



Curry, John (1949-1994)

by Linda Rapp

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John Curry's combination of athleticism and grace brought him enormous success in figure skating. A five-time champion in his native Britain, he also won gold medals in world and Olympic competition.

Although it was a potentially career-destroying move, Curry came out publicly as a gay man before the 1976 Winter Olympics, becoming one of the very few elite athletes to come out while still competing. Throughout his career, he consistently spoke candidly about his sexual orientation.

Curry was born September 9, 1949 in Birmingham, England, where his father was an engineer and factory-owner. As a small child Curry became fascinated with dance, but his father considered dancing inappropriate for boys and firmly vetoed the idea of dance lessons. He did, however, allow young Curry to take up figure skating at age seven.

With his natural aptitude and dedication, Curry won his first competition a year later. He continued to have success and went on to win the British junior title in 1967.

Although Curry's father had agreed to let the boy become a figure skater, he showed little enthusiasm for his son's athletic endeavors. Only twice did he see Curry skate.

After his father's death, Curry, then sixteen, moved to London, where he began taking the long-denied dance lessons and worked part-time to eke out enough money to pay for coaching for his skating.

Curry placed second in the 1968 and 1969 British championships and won the first of his five national titles in 1970.

Like his contemporary Toller Cranston of Canada, with whom he shared a number of traits, including homosexuality, Curry suffered from the prejudice of judges against his skating style, which emphasized grace and artistry, and which some considered "feminine," even though Curry also demonstrated mastery in jumping and other physically demanding aspects of the sport.

Curry's glory year was 1976. After a narrow victory over Robin Cousins in the British championships, he went on to win gold medals in the European Championships, the Olympic Games, and the World Championships. Curry had the honor of carrying the English flag at the opening ceremony of the Olympics, and after his triumph at the games, he was awarded the Order of the British Empire. He was also named England's sporting personality of the year.

Curry had come out publicly as a gay man prior to the Olympics, and upon his return to Britain he spoke openly about his sexuality.

Curry turned professional after his win at the World Championships. Saying that he "never could see the point of spending 12 years training to go dress up in a Bugs Bunny suit," he turned down lucrative offers

from established ice shows and formed his own company, one that emphasized dance.

His *Ice Dancing* show was a hit on Broadway as well as in London, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. In his production Curry sought to explore the relationship between skating and dance. Twyla Tharp was among the choreographers with whom he collaborated.

Curry also did choreography for the first show and took an increasing role in subsequent productions, choreographing fifteen of twenty-four numbers in the 1984 version of the show. These included Johann Strauss's *Skater's Waltz*, which Curry performed with JoJo Starbuck, and an ensemble piece to Aaron Copland's *Rodeo*.

In addition to his skating career, Curry appeared in a number of plays, including a 1980 Broadway production of Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe's *Brigadoon* that was choreographed by Agnes de Mille. Curry's performance of the "Sword Dance" was a highlight of the show.

Curry saw AIDS take a toll in the skating world. "It is hard to watch people in that situation, and it was frightening when people started to become ill," he said, adding "You start to think 'When is it going to be my turn?'"

It was in late 1987 that Curry found out that he, too, was HIV-positive. The following year he participated in *Skating for Life*, a show to help fund AIDS research. His final skating performance in 1989 was part of another AIDS benefit.

Diagnosed with full-blown AIDS in 1991, Curry returned to England to spend his last years with his elderly mother. He died on April 15, 1994 in Binton, Warwickshire.

Curry was held in high regard by the skating community. World and Olympic champion Peggy Fleming described him as "totally devoted to the art of skating," and Olympic medalist Paul Wylie lauded him as "the ultimate skater." Because of his artistic interpretation of the music of classical composers, Curry has been called the "Nureyev of the ice."

He was also much admired for his candor and courage in coming out despite the potential risk to his athletic career. Curry was always forthright in this regard. In a 1992 interview he stated, "I never pretended not to be homosexual, ever."

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