

FIGURE SKATING » PAIRS » JUDGING

# Former Olympic champion defends new system

BY BEVERLEY SMITH VANCOUVER

David Pelletier, the 2002 Olympic pair champion, harbours no bitter feelings toward the French figure-skating judge who initially deprived him of victory at the Salt Lake City Olympics.

He met the judge, Marie-Reine La Gougne, last October in Paris at a Grand Prix event, and extended his hand to her.

Pelletier is at the Vancouver Games as a commentator for CTV.

In Salt Lake, La Gougne placed Pelletier and his partner, Jamie Salé, second behind Russians Elena Berezhnaia and Anton Sikharulidze in the pairs event amid a chorus of boos, then said she had been pressured by Didier Gailhaguet, president of the French skating federation, to do so.

Later, La Gougne recanted her admission, saying it was her own decision.

The International Skating Union banned both La Gougne and Gailhaguet for three years for their roles in the scandal. Salé and Pelletier were awarded a gold medal, and the Russians kept theirs. La Gougne no longer works as a judge.

Pelletier said La Gougne was visibly nervous when he bumped into her last October. "She was shaking," he said. "But you know what? It was great talking to her. Not for me, but for her."

"I made her understand that from my point of view, I actually thank her for her courage to come out, because she did come out that night," he said, referring to her admission that she pre-determined the event.

But she changed her story, and Pelletier feels for her. "I'm not her," he said. "I wasn't there. I was not in her position. I can't really judge what she went through. But I know she was put in a situation which was a no-win, no-win."

Pelletier says he feels that La Gougne was used, that she was a victim of politics.

"If she hadn't been vocal

that night after, the course of history would have been changed," Pelletier said. "So I thanked her for her courage."

La Gougne couldn't believe Pelletier's take on the events.

"I have no time for bitter feeling," Pelletier said. "Walk a mile in somebody's shoes before you can actually judge somebody. I thought she was a cool cat."

After the scandal, the ISU altered the judging, bringing in a points system that ditched the old 6.0 method for one in which athletes must win points for various technical and artistic feats.

The new judging system has become a touchstone for argument, with critics saying it has destroyed the artistry of the sport and alienated fans who could relate to 6.0, the standard for perfection.

Pelletier said the new system – used for the second time here at an Olympics – is good for the sport. "It's the best system possible," he said.

An example of its usefulness, according to Pelletier: Canadians Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir finished sixth at their first world championship and that would not have been possible under the old system, Pelletier said.

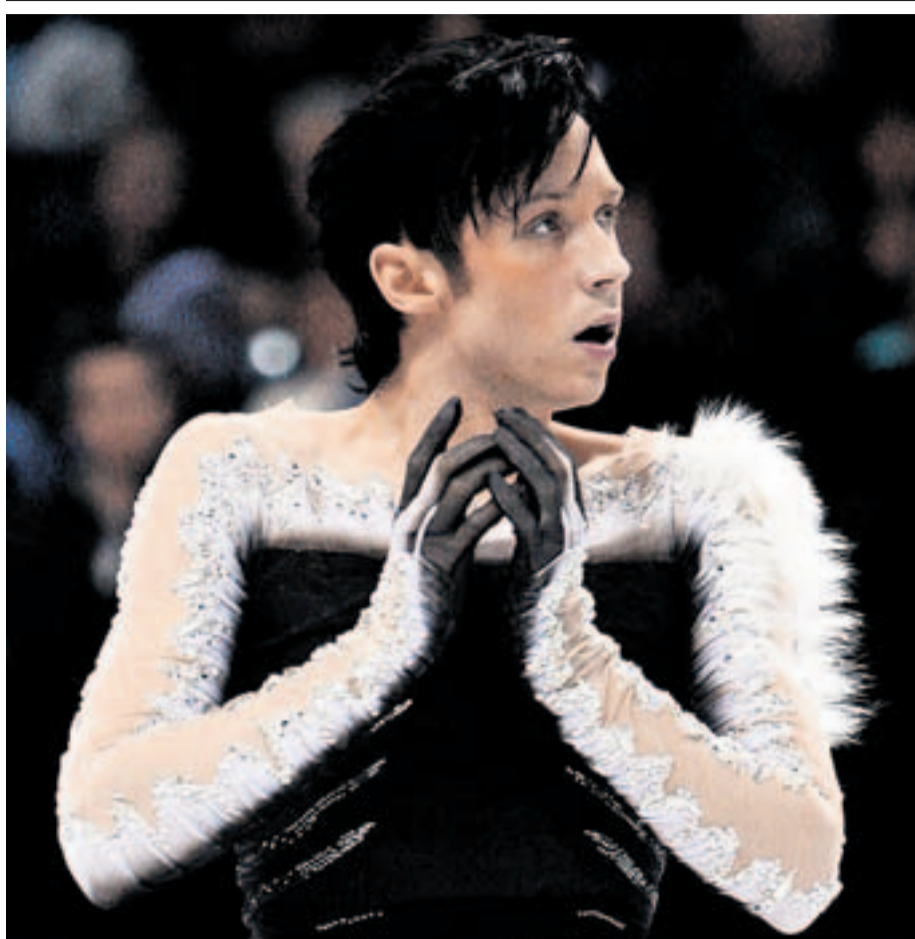
"You can be seventh, and it means nothing if you're only three points behind first," he said. In the old system, it was impossible to move up after being seventh.

No system is perfect, Pelletier said, because humans are not perfect. The most subjective part of the new system is the program component or presentation mark, and questions remain about how well that section is marked.

"That's figure skating," Pelletier said. "If you don't like it, don't do figure skating. That's always going to be part of it. It's never going to go away. Do you want a robot giving you component marks?"

"I'd rather have that than racing against time where you have to take a pill to go faster than the guy beside you."

FIGURE SKATING » MEN'S COMPETITION



» U.S. TEAM  
**JOHNNY WEIR**  
Animal-rights protesters drive skater to athletes village – he defends his fur-adorned costumes

Johnny Weir wears white Arctic fox as part of his costume. ELAINE THOMPSON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Former U.S. figure skating champion Johnny Weir says he's staying at the Olympic athletes village because he fears for his life after getting "very serious threats" from an animal-rights group for wearing a patch of fox fur at the U.S. championships in Spokane a couple of weeks ago.

Although he said after the Turin Olympics that he wouldn't stay in the athletes village again and would rather stay in a hotel, he says "all the crazy fur people" have changed his mind.

Weir added a patch of white Arctic fox fur to the left

shoulder of his costume for the U.S. nationals. One of the groups that protested against his choice was Friends of Animals, which sent him a strongly worded letter.

Weir said it would be difficult to stay in a hotel in Vancouver because "there have been threats against me, and threats of harming me personally, so I didn't want to get hurt."

He said he's received death threats.

The threats came through various sources. His costume designer got some "stuff" Weir said, while his agent received many faxes, e-mails and letters. Weir got letters at the rink where he trains. Someone found his personal phone number.

"People are nuts," Weir said yesterday.

Weir is sharing a two-bedroom suite in the village with ice dancer Tanith Belbin. Staying in a communal village isn't Weir's first choice, he said, but "it's what I've got to deal with and I've got to make the best of it."

"I don't want any outside influences to hurt my chances here," said Weir, who added that this is the final Olympics where he has a chance to win a medal.

Weir said he does understand the position of the anti-fur activists.

"One thing that's horrible to me is when somebody pushes a belief on you, like a religion or an activism," he said. "I was definitely threatened and I felt very threatened."

Although Weir originally said he would change the fox fur to faux fur, he said yesterday, he doesn't like faux fur, and will just use another costume for the Olympics.

"I have no argument other than I like it [fur]," he said. "I like fur products. I like things that come from dead animals. I wear leather skates made of cow. We all wear leather skates made from cows."

"I'm just an easy person to pick on because I'm very open that I like fur. And I'm an easy person to stand on, especially coming into the O. It's easy to put your cause against an athlete going to the Olympic Games. It's a very good free publicity thing for these activists."

"I choose the way I live my life. I choose the things I like. I choose the things I do, just as they do. And I have no ill will against them because they don't support the fur industry."

» Beverley Smith



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