

Facing the Music

By Zoe Bell

I stood in the middle of the ice, facing the judges. I plastered my biggest, most confident smile across my face and looked right at them. They stared back stone-faced, pencils in hand. My arms were raised above my head, fingertips touching, while my left foot was pointed, a step back from my right. I looked at the judges, but I felt the crowd behind me. Still smiling, I managed to take a deep breath, and tried to block out the swirling thoughts and the reality that this was it. It was like waiting at the starting line of a race – instead of the gun to signal the start, it was the notes of my music: once it began, I would have three minutes and thirty-nine seconds to show what I had been working towards for months, and really, years. I tried to mask the heart-racing, mind-swirling anticipation and told myself, “I can do this. I have trained hard. I know I can do this.” I thought this a couple times, took another breath, and heard the first few notes of the music over the speaker.

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The competition had really started a few hours earlier when I walked through the automatic doors of the rink — a community centre in Thornhill, Ontario I had been to many times. Rinks all have a familiar feeling: crisp air, with a smell of rubber floors and hockey gear — some smelling more like sweat than others. This rink was right next door to a pool, adding a faint smell of chlorine to the mix. As I did for every competition, I got

there early to get ready, changing in the bathroom into my beige tights and short deep pink dress with sequins along the neckline and bodice. I had already applied my makeup at home — with smokier eyes and darker lipstick than I would ever wear on an average day — and had pulled my hair back into a tight bun layered with enough hairspray and gel to glue my hair to my head.

The hours before the competition were all about checking off what needed to be done before my skates were on and I was at the rink doors: I signed in, dropped off my music at the front desk, double-checked what time my warm-up would be, found a spot to warm up and map out my program off-ice. I found my coach, Karen, with her long black coat and Louis Vuitton bag, who greeted me with, “Hello sunshine!” I smiled at the familiar greeting that was quintessentially Karen: her chipper and easy-going persona was entirely calculated to convince me this was just another day.

I warmed up alongside my friends Ivana and Chantal who also trained with Karen at our rink, Canadian Ice Academy. We had been at this annual competition, the Central Ontario Section Championships, seven times — our first when we were all ten years old. Now, I was seventeen and it was my final year of high school. It was only November, but my fast approaching graduation was something I tried to block out of my mind during the weeks and months leading to this competition. Finishing high school meant this was my last year of competing, and this Sectional championship was my final competition — ever. The next year I planned to retire from skating and move away from home for university.

Up to that point, my life had been stuck in a rigid routine: every day I left school at lunch time and drove straight to the rink a few minutes away. I walked through the same doors to the same room where I had tied my skates up almost every day for years. I

wore my hair the same way, laced my left skate up first every time, and sat in the same spot — my spot. I saw the same people — my fellow skaters and all our coaches — every day during the week.

We all knew each other so well. As I waited to get on the ice for my warm-up with Karen and the other competitors, I paced back and forth. I took long, deep breaths, in through my nose, and out through my mouth, shaking out my arms and legs on the exhale. Karen laughed at me, as she did every competition.

“Zoe’s got her Lamaze breathing going,” she laughed.

Chantal let out a big “Ha” at Karen’s joke — one she made so often it was almost a competition tradition — while Ivana, focused on her own thoughts, just kept pacing.

“You look like you’re about to go into labour,” Karen said.

I laughed mid inhale, stopping my breathing ritual for a moment. “I’m trying to breathe!” I shrieked.

“I don’t want to see what happens when you really have a baby,” Karen said, with a mocking tone of warning. “I’m telling you now: this,” she gestured to the ice and competitors around me, “is nothing.”

I laughed along with Karen because she was right; my heavy breathing to rid myself of nerves was a little much — but for this competition in particular I needed to be calm. If I let myself think about the finality of it all, I knew that I would freeze up. I just kept pacing and breathing, until it was time to be on the ice.

I warmed up all my elements, trying to focus on myself and not let the other four skaters on the ice distract me. We only had six minutes, and I was skating my program first out of the group, so once four minutes were up I started to slow down. I took the time to breathe and calm down, before it was time for all the other skaters to get off the

ice. I stood at the boards with Karen on the other side.

“You’re ready for this,” she said. She stuck her hand out and I shook it. She smiled at me and said, “Go have fun.”

I pushed away from the boards and skated around the corner, the familiar feeling of cold air rushing over my face and uncovered arms, while my name was announced, and I skated to my spot. I heard my dad let out his usual “Whoop!” while the rest of the crowd politely clapped. I stood in my spot and waited.

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There I was, in my starting position. Waiting, until I heard my music: the strong beginning with dramatic notes and crescendos. I told myself I could do it, and I could. I was usually so shy and self-conscious, but for a few minutes I could be strong and dramatic, and push away the nerves. That was what I had trained to do, so that is what I did.

I began my long program: the program I went through in my head before every practice, when I got off the ice, and every time my head hit the pillow and I tried to fall asleep. I skated across the ice, smiling at the judges just before entering my first jump. I landed it confidently, before moving on to my next and hardest element: a double axel. I took a breath before I glided into it, taking my time on the take-off. I landed it – the jump that I had spent more time crying over in high school than I ever had about boys or school. The rest of the program was not perfect – there were a few shaky landings on a couple jumps near the end – but I started to realize that it was enough. I had done enough to be proud of, enough to prove to everyone and myself how hard I had worked

and how much I had accomplished. I finished my final spin and struck my final pose – it was over.

I smiled with relief, as I did at the end of every competition, and skated to the middle where I took a bow. I looked around at the judges and the audience – taking in one last time the feeling of being alone at center ice – before I skated back to Karen at the other side of the boards.