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# 'Ice' reflections

Newest 'Stars' show looks back on 20 successful years of thrilling skate fans

BY AMY E. TUCKER  
 SPECIAL TO THE TIMES UNION

In 1986, Olympic gold medalist Scott Hamilton was bounced from the Ice Capades with this explanation: "Male skaters aren't a ticket draw."

Hoping that verdict was wrong, Hamilton — who at that point was only two years past his top finish at the Sarajevo Olympics — teamed up with International Management Group to produce "The Scott Hamilton America Tour." Five shows in, they decided to change the name to "Stars on Ice."



SCOTT HAMILTON

Its main competition was "Champions on Ice," a long-running road show made up mainly of Olympic or world-champion skaters reproducing their winning programs — essentially an unconnected program of elegant reruns. But Hamilton and his collaborators wanted their new show to be at once a more cohesive package and a more ambitious one: a professional forum in which skaters could challenge themselves by devising theatrical and technical group and solo numbers.

And maybe using a few male skaters, too.

"I thought if we could just stay alive several years, that would be a huge success," Hamilton said in a recent phone interview.

Twenty years later — after more than a thousand performances, 75,000 costumes and an unthinkable number of hours on tour buses — the brand has proven durable enough to warrant its own look back.

When "Stars On Ice" arrives at Albany's Pepsi Arena on Sunday, the program, titled "A Show ... About the Show," will feature both old and new, and a troupe of Olympic and world champions.

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**"If you think your Olympic career is as high as you can go and the rest is gravy, then you're not going to fully appreciate what 'Stars' has to offer."**

SCOTT HAMILTON

KVOKO INA and John Zimmerman, shown in 2002, are among the top-flight skaters performing Sunday in "Stars on Ice" at Pepsi Arena. Skaters are everywhere these days: Zimmerman, for example, recently got the "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" treatment. Todd Eldredge, left, is another member of this year's cast.



STARS ON ICE



# 'ICE': Skating champs at Pepsi

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The new show is cleverly designed to give audiences a comic peek behind the scenes at the show, as well as a history lesson about the performer-athletes who made "Stars" their professional home over the past two decades.

"Some of the numbers in the first half are about us rehearsing and getting ready to go on tour," said pairs skater John Zimmerman. "The opening of the second half is a parody on things, and the finale is supposed to be the beginning of an actual show."

"It's very tongue-in-cheek, with a lot of humor," said Hamilton. "This is the first year we've used the video screens, and now we're hooked."

There are also tributes to absent friends. Canadian Olympians Jamie Sale and David Pelletier re-create a jazz number to Scott Joplin's "Elite Syncopations" as a tribute to Canadian ice dancer Rob McCall, who died of AIDS-related causes in 1991. Yuka Sato, the 1994 World Gold medalist, performs a memorial piece using video footage of all the "Stars on Ice" members who have passed away.

Except for this year's addition

of Jennifer Robinson, this "Stars on Ice" cast has been together for almost five years. The cohesiveness, several skaters suggested, helps the production despite the frustrations of being on the road for three months at a time.

"The tour lifestyle is not as easy as what you see by watching the show one night," said Sato. "You live on the bus, in the hotel and out of the suitcase, and you become very close to the cast members. At the same time, we all have our days where we're a little tired, and someone can push our buttons."

But, she said, "Being able to perform every night in a different city makes you feel like you get better and better. You learn so much every night."

## Stars still rising

"If you think your Olympic career is as high as you can go and the rest is gravy, then you're not going to fully appreciate what 'Stars' has to offer," said Hamilton. "We want everyone on the tour to look at their professional career ... as a way to become an appreciating asset, not a depreciating asset."

Hamilton left full-time touring with "Stars on Ice" in 2001. For most of the past decade, he's been

dealing with health problems, including testicular cancer in 1997 and a pituitary brain tumor in 2005. Recent radiation treatment took a heavy toll on his peripheral vision. Still, he's hoping to return to the ice.

"I've been on different hormonal therapies, and we're gaining on it," said Hamilton, who married in 2002. "I'm getting stronger and I've discussed with my wife returning to skating again. I've always felt better when I'm on the ice."

Many of this year's performers, meanwhile, have found highly visible careers off the ice. In addition to Kurt Browning's role as a top commentator for ABC, John Zimmerman, Jenni Meno and Browning recently appeared on Fox's reality show "Skating with the Celebrities."

"It was a bit of a gamble," Zimmerman said. "We taped the show in August through October of 2005, which is when I have to begin putting together my programs for the tour and really get into shape."

Zimmerman's partner on the show was Jillian Barberie of "NFL on Fox," who was fully four inches shorter and about 30 pounds heavier than Zimmerman's regular skating partner, Kyoko Ina.

"Our timing wasn't always together, so it was like lifting a lot of dead weight," Zimmerman said of training with Barberie.

"It was a chance for me to work out in a way that I haven't been able to with Kyoko. When I got back, I felt like Superman." He and Ina put that extra strength into their "Stars on Ice" program, which uses U2's song "Vertigo."

## Sparse crowds

It's no secret that figure skating's marketability is pegged to the Olympic schedule. But since the games in Turin, the skating community has been bemoaning how lower-than-usual attendance and TV ratings have depressed the skating industry at both the amateur (competitive) and professional (touring) levels. American skater

## Ticket info

### SMUCKER'S "STARS ON ICE"

■ **With:** Kurt Browning, Jamie Sale & David Pelletier, Elena Berezhnaya & Anton Sikharulidze, Todd Eldredge, Alexei Yagudin and others

■ **When:** 4 p.m. Sunday

■ **Where:** Pepsi Arena, 51 S. Pearl St., Albany

■ **Tickets:** \$24, \$44, \$59, available at the Pepsi Arena box office and all Price Chopper locations, or by calling (800) 303-8368

Sasha Cohen, 21, recently told the Los Angeles Times that she was considering a career in acting after skating too many nights in front of sparse crowds.

"I look at today's skaters and it seems that a lot of them have a sense of entitlement — that because they won a world championship or Olympic medal, that the audience should just be there," Hamilton said. "That's not the way it is at all, ever. It's about spending time and putting in a great deal of effort over a long period of time to really nurture and build and grow your audience."

"Whether that means putting on gloves to unload the truck because a crew didn't show up, or traveling until 3 a.m. by car to be at a television station the next morning at 6 a.m. to publicize the tour — all of this is equity that you're building over years and years of being out there doing whatever it takes to bring an audience in."

"... There are few entities like 'SOP' that cater to the entire family from toddlers to great grandparents," said Hamilton. "There's something in the show for everyone and seeing it year after year creates a family tradition in a world where few opportunities like that exist."

"It has nothing to do with where skating is now," Hamilton continued. "It has to do with where you can take it as an individual, and as a company of skaters. That takes time, quality and effort."

► *Amy E. Tucker is a freelance writer from Saratoga Springs.*