



Cranston, Toller (1949-2015)

by Linda Rapp

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Toller Cranston performing in 1974. Photograph by Rainer Mittelstädt. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike License 3.0 Germany license.

The subtitle of *Zero Tolerance: An Intimate Memoir by the Man Who Revolutionized Figure Skating* is only slightly hyperbolic. Cranston's combination of artistry and athleticism delighted the public, confounded the judges, and ushered in a new era in the history of skating.

Although the skating establishment was somewhat slow to appreciate and reward Cranston's innovative and artistic skating, he eventually became a six-time Canadian champion and won bronze medals at the 1974 World Championships and the 1976 Olympic Games.

Cranston's other passion was art. Throughout his life he devoted himself to painting. His artwork showed the same imagination, exuberance, and flair as his skating.

Cranston was born into the middle-class Hamilton, Ontario family of Montague and Stuart Cranston on April 20, 1949. His father had been a college quarterback, and his mother an amateur painter of bucolic scenes. Not quite following in their footsteps, Cranston became both an athlete and an artist, but in his typically individualistic way, he chose figure skating as his sport and developed a painting style that favored magical subjects, attenuated figures, and vibrant color and energy.

Cranston began skating at an early age, and was soon participating in inter-club competitions. In 1968 he made his first attempt to qualify for the Canadian Olympic team. Faced with his innovative style in the free program, the judges gave him marks ranging from first (5.9) to last (4.2). As a result, he did not make the team.

The pattern continued throughout his career. As John Malone noted, "It was common for him to receive very high artistic marks from a few judges and absurdly low ones from others."

The judges may have been befuddled, but audiences were wildly enthusiastic about his performances and regularly booed judges who did not reward him.

A pivotal moment in Cranston's skating career came in 1970, when he began to study with Ellen Burka, a former Dutch champion who had emigrated to Canada and became a highly respected coach. Cranston was unable to pay for lessons, but Burka was so impressed with his painting that she took artwork as compensation.

The following year Cranston won the first of his six consecutive Canadian championships. He also won Skate Canada in 1973 and 1975.

Cranston never won a gold medal in international competition. Eastern European judges in particular consistently penalized him for his creative and dramatic free-skating style. He was, however, awarded bronze medals at the 1974 World Championships and the 1976 Olympics. Two-time Olympic champion Dick Button was among the prominent members of the skating world who felt that Cranston was denied his due.

At its height, Cranston's skating was artistic, athletic, spontaneous, and dramatic. No spectator could fail to be engaged by Cranston's performances. His costumes, many of which he designed himself, complemented his musical selections, which he interpreted in a manner informed by dance--modern dance in particular--even though he had no formal training in that area.

When his amateur career was over, Cranston went on tour with professional skating companies. Some of the venues, lodging, and travel arrangements for skaters on tour were decidedly second-rate, but Cranston's star status--the European press named him the skater of the century--and his flamboyant persona as an *artiste* as both a skater and a painter brought him opportunities to mingle with the rich and famous.

Cranston's social life was largely devoid of romance, however. In his memoir he mentions only one affair, furtively conducted because the other man was a married diplomat.

Cranston's relative openness about his homosexuality may have been inspired in part by 1976 Olympic gold medalist John Curry's announcement of his homosexuality soon after the competition.

After he retired from skating, Cranston worked as a choreographer and also as a sports commentator for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. He excelled in the latter capacity. With his extensive knowledge of figure skating, he provided honest and insightful analyses that were very helpful to the television audience.

In a move that he would come to regret, Cranston agreed to coach the virtually uncoachable singles skater Christopher Bowman, whose talent was undermined by his lack of discipline. The ordeal of coping with this difficult pupil plunged Cranston into a severe depression and a period of substance abuse, from which he eventually recovered.

Even while he was on the skating tour, Cranston managed to pursue his career in art. He became a prolific and successful painter.

Cranston was inducted into both the Sports Hall of Fame and the Olympic Hall of Fame in Canada. He also received the Order of Canada for his achievements in sports.

Contemporary figure skating owes much to Cranston for his bold introduction of elements of modern dance, theatricality, and imaginative costume design. No one who witnessed his innovative performances will forget the excitement of seeing his creative new approach to the sport.

In the last decades of his life Cranston divided his time between homes in Toronto and San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

On January 24, 2015, Cranston was found dead in his home in San Miguel de Allende, apparently a victim of a heart attack.

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"Toller Cranston." www.tollercranston.com

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