
Katarina Witt

Figure skating

Born: December 3, 1965
Staaken, East Germany (now in Berlin,
Germany)

Also known as: Fire on the Ice

Early Life

Katarina Witt was born on December 3, 1965, in a suburb of Berlin in what was then communist-ruled East Germany. Katarina's father was the manager of an agriculture cooperative; her mother was a physical therapist. Her sister-in-law Anett Pötzsch



Katarina Witt, two-time Olympic gold medalist, in 1988. (AP/Wide World Photos)

was a figure skater who won the Olympic gold medal in 1980.

Katarina was fascinated by figure skating while still in kindergarten. At the age of five, she persuaded her parents to let her try the sport. The first time Katarina skated she decided to make figure skating her life's work.

The Road to Excellence

Bernd Egert, the head coach of the Karl-Marx-Stadt Sports Club and School, one of the best in East Germany, saw Katarina skating by chance and was so impressed by her performance that he enrolled her in the school's intensive training program.

The training was strict and demanded the complete attention of the trainee, but Katarina was an excellent pupil. She trained every day from 7:00 A.M. in the morning until 8:00 P.M. in the evening and spent more time with her coaches than she did with her family. She had no time for anything other than her training and no friends outside those with whom she worked.

The work paid off. By the age of nine, Katarina had become so skillful that her talents were recognized by Jutta Müller, East Germany's most famous skating coach, who took over the young girl's training and made her into a world-famous sports figure. Many criticized East Germany's training system as too rigid and severe, but Katarina maintained she could not have achieved her success in any other way.

The Emerging Champion

Under Müller's coaching, Katarina soon demonstrated her extraordinary skill, when, at the age of eleven, she made her first triple jump, a salchow, which involves rotating the body in mid-air. At the age of fourteen, she finished tenth in the world championship competition, and two years later, still a teenager, she captured the European championship and placed second in the World Figure Skating Championships.

In 1984, she achieved the world championship, defeating Rosalynn Summers of the United States, a two-time national champion. Katarina's greatest triumph, however, and that which made her a world star, was her amazing performance that same year at the Winter Olympics held in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, where she again defeated Summers to capture the gold medal. What impressed the judges was not only Katarina's skating but also her artistic ability, combined with a radiant personality and natural beauty. An observer commented that her performance was a perfect blend of athleticism and art. It so impressed the viewers that Katarina received more than thirty-five thousand love letters.

After Sarajevo, Katarina's triumphs continued; she was first in the field of women's figure skating. In the World Figure Skating Championships held in March, 1985, in Tokyo, she defeated Kira Ivanova of the Soviet Union, thereby preventing Soviet skaters from capturing all the top titles. Katarina skated to the music of George Gershwin, landing each of her triples smoothly in perfect time with the music.

In 1986, Katarina lost the world championship title to the American contender Debi Thomas, the first African American woman to gain the title. The following year, Katarina regained her title after a fierce contest with Thomas, perfectly completing five triple jumps and two double axels and receiving top ratings from seven of the nine judges. To win that contest, Katarina claimed she had trained harder than she ever had before. Even Thomas had to admit that her rival was amazing: "She's tough; she just goes out there and does what she has to."

The two superstars competed again in February, 1988, at the Winter Olympics in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, in what was known as "The Battle of the Carmens." Both skated to the music of Carmen, an opera by the French composer Georges Bizet. The contest was close, but Katarina's artistic interpretation of the opera's heroine won her the gold medal. For two years, Katarina had studied acting, and, as a critic noted, Thomas skated brilliantly to the music but Katarina became Carmen. Some skating fans

Major Figure-Skating Championships

Year	Competition	Place	Year	Competition	Place
1980	European Championships	13th		World Championships	1st
	World Championships	10th	1985	European Championships	1st
1981	European Championships	5th		World Championships	1st
	World Championships	5th	1986	European Championships	1st
1982	European Championships	2d		World Championships	2d
	World Championships	2d	1987	European Championships	1st
1983	European Championships	1st		World Championships	1st
	World Championships	4th	1988	European Championships	1st
1984	European Championships	1st		Olympic Games	Gold
	Olympic Games	Gold		World Championships	1st
			1994	Olympic Games	7th

were irritated because they thought Katarina relied too much on her radiant good looks, her acting ability, and her beautiful costumes, thereby unfairly influencing the judges. Katarina defended her performance, saying one should stress what one has and what is attractive.

Katarina again won the world title at the competition held less than a month after Calgary in Budapest, Hungary. She retired from amateur competition after the World Figure Skating Championships and returned to Germany. She was grateful for the excellent training she had received free of charge from the state.

Continuing the Story

After her 1988 triumphs in Calgary and Budapest, Katarina became a highly sought after and successful professional skater. Her grace, sensuality, theatricality, and poise were perfectly suited to the professional arena. She also became a savvy businesswoman in marketing and public relations, carefully selecting her engagements, endorsements, and exhibitions. In addition, she pursued television and film work. In 1990, she starred in the television special *Carmen on Ice*. She earned an Emmy Award for her performance—the first female figure skater to do so. In addition to television ice-skating specials, Katarina made many guest appearances on television shows and in film. She also did figure-skating commentary and analysis for Germany's Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF) and Columbia Broadcast System (CBS) Sports.

Shortly after retirement, Katarina joined Brian Boitano, the men's gold medal winner in Calgary, on the ice for several years on a successful and popular tour. A special rule made Katarina eligible for

the 1994 Olympics in Lillehammer, Norway. She knew that she was not to be a medal contender and was pleased with her seventh-place finish. She was, however, a crowd favorite, a spectacular performer, and a poised, gracious, calming, and mature presence in the midst of the media frenzy surrounding America's top skaters Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan.

In the 2000's, Katarina was still a hardworking professional. She was still skating, still working in front of and behind the cameras, and still juggling appearances, exhibitions, and charity work. In 2005, she published her first book. The following year, she started her own television show in Germany.

Summary

In her brilliant career, Katarina Witt won the European Figure Skating Championships six times, the World Figure Skating Championships four times,

the Olympic gold medal twice, and professional titles numerous times. She is proof of what talent, inspiration, excellent training, and hard work can do. Possibly Katarina's greatest contribution to figure skating was that, through her acting ability, the use of music, and the careful selection of costumes, she helped raise an athletic event to an art form.

Nis Petersen

Additional Sources

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