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Q&A with Nikki Nichols

Author of *Frozen in Time: The Enduring Legacy of the 1961 U.S. Figure Skating Team*

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by [Bethel Swift](#)

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Nikki Nichols is an adult figure skater, freelance journalist and career woman. She won the figure skating title of her home state of Indiana, and was a finalist in the women's singles event at the 2005 U.S. Adult National Championships. Nichols is the author of *Frozen in Time: The Enduring Legacy of the 1961 U.S. Figure Skating Team* - the first book written about the 1961 plane crash that killed the entire 18-member skating team. She resides in Indianapolis, Indiana where she works as the Public Relations and Marketing Manager for the National Committee on Planned Giving. Nichols plans to continue her work in the nonprofit sector while freelancing for local publications and beginning work on her next book. She is also training with her pairs partner and fiancé, Michael J. Cunningham, to qualify for pairs competitions next year. We corresponded with Nichols about her skating, her fiancé and the disease that keeps her fighting.

Bethel: How long have you been figure skating?

Nikki: I began skating nine years ago. I was working in television news and had moved to Albuquerque, NM to be a news producer. I saw a skating rink at the base of Sandia Mountain and it seemed to call to me. I loved skating as a child, I loved dance, and I played violin for many years. Skating was a way to combine all three!

Bethel: Can you expand on that?

Nikki: Skating is such an expressive sport. Few sports give the athletes such an opportunity to indulge their personalities and emotions. Because I love classical music and had such exposure to it growing up, I see skating to this type of music as yet another way I can explore that musical appreciation. It's a phenomenal experience to skate to a favorite piano concerto. Of course, skating is not all about jumps--there has to be artistic interpretation, so dance finds its way into freestyle skating routines quite a lot.

Bethel: How long have you been competing and what do you like most about it?

Nikki: I started competing almost as soon as I laced up - just in basic skills competitions. I love competing because it gives me a goal to achieve in my skating. I don't care for the feelings of vulnerability I have standing out there in a very tiny dress with all eyes on me! I am much more of a practice skater, but I know I need to compete to keep focused. I love meeting other adult skaters and I love taking part in the great camaraderie between us. Mike (partner and fiancé) and I are working towards our first program with the goal of competing at the 2007 Adult Nationals. We didn't try this year because we are getting married next month!

Bethel: Congratulations! How did you two meet?

Nikki: I began training at the Indiana/World Skating Academy in downtown Indianapolis. Michael was always a passing acquaintance and I thought he was very nice (and handsome!), but it took him about four years of seeing me casually before he asked me to

be his pairs partner. Since then, we have been inseparable. It's very easy to fall in love with a pairs partner--there is so much trust involved. You get to know someone really fast when they pick you up and glide across a slippery surface. It's exhilarating to share that with someone.

Bethel: Are there differences between your and Michael's skating styles?

Nikki: Mike is a much more relaxed skater in training. He wants to preserve the fun factor, so he has a more relaxed pace. I tend to use up every second of practice until I am completely exhausted. I am often teased by Michael and our coaches because I say "just one more," and I end up doing 20 more. It's just the way I am. I hate leaving a practice session knowing I fell on the last element I tried!

In terms of style, Mike is a better "toe jumper" and has a better overall edge quality to his skating. I am a better spinner and edge jumper. I need to work on my connecting moves to match up to Mike, whereas he needs to work on his spins to catch up to me. His favorite move is the Lutz jump. Mine is the Axel. The Axel is a hard jump for an adult skater, and I love that I have achieved that.

Bethel: What is your favorite pairs move?

Nikki: My favorite pairs move is the throw loop jump. It's an amazing feeling - call me crazy if you want - to be thrown across the ice and land solidly on one foot. Right now, we are working on a back outside death spiral. We are close to getting it!

Bethel: Have you or your partner suffered any skating related injuries?

Nikki: I have had some stress fractures and I have had two surgeries on my right heel for Achilles bursitis that was most likely related to my skating. The cushion in that heel just wore out a little and a cyst formed twice.

I also was diagnosed in 2005 with an autoimmune inflammatory disease called Ankylosing Spondylitis (AS). It's an incurable arthritic condition of the spine, which in time causes the spine to fuse. I am taking infusions of a TNF inhibitor called Remicade which slows the disease's progression. Three weeks before Adult Nationals in 2005, I was having trouble walking. I took my first dose of Remicade and I started feeling much better. Unfortunately, I had missed a lot of training. I was very pleased and lucky to make it into the finals at nationals. Next year, I plan to do much better!

Bethel: How does AS affect your skating on a day-to-day basis?

Nikki: There are some days where I feel great and others where I have a lot of muscle spasms and soreness. I wouldn't want to do any pairs moves when I have spasms because then it becomes a safety issue for my partner. My favorite spin is the layback spin and it's pretty traumatic on the back, as you can imagine. I tend to only practice a few of those per week just to maintain the level of spin that I have. There is a camel-sit spin combination that really seems to tweak my right hip, so I tend to lay off that one. It's really hard knowing you need to practice something and your body is saying 'no'. Since my diagnosis, I do jump about 75% less in practice sessions, so I am getting less of a workout unfortunately.

Bethel: How long does the infusion process take and how often do you have it?

Nikki: My infusions take between two and three hours, depending on when the medicine arrives. I have to get the infusions every eight weeks. I am lucky that my spine has not fused at all yet. The Remicade is hopefully going to prevent that. If my spine does fuse, it would be impossible to continue skating. The [spinal] fusion results from the spine trying to heal itself and calcifying because the immune system is attacking it. If my spine fuses, one fall on the ice could break the spine.

Bethel: Olympic figure skater, Irina Slutskaya, who suffers from a heart condition, has been very open and optimistic about her disease, speaking



about it as a learning experience. How do you stay positive?

Nikki: I do live in fear of the day my spine may fuse or the AS may debilitate me to a point where I can't skate. For now, however, I just plan to enjoy it as much as I can. Having the disease has made me very grateful when I am able to practice.



Bethel: Thanks so much for sharing! If there was any advice you could give to adult skaters, what would it be?

Nikki: My advice to adult skaters is this: Enjoy it as long as you can. Stretch well, eat well, and listen to your body

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