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Katarina Witt is one of the most successful figure skaters ever, with two Winter Olympic gold medals (1984 and 1988), four World Championship titles during the 80's (plus two silver medals), and six consecutive European Championship titles from 1983 onwards. She was awarded an Emmy for her role in *Carmen on Ice* (1989) and was voted "Most Favorite

Female Athlete in the United States" 1999, after having appeared completely nude in *Playboy* Magazine the year before, selling out the issue for only the second time (the first being the inaugural issue featuring a naked Marilyn Monroe). She created a stir already in 1988 by the way she dressed on ice, which led to a change in ISU dress code for female skaters. And now she has "written" a book, *Only With Passion: Figure Skating's Most Winning Champion on Competition and Life*, in which she advises a fictive young skater, Jasmine, on making a career in figure skating. We asked Sanna Nordin, sport psychologist, for a review. All too often, she had her pleasant reading brutally interrupted by assertions that contradicts the generally accepted scientific knowledge of modern sport psychology.

Don't buy this book – at least not for its indented audience

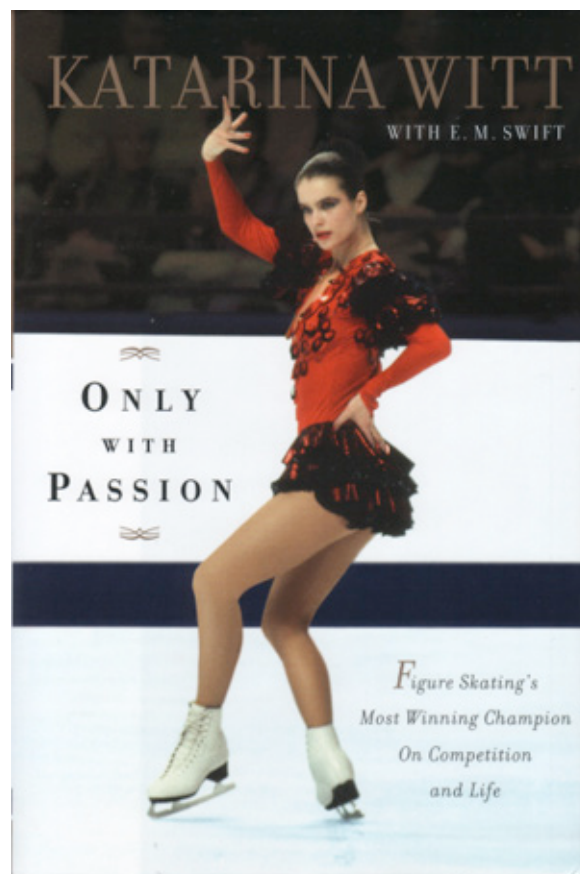
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Katarina Witt (with E. M. Swift)
Only With Passion: Figure Skating's Most Winning Champion on Competition and Life
168 pages, hc., ill.
New York: PublicAffairs 2005
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When first asked to review Katarina Witt's book *Only with Passion*, I got really quite excited. The book is basically a story full of advice on sport and life, and it is written in an easy-to-read, conversational and engaging style. As a previous aesthetic sport-athlete myself, I am aware that books by prominent, successful women for young aspiring athletic females are not exactly abundant, and so I looked forward to hearing what she had to share. The book promises to be "inspiring reading for young athletes" (back flap of book cover) and amazon.co.uk sells it as being "the perfect gift for young women, young athletes". Unfortunately, I strongly disagree with these descriptions, and will outline why below.

Katarina Witt is perhaps the most well-known figure skater of all time, having won more titles than anybody before her, having participated in three Olympic games, and still skating professionally to this day. As such, it becomes a difficult task to disagree with her on what she clearly knows an awful lot more about than I do – figure



skating. However, I believe that a review in light of sport psychology research could still be of benefit.

The book takes the format of Katarina talking with a hypothesized young skater, named Jasmine, who is talented but not necessarily motivated enough. Through their (made-up) conversations, advice for Jasmine emerges both directly (as advice) and more indirectly (through anecdotes from Katarina's life). I should emphasize that several of these conversations are very informative and inspiring, and all of them are engaging. For example, Katarina speaks passionately about the sport and how critical it is to find joy in the simple act of executing one's chosen activity. However, the basis for my overall negative judgment comes from a series of statements or pieces of advice that go against what current sport psychology would advocate. For example, on the topic of coaching there are a number of interesting and provocative pages.

Coached since teenage years by one and the same coach, Katarina clearly has learned a lot from her mentor, Frau Müller. Equally clearly, Frau Müller must have done a lot of things right to be able to 'produce' a champion like Katarina. But do young athletes really need to hear that "In sports, maybe 80 percent of your effort is your own free will, and the other 20 percent is pain. Torture. You need someone cracking the whip at you to reach your potential." (p. 27)? There is no denying that reaching the very top in sports is a hugely difficult task and painful at times. But that 20% more can be got out of you by coach 'torture' because your own free will to work hard will never be good enough? Certainly current theories of motivation and self-determination would disagree with such a view.

Coach Müller was also involved in designing Katarina's eating programme, which is the matter of my perhaps greatest concern with the book. She writes:

I was training seven hours a day, but I was only getting water and rice at lunch, with a few slices of apple and artificial sweetening. It was disgusting. That was my lunch, because she wanted me to lose weight. ? I trusted Frau Müller. She could have told me anything, and I'd have done it. (p. 40).

Regarding her parents' involvement and interaction with this coach, she states:

? once a month they met with Frau Müller at the ice rink, and she'd complain about all the problems I was giving her, how I didn't train enough, I was too lazy, I'd put on too much weight. ? Frau Müller did not like seeing my more womanly form emerge, and the truth is I was never comfortable in my body for many years. (p. 41).

It would be unfair to leave my examples at that, however, because Katarina does recognise that some of Müller's actions were wrong, and she does emphasise that skaters need to eat healthily to be able to sustain a healthy training programme. Nevertheless, I am left with a nagging suspicion that young girls reading this book might do as Katarina did, and not as she says. After all, she did become so very successful, and she is coached by Frau Müller to this day. In my view, therefore, she has not taken an active stance against some of the coaching methods that go against all current recommendations from sport psychology and also nutritional science. Moreover, there are examples of Katarina herself openly supporting such methods. For example, she states that

Frau Müller was the most successful coach in the entire world when I had her, so we had to accept her the way she was. Democracy is great, but sometimes a coach needs to be a dictator. Sometimes there's only one way. For a skater, eating normal portions is too much, and I ate pretty normally. (p. 43).

Open any textbook on sports nutrition and you will find that athletic training requires larger portions than normal, not smaller. They certainly would not advice athletes to eat steak for breakfast, rice for lunch, and then chocolate for dinner, as Katarina says she did! Similarly, open any textbook on sport psychology and you will find that an array of problems are more likely to occur when coaches are dictatorial, openly disapprove of young women's natural maturing processes, do not tolerate mistakes, and prescribe impossible eating regimens. Perhaps having such a coach might be one reason why Katarina feels that "*Frau Müller had to be my enemy sometimes. I had to hate her. I had to feel aggressive toward her, so I'd be able to work under her discipline.*" (p. 44). In fact, this is a particularly interesting section, because she goes on to say that

There has to be an element of fear. That's the only way, I think. That's why some other skaters quit. They couldn't take her anger and turn it into their own energy, as I learned to do. They'd just get more frustrated and think they were worthless. I was very strong, very stubborn, and could forget very quickly. (p. 44).

But what about those other skaters? Well, they are displaying just the reactions that are likely to result from coaching behaviours like those just described—frustration, undermined self-confidence, and dropout. And perhaps they would not need to have felt that way, had coaching methods been different. Clearly, I agree with Katarina that being

able to turn something negative into positive energy for oneself is an extremely useful skill. In fact, this mental toughness is very likely to have been an important component of her success, not least her ability to effectively use the perhaps less than psychologically ideal coaching that she has had. But I can't help but suspect that it is Katarina who is the unusual one, the one with a mentality strong enough to succeed *despite* some of these coaching behaviours – not *because* of them. And had such behaviours not occurred at all, perhaps those other skaters would not have needed to quit. So instead of presuming that mental toughness is something inborn and unchangeable (as Katarina also suggests), we can turn to the sport psychology literature with its many successful psychological skills training programs, or perhaps to the new positive psychology and its research indicating that resilience and mental tenacity is a result of helpful nurturing, not genetics. Thus, more strong and successful athletes like Katarina are likely to emerge if we focus on helping support mental toughness and hard working attitudes, rather than by simply weeding out those who perhaps do not have them already prior to participating in sports.

As noted, Frau Müller must clearly also have had many good sides as well as a depth of knowledge. In one chapter, she tells Jasmine: “Work hard and set your goals high. Katarina always wanted to be the best, and this is what you must also aspire to. Never be satisfied.” (p. 54). With the risk of sounding tedious, I must say that the last part of this statement is again *not* what sport psychology would encourage a coach to say to an athlete. Healthy perfectionism is a good thing, and nurturing an ethic of working hard and setting high goals has all the research support one could wish for. Never being satisfied, however, is a typical example of the darker side of perfectionism. In contrast to the healthier version of this train, such perfectionism relates significantly to an array of undesirables – lowered motivation and self-confidence, frustration, rumination over mistakes, dropout, eating problems, even injury and indices of mental and physical ill-being. It is also more commonly displayed by those who are overly competitive against other people. Now, it is perhaps obvious that to become an Olympic champion, one has to be competitive. Typically, however, competing against oneself is to be encouraged as it emphasises factors within one's control. As such, it less often causes frustration and lowered motivation in the face of failure. Being overly competitive against others, by contrast, has been shown to relate not only to frustration, motivation drops and anxiety, but also to a greater likelihood of cheating or using unsportspersonlike behaviours. As an example of her competitiveness, Katarina writes about her cross training as follows:

My favourite was when we played soccer indoors? I was good, and one of my strategies was to miss the ball and kick the others in the shins on purpose. Then I'd take the ball away from the poor girl and put it in the goal. I was a competitor, it didn't matter what sport. (p. 83).

Enough said.

On a similar note, she writes of her desired pre-performance state as follows:

To do my best, I had to develop a kind of aggressiveness before a competition? It may have been a friendly environment, but the Olympic Games were still a competition, and Roz was the enemy. That's what I always tried to think. The opponent is your enemy. You live and let die. (p. 100).

Fortunately, she says that she now thinks differently of such attitudes, recognises that people differ in this regard, and that skating should really be about competing against yourself. But despite these 'milder' opinions, she still believes that “There are many words that have a negative connotation in life that have a positive meaning when it comes to sports. Words like ‘cruelty’ and ‘insensitivity’, which are necessary in becoming a champion.” Perhaps high performance sport is necessarily different from sports at slightly lower levels in this regard, but isn't sport really supposed to teach you lessons about life and help you gain transferable skills, not simply about how to gain a medal position? I would be interested in seeing whether such attitudes are *truly* useful, or whether they are simply culturally transmitted in certain sporting cultures. As Katarina herself states: “But that was how I was brought up: to be an athlete. I'd always been taught to go to an event to win, not just to be a participant.” (p. 157).

Sport psychology itself is the topic of another curious anecdote. Katarina states:

I never needed one. I tried it one time, and it was a disaster. I was about fourteen or fifteen, and she came in to hypnotize me: Your arms are heavy? your legs are heavy. ? Then she got me to visualize my jumps. Okay, so then I got onto the ice, and my arms still felt heavy. My legs still felt heavy. I felt blah. (p. 31-32).


And in one fell swoop she has reduced faith in a whole profession, with an outdated view and a bad example. I mean, what is a young athlete to make of that – that sport psychology is not useful at all? Or that it is only for people who “need help”? As a sport psychology researcher myself I am clearly inclined to view my topic area as valuable, and I do realise that I am biased. However, I do not think that somebody viewed as a legend in her field should dismiss a whole sports science discipline based on a single incident that occurred over twenty years ago, while

stating that her hair stylist is an important part of her support team.

So, in conclusion, I am disappointed that I have not been able to provide a more enthusiastic review of this book – so unusual in its genre, well written, and by such a successful athlete. But despite some very interesting and inspirational episodes as well as some wonderful quotes about how the journey, not the destination, is what makes sport worthwhile, my overall conclusion after having read the book is – don't buy it. At least not for teenage girls in aesthetic pursuits, for whom it is clearly intended. I might use it for thought-provoking discussions with sport psychology students, but would not want to encourage girls at a vulnerable age to try and emulate some of the behaviours that Katarina Witt somehow managed to succeed in spite of.

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