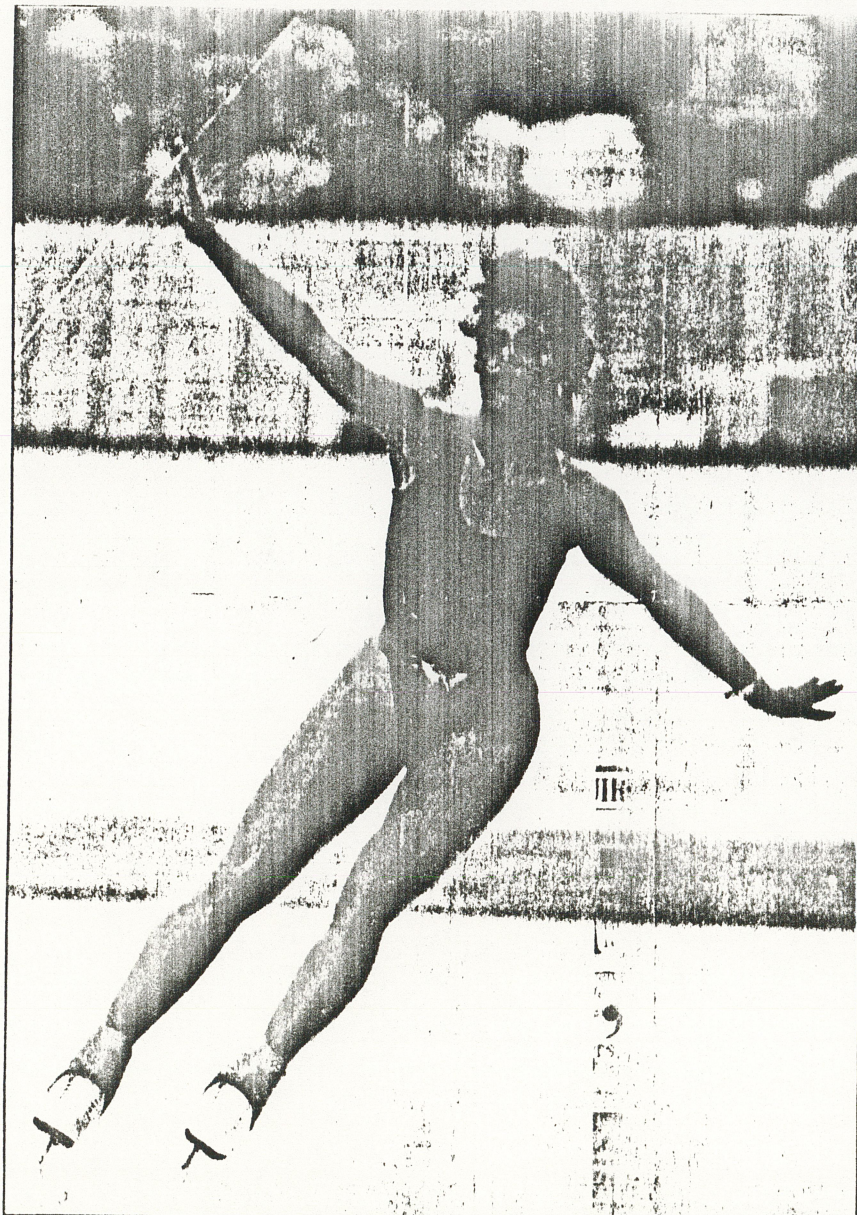


MARCH 8, 1987

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Debi Thomas' frenetic world



BY CINDY STARR
The Cincinnati Enquirer

For nearly a year, Debi Thomas was everyone's superwoman. She was trying to do it all, and she was succeeding.

She was a woman shaking down the status quo. She was an athlete who went beyond being a student, a premed major at Stanford University. She was a woman who wanted to become an orthopedic surgeon, a career almost always chosen by men. And she was a black athlete at the pinnacle of a white athlete's world, a U.S. and world champion figure skater.

She was friendly to boot. She was funny. People took to her instantly, and the honors rolled in.

The 19-year-old sophomore was named Amateur Sportsman of the Year by the Women's Sports Foundation. She was ABC's Wide World of Sports Athlete of the Year. Mark McCormack's International Management Group, which knows an endorsement gold mine when it sees one, signed her up and passed out the publicity flyers, glossy and in shimmering color.

IMG made the job of superwoman sound so natural and easy. "Why should I worry about sleep," the publicity blurb quoted Thomas as saying. "I never got any in high school, either."

But underneath the gloss, underneath the dreams of championships and medical school and an Olympic gold medal, there was another dream that few people seemed to understand. "My dream," Thomas said six months ago, "is to not fall apart. I hope I can handle all the pressure."

Today, no one is saying that Debi Thomas has started to lose her magic. No one has said that this wonderful success story has begun to unravel. But things appear very different from what they were a year ago. The fine edge of Thomas' excellence is frayed. There is a loose thread here, an imperfection there.

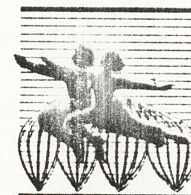
"I'm confident about my chances," Thomas said when she arrived in Cincinnati to defend her title in the World Figure Skating Championships. "I don't know how confident I am about whether I can hold it together or not."

Debi Thomas comes into the World Championships, which open Monday, with her athletic and academic lives out of order. She is skating in pain, the result of improper, last-minute training before last month's nationals. She is skating without her U.S. crown, which Jill Trenary, mentally and physically sharp, deservedly took from her. And she is competing with the burdensome knowledge that "things are total chaos at home."

Finals week, Thomas thinks (she said she isn't sure), is this week, and only her academic adviser knows when she will make up her papers and exams. Thomas has promised the U.S. Figure Skating Association that she will appear during the entire three-week, cross-country tour following the world championships, which conclude next Saturday.

"I left (Stanford) really confused," Thomas said. "I think I'm going to have a lot of incompletes. I have a whole library with me."

Thomas said her academic adviser is supposed to be "taking care of everything" for her. In return, "I do know I'm supposed to be studying here."



The Cincinnati Enquirer/Jim Callaway

Although Debi Thomas lost her U.S. title last month, she's confident about defending her World championship this week.

(Please see THOMAS, Page C-6)

Thomas

CONTINUED FROM PAGE C-1

Thomas' coach since childhood, Alex McGowan, warned her repeatedly last year that she could not maintain her peak level of skating while taking a full course load at Stanford. Thomas' standard reply: "Watch me."

After her stunning victories in the 1986 U.S. and world championships, McGowan backed off somewhat, at least publicly.

Even after losing her title at the nationals, Thomas refused to say that something in her life would have to give. "I don't think this had anything to do with school," she said bravely. "The injury was a surprise."

Thomas has already said she will take a semester off from Stanford next winter to devote all her energies to the Calgary Olympics. The outcome of the world championships this week should help her decide whether she can afford to wait that long.

Overcoming barriers

Whether Thomas finishes first here or not, she has already achieved far more than most young people. Reaching the top of figure skating is a mammoth feat for any person, and Thomas had more hurdles to clear than most.

First among them was the financial barrier. Thomas grew up in a comfortable home in San Jose, Calif., but her family constantly struggled to pay the thousands of dollars required for her training and outfitting. Said Janice Thomas: "The ice bill can be \$2,000 to \$3,000 for one month around competition time."

Janice, twice divorced, works as a computer programmer-analyst and has paid most of Debi's expenses. Debi's father, McKinley Thomas, a program manager at another computer company, has paid much of her ice time. Debi's brother, Ricky Taylor, a high school teacher, has also contributed. Debi once wore second-hand skating dresses and wore the same pair of skates even when her toes were cramped up inside.

With IMG's help, Thomas now has a trust fund, which swelled instantly after she did a television commercial with basketball star Larry Bird. Amateur skating rules allow Thomas to draw from the fund to pay her expenses.

But as recently as last summer, Thomas was so broke she couldn't afford to get her car fixed when it broke down. Because her home was 33 miles from the rink, she went to live with friends who were closer and rode her bicycle to practice every day.

"She lost a lot of training," Janice Thomas said. "Some days she couldn't get there."

Thomas has lost training time for academic reasons as well. She is the first skater since Tenley Albright, a 1958 Radcliffe graduate who is now a surgeon, to achieve world-class status while attending college full-time. McGowan estimates that Thomas practices only 50% as much as other elite skaters.

"Debi is a special type of person," McGowan said. "Not everyone could handle that."

"She has worked hard at her skating," McGowan said. "All of the champions have worked hard."

The skater who is black

Thomas had one other hurdle to overcome. She is black.

Figure skating is a sport that did not immediately warm to blacks. For many years, blacks were barred from being members at some clubs.

Thomas was not the first black to be ranked nationally in the United States, but she was the first to win a major title. In her wake are several young black male and female skaters who are receiving recognition at the regional and national level.

Thomas, ever gracious, will tell you she has never encountered racial bias when competing. But the ironies of her career suggest otherwise. First among them is that Thomas had to go abroad to be discovered.

In 1983, Thomas was ranked only 13th in the United States. But in an international competition in Tours, France, she dazzled the audiences with her free skating and came away with the gold medal.

In 1984, ranked only sixth nationally, Thomas placed first in competitions in St. Gervais, France, and Oberdorf, West Germany.

Finally, after she replaced injured Tiffany Chin at a competition in Tokyo and finished second, the United States was ready to acknowledge her. In the 1985 nationals, Thomas placed second behind Chin, and in the ensuing world championships, she was fifth.

"It's kind of funny," Thomas recalled. "It seemed like it took the United States a longer time to figure out I was a pretty good skater. I have no idea what the reason was."

"Being the first black skater was unique for the United States," McGowan said. "Perhaps the judges didn't know if she would be accepted."

"She probably had some discrimination," Janice Thomas said. "But there's no way you could tell it from the ordinary discrimination that occurs in figure skating."

In any event, Janice Thomas never allowed Debi to use racism as an excuse. If Debi complained that the judges hadn't marked her fairly, Janice immediately shot down that idea.

"You could have done this better, you could have done that better," Janice would say.

"You don't like the way I skate," Debi would counter.

If Debi did not succeed in a competition, Janice said, "We never dealt with it in terms of discrimination. I never let her think that was what it was. In skating, a judge can say, 'This kid is from my club. That's the one I want to support.'"

Going for gold and more

Debi Thomas easily could have retired from amateur competition last March, after her stunning upset of East Germany's Katarina Witt, the two-time world champion and the 1984 Olympic gold medalist. Thomas could have gone out on top, made a bundle in endorsements, and proceeded with her dream of becoming an orthopedic surgeon.

But she pursued the harder road. She wanted Stanford and the Olympic medal.

"I love being in school," Thomas said. "It's so much fun. It makes me relax."

But her foundation began to crumble this winter.

She said she would be "going loose" on her winter quarter, but it still consisted of 17 credits, with courses in biology, Shakespeare, Greek mythology and creative writing. Last year, Thomas was upset when she received a C.

"Right now, I'm trying to be sufficient at both rather than trying to be the top premed student at Stanford," Thomas said.

Being sufficient hasn't been easy, either.

Thomas had not trained sufficiently when she began to gear up 4½ weeks before the U.S. championships, Feb. 2-8, in Tacoma, Wash. During that period, she took some bad advice from a trainer who wanted to help her strengthen her legs. "He didn't know what he was doing," Thomas said. "He kept saying, 'No pain, no gain; push it, push it.'"

At one point, Thomas said, her calves were so sore she could hardly walk.

The pain in her calves subsided but she developed tendinitis in both Achilles' tendons. She was unable to practice as much as necessary, and the result was a lac luster showing in her long program at the nationals. Although she won the first two portions of competition, the compulsory figures and the short program, Jill Trema outskated her in the long program and captured the title.

Thomas took a week off after the nationals, hoping that her ankles would heal.

Now, Thomas is trying to fight through the pain and hold on to her world title. Coming from behind, nothing new to her, and if anyone can pull off a miracle this week she can. After all, only one person has defeated Katarina Witt in the last three years, and that person is Debi Thomas.

Handling the pressure, McGowan said, is Thomas' strength.

"She might look shaky, based on her practices," McGowan said. "But when it comes down to doing it, she has that magical quality of doing it when it counts."

A superwoman like Debi Thomas should never be counted out.

At a glance

On the eve of the competition, the official draw that determines the order in which contestants will skate their first phases will be held today at Music Hall. It will determine the order of contestants for the men's and ladies' compulsory figures, the pairs' short program and the dancers' compulsory dances.

A banquet for the skaters also will be held at Music Hall. Both are closed to the public.

Because of those events, fewer practices are scheduled today. Practice times for American and other featured skaters are noted in the accompanying schedule.

Skaters are not required to practice and may not attend their sessions.

SUNDAY, MARCH 8

Riverfront Coliseum
7 a.m. - 10:15 a.m.: Dance free
dance (U.S. 7-8; USSR 8:30-9:30).

10:15 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.: Pairs' free
skating (U.S. 12-12:45; USSR 11:15-12).

1:30 p.m. - 5 p.m.: Men's short
program (U.S. 2:30-3:15; USSR 1:30-
2:15; Canada 4:15-4:45).

Convention Center

7 a.m. - 10 a.m.: Men's compulsory
figures (U.S. 8-9; USSR 7-8; Canada
9-10).

10 a.m. - 1 p.m.: Ladies' compulsory
figures (U.S. 11-12; USSR 10-11; EG
Germany 12-1).

1 p.m. - 5 p.m.: Ladies' free skating
(U.S. 1-2; USSR 4-5; EGermany 2-3).

■ Day by day schedule, Page B-2



Amid the chaos of her dorm room, Thomas marvels at the tidy structure of a molecule.

Sunday morning, 9 a.m. Sleepy silence in Stanford's Toyon Hall, except for a muffled rustling in room 133. Debi Thomas, national figure skating champion, is leafing through a chemistry text. She is lying on two pillows, contorted amid the litter of papers, books, laundry and shoes, which five minutes of tidying did not begin to dent. The walls are decorated with souvenir banners and flags, a pair of antique skates, a poster of John Lennon, Godiva chocolate advertisements and dozens of aphorisms written with blue and red Magic Markers.

LIFE IS BAD WHEN THE OREOS ARE DROPPED. Ain't it the truth.

THERE'S A HELL OF A GOOD UNIVERSE NEXT DOOR; LET'S GO—e.e. cummings. You first.

THIS WALL IS ALIVE.

If the wall isn't, the stained, mustard-colored rug almost certainly is. Or could it be those socks? A vase of roses sits decomposing on Thomas's desk. A portable TV rests on a portable fridge. The beds? There are no beds. Just a three-woman loft in the adjacent room. This is college living, all right, the real thing.

Thomas begins to construct a model of a molecule, which delights her in visible if mysterious ways. An 18-year-old freshman, she has already declared a medical microbiology major, a curriculum a Stanford spokesman describes as "one of the most difficult in the university." The courses include general microbiology, principles of immunology, animal viruses. "All that stuff sounds great," says Thomas. She is spontaneously funny by nature, but apparently is serious about this. She intends to be an orthopedic surgeon specializing in sports medicine when her skating career is finished and, given her track record,

Debi Thomas, who won the U.S. figure skating title with a magical act, will try again at the worlds

by E.M. SWIFT

Another Miracle On Ice?

one isn't inclined to bet against it.

"She's into school," one of her roommates, Nicole Holzapfel of Pottersville, N.J., says. "We go to bed at 11 or 12, and Debi will be down there studying. Sometimes she'll crawl up into the loft at 3 a.m., or maybe we'll find her asleep on the floor in the morning. She wants to prove she can do it—skate and get good grades. She's not here just to get by."

For the past month, since Thomas won the U.S. Senior Ladies Figure Skating Championship in Uniondale, N.Y., becoming the first black skater to win a senior national championship, her life has been a whirling arabesque. Midterms, all-night cramming sessions, interviews with, among others, ABC, NBC, CBS, *Ebony* and *Time*, plus a bout with the flu have kept her from any sort of serious training or sleep. Holzapfel and Thomas's other roommate, Kaija Lewis, have doubled as her unofficial press buffers, fending off reporters who began calling the dorm with such frequency that the university finally changed Thomas's phone number. Debi's mother, Janice Thomas, who lives in nearby San Jose, changed *her* number, too. "It's been interesting to watch," says Holzapfel. "Look! They're filming Debi eating salad! It hasn't really gotten to Debi because she's just so funny. She isn't intense about it. And she loves to talk to people. She once told me that's what she likes most about college."

With midterms behind her now, Thomas can direct her energies toward the world championships in Geneva, which will be held March 17 to 23. Thomas is, as she puts it, "ready to cram for skating." She's preparing for a showdown with Katarina Witt, the East German beauty who currently reigns as world and European champion. Thomas believes she can beat her. "I think I can outstyle her and out-triple her," she says, referring to the five triple jumps that she nailed at the nationals. Witt attempted only two at January's European championships, though she has done as many as four in the past. "Katarina does the stuff and smiles, but her jumps aren't all that high," Thomas says. "Her landings are kind of robotic. Toller Cranston [the '76 Olympic bronze medalist] has said

there's nothing artistic about her skating. I don't mean to criticize, because she gets the job done. But if I skate the way I can, I don't think anyone can beat me."

Thomas puts down her molecule model, checks the time and changes into her sweats. Late again for her workout.

About 10 miles away, at the Redwood City Ice Lodge, Alex McGowan pulls at his Harpo Marx-style hair. "It's totally frustrating," the transplanted Scot blurts. McGowan has been Thomas's coach since she was 10 years old. She is his first national senior champion, and theirs is a love-hate relationship. "I'm going crazy," he continues. "The East Germans are training up to eight hours a day. [Caryn] Kadavy and [Tiffany] Chin [who

finished second and third at the nationals] are training six hours a day. And where's Debi? People say she can do both the training and the schoolwork. That's fine. Only I don't see the training. It was the same way before the nationals, and she needed a miracle to win. Well, you can't rely on miracles."

No. But you can ask. Thomas flicks off the light switch, bound for Redwood City. On the wall beside the door is another of those quotes: I NEED A MIRACLE.

The Black Question. That's the way Debi and her 27-year-old half brother, Rick Taylor, refer to the oft-repeated query: How does it feel to be the first

continued

Practice makes perfect if you can make practice, which Thomas frequently can't.





Thomas is adept at skating through press conferences (above), but McGowan has a hard time keeping his prime pupil on ice.

DEBI THOMAS *continued*

black champion in a lily-white sport? The truth is, Thomas never thought much about it until the media began asking her all the time. First off, there were always other black skaters around. As long ago as 1966 a black skater named Atoy Wilson won the men's national novice championship, and Bobby Beauchamp is currently the 10th-ranked American man. And 16-year-old E. Rory Flack is the top-ranked junior skater among girls.

More to the point, Thomas has never felt, or been made to feel, like an outsider or part of a minority. "I never had anybody talk to me in a way that made me feel I was any different from anyone else," she says, "so why on earth would I want to become the first black champion? I just wanted to be the champion."

Says her mother, Janice, "Debi doesn't even know the meaning of being discriminated against."

That's wonderful news, of course, testimony to how much has changed in a generation. Janice Thomas grew up in Lawrence, Kans. in the '40s and '50s—"a funny town that wasn't North and wasn't South," she says now. Until she was in

the seventh grade, Janice went to a segregated school. In the movie theater blacks had to sit in the balcony ("I used to think we sat up there because we liked it," she says), and they were served at the local Woolworth's at the stand-up snack bar, rather than being seated in a booth. Hotels in Wichita wouldn't admit blacks; some restaurants would, but some wouldn't. You could never tell which, and that often led to embarrassing scenes. There was one roller-skating rink in town, but Janice never skated there. Whites only.

It's easy to see where Debi gets her smarts. Her grandparents, Dr. and Mrs. Daniel Skelton—who still live in Wichita, where he works as a veterinarian—met at Cornell. Janice went to Wichita State, major-

ing in math with a minor in physics. "I was in this big hurry," she says. "I started college at 16, was married at 17, had Rick at 18 and was divorced at 19."

Janice married again after moving to Poughkeepsie, N.Y., which is where Debi was born, to work for IBM. The family moved to San Jose when both Janice and Debi's father, McKinley Thomas, were offered positions at Control Data in nearby Sunnyvale. Eventually they, too, were divorced. McKinley now is a program manager at a computer company, Masstor Systems, in Santa Clara, while Janice, juggling the frenetic schedule of a single working parent, remains at Control Data, where she is a senior programmer-analyst.

When Debi was 3½ Janice took her to the Ice Follies. A rubber-legged comedian named Mr. Frick made such an impression on Debi that she asked her mother for ice skates. At five she finally got them. She entered her first competition at nine, won it and decided it was

continued



time to begin selecting her own music—a practice she continues to this day. “Mom, what’s that song that goes: ‘Dun-dun-dun-DUNNN?’”

“Beethoven’s Fifth.”

“I want to skate to that.”

What’s a mother to do? Debi created her own program around Beethoven’s masterpiece—she is nothing if not full of moxie—and asked her grandmother, who was visiting from Wichita, to watch her in her second competition. Her performance was a fiasco. She forgot her program and skated miserably. Her grandmother, convinced that she had somehow precipitated the disaster, didn’t see Debi skate again for eight years, opting instead to send money. What this girl needed was a coach.

Debi was 10 years old when her mother first approached McGowan about coaching her. McGowan remembers the scene like this: “‘Would you coach my daughter? She’s very talented.’ You hear that all the time, so I asked: ‘Where did

she finish in her last competition?’ ‘Tenth.’ I thought, ‘Oh, God, another turkey.’ Then I saw her skate figures. Just as I suspected, real rubbish.”

Debi laughs at the memory. “I skated for fun. I wasn’t skating because I’d watched the Olympics. I started because I’d watched Mr. Frick.”

Debi was good as a youngster, but she was never the star, the girl the judges keep their eye on. “One thing that makes her so tough is she had a lot of second-place finishes while growing up,” says her mother. Debi landed her first triple jump at 11, and at 12 she advanced unexpectedly to the national finals in the novice class, ending up with the silver medal. It was the first sign that she might, one day, become a champion.

So she and her mother made a decision. To allow Debi to concentrate on skating, she was taken out of school and finished eighth grade by correspondence—a practice not uncommon among young skaters. It gave her time to

train under McGowan and to take classes in jazz dance and ballet off the ice. That year, 1980, she moved up from the novice to the junior ladies division, but when the regional tournament was held, Debi finished fourth. Only the top three advanced to the sectionals. “I hate to say it, but I was robbed,” says Thomas now. “I thought I could be junior world champion that year.”

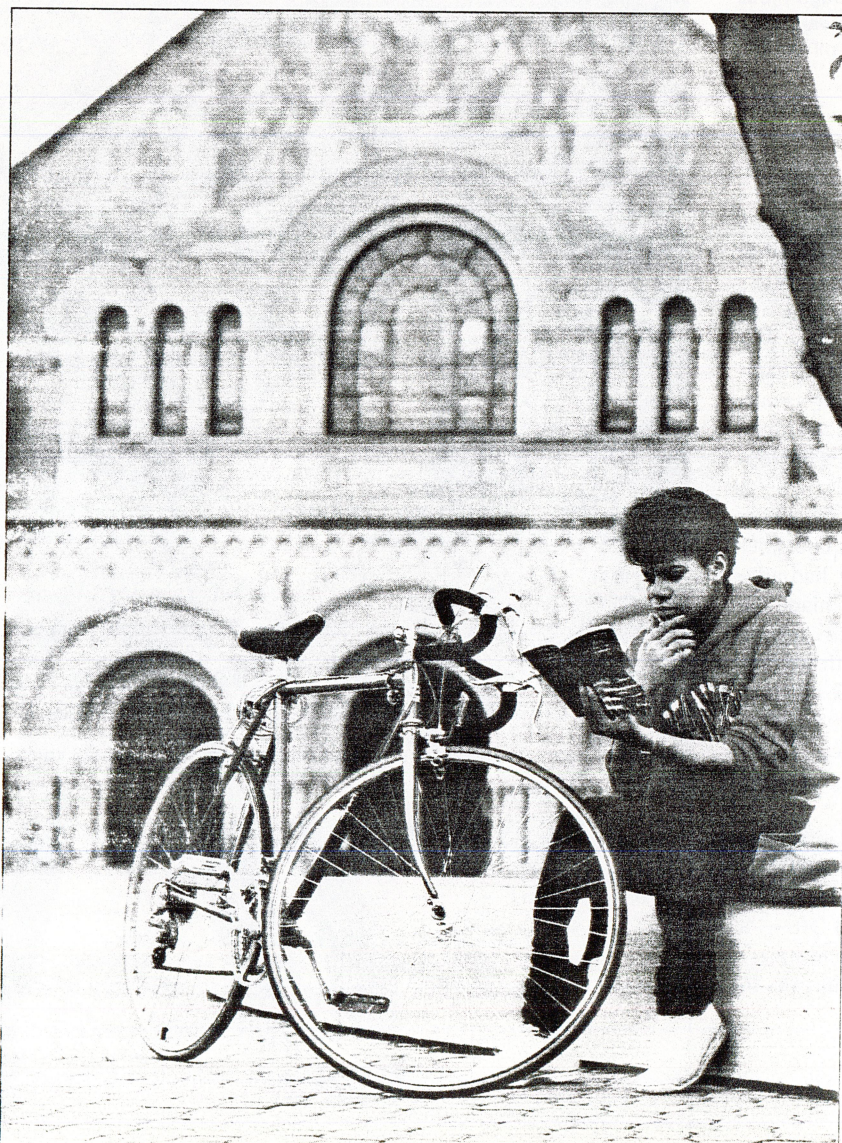
She and her mother decided right then that her education would henceforth come first. “You have too good a mind to waste,” Janice told her daughter. “Your future is not going to depend on the whims of this sport. Let’s concentrate on your vocation, and if your avocation works out, fine.”

Debi enrolled in San Mateo High, about 30 miles from her home in San Jose but only 12 miles from the Redwood City Ice Lodge, and for four years her mother drove some 150 miles a day—dropping Debi off at school before work, returning to take her to practice, then picking her up again after working late to drive the two of them home. Money was always tight—it can cost \$25,000 a year to train a top skater—and Debi’s skates were rehabilitated with Elmer’s glue long after most skaters would have heaved them into the trash. One year she skated figures in a pair of refurbished second-hand black roller skates. She even taught herself to sew and began making her own skating dresses. “I never could sew buttons,” says Janice.

On the way to school Debi studied, and on the way home she slept. Somehow everything began to fall into place. Her ranking among senior women went from 13th to sixth to second between 1983 and ’85—a nice steady progression up the political ladder that rules figure skating. Academically, she excelled to the point of being accepted for admission to Harvard, Princeton and Stanford. Asked on her Stanford application to choose one adjective to describe herself, Thomas wrote: “invincible.”

In some ways, the skating and the studies have complemented each other. When Thomas skates, her mind is freed from the cobwebs of molecules and organic chemistry, and when she studies, it’s freed from the dizziness of sit spins and triple loops. A bright mind is easily

continued



Medical microbiology, Thomas’s major, is “one of the most difficult” at Stanford.



Janice Thomas endured discrimination, but Debi has never felt like part of a minority.

DEBI THOMAS *continued*

bored, and a bored mind is little good to a teacher or a coach.

"At the nationals this year, I didn't look at the competition through a haze," she says. "It wasn't do or die for me. I'd been working hard at school, and I thought to myself, 'All right, try to enjoy yourself now, and maybe by accident you'll land all these triples.' I wasn't burdened with the pressure of knowing that was all I had been working for."

Enjoy herself she did, executing all five triples on her program for the first time in five months—practices included—in a dazzling performance that brought the New York crowd out of its seats. Thomas is an exciting skater, fast and powerful, jazzy as much as balletic. Just before her freestyle final, however, McGowan tried to remove the triple loop from her program because she had fallen three times trying to land it in warmups. Thomas wouldn't let him. "If you take it out, I can't win," she told him. "I want to do it."

"She's stubborn, but I can use that stubbornness," says McGowan. "I let her know at the nationals that she was deliberately going against my instructions and if she didn't make that triple loop I was going to be furious. The idea was maybe to make her more afraid of me than of the triple.

So of course she made it, just so she could prove her coach wrong. But to even try it, after missing moments before, took the sort of determination that puts her head and shoulders above some of her competitors." McGowan smiles. "She also told me once that, underneath it all, she's really a ham. The bigger the crowd, the better she skates."

At Redwood City, Thomas is practicing that triple loop again—no crowd this

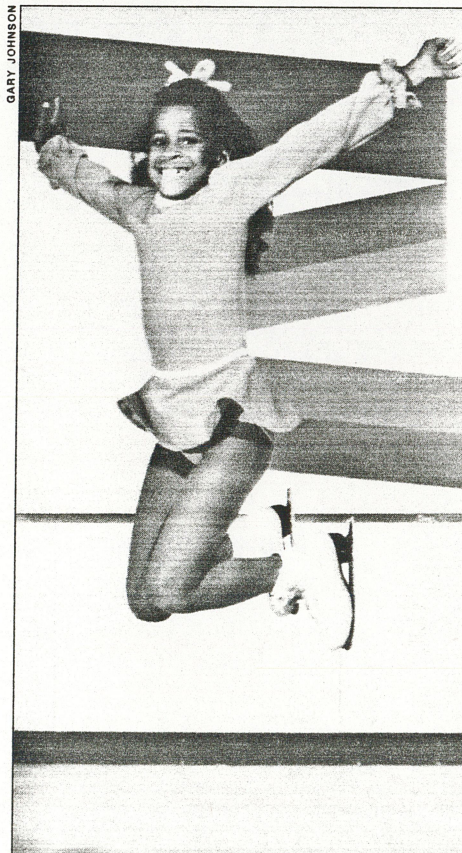
time, no national championship at stake. Just McGowan and the dramatic strains of Duke Ellington's *The River* reverberating through the Ice Lodge. She has missed it twice in a row, doing what McGowan calls "jelly bean jumps," instead of leaping high and far, which is her trademark. "Imagine there's a New York crowd in the background," McGowan says, clapping his hands. As Thomas begins to circle into the jump, he begins cackling: "Yaaaa-yaaaa-yaaaa! Yaaaa-yaaaa-yaaaa!" Thomas is suddenly airborne, spinning once, twice, three times and landing with a graceful arc. She glides silently to a stop.

"There," says McGowan, beaming. "Did I sound like a New York crowd?"

"No, you sounded like a chicken," says Thomas.

McGowan rewinds the tape. "All right. Try it again," he says. Thomas grumbles a little before reassuming her starting posture. "It's only one lousy jump, Debi," McGowan says. "You've got to do five to beat Katarina Witt."

Maybe she needs a miracle. Or maybe she just is one. **END**



GARY JOHNSON



JACK DURAN

At 7, Debi was just another enthusiastic kid. By 15, she was beginning to bubble to the top.