



Boitano, Brian (b. 1963)

by Linda Rapp

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American figure skater Brian Boitano achieved great success in his career, the highlight of which was the 1988 Winter Olympic Games in Calgary, Alberta. The men's competition that year has come to be known as "The Battle of the Brians" since Boitano was pitted against the other superstar of the time, Brian Orser of Canada. Both men turned in impressive performances, but Boitano was able to prevail by a slim margin to win the gold medal.

Boitano is a native of the San Francisco area, where he still resides. Born on October 22, 1963 in Mountain View, he grew up in the adjacent city of Sunnyvale, just south of the San Francisco Bay.

"I lived in this perfect suburban town. . . . It was so typical," Boitano told Pat Jordan of the Los Angeles Times. "I had a great childhood. I was very independent and had a great imagination." His memories include roller-skating on the sidewalk of his block.

Skating was not a tradition in the Boitano household, but there was a connection with sports since Boitano's father had played semi-pro baseball for the San Jose Bulls before opting to pursue a career in banking.

Lew Boitano never lost his love for the game, and he encouraged his son to participate in it. He served as the coach of the Little League team on which the boy played.

"[My father] wanted me to be a baseball player, too," Brian Boitano told Jordan. "He never showed it, but I always felt he was disappointed when I became a skater." Nevertheless, he stated that his parents were very supportive once he had made the decision.

Boitano discovered ice skating at the age of eight when his parents took him to an Ice Follies show in San Francisco. Boitano begged them for ice-skating lessons, and they signed him up for a class at the Sunnyvale Ice Palace. His teacher, Linda Leaver, saw such promise in the boy that, she recalled to E. M. Swift of Sports Illustrated, "I went home and told my husband that one day he'd be a world champion."

Leaver would be at Boitano's side when her prediction came true. She remained his coach throughout his



Brian Boitano in San Francisco in 2010.
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entire career and continues to work as his personal manager.

Boitano quickly became a proficient skater who was especially strong in his jumps. His abilities earned him a bronze medal at the World Junior Men's Singles Championships in 1978.

"At fourteen, all Brian wanted to do was go fast and jump. I told people he had creativity and it would come out in time," Leaver recounted to Jordan. For his part, Boitano had a somewhat different take on the situation. He thought of himself as a "technical robot" who needed to do each move powerfully and to perfection.

"If I was a robot on the ice, it was because I let them [apparently referring to judges] make me into one," he stated to Jordan. "I was naturally passionate, but I could see passionate people weren't making it in skating. . . . I had to be a robot because what I was trying to do needed to be so technical."

Boitano's excellence at jumping soon began attracting attention. In 1982, in his first appearance at the United States National Championships, he became the first skater to land a triple Axel--the most difficult of the triple jumps--in that competition. The following year, at the World Championships, he landed all six of the triple jumps, which had never before been done in that event.

In the next Olympic year, 1984, Boitano finished second in the National Championships, thus qualifying for the United States team that competed in Sarajevo.

In Sarajevo, Boitano finished out of the medals, in fifth place, but he was on the verge of the most illustrious phase of his career.

The next year Boitano won the first of four consecutive United States National Championships. He also took gold at the 1986 World Championships but came in second to Brian Orser of Canada in 1987.

Boitano and Orser were clearly the two most accomplished male skaters of the day, and the scene was set for "The Battle of the Brians" at the Calgary Winter Olympic Games in 1988.

Still dogged with a reputation as a superb technician but lacking in artistry, Boitano had added Sandra Bezic to his team as a choreographer. Bezic, a former elite skater with five Canadian national pairs championships to her credit, commented to Swift, "Artistically, a lot of people thought that Brian Orser was superior to [Boitano] and that my Brian just might not have it. I was worried about that myself. But he does have it. He just needed some direction."

Whereas Boitano had previously chosen rock-and-roll or fiddle tunes for his routines, Bezic selected a ballet piece, "Les Patineurs" ("The Skaters"), by Giacomo Meyerbeer for his short program. In this routine, Boitano portrayed a boy showing off to his neighbors while skating on a frozen pond.

Bezic used a military theme for the long program, set to music from the score of the film Napoleon by

Carmine Coppola.

Both of "the Brians" skated superbly in the short program, and so victory in "the battle" would go to the winner of the long.

Fans were treated to superlative performances by both men and then briefly left in suspense as their extremely close marks were sorted out. Four of the nine judges gave higher scores to Orser, three gave them to Boitano, and two scored them even. A tie-breaking rule had to be invoked. Under that, the competitor with the higher technical number got the vote of the judge in question, and, in both cases, Boitano had a slight edge. The former "technical robot" had combined athleticism and artistry to win Olympic gold.

Boitano retired from the amateur ranks after the Calgary Games and then added five World Professional Championship victories to his record. He also began appearing in television specials, including *Carmen on Ice*, for which he won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Performance in Classical Music/Dance Programming in 1990.

In the early 1990s there was considerable controversy about what constituted amateur versus professional status in various sports and in different countries--an important question for the Olympics since, at the time, only people recognized as amateurs were allowed to compete. In 1992 Boitano requested reinstatement of his amateur status so that he could try to make the United States team for the Games in Lillehammer, Norway in 1994.

Boitano's petition was successful and established what was then known as the "Boitano rule." Under it, various other skaters were also allowed to compete, including Ekaterina Gordeeva and Sergei Grinkov of Russia.

Boitano won a spot on the Olympic team, but an unusual miss on a triple jump cost him, and he did not reach the medal podium in Lillehammer, where he finished in sixth place.

Still, Boitano's mark on figure skating is indelible. In 1996, he was inducted into both the United States and World Figure Skating Halls of Fame.

After the Lillehammer Games, Boitano again retired from the amateur ranks. He founded a company, White Canvas Productions, to develop skating shows both for live performances and television specials. More than twenty specials produced by White Canvas have been broadcast.

Boitano had achieved such fame as a skater that he was used as a character in Trey Parker's 1999 animated movie *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut*. In it, he is portrayed as a superhero, "fighting grizzly bears" and "evil robot kings" from the future, among other feats. One of the songs from the film is "What Would Brian Boitano Do?" The Boitano character has also appeared occasionally on the *South Park* television series.

After his retirement from skating, Boitano developed an interest in cooking, especially Italian cuisine because of his ethnic heritage. He became proficient enough as a chef to land his own show, *What Would Brian Boitano Make?*, which debuted on the Food Network in 2009 and ran for two seasons. Boitano subsequently published a cookbook with the same title in 2013.

Amid controversy regarding the persecution of glbtq people in Russia, on December 17, 2013, Boitano was named to the Presidential Delegation to attend the Opening Ceremony at the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. The fact that President Obama (along with President Hollande of France, Prime Minister David Cameron of the United Kingdom, and President Joachim Gauck of Germany) declined to attend the games himself or to send high-ranking government officials was interpreted as a rebuke of the Russians and their anti-gay policies.

When it was revealed that two openly lesbian athletes--tennis legend Billie Jean King and two-time ice hockey Olympic medalist Caitlin Cahow--were in the delegation, the selection of the delegates was also interpreted as further evidence that President Obama selected the delegation with the intention of sending a message of support for gay and lesbian athletes.

In this context, two days later, Boitano came out publicly as a gay man. He issued a statement that read in part "It is my desire to be defined by my achievements and my contributions. While I am proud to play a public role in representing the American Olympic Delegation as a former Olympic athlete, I have always reserved my private life for my family and friends and will continue to do so. I am many things: a son, a brother, an uncle, a friend, an athlete, a cook, an author, and being gay is just one part of who I am. First and foremost I am an American athlete and I am proud to live in a country that encourages diversity, openness and tolerance."

The news that Boitano is gay came as a surprise to almost no one. Boitano had assiduously avoided addressing questions about his sexual orientation, but speculation that he was gay had been rife for years. Indeed, in reporting on the delegation going to the Sochi Games, blogger Carla Marinucci of SFGate (the on-line site of the San Francisco Chronicle) named the "two prominent gay athletes" among their number not as King and Cahow, but as King and Boitano.

Michael Petrelis, a glbtq rights activist whom Marinucci interviewed for the piece, made comments implying that he, too, was under the impression that Boitano was openly gay.

It is unclear whether the open secret that Boitano is gay was a factor in his appointment to the American delegation or whether the appointment was a factor in Boitano's subsequent decision to come out publicly.

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