

The Skating Lesson Podcast Transcript

Elaine Zayak on the Other Side of Gold: The Zayak Rule, Distractions and Rivalries

Jenny Kirk: And after that event, the ISU passed a rule, forever known as the Zayak rule, which limits the number of triple jumps a man or a woman can do in his or her long program. At the time, did you feel targeted at all by this rule, and were you worried that the greatest strength of your skating, this ability to do multiple triple jumps in a long program consistently, was threatened at all?

Elaine Zayak: Absolutely, because I do think that – not only in the '81 worlds, but the '82 worlds, and this was really only – the rule change was only done by the ISU, and it was because I think that so many were after the '81 worlds and the '82 worlds were trying to do so many triples or at least two or three. And they were falling and missing, and they didn't want the sport to be changed into a triple jump competition. And that's why they made that rule. It was to deter girls from doing triple jumps. So I think that was why the rule was set, but to me, it was saying – okay, now Elaine, you're the world champion, but now you can't do all of your triple jumps. And it was, kind of, you know, downplaying the fact that they wanted me to work on other things which I absolutely did, and it was great. It was comforting to know that now it's maybe a little fairer for some girls that might not think I was gonna beat them because they were gonna do the same amount of triples as me. But I did overcome working my spins, my choreography, they gave me time. But I do think that, inevitably, the best part of that rule was that it didn't work because it made the girls do every triple and every single one, and I'm happy for that.

Jenny: Well, you reached the apex of your career two years before the '84 Olympic Games when you won that world title. How were you able to keep yourself motivated for those two years leading up to Sarajevo?

Elaine: It was very hard for me to have two more years to go. And then, of course, so much pressure and attention was drawn to me by the media, by, you know, a lot of endorsements, commercials, you know, just so much media attention that I didn't really focus on skating so much. And then I did go to every banquet and every function, and you know, to me, I was like – I don't know if I can last two more years with this. And there was too much pressure. And then on top of my parents definitely getting divorced, my coaches were getting divorced. It was like I had no one to turn to, and I didn't really enjoy skating anymore. So for me, it felt like the '83 was the worst year of my life. Seventeen years old, worst year of my life. But I do think I needed to go through that because when I did realize that it wasn't working, I focused on working with other people, other coaches. And I definitely regained my energy and my confidence and my desire to skate again when the 1984 year came. And it really was a great year for me, even though I did with the Olympics, but I definitely feel like I skated the way I wanted to. And wearing the bronze medal at the worlds was just, you know, the icing on the cake for me.

Dave Lease: So, you talk about 1983 being a very difficult year. And it will forever be known in figure skating as really the dawn of a rivalry between Rosalynn Sumners and Elaine Zayak. And the press pounced on this. Of this, the New York Times wrote:

Ms. Zayak was amused. She said that she didn't see why they couldn't be friendly; although it was clear that her feelings were mixed.

“I was the champion first, and it kind of hurts when someone takes your place. Still, I don't see why I shouldn't talk to her.”

But then, when I've been fat or injured, that's when she would say 'hello.' When I was at my best, she wouldn't come near me.”

So take us back to that time. How intense was the rivalry between Ros and yourself, and how intense was it between everyone around you?

Elaine: Well, it was kind of intense, but to me, I always felt like I was the champion always. So to me, Rosalynn only came in at 1983. And I had been there four or five years before that. Where to have someone who never was champion and never did what I did, never went through what I went through really wasn't a threat or a challenge to me. So I never really looked at her as a competitor of mine. But – and I always believed that she only won because of my mistakes, and that is the truth. I'll say it today. But it's just the fact that, you know, you will let people through the door if you don't do what you should do. Every day, to this day, you have to be the best if you want to win. So I led her through the door, but I do always believe that I was the better skater. But also, it was good that we did I think bring attention to the sport. Because everyone always loves to have a rivalry. You know, of course with the Nancy and Tonya story, but it wasn't that bad. It was just that, you know, I believed that she thought she was the best, and I thought I was the best. So, of course, who's gonna win? You know, that was the whole thing. And to me, I – you know, I appreciate that she had the confidence to think she was the best. But, you know, it was kind of annoying sometimes, you know. And to me, I don't tend to be bothered with anybody else. I only focus on myself and what I had to do. And I knew that that's what I was there to do every competition I was in. So, I overlooked it, but I think she was more into it than I was about the rivalry. And I think everybody else – there was somebody who told me that there was like a Las Vegas betting going on about who's gonna win and it was just crazy! And I think it was funny, but I do know that it was kind of a difficult distraction to a lot of people. But I never really looked back – I just always pushed forward, and I never really worried about who I was competing against. I just knew that I had to do the best that I could and not worry about what else happens.