



JOHNNY BEING JOHNNY



FIGURE SKATING MAY THINK HE'S TOO FLAMBOYANT TO REP THE SPORT. BUT IF JOHNNY WEIR MAKES IT TO VANCOUVER, GET READY FOR SOME SERIOUS DRAMA ON ICE.

BY SHAUN ASSAEL

THE BLADE SMACKS THE ICE LIKE AN AX. IT doesn't wobble, it doesn't shake. It grinds into the surface, spraying frozen shards into the air. The sound could best be described as chilling, if the rink in Wayne, N.J., weren't already so damn cold.

Maybe you've never thought of figure skating as a ferocious sport. Maybe you've been too distracted by its sound tracks and outfits to realize it is a series of brutal impacts. When the blade of Johnny Weir's skate hits the ice, the ice slams back with a force equal to 15 times his body weight. Since Weir weighs 132 pounds, his left leg absorbs the sudden jolt of nearly one ton. Landing a triple axel is a thing of pure violence.

In a clever bit of physics, Weir sweeps his arms skyward, redirecting the force of his landing. He glides to his next attempt and another huge leap, this time off his left foot. Again he floats, and again the left skate of the 25-year-old smacks down on the ice. *Thwack!* This time, though, his left leg bends and he tumbles to the ice, prompting his Ukrainian coach, Galina Zmievskaya, to yank off her furry hat and rub her exhausted blue eyes.

"*Jahny! Jahny! Jahny!*"

The routine that Weir is trying to nail is part of the program he'll skate at the U.S. nationals on Jan. 15. It's a fast, acrobatic samba featuring a triple lutz-triple toe loop combination, followed by a triple axel and a triple flip. The world's No. 8 skater must perform it flawlessly if he wants to live up to expectations and earn one of three spots on the U.S. Olympic team.

Yet, if he nails it, Weir will also skate smack into the middle of a debate growing within his sport. For the first time since 1964, the U.S. women lack a strong medal contender, meaning the spotlight will be on the men in Vancouver. The lords of figure skating see this as an opportunity to broaden the sport's base of male fans, to grab a larger share of the 4.2 million American men expected to tune in to the Games (compared with 5.4 million women). Some even think that if figure skating tones down the sequins and turns up the masculinity, it can grab a share of the hockey set and go mainstream for good.

Johnny Weir, though, is not that type of flag bearer. The undisputed diva of men's figure skating, he is a fearlessly flamboyant stylist whose signature routine, "The Swan," was hilariously lampooned in Will Ferrell's *Blades of Glory*. His disarming frankness—he once told reporters after an event, "I could have peed myself, I was so nervous"—led the Sundance Channel to give him an eight-part reality show, *Be Good Johnny Weir*, which begins Jan. 18. His fan club, Johnny's Angels, has chapters as far flung as Moscow and South Korea. And he cuts a wide swath through the fashion scene, where he's been photographed in a miniskirt and high heels. If the Olympics is the ultimate real-time reality show, his gender-bending flamboyance and medal-worthy talent could make



Weir is in love with Russian culture: "I want to move to Moscow and adopt a child."

him a household name in Vancouver. Just not the household name many in the figure skating establishment would like.

IT'S JUNE 11 at the Manhattan premiere of *Pop Star on Ice*, a documentary about Johnny Weir's life. Awaiting the movie's star on the red carpet is a 9-year-old named Jared, an aspiring skater who spent the day with his mom shopping for the butterfly-pattern shirt he's wearing. A pink scarf is tied around his neck. Weir arrives sporting a white blazer with a black carnation, skintight pants and cowboy boots. He bends down to hug Jared, rendering the boy speechless. "I think Johnny is an amazing role model," says Jared's father.

The documentary traces Weir's improbable journey out of Quarryville, Pa., a blue-collar town where he learned to skate at 12 after watching Oksana Baiul of the Ukraine win gold at the 1994 Games. He was a natural, winning the world juniors at 16 and three national titles by 21, his style influenced by Baiul and Russian ballet. He finished fifth at the 2006 Olympics and, in a stroke of fate, hired Zmievskaya, Baiul's former coach, a year later.

It's the off-ice stuff, however, that's giving buzz to this crowd at NewFest, a gay and lesbian film showcase. The doc shows Johnny strutting the runway at New York Fashion Week, dressed like David Bowie's Aladdin Sane, and Weir dressing down a reporter who asks if he has a responsibility to tailor his image for kids. ("Well, certain kids," he answered.) When he's shown in a bubble

bath with a male friend, mimicking a Russian reporter asking questions about "*Jahny*," the audience laughs.

Talking about the film two weeks later, Weir is careful not to label himself: "I'm comfortable with who Johnny Weir is and don't feel the need to talk more about it. When you make an example of yourself, it cheapens you."

That coyness led openly gay figure skating analyst Mark Lund to say during a 2007 TV broadcast, "I can't wrap my head around how overly out he is without saying he's out." But Weir, who called Lund's remark "mean-spirited," believes he shouldn't be scrutinized more than athletes in other sports. "It's not like anyone goes up to Michael Jordan asking, 'Hey, are you black?'"

Trouble is, figure skating isn't like other sports. The NBA may have wrestled with a dress code, but no sports league has ever told its athletes to stop wearing frilly costumes, as Skate Canada chief exec William Thompson did in May. The media dubbed it a "macho makeover," and the plan came under fire from gay rights groups. Thompson said he was trying to "remind viewers of the level of fitness, mental training and commitment required to be an elite skater." Elvis Stojko, a two-time Olympic silver medalist, is more blunt: "Men's skating should be about strength. If you're feminine, that's not men's skating. There's a difference between performing in a recital and performing in a sport."

But Priscilla Hill, Weir's coach until 2007, thinks Weir should get credit—not blame—for bringing the Russian ballet style to men's skating. "Before Johnny, we thought that style was for girls," she says. "Guys just plowed through their routines. But with Johnny, judges saw the total package. They loved the pureness of his skating, how effortless it looked."

HE'S A STRAIGHT SHOOTER WHO REFUSES TO SAY IF HE'S GAY OR STRAIGHT, A WORLD-CLASS ATHLETE WHO REFUSES TO BE BOUND BY ATHLETICISM ALONE.

Still, she doesn't agree with Weir's claim that he is "picked on more than any other athlete" because of his off-ice exploits. "Maybe in the beginning when we brought a different look to skating," Hill says. "It hurts to say, but Johnny could never let go of that when he needed to."

Adding fuel to Weir's fire are endless comparisons with America's other great skater, world No. 1 Evan Lysacek. The two are easy to put in contrast. While Weir thinks nothing of showing up to an interview in a bright-purple tank top, plaid shorts and gold slippers, it's not unusual for Lysacek to be photographed with girlfriend

(and world-ranked ice dancer) Tanith Belbin on his arm. If Weir is figure skating's peacock, Lysacek is its lady-killer, the one the sport's fan-hungry caretakers are eager to promote.

The two have been competing since 2000, with the rivalry heating up the next year when Weir captured the world juniors and Lysacek came in second. In 2008, they skated to a remarkable 244.77-point tie at nationals, forcing judges to go to the rule book to decide that Lysacek's 1.35-point lead in the free skate gave him the edge. After Lysacek pulled out of that year's worlds with an injury, Weir won bronze. The momentum swung back to Lysacek in 2009 when, with Weir absent, he turned two nearly flawless performances into world championship gold. After watching the event on TV from his New Jersey apartment, Weir became so distraught he hung up his skates for a month. He has not beaten Lysacek since.

Still, Weir says "this thing with Evan is not a great rivalry, it's an *eh* rivalry." Lysacek, who sidesteps comparisons with Weir on and off the ice, is happy to question his rival's commitment to the sport, obliquely: "I've been approached to do a reality show and said no. I don't want to take away from my focus."

The F-bomb (focus) has been hurled at Weir before. As Hill notes, "He's probably one of the most gifted athletes our sport has ever had, but it came too easy. That's made it hard for him to put in the work to become an Olympic champion." In fact, Weir's absence from the 2009 worlds could be attributed to a lack of focus. A couple of weeks before nationals in Cleveland, where the worlds team would be selected, Weir opted to make a side trip to South Korea to perform in an exhibition for a low five-figure payday. When he arrived in Ohio, he was so sick from traveling that he botched triple axels in both his long and short programs. Weir finished fifth, missing the cut. "Even my dry cleaner wanted to know why I went to Korea," he says with a tight smile.

Weir wasn't exactly gracious after nationals, either, lobbying U.S. Figure Skating to still place him on the team. "One year after I came through for my country at the 2008 worlds, they cut off my wings," he says.

A SAUCY samba is blaring so loudly from the sound system at Weir's New Jersey practice rink that the glass barriers are starting to shake. Weir isn't scripping on the vogueing. His short program has plenty of club-ready dance moves and Garbo-like poses. Seeing him build to them is like watching a pilot take off on a short runway—the more he runs out of room, the more nervous you get, until, just

like that, he's spinning 1,080° in the air. He sticks the landing and descends into a crouch, rotating so fast his legs look like rubber bands. It's difficult to imagine the best athlete in any other sport doing this. All that's missing are Weir's screaming fans.

About those fans: Their sport has grown more conservative the past several years. Skating's most difficult maneuver and biggest crowd pleaser, the quadruple jump, is now a rarity in competition. The culprit is a scoring system put into place by the International Skating Union after the 2002 Games, when an alleged Russian mobster was accused of bribing a judge. Out went the subjective scale that valued showmanship, replaced by a system that requires judges to measure routines by dozens of components.



Weir trains hard in New Jersey so that he will finish above Lysacek (in white) on the podium.

Although well-intentioned, the system, critics say, rewards skaters who forgo risky moves in favor of easier ones that draw bonus points for flawless execution. After the 2008 worlds, former French world champion Brian Joubert, frustrated with the technically inclined scoring system, declared that a world champion should not be crowned unless he attempts a quad in his program. But why attempt a quad when a couple of triple toe loops will do?

Weir, who says "my body is too fragile to do quads all year," has never cleanly landed the jump in competition and is cagey about whether he'll add one to his routine at nationals, saying only that he practices it. But the reality for skaters and fans is that pushing boundaries is no longer worth the risk. "A bunch of half-assed positions, just to earn a point?" Weir asks. "I can't do as much artistically now because I'm so exhausted from these little jumps."

And yet, that seems to be precisely the point the skating establishment doesn't mind making. At the 2006 Torino Olympics, Weir performed "The Swan," contorting himself into the shape of the bird, holding up his arm to form a neck and sticking out a red-gloved hand to simulate a beak. Though he missed the podium, his routine would go down as one of the most famous in skating history. It showed how easily Weir transforms into a piece of flying art. But it was also arguably the moment skating lost any chance at the six-pack set, the moment Johnny Being Johnny became a liability. As one fellow skater, who asked not to be named, says: "A lot of guys don't like Johnny because they think he's out for himself."

By this logic, Weir should show less personality to help the sport broaden its audience. But he has no inclination to mute himself to win America's affection. "I want people to know Johnny as Johnny," he says. And it's impossible not to appreciate his juggling act. He's a straight shooter who refuses to say whether he's gay or straight, a world-class athlete who refuses to be bound by athleticism alone. But is he man

enough for those who want a more manly sport?

The final word on that might be his new long program, "Fallen Angel," which helped earn him bronze at December's Grand Prix Final in Tokyo (Lysacek won gold). It has all the hallmarks of a splashy Vegas comeback, a stirring mood piece that begins with a soft cello and rises in tempo and ambition. "The piece starts sad then gets defiant," Weir says. "I've made some bad decisions in my life, so I want to bring that out. The entrances and exits are more complicated than ever. Body parts fly."

He pauses, a big and serious pause. "Throughout my career," Weir goes on, "other people have always thought they should have a say in what I do. But they have very little say. At the end of the day, my programs are for me." ☺

Got a theory about figure skating? E-mail the writer at shaun.assael@espnthemag.com.