



U.S. ice dance champions Maia and Alex Shibutani reconnect with their childhood coaches, Susie Kelley and Andrew Stroukoff, at the 2016 U.S. Championships in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

Partners in life

'76 OLYMPIANS FIND JOY IN COACHING CAREERS

by LOIS ELFMAN

When three-time U.S. ice dance medalists Susie Kelley and Andrew Stroukoff attended the 40th anniversary reunion for skaters who competed at the 1976 Olympic Winter Games in Innsbruck, Austria, their teammates were quite amused to find out that the former ice dance couple had been married for 28 years.

"We had a team breakfast," Kelley said. "We went around the room to tell everyone what we'd been up to. People looked at us like, 'You two got married?' They were totally shocked we had gotten married in the first place and even more surprised we're still married."

"We were both very intent people when we skated and had no trouble expressing our points of view," Stroukoff added. "We fought. Judi Genovesi (Whaling) said, 'You learned to make up better than anyone else.'"

It was a bit serendipitous that Kelley, 62, and Stroukoff, 66, even teamed up. From the Boston area, Kelley had been ice dancing with her younger brother, but she temporarily outgrew him. She figured she'd sit out a year while he caught up to her.

Around that time (1970), Stroukoff, who grew up in New Jersey, went to Boston to attend college. He suggested to Kelley they skate together for the year, and the rest is history. When they started, their coaches in Boston included Leona Cooke, Barret Brown, Tom McGinnis and Tom Lescinski. Eventually, they relocated to Delaware to train with Ron Ludington. Part of the group affectionately known as the "midnight skaters," they trained at the Skating Club of Wilmington from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m.

"It was the best," Kelley recalled.

All the skaters lived in close proximity and

it was a familylike atmosphere. In those days, it was forbidden to coach and compete, so they did odd jobs to get by. Kelley cleaned houses and worked in the office at the rink. Back when video cameras were new, Stroukoff learned how to operate one and videotaped skaters for Ludington's review.

Participating in the 1976 Olympics was an unexpected thrill, because they went into the U.S. Championships projected to finish fourth. Although the early start of the compulsory dances kept them from attending the Opening Ceremony, the overall experience was a blast.

"The level of excitement was wonderful," Stroukoff said.

The U.S. Olympic Team did some appearances in New York City before departing for Europe. After the Games, they stayed in Europe to prepare for the World Championships. They were in Germany, Austria, Finland and Sweden over the course of two months.

"What's not to like?" Kelley said with a laugh. "It was a great time."

A favorite competitive moment in their career was their free dance at the 1977 World Championships in Tokyo, where they finished 12th.

"You hear about being in the moment, in the zone, that you don't remember anything about it afterward," Stroukoff said. "We skated really well in the free dance and it just flowed. It didn't take any conscious thought. At the end, I really had no recollection of it, which is odd because this is one of the things that Susie and I were good at — thinking while we were moving. To be able to make that leap is one of my favorite moments."

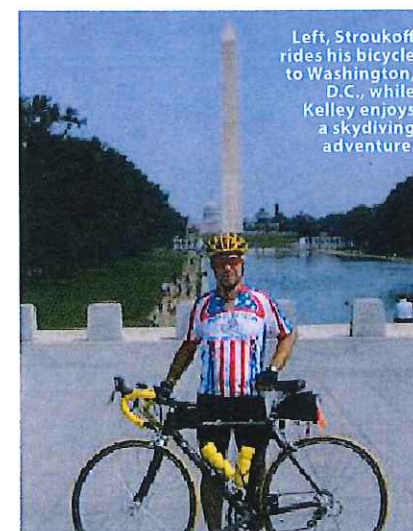


1976 Olympic ice dancers Susie Kelley and Andrew Stroukoff display their grace and skill.

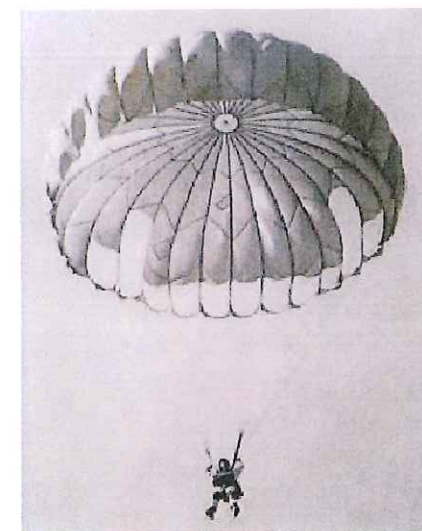
They still have their costumes, medals, trophies and pins, but sadly no videotape of their performances because they skated before the days of VCRs. Stroukoff had a necklace made for Kelley out of her Radix pins, and another one of the Olympic rings.

After finishing third at the 1978 U.S. Championships, they called it a day on their competitive career and went into coaching. They moved to New Jersey, where they still enjoy the grassroots of the sport, coaching at Mennen Arena in Morristown for the past 32 years (2.8 miles from home). In addition to ice dance, they work on moves in the field, edge work and low-level freestyle.

Among the teams with which Kelley and Stroukoff worked were a young Maia and Alex Shibutani. The siblings were living in Con-



Left, Stroukoff rides his bicycle to Washington, D.C., while Kelley enjoys a skydiving adventure.



necticut, and when they wanted to try ice dance, their freestyle coach, Kathy Bird, suggested they work with Kelley and Stroukoff. They made the trip to New Jersey several times a week for about a year and a half.

"You knew right away they were good," Stroukoff said. "They're both wonderful showmen and they work hard. We taught them through their juvenile silver medal at nationals and then they moved on to Colorado."

"[At nationals this year] we got to watch them win their championship. It was very exciting."

Other former students include 2006 U.S. novice ice dance champions Cathy and Chris Reed, who worked with Kelley and Stroukoff for several years at the start of their ice dancing career. After competing in the U.S., the Reeds represented their mother's homeland of Japan at two Olympic Winter Games, and their younger sister, Allison, was a 2010 Olympic competitor for Georgia and recently represented Israel.

"It was very cool to watch the Olympics and realize that five of the skaters started with us at Mennen," Kelley said.

Kelley and Stroukoff prefer working with grassroots skaters who mostly compete locally. They also work with solo dancers, which requires a bit of travel.

"We're better off doing, as a friend of ours calls it, 'the step-step glide,' and get them out of group [lessons] and get them started and instill a love of the sport in them," Kelley said.

"Obviously, if that many of our kids did well enough to be in the Olympics, one of the things we can do is create a spark in them that makes them want to get better and makes them want to understand the process of improvement," Stroukoff said.

They work separately, but share some students as well as team teach with other coaches. They also fill in for each other. The expression on kids' faces when they master new skills keeps them inspired. The enthusiasm of adult skaters also reminds them daily of the joy of skating.

"All of these things still are rewarding for us, as much as they were 38 years ago," Stroukoff said.

Each has interests away from the rink. Kelley is an avid gardener and Stroukoff is passionate about cycling. Since 2001, he has ridden more than 4,000 miles a year. This past summer he did a weeklong ride in the Adirondacks, climbing White Face Mountain one day.

"Before I turned 60, I decided I was going to ride from Maine to Florida, so I did that," he said. "I've done several cross-state rides — ridden across North Carolina, ridden across Oregon."

He likens skating to bike riding, saying they share a freedom of movement. Kelley said her enjoyment nurturing plants goes to a similar motivation she feels nurturing her students.

They enjoyed watch the Olympics from Rio this past summer — marveling at the gymnasts, cyclists and sprinters. Heightening the experience is the connection they feel with the athletes.

"It's like belonging to a club," Stroukoff said. "It's a pretty good club to belong to."