified. This was the first time I had every worn a body suit. I look back at these pictures now, and I feel sad that I had to go through those emotions. I’m horrified that I thought I looked fat in this costume, when I was clearly in great shape. In fact, you can literally see I put this costume on and though I looked extremely heavy! I thought I looked horrible, but in this photo you can literally see my hip bones.

October 2013
14 years old
my hip bones in the pictures of me in this costume. When I look back at memories like this, I wonder how I could have possibly thought I was fat, when I so clearly wasn’t. These are the types of memories that make me grateful for having gone through these experiences and come out the other side a better and stronger person.

Another similar experience was in the costume pictured here. I wore this costume my last year doing pairs with my brother. Throughout the entire competition season, I was struggling with deciding if I wanted to continue to try and do pairs, even though I was being told that I was too large and it would be difficult to find a partner. I remember getting off the ice from our first practice ice at Sectionals that year and going to sit up in the stands with my mom. The first thing she said to me was that I needed to drink a bunch of water that day before I competed, because I was looking a little sluggish and slow on the ice. I had already felt like this costume wasn’t extremely flattering on me and I was already struggling with feeling too heavy to do pairs, so although my mom just meant that I needed to drink water to be able to compete to the best of my abilities, I read into what she was saying to mean that I looked fat.
These struggles with finding costumes I felt comfortable in continued even more as I began to grow into a women and get curves. The costume pictured on the left took forever to find because my coach and our seamstress couldn’t seem to find the right dress that flattered my body type for this particular number in the show. We finally settled on this dress, but after struggling to find a costume that I looked thin enough in, I had a hard time finding confidence in this costume.

Relationships with Adults

Adults are a powerful influence in a child’s life and there are a few adults who I believe influenced the way I perceived my body. My two coaches greatly influenced my expectations of myself and my eating disorder. As I grew up and my coaches realized that I had a curvier shape, they made sure that I knew to watch my weight. I also believe that because both of my parents are on the heavier side, my coaches and mother were even more cautious and watched my weight more than they normally would. As I started to develop and get curves, I was told to start watching what I ate and start losing weight. One of my coaches would ask me my weight on a regular basis. I used to take group lessons with my best friend and my coach would ask us both what we weighed and if we had lost any weight. It came to a point where we both started to lie about our weight.
would tell her my coach that I weighed about 5 to 10 pounds less than I actually did to try and avoid the same lecture I had heard a million times about how I couldn’t succeed in figure skating if I was heavy. I began to have so much anxiety about going to her lessons just because I didn’t want to hear the lecture.

Both of my coaches were consistently on me to lose weight. They would also comment on how my body was looking most days. For instance, if I looked a little bit thinner one day or looked like I was jumping a little bit higher I would get comments on how I looked like I had lost a few pounds. I would also receive comments if I looked a little bit heavier or more sluggish on some days. These were the kinds of comments that did the most harm to my mental state and created an environment in my mind where everything was about weight.

I also felt pressure from my mom to lose weight. My mom grew up struggling with her weight and has always been a little bit heavier so she has had issues with her body image as well and struggled to accept herself. My mother told me once that she really hoped that I wouldn’t end up like her. She didn’t want me to end up years down the line and continue to hate my body. This was my mom’s way of convincing me to lose weight. I would also hear regular comments from my mom about how certain outfits made me look heavier and how I needed to slim down before wearing certain costumes for competitions or shows.

I know that both my coaches and my mom have always had the best intentions with their comments about my weight and have only wanted me to be able to succeed and be the best skater possible. In no way do I blame any of them for my experiences or struggles with an eating disorder. However, these are examples of how the sport of figure skating places pressures for weight loss not only on the athlete, but also on the people surrounding the athlete.
Obsession with the scale

Between the age of 11 and 18, I was obsessed with the scale. There were periods of time when I would weigh myself three to four times a day. A day never went by that I didn’t weigh myself first thing in the morning. It was always the first thing on my mind in the morning. The only scale in the house was in my parent’s closet, so that was the first place I went in the morning. I remember sneaking into my parent’s room before they woke up to weigh myself in the morning. When I finally got my own scale that I kept in my bathroom, I would make sure to weigh myself naked every morning before I got in the shower because I knew the number on the scale would be smaller. I also squeezed in my stomach as much as I could and pulled myself up making myself as tall as I could every time I weighed myself. Growing up in a pair skating environment, we were taught that in lifts we should pull ourselves up and engage our core because these things would make us feel lighter and easier to lift. I somehow convinced myself that when I step on the scale if I utilize the same techniques the number would be smaller and I would weigh less.

I was almost always disappointed with the results of my daily weigh-ins. I started weighing myself both morning and night to see if I could eat healthy enough and work out enough during the day to lose weight. Of course I would gain weight throughout the day because that is natural. But after a while, I had it completely worked out in my head that if I weighed myself at night, I could guess almost perfectly every time what I would weigh the next morning. So I knew the less I gained throughout the day, the more I would have lost by the next morning. This created a habit of weighing myself twice a day, which I did for at least a few years.

If my parents weren’t home, there were several times that I would use the scale in my parent’s room just because they had a bigger space. This allowed me to weigh myself, and then
when I wasn’t happy with the outcome I would run back and forth in my parent’s room maybe five times, do several jumping jacks, and then weigh myself again. I wanted to see what the difference was if I got my heart rate up and was always hoping to somehow lose weight after making myself move around. There were also several times that I would need to use the restroom and I would purposefully weigh myself before and after I went just to see the number on the scale go down. There was something so satisfying about seeing the number go down even just one ounce. Even if the starting weight was already to my standards, I always wanted to see a lower number. That was the ultimate goal.

There were very few times that I was actually happy with the number I saw. I remember one of those times was shortly after I had my surgery on my ankle. About two weeks after I had surgery, I started feeling ill. I had developed clostridium difficile (C. diff), which was caused by one of the antibiotics I was taking to avoid infections. The antibiotics ended up killing the healthy bacteria in my digestive tract which allowed the C. diff to grow and make me sick. I went almost a week feeling ill before I finally went to a clinic to get checked out. They had to do a test and wait a few days for the results before prescribing me any medication. Unfortunately, before the results came in I ended up getting even more sick and ended up in the emergency room. They immediately knew what was wrong with me and were able to give me antibiotics to make me start feeling a little bit better. I ended up having a CT scan on my abdomen to double check that they were correct and that there was nothing else wrong with me. After a week and a half of being extremely ill, I was finally starting to feel a little better. The next day I went to take a shower and did my regular ritual of weighing myself first. It had been about a week since I had last weighed myself because of being so ill. I had lost almost 10 pounds in a week from not being able to eat
and finally weighed 145 pounds, which had been my goal for a long time before my surgery. I remember sitting in the shower after I had weighed myself and crying from sheer joy at seeing my weight be that low. I was excited to finally be back at a weight that I felt was acceptable. I was happy that I had been sick to be able to allow my body to lose the weight. I was making a plan in my head of how I was going to keep the weight off as I started eating a “normal” diet again. I would eat as healthy as possible and keep my food intake as low as possible to make sure my weight stayed where it was.

I look back now and recognize how ridiculous and unfortunate my thought process was. I had to physically be ill and throwing up in order to be happy with my weight. And even when I was happy with the number on the scale, my thoughts were immediately on how I would keep the weight off and restricting myself enough to not gain any weight back. But how unrealistic is that? I had gone from barely eating anything but Jell-O and mashed potatoes for almost a week and was now going to have to eat a diet that was able to sustain me. Of course I was going to gain the weight back and it was foolish of me to think anything different would happen. Gaining the weight back was a healthy way of my body healing and re-nourishing itself, but my brain couldn’t recognize that. It was fixated by this meaningless number that was just a measure of the level of gravity holding me to the earth. Rather than seeing what health really is and understanding that when your body goes through illness it must heal itself, I was just thrilled to have lost weight.

From My Journal
7/6/14 - 16 years old, summer between junior and senior year of high school
“When the summer started I was extremely pumped to workout everyday and get fit! It’s been almost a month and I have not been committed enough! There’s about 43 days left of summer and I want to be 150 lbs by the first day of school! I need to lose 23 pounds to reach that goal and I know I can do it.”
"I cannot keep gaining weight. It's over! I'm already 205 lbs. That's over 200 lbs!!! I need a plan and I need to stick with it or I'm going to end up being 300 lbs & alone."

Eating with other people

Eating around other people and in front of other people was always an area of anxiety for me. I dreaded eating in front of other people and avoided it at all cost. I believed that if I had to eat in front of other people that they would either judge how much I was eating or I would have to restrict myself from having the portions that I wanted, which was difficult for me. In my mind, I was already a heavy athlete, so I should be watching my weight and eating less than anyone else at the table. I also thought that my family would be judging me if I continued eating more than my fair share of food. I remember times as a child that my mom would give me this look at the dinner table. I took these looks to mean “stop shoving your face” or “slow down, you’re being a pig.” I don’t think my mom meant these things but my insecurities fed that. I also assumed that other people would be judging me around the dinner table, but they never were. The scariest people to eat around were my coaches. Every once in a while we would go out to dinner as a skating club with the coaches and that was terrifying. I always had to order a salad even if I wanted something different. I also got anxiety ordering first in case everyone else was planning on eating something healthier than me. I wanted to be eating less than the other athletes around me and healthier, so if they ordered first I could change what I was going to order at the last minute in order to be able to get something healthier. I did everything in my power to make sure that I was eating healthier and smaller portions than everyone at the dinner table. This left me hungry after the meal which often times led to me binge eating later that night.
Thoughts of physically harming myself to feel skinny

One of the most intense thoughts that would pass through my mind while I was struggling with body dysmorphia was wanting to physically alter my body. I wanted to change so badly that I would have thoughts about how cool it would be if I could just do it myself. How awesome would it be if I could just physically change the way I looked effortlessly and painlessly? I used to hate the inner part of my thighs. This was the part of my body that I wished I could change above anything else when I was about thirteen years old. I had a fairly flat stomach, and everything else on my body was pretty thin. I just had these curves on my inner thighs that I could never accept or really understand. Everyone else had such thin thighs and thigh gaps that I didn’t have. I had such a strong desire to get rid of my curves that I used to sit on the edge of a chair and squeeze my fat on my inner thighs and think about how sweet it would be if I could just take a knife and cut off that fat without actually harming myself. Like, how awesome would it be if I could just slice the fat right off and there would be fresh new skin underneath and no blood? I wouldn’t be actually harming myself, I would be bettering myself by cutting off this horrible piece of fat that I couldn’t stand and that made other people think of me as overweight. I never once had serious thoughts of harming myself nor did I ever harm myself, but just had thoughts about how cool it would be if it were possible to take that fat off. The fact that I got to seriously thinking about harming myself in order to feel thin and accept my body is terrifying.

My Eating Disorder

For years I believed that my issues with my weight were normal and I was convinced that I just liked to eat. That’s what everyone had told me and I believed that my episodes of eating crazy
large quantities of food was just a lack of self control. I would be so disgusted with my behavior and annoyed in myself for giving in to another binging episode that it created this pattern of binging and then hating myself for not being able to stop it. My thoughts and my days were controlled by food. I would wake up in the morning and immediately be ashamed with what I ate the day before or frustrated in myself for what I weighed in at that morning. The rest of my day was spent trying to restrict my food intake enough to make up for my binge that had occurred the night before, but my days would typically end with me failing and finishing my day eating large quantities of food because I was so hungry and I had lost control. I felt like I had zero self control and no matter how hard I tried I would never be able to break this habit or lose any of the weight that I was told was necessary for me to be a competitive athlete.

One day towards the end of my freshman year of college I came across a YouTube video posted by a teenager named Cambria Joy. I had seen her videos before, but they were mostly just beauty tutorials or vlogs. In this video she was discussing her experiences with binge eating disorder (BED) and how she overcame it. I had never heard of BED before listening to this video. When most people discuss eating disorders they talk about two most commonly known ones which are anorexia and bulimia. Of course I had heard of both of these eating disorders and knew that I had neither one. When Cambria was describing what binge eating disorder was and her experiences with it, I felt a stinging sense of familiarity with what she was describing. She defined it as, “a type of eating disorder not otherwise specified and is characterized by recurrent binge eating without the regular use of compensatory measures to counter the binge eating.” To make sense of this in my brain I told myself that it was bulimia without forcing yourself to throw up afterwards. She explained more of the symptoms like, “frequent episodes of eating large quantities of food in
short periods of time and feeling out of control over eating behavior during the episode.” I started to recognize these symptoms in myself. The feeling of being out of control was the one that stuck with me the most. She went on to explain that, “there are also several behavioral indicators of BED including eating when not hungry, eating alone because of embarrassment over quantities consumed, eating until uncomfortably full.” I realized that all of these things she was describing perfectly described what I had always believed was just a lack of self-control around food. It started to all make sense to me; my desire to eat extremely large quantities of food without the ability or control to stop myself and eating to the point where I felt physically ill. Suddenly I felt less ashamed of myself. I started to feel like it wasn’t just a lack of self-control and that it wasn’t my fault. This behavior and feeling obsessed with food all day every day wasn’t normal. I finished watching her video with tears in my eyes. Now I knew that I had an eating disorder. Knowing that was incredibly scary, but it was also a relief to know that I wasn’t just crazy or lacked the self control to maintain my weight and stop eating ridiculous amounts of food. It was a relief to know that I had somewhere to go now that I knew I was struggling with a real thing that I could actually heal from.

Shortly after I watched Cambria’s video is when I went to my therapist and opened up to her about my issues I was having with my body and my eating disorder. This was the beginning of healing for me and I truly think that Cambria’s video gave me the strength to recognize that my issues with food were real and that there was a way out and a way to heal. This was the first time that I thought maybe it wasn’t normal for me to feel so consumed by food and hating my body. Maybe there was another way for me to live my life happy with who I was and not thinking about food, or losing weight, or that I would never be thin enough to be a competitive athlete.
From My Journal
6/10/16 - 18 years old, freshman to sophomore year of college
“Today was my second day discussing my binge eating and body image issues. Last week I was able to finally open up to Sarah about how my past with skating led me into binging and never being happy with my weight or the way I look. I’m just now starting to realize that life isn’t all about the number on the scale or losing weight. Even if I was 100 pounds lighter, I would still hate my body and have binge eating issues. I need to focus on being happy in any weight rather than losing large amounts of weight. I’m excited to continue working with Sarah and finding out how to love myself in whatever weight I am.”

The Moment I Knew It Would Be Okay

I remember watching Cambria Joy’s video on her journey with binge eating and connecting with everything she was saying on such a deep level. I now had an explanation for my obsession with food and something to heal from, rather than something that I was just going to deal with for the rest of my life. In that video, Cambria talked about Thanksgiving and the holiday get-togethers that she would struggle with and I completely connected with this.

For many years as a child, I remember holidays, especially Thanksgiving and Christmas, being so connected with food. The urge to binge on holidays was so incredibly strong, it would start days in advance. On the days before Thanksgiving or Christmas, my mom would be bringing all the groceries, pies, cookies, and goodies into the house that we would get to eat on the holiday. And instead of just being excited to have a nice meal and some treats and getting to spend time with my family, my brain would instantly start thinking about after the holiday and secretly binging on all of the leftovers. At any holiday, when it came time to sit down with the family and have our meal, I always restricted what I ate. I felt the need to control what I was eating around my family. However, during the whole meal I was just thinking about binging later that day on leftovers and pie.
For the entire holiday, my brain was obsessed with the food. The entire day I would control every little thing I ate to not be judged, while I was wanting more than anything to binge. I was so focused on food that I couldn’t even enjoy the time with my family. My first Thanksgiving after I realized I had BED and had started to heal was the moment I knew that it was all going to be okay. That I wouldn’t have to deal with obsession with food for the rest of my life. I simply enjoyed the Thanksgiving holiday with my family and wasn’t focused or concerned about food at all. I didn’t even realize it till later that day when I was sitting in bed about to fall asleep and realized that I hadn’t even thought of binging all day. I sat in my bed and broke out into tears because I was happy to have made it all day without even thinking of food.

From My Journal
11/24/16 - 20 years old, junior year of college
“I just experienced my first thanksgiving after facing my binge eating disorder. Tears of joy are streaming down my face right now. I remember the last few years of holidays where my binge eating was most uncontrollable. All evening I was so excited for everyone to leave so that I could be alone to sneak more food and leftovers and binge and eat everything I really wanted. It was all I could think about. The idea of eating controlled my life. It’s almost midnight and I just realized that I have not done that today. I haven’t even had the desire to continue eating. Don’t get me wrong... I ate a lot throughout the day. But my brain wasn’t clouded with thoughts of food all evening. I didn’t feel controlled by the desire to binge after everyone else went to bed. I didn’t even think about food after everyone went to bed. I feel so grateful for the growth I have experienced over the past 6 months.”

Freedom from the Scale

After years of healing from these obsessions with weight, I no longer own a scale. It has taken me a long time to heal from this addiction to weighing myself, but through therapy and time I began to realize that my entire days’ emotions and mood was being determined by how much I weighed that morning. If I had gained weight, I instantly felt disappointed in myself and anxiety
about how others would see me. The more I weighed, the more I felt that other people would no longer accept me or would judge me for my weight gains. If I had lost weight, I would usually be really happy for the day and usually decide to reward myself with a treat of my favorite meal. But there were some days where I would lose weight but still be disappointed in myself. I would be upset that I didn’t lose enough or I would be satisfied but start to feel overwhelmed by how much further I had to go to reach my unrealistic goals. I would start to think about how much further I had to go to be happy with the number. This is when I started to realize that no matter what happened on the scale, I would never be happy with the number I saw. I would always want it to be lower. I started to weigh myself only once a week and then slowly started weighing myself just once in a while. Some days it would be extremely difficult to stop myself from stepping on the scale. I noticed that when I only weighed myself about once a month, those days were the most emotional. I would weigh myself and then for two straight days I would be so disappointed in myself for gaining more weight or for not losing weight.

I wanted to throw my scale away for so long, but I could not bring myself to do it. I even had my roommate hide my scale from me for a while so that I wouldn’t use it. But there was something about actually throwing it in the garbage that was so final, so daunting, so terrifying for me. I was scared to not have a scale to weigh myself with and then I wouldn’t know if I had gained a ton of weight. I was also concerned that I if I started eating healthy and taking better care of my body, I would start losing weight but I wouldn’t have the scale or the number as proof or the satisfaction of seeing my weight drop to keep me motivated to keep going. If I didn’t have the satisfaction of looking at the scale to see my weight drop, then what would the point be? Finally, I got the strength to throw my scale in the trash and haven’t weighed myself since. It feels incredibly
satisfying to not have my emotions be determined by my weight. It feels amazing to be able to wake up in the morning and not have a single thought in my mind about how much I weigh. I have no clue what I weigh, but that is okay. My life is not centered around that anymore and that sense of freedom is wonderful.

From My Journal
6/2/17 - 19 years old, sophomore to junior year of college
“A year ago I would have never imagined my life would be like this. I was looking through old journal entries about my desire to lose weight at 156 pounds and hating myself. Today, I weigh 250 pounds and I could not care less. My life is no longer controlled by a number on a scale. I am so incredibly grateful I am free from an eating disorder. I am able to wake up in the morning and my weight is not the first thing I automatically think about. I am so excited to see where this journey of moving out takes me. Always remember to love yourself above all else. I used to think if I could just eat healthy then I could lose weight and then I could be happy. Now I realize how opposite it is. Happiness comes first. Above all else. I had to tackle the deep shit that wasn’t making me happy. Then I was able to be happy as I am – at my heaviest. Then because I was happy and free from guilt – binging became easy to stop.”

Things that I Still Struggle With

There are many things that I continue to struggle with today regarding my body image and weight. One of these things is feeling that I am not worthy or good enough as a coach because I am overweight. Over the past few months, I have gotten more secure in my coaching abilities thanks to some influential coaches that moved to our rink and helped me to believe in my abilities more. But there are still some days when I get on the ice and think to myself that all the other coaches on the ice and parents watching are judging my abilities based on my weight. When I first started coaching more, I struggled with this a lot. Every time I got on the ice it was very difficult for me to believe in myself. As I get more comfortable in my abilities, I have learned that my weight does not determine my coaching abilities.
I also strongly believe that my experiences with binge eating and body image issues will stay with me for the rest of my life. I am thankful for these experiences as they have made me a stronger person. I know that I would not be able to love myself the way I do today if I hadn’t gone through those extreme lows of hating myself and my weight. I also know that because of what I have gone through I am able to notice things that I believe are not okay. Things like weighing athletes in a group and specific ways in which coaches tell their students that it is time to watch their weight. My experiences have given me the ability to fight for what I believe in and stand up for what I believe in now and has given me the ability to understand who I am more and have more confidence in who I am as a person.

Conclusion

With so many athletes struggling with eating disorders and body image issues, it seems clear that something should be done to try and improve the situation. “Unfortunately, there is no simple way to solve this systematic problem in figure skating, and other sports like it, when it is an immensely, deeply, cultural issue. Many times, skaters end up leaving the sport to move onto better things, simply because the pressure is too much” (Grandstand Central, 4). Although it may be daunting, it is clear that something must be done to improve the culture of figure skating as a whole.

Megan Duhamel states that “you need to fuel your body and your mind. You can’t focus for an entire day of training if you haven’t eaten properly, if you haven’t fuelled yourself properly. It goes beyond your body image, it goes to your focus, to your energy, to your sleep. All these things that are so important in your life are fuelled from nutrition... I don’t own a scale. I don’t
have PhotoShop on my phone to edit photos ‘to look thinner’... I wish people could celebrate their bodies! Be proud and take care of yourself. You have a life after sport and trust me when I say, it’s a lot more pleasant when you are healthy” (Duhamel, 2). I think that this is the attitude that should be celebrated in the sport of figure skating. It is clearly essential to teach figure skaters about watching their weight and being healthy as the sport is very difficult to succeed in if you are not thin and in shape. However, I think that the focus needs to be transitioned from the current standpoint of being as thin as possible to discussing how to care for and nourish an athlete’s body. It is important to teach figure skaters that health is not just losing weight or getting a lower body fat percentage. Health is also about the mind and learning to love and accept your body and nourish your body in order to stay fuelled for the intense training athletes are put through. I believe that there is not enough discussion about mental health and body image.

To change the focus to more discussion on mental health, it is important for, “federations to stare this issue dead on, and address it, providing training to coaches, and athletes on it, just as training would be offered on understanding the rule changes in the sport. The federations need to place pressure on the ISU to raise the minimum age of skaters, with a focus on women, so the pressure to remain the size of a 12-year-old is lifted, and athletes can feel comfortable embracing womanhood” (Grandstand Central, 4). If the pressure to remain an unreasonable size is lifted from the top-down, it will make a more impactful difference in the sports’ environment as a whole. It is also important to education the coaches, trainers, and other sports staff. “These often trusted and respected individuals work closely with figure skaters. With proper training and knowledge, they can help reduce skaters’ risk of developing an eating disorder or be able to help those who may be struggling to get the support they need” (Figure Skating and Eating Disorders: What You
Need to Know). This is probably one of the most important changes that could be made.

Educating the coaches that work daily with these athletes can help to reduce the risk of pressure placed on the athlete by the coaches to lose weight and can also help coaches to understand how to spot an eating disorder and what to do when they believe someone is struggling with an eating disorder or body image issues.

The skaters that have come out recently to share their stories have been able to loosen the stigma of figure skaters with eating disorders and have been able to, “shed light onto painful and challenging issues - we in the wider skating community need to support them, and advocate for change within the sport. Maybe then, we can appreciate that you can be a champion, while having a different body type” (Grandstand Central, 4).

It is also important to understand that further, “research on the development of eating disorders, treatment, and prevention must be considered a priority” (Sundgot-Borden, 418). In addition, research on the development of eating disorders, treatment, and prevention in specifically the sport of figure skating should be considered a necessity. Research should be done on the best way to train and teach parents and coaches how to deal with young athletes and how to address weight issues in an appropriate manner as well as how to spot and deal with eating disorders if they do arise. Research should also be done on mental health and the best way to promote mental health and body acceptance throughout U.S. Figure Skating entirely. Lastly, research should be done on what other additional measures that the International Skating Union and U.S. Figure Skating could take to promote a healthy body image among their athletes and to spot and prevent eating disorders among figure skaters.
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