

Love of the game

Navarro and Bommentre share skating passion with students

BY MICHELLE COOPER

When ice dancers Kimberly Navarro and Brent Bommentre were asked to speak at Drexel University about the mindset of an elite-level athlete, they weren't quite sure what they were going to say. As relative newcomers to the senior international skating scene, the subject was somewhat new to them. They felt a bit like college freshmen during their first days on campus.

Just two weeks after their first appearances at Skate America and Skate Canada, however, they were scheduled to speak to professor Marilyn Piety's Philosophy of Sports class.

"I was a little nervous," Navarro said. "This is still the beginning for Brent and me. At the Grand Prix events, a lot of our goals and beliefs of who we are, as a team, were challenged. We hadn't had a lot of time to talk about those experiences with each other."

After spending three hours with Piety's students, Navarro and Bommentre were pleased to discover that they were still on the same page.

"It was interesting that we both came up with the same answers and that our goals were the same," Navarro said.

Most of the questions focused on what motivates figure skaters to work their way to top. Navarro and Bommentre agreed that it isn't money, fame or even standing on the podium.

When one student asked, "How successful do you have to be to make money at this sport?" Bommentre explained that skaters can earn Grand Prix prize money. However, unlike many other sports, figure skaters primarily fund their own training and travel, which can be very expensive.

He said it can be hard to understand where motivation comes from, especially when judging is subjective and results aren't always necessarily in line with the performance.

"What motivates us is not placement," Bommentre said. "For us it is more of a personal thing...how can we increase our performance and become better..."

That perspective helps this ice dancing team, which finished sixth at both Skate America and Skate Canada to "not get caught up in things that are out of our control," he said.

Another student asked how the skaters handle a less-than-ideal skate or a low placement.

"Disappointment is OK," Bommentre said. "It's one of those things that drive improvement. When you have a bad skate, like we did at Skate Canada, we learn a lot about each other from that experience. You can win and still not feel good about your skate.

"You can control what kind of person you are and what you put into it, but you can't control the outcomes. In a sport like this, it is hard to tell yourself all you have to do is work hard. It's not just about being successful. It's about enjoying ourselves. It's like Tiger Woods – he's trying to beat himself."

"That's the strength of our performances," Navarro added. "We genuinely love what we're doing."

Piety, who recently took up figure skating, often found herself dodging the fast-moving team during practice sessions at the Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society. She thought they would be the perfect pair to speak to her class, so she slowed them down long enough one day to invite them to Drexel University.

Her goal was to make her curriculum come to life by exposing her students to real-life athletes, who were totally immersed in the climb to the top of their sport. She wanted her students to understand the nature of the competitive spirit.

The course was designed to "look at broad issues such as the nature of sports, or games...as opposed to activities such as law and medicine that are directed toward achieving goals that are external to those activities," Piety said. "You don't need any external impetus for games, only the desire to play, and that makes games, and more specifically sports, different in important and interesting ways from most other human activities."

She also wanted her students to be able to "approach sports in a more reflective way" and to be able to appreciate "the beauty inherent in them" to gain a "greater understanding" of themselves, human nature and society in general" said Piety, whose interest in sports goes back to her childhood and her father's job as a sports writer.

Required reading in Piety's sport philosophy class includes *The Philosophical Athlete*, by Heather L. Reid and *The Natural*, by Bernard Malmud. The class covered such topics as what can be learned from sport; characteristics of a philosophical athlete; taking responsibility for actions, attitudes, values and meaning; showing respect for yourself and others; showing respect for your sport; equality and difference.

Piety began the Nov. 21 class time by showing a video of ice dancing performances at the 2006 Olympics, including the harrowing falls, to show that ice dancing is anything but a gentle sport. Navarro and Bommentre also shared a video of their well-received free dance at the 2006 State Farm U.S. Championships.

Navarro and Bommentre confirmed Piety's premise that competition has taught them a lot about life, themselves and relationships.

PHOTO BY MICHELLE HANWITZ



"The team is our main concern," Navarro told the students. "We agreed to always be honest with each other. We put as much energy into our skating as we do into our relationship."

Bommentre added, "Our relationship is equally as important as our skating. If you are not happy with the person you are skating with, that will come across" in your performance. "If we are upset, (with each other) we have to talk about it."

The team also explained that respectful relationships exist among ice dancing teams, despite the competitiveness. Most skaters feel bad when they see others have a bad performance, but, even if you're not happy with your own performance, "you never see a skater give their medal to somebody else," Bommentre said. "We have friends in skating and we want them to do well. We are all in this community of skating"

That level of respect grows with higher levels of skating, with age, as skaters develop a better "sense of self," and as teams get to know each other over the years, Navarro said. "We do respect

Kimberly Navarro and Brent Bommentre don't equate success with medal finishes. Enjoyment and improvement are their measuring sticks.

(other teams). There's a sense of camaraderie."

When asked about their partnership and how they chose each other, the skaters explained the importance of a physical match.

"But it doesn't stop there," Navarro said. "This felt right because we both didn't want to skate just for results. It was nice to find someone who also looks beyond that."

In the end, Navarro was happy that she and her partner could convey a positive message to the Drexel students about elite athletes.

"I think we were perfect candidates for this," Navarro said. "We may have taken more out of the session than the students. We learned some lessons ourselves. It further solidified our goals."

Piety agreed.

"I think I did accomplish what I had hoped to accomplish," Piety said. "I wanted to present to the students, real life examples of (athletes) who pursue their sport for the love of it rather than for fame or money. My impression is that most of the students were convinced that this is why Kim and Brent compete." ■



Student Tom Konrad, professor Marilyn Piety, and ice dancers Kimberly Navarro and Brent Bommentre stand behind the poster promoting Piety's special "Skating into Competition" discussion.



The Philosophy of Sports class at Drexel University watches highlights of Kimberly Navarro and Brent Bommentre from the 2006 St. Farm U.S. Championships.

Photos by Michelle Cooper