



Weir, Johnny (b. 1984)

by Linda Rapp

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2011 glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Figure skater Johnny Weir won three United States Championships in men's singles, twice represented his country as an Olympian, and won a bronze medal in the World Championship. Although technically proficient, Weir drew criticism from some in the skating establishment for his choice of costumes, which were dramatic and unconventional, and for his demeanor, which was the same.

Practically from the moment that he took to the ice in elite competition, there was widespread speculation that Weir was gay, but he refused to address the issue until he came out in a memoir, *Welcome to My World* (2011). He has since become an advocate for glbtq rights.

Weir was born July 2, 1984 in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, but soon moved with his family to nearby Quarryville, where both of his parents worked at a nuclear power plant.

Figure skating was not the first sport to capture Weir's attention. At an early age he showed promise in equestrianism, a sport in which his father had excelled as a boy.

Because Weir "fell in love instantly" with riding and demonstrated considerable promise, winning his first show and soon being regarded as a prospect for the national team, the family relocated again, this time to the small town of Little Britain, which was closer to his training site.

Although the young Weir was devoting himself to equestrianism, he had also become intrigued by figure skating while watching Kristi Yamaguchi win the gold medal at the 1992 Olympics. Having talked his parents into buying him used skates, he headed for a frozen-over cornfield—crashing into a snowbank on the way—and using his rollerskating skills to maneuver around rocks once he reached it.

Because the boy maintained an interest in skating, his parents gave him a new pair of skates—“black beauties with blades so sharp they could cut skin”—he recalled, and they also enrolled him for lessons at the first-rate skating rink at the University of Delaware.

Once he started his lessons, the die was cast. In the free skate after the third class, Weir launched himself into the air and landed successfully after one and a half rotations. His group teacher took him aside and told him that what he had considered just a “jump” was in fact an axel, adding, “That usually takes someone at least two years to learn. You just did it in two hours.”

The teacher brought Weir to the attention of Coach Priscilla Hill, who confirmed Weir's potential and recommended to his parents that the family move to Delaware so that their son could continue training.

It was not practical—either physically or financially—for Weir to continue to work toward elite performance in both equestrianism and skating, and so his parents asked him to make a choice. The boy opted for skating, and so the family relocated once more even though it meant a long commute for his



Johnny Weir at the 2010 GLAAD Media Awards ceremony. Photograph by Greg Hernandez. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license.

parents.

Weir quickly made friends with other young athletes at the ice rink, but his schoolmates, upon learning that he was a skater, hurled homophobic epithets at him and "would sing aggressively anti-Johnny raps."

"I was always strong enough to take that sort of thing. Especially now that I had skating to wrap myself in: it was my art and nobody could take it away from me," Weir recounts in his memoir.

He might have added that no one—particularly a pre-teen child, as he was at the time—should be subjected to such abuse. Considering his years of reluctance to address questions about his sexuality, one may wonder if the slurs that he endured did more damage than he has acknowledged.

Weir enjoyed early success at the Juvenile and Novice levels of competition. In the 1998-1999 season he moved to the Junior level and also competed abroad for the first time. He placed fourth in the national Junior Championship and harbored dreams—"ludicrous" ones, he said in retrospect—of competing in the 2002 Winter Olympics.

The next season was a difficult one for Weir. At fifteen he had a growth spurt, which meant that he needed to adjust his techniques, notably on the triple axel, a jump necessary for competition at the highest levels.

In addition to coping with the physical changes, Weir had to learn to navigate the dynamics of the world of competitive sports. Most of the other participants had been skating for medals since they could barely walk, and so they knew the drill, but Weir, a relative late-comer to the sport at twelve, suffered from nervousness and stress.

In the U.S. National Junior Championship in 2000 he was in the lead after the short skate—despite having fallen on the triple axel, which no one else had attempted—but "had a complete meltdown in the free program" and finished fifth.

The following year Weir rebounded, winning the Junior World Championship and finishing a respectable sixth on the Senior level in the United States. He advanced to fifth place in the U.S. National Championship in the 2001-2002 season.

Weir was scheduled to begin the following season by competing in the Cup of Russia and was excited by the prospect. With a Russian choreographer, Yuri Sergiev, Weir anticipated a favorable reception to his skating style. In addition, he had developed an interest in the national culture and the language, in which he has become fluent.

Weir had designed his own costume, inspired by his Cirque du Soleil music. The American judges took exception to it, complaining that it was "a slap in the face" to the United States because it made Weir look like a Russian skater, and demanding that he change it. This was hardly a practical order on the eve of a competition, and Weir saw any change as an artistic mistake because the costume was as integral as the "choice of music . . . [to] create the mood and character of the program."

The teen-aged Weir felt overwhelmed by the pressures of being an athlete, a representative of his country, and a costume designer, and remaining true to his own artistic vision. Perplexed by the situation, he feigned illness and withdrew from the competition.

The following summer, a week after his eighteenth birthday, Weir confronted another potentially difficult situation, coming out to his mother. Although momentarily taken aback, Mrs. Weir quickly assured her son that his happiness was paramount to her, and she also said, "I want you to have someone in your life."

Shortly thereafter, Weir met a man whom he identifies only as "Alex," a pairs skater. The two began a romance of several years but one complicated by the fact that Weir was so often on the road and still, except to his immediate circle, in the closet. Stresses on the relationship eventually took their toll, and Alex broke it off.

In the 2002-2003 season, Weir suffered a knee injury in an early event and was unable to compete for the rest of the year.

To launch a come-back he began working with legendary coach Tatiana Tarasova, who normally charged tens of thousands of dollars for instruction but who waived the fees for Weir after another protégée, Sasha Cohen, recommended him and Weir did well in a try-out.

Weir had to go through a rigorous qualification process to earn a place in the national championship, and a judge from the skating federation warned him early on that "you're not getting any favors from us." He won the Sectional championship and went on to the U.S. Nationals, where he stood first after the short program. His marks for artistry had been distressingly inconsistent, ranging from a pathetic 4.9 to an impressive 5.8 out of 6, but his technical proficiency could not be denied. His strong marks won him the first of three national championships.

As the U.S. champion in 2005-2006, Weir earned a spot on the Olympic team. His competition in Turin got off to a good start, and he stood second after the short program, well ahead of his American arch-rival Evan Lysacek (whom, Weir felt, the national skating establishment had been promoting at his expense).

Congratulatory e-mails from fans poured in, but the exultation was short-lived. On the day of the long program Weir barely made it to the rink on time. Waiting at the Olympic Village bus stop with his coach and also the president of the Japanese Skating Federation, he grew increasingly nervous as no bus appeared. Eventually the trio prevailed upon a Village volunteer to drive them to the rink. Only later were they informed that the bus schedule had been changed.

After rushing through costuming and make-up, Weir took to the ice, starting well but then two-footing a jump and later deciding not to try for the second half of a triple-triple combination that he doubted he could land.

Subsequently he attempted to revise his program on the fly, trying to remember which elements and combinations he had made or missed and to decide what to reintroduce and when to do each to maintain the artistic integrity of the program—essentially an impossible task.

Weir wound up in fifth place. As he walked through a press area, one reporter asked him how he felt about losing "America's medal" while another wanted his reaction to an Internet poll on whether people cared that he might be gay.

Coach Hill, wrote Weir, "extricated me from the press conference from hell."

After completing required drug testing, Weir emerged from the building, saw his mother at the security barrier, raced over to her, and hugged her through the bars, apologizing for his failure to win a medal after all the family's sacrifices. Her response, he recalled, was "Honey, you made it to the Olympics. I've never been more proud of you in my life."

After the Turin Olympics, Weir ventured into other areas of endeavor, appearing on Kathy Griffin's reality show, *My Life on the D-List*, on the Bravo Network, as well as doing photo shoots for fashion magazines. He

also joined the Champions on Ice tour in order to "pay the bills." Weir chose as his music Frank Sinatra's "My Way" because, he recounted in his memoir, of "its obvious symbolism."

For competition, Weir was in need of a new choreographer because Tarasova had gone back to Moscow. He chose another Russian woman, Marina Anissina, who had been a gold medalist in ice dancing at the 2002 Olympics, but the partnership proved infelicitous because Anissina was determined to turn Weir into a more "masculine" skater in terms both of the technical manner in which he executed the elements of his program and of artistic considerations, including choice of theme, music, and costuming.

Prior to the U.S. National Championships in January 2007, the matter of Weir's sexuality again arose as an issue when Mark Lund, an openly gay man and the founder of *International Figure Skating* magazine, stated during an appearance on the cable show *Nancy Kerrigan's World of Skating*, "I can't wrap my head around how overtly out he is without saying he's out. I'm sorry, but I don't think he's a representative of the community I want to be a part of." He went on to disparage Weir's costume choices and to praise Lysacek's "masculinity on the ice."

As the national championship began, the notoriously homophobic Pastor Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptist Church led a rally protesting the presence of gays in figure skating. Although the group was not specifically targeting Weir, his mother feared for his safety.

Weir himself feared for his long program, over which he had clashed with Anissina because he felt that it did not suit him. In the end he finished badly—but for him—but still got onto the medal podium with a bronze.

Realizing that he needed a new direction, Weir sought a different coaching team, including a replacement for Coach Hill, which was a difficult decision for him because of his appreciation for her nurturing role in his early development.

Weir considered returning to Coach Tarasova but feared adverse reaction from the American skating establishment if he lived and trained in Russia, and he was, in any event, unable to afford to do so. He felt that a Russian coach was best suited to his athletic and artistic needs, however, and so was delighted to sign on with Galina Zmieskaya, who had Olympian Viktor Petrenko as an assistant coach.

Weir was happier with the new team, and he excelled at the 2007-2008 National Championship, finished in a tie at the top with Lysacek, each of them having—most improbably—244.77 points. Tie-breaking rules gave the gold to Lysacek and the silver to Weir, who also won a bronze medal at the World Championship, which was important because it meant that three American men could compete in singles at the next Olympics. Weir wrote that he "was ecstatic . . . [that] I came through for my country."

Early in the next season, Weir took ill before a competition in Korea. He managed to complete his program but afterward was rushed to the hospital to be treated for dehydration and exhaustion. In a weakened condition and having undergone a severe weight loss, he skated to a disappointing fifth in the 2008-2009 National Championship.

Meanwhile, filmmakers David Barba and James Pellerito had completed their documentary about Weir, *Pop Star on Ice* (2009), and aired it at summer film festivals. The Sundance Channel bought the film and used it as the first episode of a reality show, *Be Good Johnny Weir*.

For his exhibition skate after the Nationals, Weir chose as his music "Poker Face" by Lady Gaga. He described his interpretation of it as "very suggestive," his costume as "slightly sado-masochistic [and] corseted," and his overall performance as "really excessive for a figure skating show on NBC during a Sunday

afternoon."

The exhibition only fueled the already rampant speculation that Weir was gay and renewed criticism from some in the glbtq community for his failure to come out.

It also drew the attention of Lady Gaga, who invited Weir to attend one of her concerts at Radio City Music Hall and to sit with her mother, an aficionada of figure skating.

In the 2009-2010 season Weir finished third in the U.S. National Championship and then looked forward to the Olympics in Vancouver.

Weir skated to a sixth-place finish, igniting controversy on two fronts. A revised system of scoring for technical merit had been adopted, and commented, Gia Kourlas of the *New York Times*, a "sad result of the new system is that techniques that score well don't necessarily encourage innovative choreography. . . . Instead of emphasizing technical ability, which strips the form of its soul, skating should take a page from American skater Johnny Weir[, who] skated beautifully. Skaters need more of the bravery that he shows," adding that "Mr. Weir is unusual, and not because of his flamboyance . . . but because he approaches skating from a choreographic sensibility."

Besides the debate about scoring—a perennial issue in figure skating—there was a flap over remarks by French-language Canadian sports commentators Alain Goldberg, a skating analyst, and Claude Mailhot, once a deputy minister of amateur sport in Quebec, that Weir should have to undergo a "femininity test." Goldberg also stated that Weir was "a very bad example" for young skaters.

Chris Rudge, the president of the Canadian Olympic Committee, decried the comments as reflective of the prejudices of a bygone era. "Figure skating has gone far beyond this," he declared—perhaps with somewhat excessive optimism—continuing, "Remember what they said about Toller Cranston [a gay Canadian skater whose heyday was in the 1970s] when he started? Nobody had ever seen anything like him, and they didn't know how to judge him."

Rudge added, "This kid [i.e., Weir] is doing his own thing, and he has the right to interpret movement however he wants"—an opinion apparently shared by the audience at the Olympic rink, who loudly booed the judges' low marks for Weir's performance.

At a later press conference to address the homophobic remarks by the sports commentators from Quebec, Weir vigorously opposed the contention that he set a poor example for children; nevertheless, he stated that he hoped that the broadcasters would not be fired over their comments because he respected their right to hold and express their opinions.

Weir did not explicitly come out at the press conference, saying only that he hoped to be an inspiration to young people who "dance to a different beat."

Subsequently, in an insightful article in the *Toronto Star*, Brent Ledger first addressed the question of the judging criteria—technical merit and artistry—writing, "Weir is what skating is all about. Not just an amazing athlete but also someone who can put on a performance and tell a story"—qualities not always sufficiently recognized "[i]n the conservative-ultra closeted world of major-league figure skating."

Ledger asserted that "it takes someone like Weir, with his mad mix of qualities, to bring out skating's essential style. Certain butch types say it's all about the jumps, but skating's true beauty lies in its ambivalence. Half art and half athletics, it goes where most sports fear to tread." [Ledger's reference to "certain butch types" may be an allusion to Canadian skater Elvis Stojko, who projects a hyper-masculine persona and performance style.]

Ledger also addressed the question of Weir's as yet unacknowledged homosexuality, writing, "Weir has already struck enough flamboyant poses to let us know where he's coming from and I've no doubt he's already a role model for a lot of kids trying to go their own way in an increasingly conformist world."

Ledge went on to note that "[a]fter his performance in the free skate, [Weir] donned a crown of red roses. It was one of the silliest, gayest and bravest things I've ever seen anyone do."

It thus came as a complete surprise to practically no one when Weir came out publicly in his 2011 memoir.

Following the publication of the book, Weir acknowledged his debt to glbtq activists of the past, stating to Chris Azzopardi of *Between the Lines*, "They really had to fight to live their life freely and openly, and they had so many more obstacles than I've had in my life. They were the warriors, that whole generation— from the '50s, '60s, and '70s. . . . Thank you for the people who've done it before me, but I don't have to fight for anything."

Yet, even as he said that, he acknowledged that his decision to come out was influenced partially by a rash of suicides by glbtq youth in the fall of 2010 and that he had taken up the fight by becoming a sponsor of the Trevor Project, which operates a help-line (1-866-4-U-TREVOR) offering life-saving counseling around the clock every day of the year.

Moreover, Weir himself has paid a price for his unabashedly gay mannerisms. Even though he finished sixth in the 2010 Olympics, he nevertheless established himself as the most exciting figure skater in the world, far more enjoyable to watch than his gold medalist rival Evan Lysacek. Still, he was passed over by sponsors and even gigs with ice skating shows such as Stars on Ice because he is perceived as "too gay."

In addition to the Trevor Project, Weir also supports such organizations as the Elton John AIDS Foundation, Equality California, and the Human Rights Campaign.

In an interview with Cloe Cabrera of the *Tampa Tribune*, Weir contrasted his fortunate situation of having "two very supportive and loving parents who are very strong and independent and never begrudged [him] anything" with that of a young man whom he chanced to meet at an airport and who told him that his father had stabbed him when he acknowledged his homosexuality.

"When I hear stories like that I feel blessed, but I feel even more of a responsibility to help people who will have a hard time coming out," he stated, adding, "In my own way, I hope I've made the journey a little less scary for the next Johnny Weir."

In May 2011, Weir spoke out on behalf of many gay athletes when Olympic gold medalist gymnast Peter Vidmar was selected as "*chef de mission*" for the 2012 U. S. Olympic team. After Outsports.com revealed that Vidmar had campaigned in favor of California's Proposition 8, which banned same-sex marriage in the Golden State, Weir denounced the choice of Vidmar as "disgraceful" and a violation of the Olympic Charter's prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

The U.S. Olympic Committee initially defended the choice of Vidmar for the job, which involves acting as chief spokesperson for the team and as liaison between the team and the International Olympic Committee and the London organizing committee. But when other athletes followed Weir's lead in denouncing the selection, Vidmar, perhaps at the urging of the USOC, withdrew from the position, saying he did not want the controversy to overshadow the Olympic athletes.

In June 2011, Weir served as the Grand Marshal of the Los Angeles Gay Pride Parade.

On December 30, 2011, Weir and Victor Voronov wed in a small civil ceremony at the New York City Courthouse. It was attended by the parents of both men.

The couple announced that they have changed their surnames to Weir-Voronov, but that Weir will continue to use the name Johnny Weir professionally.

Following the ceremony, Weir issued a statement saying, "Marrying Victor has been the greatest moment in my life and I will work very hard to make him proud and happy. . . . Finding someone to share your life with is one of the most important things a human can do and was preached to me by my mother. Victor is the epitome of a gentleman, as handsome as he is clever and loving. Our road to marriage has been a fast one, but one I never waivered on. I am honored to have been married in the great state of New York, and I hope more states pass laws allowing all Americans to be united through love and marriage."

In 2013, Weir declared his intention to return to competitive skating in hopes of making the team for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games to be held in Sochi, Russia. Many considered the comeback bid improbable, and, indeed, in October 2013 Weir announced his retirement from competition, although he stated that he planned to continue skating in ice shows.

Interest in the Sochi Games became inextricably tied to the news that gay men and lesbians were the subject of a pogrom in Russia. Russia's infamous law against "gay propaganda" sparked a sharp uptick in violence and discrimination directed toward gay men and lesbians in Russia.

Whatever credit Weir had earned as an advocate for equal rights was soon cast in doubt as he appeared frequently on television programs discussing his experience as an openly gay Olympian. In these appearances, Weir struck many as indifferent to the plight of glbtq Russians and more interested in self-promotion. In one appearance, he wore a Russian military uniform.

The controversy intensified when Weir was hired as a commentator for NBC, the television channel that owns U.S. rights to broadcasting the Olympics.

Although Weir had made statements lamenting violations of human rights, he had also strongly opposed a boycott of the Sochi Games in protest of Russian policies toward its glbtq citizens. In July 2013 Weir stated that the Olympics "do not represent their host [country]. . . . People make their own futures, and should a government or sponsor steal that future, whether it be a Russian government or American government, it is, as an athlete, the death and total demolition of a lifetime of work."

Since these comments were dismissive of the fact that some glbtq Russians had lost not dreams of Olympic glory but their very lives, a group of protesters from Queer Nation NY and RUSA LGBT picketed a speech that Weir gave at Barnard College in early December 2013. Responding to the protest, Weir declared people who supported a boycott "idiots like the four outside."

When glbtq activists denounced Weir's characterization of the protesters, he issued an apology of sorts, saying that it was a case of his "tongue getting away from [him]."

Weir's view of Russia seems to be idiosyncratic--even solipsistic. It is not well informed when it comes to political and social issues. "I've never had a bad experience in Russia. Not gotten called a fag or beaten up. . . . I only see the rosy, golden side. I choose to see Russia in an arrogant, selfish way. I didn't know what to think about the new law [on "homosexual propaganda"]," he stated.

Journalists covering the story discovered an apparent conflict of interest for Weir, whose biography on the Premiere Speakers Bureau web site described him as "work[ing] with . . . [the] Russian Consulate in New York City,' thus, an employee of the Russian government. Once questions were raised, the page was taken

down. Weir's agent disingenuously attempted to explain away the reference to the work at the consulate as "a typo."

Even if Weir has no financial or political conflict of interest, he remains an unabashed Russophile. "I have always cheered for all Russian skaters, and I will cheer for all Russians when I am there in Sochi," he declared soon after signing on with NBC.

Bibliography

Azzopardi, Chris. "Figure Skater Talks about Memoir, Being 'Born This Way' and How the Closet Cost Him a Magazine Cover." *Between the Lines* (Livonia, Michigan) (March 3, 2011): <http://www.pridesource.com/article/html?article=46180>.

Beker, Jeanne. "On the Ice with Johnny Weir, Style Rebel." *Globe and Mail* (Toronto) (February 2010): L5.

Buzinski, Jim. "Peter Vidmar, Anti-gay Marriage Advocate, Chief of Mission for U.S. 2012 Olympic Team." *Outsports.com* (April 29, 2011): <http://outsports.com/jocktalkblog/2011/04/29/peter-vidmar-anti-gay-marriage-advocate-chief-of-mission-for-u-s-2012-olympic-team/>

Cabrera, Cloe. "Johnny Weir Brings Glamour to Pride Fest." *Tampa Tribune* (Florida) (June 24, 2010): Friday Extra, 12.

Johnny Weir Official Web Site: www.figureskatersonline.com/johnnyweir.

Hersh, Philip. "Vidmar Says His Opposition to Same-Sex Marriage Won't Affect His USOC Role." *Chicago Tribune* (May 5, 2011): http://newsblogs.chicagotribune.com/sports_globetrotting/2011/05/vidmar-mormons-same-sex-marriage-opposition-us-olympic-committee-johnny-weir.html

Kourlas, Gia. "In the World of Figure Skating, Winning Leaps over Art." *New York Times* (February 27, 2010): C1.

Ledger, Brent. "A Flamboyant Tale of Olympic Courage." *Toronto Star* (March 6, 2010): L11.

Perreux, Les, and Beverly Smith. "Sportscasters Backtrack on Criticism of Flamboyant Skater Weir." *Globe and Mail* (Toronto) (February 20, 2010): A8.

Sheridan, Phil. "More Performer Than Competitor, Weir in Peace in 6th Place." *Philadelphia Inquirer* (February 20, 2010): E5.

Schwartz, Alison, and Stephen M. Silverman. "Johnny Weir Is Married!" *People.com* (January 3, 2012): <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20557918,00.html>

Weir, Johnny. *Welcome to My World*. New York: Gallery Books, 2011.

"Weir on Being Excluded from Stars on Ice." *The Advocate* (March 12, 2010): http://www.advocate.com/News/Daily_News/2010/03/12/Johnny_Weir_on_Being_Excluded_From_Stars_on_Ice/

About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer,

tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtc.com.