Orser, Brian (b. 1961)

by Linda Rapp

Brian Orser carrying the Canadian flag at the opening ceremonies of the Calgary Olympic games in 1988. Photograph by Ted Grant.
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Olympian Brian Orser, known for both his athleticism and artistry, led a resurgence of Canada as a force to be reckoned with in men's figure skating, a situation that the country had not enjoyed since the glory days of Toller Cranston.

Like many young Canadians, Brian Orser, born December 18, 1961 in Belleville, Ontario, put on skates at an early age. As a child he played hockey but was more drawn to figure skating. His first pair of figure skates were hand-me-downs from one of his older sisters. He painted them over from white--then the compulsory color for women--to black, then required for men.

Orser first appeared in a skating carnival at the age of six and did his first solo performance two years later.

Orser advanced through the ranks of Canadian junior skating, combining artistry with outstanding athletic ability. In 1979 he became the first junior and only the second person to land a triple axel in competition. He would later achieve distinction by becoming the first to perform a triple axel in combination.

Orser won his first medal at the World Championships--a bronze--in 1983. In the Olympic Games of 1984 in Sarajevo he skated for silver.

When the Olympics opened in Calgary in 1988, Orser was honored by being chosen to lead the Canadian delegation as flag-bearer.

The 1988 Olympic men's figure skating contest is famous as "the battle of the Brians"--Orser of Canada versus Boitano of the United States. Orser skated proficiently and earned the higher marks for artistic merit, which would later have earned him the gold medal, but 1988 was the last year in which the technical marks would determine the winner, and so Orser again took silver.

After the Olympics, Orser competed at Worlds, again turning in superlative performances in both the long and short programs, for which he received perfect scores for artistic impression. With lower scores in the school figures, though, he finished with another silver medal.

For the outstanding way that he had represented his country, Orser was given its most prestigious civilian award, Officer of Canada, in 1988. He was elected to the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame the following year and was inducted into the Canadian Olympic Hall of Fame in 1995.

After the 1988 World Championships, Orser turned professional. In addition to touring with the Stars on Ice show, he made television specials, the first of which, *Skating Free* (1989), allowed him to demonstrate his superb artistry and athleticism in a setting of breath-taking beauty on the frozen Lake Louise in Alberta. The following year he made two more specials, including Sandra Bezic's *Carmen on Ice* for HBO, for which Orser shared an Emmy for Individual Performance in Classical Music, Dance Programming with Boitano and

Katarina Witt.

In November 1991, Orser lost a close friend, Canadian ice dancer Rob McCall, to AIDS-related brain cancer. The following year, he and other Canadian skating stars, including Tracy Wilson, with whom McCall had won a bronze medal at the Calgary Olympics, put on a benefit exposition entitled "Skate the Dream" that McCall had been planning in order to raise money for AIDS research even as he had been dying of the disease.

Orser continued his career, skating in ice shows and professional competitions and also working as commentator on skating broadcasts.

In 1998 Orser was slapped with a palimony suit. His former partner, Craig Leask, with whom he had lived for some five years beginning in 1992, sued for support and property even though he acknowledged that Orser had "denied his request to sign the equivalent of a prenuptial agreement" and that Orser claimed that Leask had "specifically promised not to seek support from him in the event of a break-up."

Orser sought to seal the record of the suit, stating in an affidavit that his career might be "irreparably harmed" by the publicity. "Other skaters, both Canadian and American," he stated, "guard their gayness closely because of the likely effect of public disclosure on their careers." As a basis for his fear, he noted that "another well-known Canadian skater, Brian Pokar, shortly after 'coming out' with respect to his gayness, lost his job as a skating commentator with CTV."

Justice Susan Lang of the Ontario court rejected the request, writing that "one anticipates that in today's society such a disclosure would not attract any public stigma, let alone one to override the important principle of the public right to court documents."

Justice Lang's pronouncement seems overly sweeping in its dismissal of the potential consequences of persistent homophobia, but fortunately her decision did not seriously hurt Orser. The case was settled out of court, and his career did not suffer.

Orser went on performing in ice shows and also took part in the 2000 Goodwill Games, winning yet another silver medal after landing a triple axel in the long program.

Nearing the end of his competitive skating career, Orser stepped behind the boards of the ice rink. In 2005 he and Wilson were appointed skating directors of the Toronto Cricket, Skating and Curling Club. The following year Orser became the coach of South Korean skater Yu-Na Kim and led her to a bronze-medal finish at the succeeding Worlds.

Although involuntarily outed and criticized by some in the Canadian glbtq community for not coming out sooner, Orser has become an advocate for equal rights. Being outed was difficult and fearsome for Orser, but he has since achieved a certain peace. "The world's more comfortable with it now," he stated in a 2007 interview. "I'm not a hypocrite, and I'm glad to talk about [my sexuality]."

Orser has been in a committed relationship with designer Jason Forbes since the late 1990s.

Orser has lent his support to programs for AIDS-related charities, notably the annual Toronto 5K Pride and Remembrance Run, for which he has organized teams of Canadian skaters. They call themselves "Silver's Bullets" in ironic recognition of Orser's memorable second-place finishes in major events. Orser's team raised over forty thousand dollars in 2007, when they ran in memory of McCall, and in 2008 they were the top team fund-raisers in an effort dedicated to Pokar.

In 2007 Orser embarked on a farewell tour as a skater in ice shows across Canada. Typical of his reception

was the scene described by Heather Sawers of the *Halifax Daily News*. Orser first performed to Neil Diamond's "Story of My Life" and then "the evening ended on a solemn note, as Orser skated an emotional good-bye program to . . . Diamond's 'I Believe in Happy Endings.' The crowd started his standing ovation during the middle of the skate, while clips of his career highlights flashed on TV monitors. By his final spin, the house lights were raised so that Orser could see the thousands of fans on their feet, applauding his career and wishing him well."

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