

Compulsory Figures

Setting: *an empty stage with an angled mirror on the upstage wall, sort of like A Chorus Line, but it shows the surface of the stage, which has been replaced with synthetic ice. Half-height rubber walls enclose the back and sides of the space, though there is a gap in the wall at stage left.*

SONIA steps through the gap, dressed in an ice-skating outfit from the later 1970s and sporting a "Dorothy Hamill" haircut from the same era. She pauses to remove her skate guards, which she sets on top of the wall, then glides to center stage. As she glides you can see the image of her blade marks in the mirror.

SONIA: Compulsory figures. School Figures. These are the moves that put the 'figure' in figure skating. Most people think it's just a figure eight, and that it's easy. Most people are wrong. I mean, the figure eight is *part* of the set of figures, but there are several.

Still, the circle is the basis of it all, so let's start there.

The figure eight is two circles, connected to each other. You're supposed to trace the circles – either outside – on the outside edge of your skate blade, or inside – on the inside edge. You go slowly and focus on precision.

(SONIA holds out her arms, as if mapping the arc and radius of her circles. Then she skates the figure as she describes it. Her blade marks are visible in the mirror, and when she pauses to focus, the only sound is the scraping of the blades on the surface.)

SONIA: The first time through the figure, is on your outside edge, on your left foot. It sounds weird, but even though you have two skates with two edges each, there are eight edges in figure skating. Right and left, forward and backward, inside and outside. The math works out, I promise.

For a figure eight, you'll change direction – from backward to forward – at the top of each circle – and that turn mark should be the only point in the circle. Like actual point. Not like place-point. More than those two points, and you're not executing the figure correctly.

(SONIA is quiet for a long moment as she completes her first figure, returning to start.)

SONIA: The thing is you don't do any figure just once. You have to re-trace them. But you retrace them differently. So, since I did an outside edge figure for my initial pass, for my first tracing, I'll do an inside edge, and start on my right foot.

(SONIA begins the figure as she's speaking.)

SONIA: If you're wondering what all the fancy arm movements are at the beginning of each figure, it's both preparation – just like when you use your arms in ballet – your arms affect your balance and speed in skating. Where they are, how you hold them. But also, the direction we hold our arms indicates to the judges the position and distance of our figures. What we skate has to match what we indicated.

(SONIA is seen twisting and turning her body to check the line of her skating.)

SONIA: As I said, figures look easy, but they're not. You're using every muscle of your body to make sure you repeat the same, precise shape. Each tracing has to match the previous one, down to where the turning points are. If you're off, your score is lowered.

(SONIA returns to center, then begins her preparation again.)

SONIA: After the first tracing, you do a second, back on the outside edge, and then after that you do one more on the inside edge. Partly, this shows off how good you are, but also, it makes the etching deep enough into the ice that the judges can easily discern where it is.

(SONIA completes the second tracing, then returns to center and begins the third and final one.)

SONIA: Dick Button used to say that the school figures are the least publicized, least entertaining, and least understood part of figure skating, even though they did give our sport its name. When I was competing, the compulsory figures were a third of our total score, which made the free skate also only a third of our score. But the school figures were eliminated, and the United States was the last country to require them in competition, ending them around nineteen-ninety.

(SONIA returns to center, pauses, then takes off, skating ovals around the perimeter of the ice.)

SONIA: The women – girls really – you see competing today never had to learn school figures, and never had to demonstrate them. Now, the focus is on jumps and turns, rather than precision. I guess I see why. Jumps and spins are dramatic and garner attention. They have crowd appeal.

But there's something so satisfying about knowing that I have the discipline and skill to trace those patterns – I know that there's a world championship skating evening in New York every year that has a figures division – but it's not the same.

(SONIA speeds up her skating, executes a textbook triple axel, and then returns to center, breathing heavily.)

SONIA: I'm not going on a crusade to bring back school figures. I'm on a crusade about something more important. I want to excise the term 'lady' from my sport. Maybe if we were referred to as women, we'd stop relying on teenagers to represent our sport.

(SONIA curtsies to the audience, then skates back to the gap in the wall, stepping through it before picking up her skate guards and putting them back on her blades. The light remains on the image of her figure eight on the synthetic ice for a long moment, then abruptly goes to BLACKOUT.)