

An American

U.S. FIGURE SKATING ICON DICK BUTTON HOLDS SKATERS TO A HIGH STANDARD THAT HE WAS THE FIRST TO ACHIEVE.

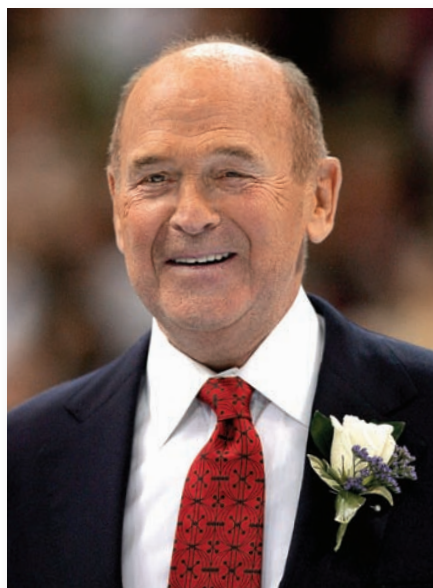
BY ANDREW LAWRENCE

Long before Simon Cowell was cutting down aspiring pop stars with his sharp tongue, Dick Button was razing crop after crop of wannabe figure skating idols with his. To say that the 81-year-old Button, a Hall of Fame skater and Emmy award-winning commentator, has an opinion about the sport that he dominated for a decade would be to traffic in something that neither he nor Cowell carries in surplus—understatement. The flourish with which Button makes his points can sometimes be as jaw dropping as the action he narrates. Few commentators mix sophistication with a sophomoric sense of humor with his élan. (He once called American ice dancer Kate Robinson “the quintessential pre-Raphaelite heroine,” and he clowned another prominent skater for skating with her arms so close to her sides that she appeared as if she were “making armpit farts.”) And absolutely none have his way with words. His most laudatory (“musical”) is reserved for the select skaters who meet his singular standard.

Where does Button get off holding others to such seemingly impossible benchmarks? Well, he set most of them himself as an amateur in the mid-20th century. Not long after winning his first juniors skating title in middle school, Button went on to a prolific amateur career. Indeed, he has been called “the father of American figure skating.” He captured Olympic gold medals in 1948 and ’52, the first American to claim Olympic gold in figure skating. Likewise, he was the first U.S. skater to win the World Championships, taking five straight from ’48 through ’52—still the most by a U.S. figure skater. His seven national titles, from ’46 through ’52, tie the record and match the longest streak of any American man.

Button’s triumphs are merely part of his legend. He also took the sport to new heights of athleticism. At the ’48 Olympic Games in

St. Moritz, Switzerland, Button landed the first double axel in competition on the way to becoming the youngest ever male Olympic figure skating champion, as an 18-year-old Harvard freshman. Four years later, at the ’52 Games in Oslo, Norway, he completed the first triple jump in competition—a triple loop—and landed on the top step of the podium again.



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Along with that Olympic crown, he claimed victories at the U.S., European and World championships, becoming the first American to sweep all four major titles.

Still, Button’s start in the sport at age 12 in his native Englewood, N.J., wasn’t smooth. His first coach found him so awkward to behold on the frozen ponds where they convened for lessons that he told Button hell would freeze over before he grasped the sport. Refusing to accept this, Button’s father—who would bequeath to his boy his own need to set others straight—collected his son and traveled to New York so that he could train with an ice dancing coach who had a much higher opinion of Button’s potential. The only question was

Button’s commitment. “If you’re really serious about skating,” he told Button, “you’ve got to go to Lake Placid.”

So Button did, setting off for a week of indoor training over the summer. Once Button arrived at the fabled skating hothouse, he took lessons from legendary coach Gustave Lussi. The two went on to form a partnership spanning a gilded competitive career that Button didn’t exactly anticipate. Much as he enjoyed the challenge of battling for a prize, Button was ultimately driven by the self-reward of making his body do precisely as directed. “The only thing a medal does is make you have to skate well at a particular time,” he once said.

In the fall of 1952, Button retired from amateur competition to attend Harvard Law School and skated with the Ice Capades during holiday breaks. The experiences would inform his second career act as figure skating’s leading arbiter and promoter. In 1960, he got his big broadcasting break with CBS, calling the Olympic Games in Squaw Valley, Calif. Two years later, he joined ABC and convinced them to televise skating, which allowed him to hone the exacting-yet-entertaining persona that would make him appointment viewing over the next five decades. When he wasn’t acting as skating’s unofficial tastemaker, he was serving as its chief advocate. He created the World Professional Figure Skating Championships, helped pioneer competition-based reality shows such as *The Superstars* and *Battle of the Network Stars* and made a cameo in the 1978 movie *The Bad News Bears Go to Japan*.

More than a quarter century later, Button endures as the small-screen star who raised the collective skating IQ of a nation. “In the early days, I could say anything,” Button once said. “Nobody knew anything about skating.” But as his audiences have become savvier, Button has tried to narrow the focus of his analysis to, as he

U.S. Figure Skating

an Original



Dick Button was the first American to win an Olympic gold medal in figure skating, capturing top honors in the 1948 Games at St. Moritz, Switzerland.

says, “what skaters are doing and then to critique it as to whether it’s particularly good or particularly bad.” Said Button, “I firmly believe that the more you learn about it, the more interesting it becomes. So I try to fill in pieces of information if I can—bits and pieces here and there. Sometimes I think I succeed, and sometimes I think I fail miserably.”

Of course, with a silver medal in the 1947 world championships the only blemish in an otherwise perfect skating career, Button’s sense of failure might be different from most.

Button, quite simply, is a national treasure. As an athlete, he was an inventive skater who blazed a trail for generations of American figure skaters to follow. As an analyst, his television commentary has been akin to decades of lectures in Figure Skating 101. Even as an entrepreneur, he has, perhaps unwittingly, molded pieces of today’s TV programming puzzle.

The Caesars Tribute celebrates and applauds Button’s enduring legacy to skating, his iconic stature as an American original. ●

Andrew Lawrence is a reporter for Sports Illustrated and a contributing columnist for SI.com. He profiled nine-time U.S. Figure Skating champion and two-time Olympic medalist Michelle Kwan last summer in the magazine’s “Where Are They Now” issue.