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Sports

puberty, when self-consciousness kicks in, the angst is amplified. "Most teenagers feel like the whole world is watching them, looking at every pimple. But in Tracey's case, it wasn't an illusion, it was reality."

The CFSA, which had previously driven the Tracey Wainman bandwagon, didn't offer much encouragement. In October 1982, they withdrew her from an international competition in Holland, saying she needed to train harder. "Skating is a sport that eats its young," says Wilkes. "Tracey was treat of the week, and then, suddenly, it was 'Bye-bye, you're old news.'"

Later that season, at the 1983 Canadian Championships in Montreal, Wainman's career reached its nadir. Though the competition was billed as her comeback, it was more like a burial. "After my practices, I remember coming off the ice and people whispering 'poor girl.' And when I performed my long program, the whole arena was silent. It was excruciating... I just wanted to get off the ice as fast as I could." The only difficult jump she tried was a double axel, and she fell. She finished seventh—an embarrassing showing for a former champion. When she returned to Toronto, she announced she was quitting.

IN THE LATE '70S AND EARLY '80S, little girls were becoming big business in elite sports. Nadia Comaneci, the 14-year-old Romanian gymnast, stunned the world when she won three golds at the 1976 Montreal Olympics. Soon after, young American teenagers Tracy Austin and Andrea Jaeger became huge stars on the professional tennis circuit. Later, in 1986, *Sports Illustrated* put 14-year-old American gymnast Kristie Phillips on its cover, dubbing her "The Next Mary Lou [Retton]." But their success came at a price. After the Olympics, Comaneci fell into a depression and was rumoured to have attempted suicide; Austin and Jaeger both retired prematurely with injured bodies and emotional scars. And Phillips, who failed to qualify for the 1988 Olympics, developed bulimia.

Back in Toronto, rumours swirled that Wainman had gone off the rails in true child prodigy fashion, drinking, smoking and generally behaving badly. Her reputation as a party girl, she claims, was blown out of proportion. When the average 16-year-old behaves badly, it isn't newsworthy. In the skating world, where sordid, campy melodrama is par for the course, Wainman's antics were the talk of the town.

In an attempt to normalize her life, she enrolled in a North York high school, but the memory of her last performance kept

haunting her. In the spring of 1984, after a year on the sidelines, she returned to her old coach at the Cricket Club. She had piled on the pounds during her sabbatical. "Tracey's skills had disintegrated into nothing," says Burka. "I had to start from scratch." The Cricket Club goldfish bowl was almost unendurable. "People were saying, 'Isn't it sad, what is she doing, how humiliating,'" remembers Wainman. Her biggest obstacle was her fear of jumping. So Burka sent her to a hypnotist to relax her mind, and put six double axels in her practice routine until she could overcome the psychological block. Though it took two years, Wainman gradually worked her way back up to the top echelons.

In February 1986, she travelled to North Bay to the Canadian Championships. Now aged 18, the cute, perky Tracey Wainman had been replaced by a sophisticated show-girl. The arena was once again hushed, but this time it wasn't out of pity. "The audience was sweating," says Wilkes. "There was this palpable sense of hope. For years, Tracey had been tarnished with this black brush. Now, it was like she'd finally stepped out of the darkness." Wainman recaptured the title she had first won five years earlier and earned a trip to the World Championships in Geneva the following month.

But if things were going better on the ice, another drama was bubbling backstage. In Geneva, she hooked up with Jozef Sabovcik, a Czechoslovakian skating star who, in addition to being the European Champion and 1984 Olympic bronze medallist, had a reputation on the circuit as a wild man and lothario. At an international competition the previous fall, Sabovcik pulled her into the men's washroom to share a cigarette. In Geneva, the romance picked up speed.

"I really had to keep an eye on her," says Burka, who, in her 50 years of coaching, gained renown as a fierce disciplinarian. "The day before the competition, Tracey said to me, 'I'm tired, I'm tired,' so I said, 'Go to bed early tonight and have a good sleep.' At midnight, I went past her room to check up, and I heard voices. So I knocked on the door, and finally Tracey opens it. There were bottles everywhere, so I said, 'Where is he?' I found him behind the shower curtain." Burka laughs about the incident now, but at the time it was serious business. The team captain was called and Wainman received a warning from the CFSA. Despite the drama, she managed to finish a respectable ninth. But when the CFSA released their assignment list for the next season's international competitions, Wainman's name was not on it.