

Peanut butter and jelly

Carroll, Congemi on same page coaching elite U.S. skaters

By Lois Elfman

Evan Lysacek knew who he wanted to direct his skating career. No doubt about it.

"I knew when I graduated from high school (in June 2003) there was one coach in America that I wanted to work with, and it was Frank Carroll," said the 2005 U.S. and World bronze medalist.

"I said, 'I'm either going to move to Los Angeles (from Chicago) and train with Frank Carroll or I'm not skating,' because I knew in my heart that was the only place where I could really accomplish what I wanted to accomplish. I could feel it."

At the time, however, Carroll was working with Olympic and World medalist Timothy Goebel and could not make a full-time commitment to another senior men's competitor. So, he offered Lysacek an alternative solution: work with another coach at the same rink, Ken Congemi, and Carroll would be part of the coaching team.

"I worked with Ken once and said yes," Lysacek recalled. "My mom and I looked at each other and said, 'This is going to work.'"

That momentous decision not only led Lysacek on the path to success, but it caused Carroll and Congemi to formalize their working arrangement. For more than

a decade, Congemi had suggested music for some of Carroll's students, including Michelle Kwan's highly lauded "East of Eden" program. After the opening of the HealthSouth Training Center in El Segundo, Calif. (now known as the Toyota Sports Center), they'd begun helping each other's students when one needed to travel to competition. With Lysacek's arrival in June 2003, it became official: They were coaching partners.

"Quite frankly, I needed Ken more because I was at a point where I had too many people wanting lessons and wanting my attention," Carroll said. "There was not enough of me to spread around. It was a perfect time for Ken and me to get together. But it never would have worked if Ken were my assistant.

"For me to work with anybody, it would have to be as equals, where I really respected him, felt I could trust him completely and felt that his capabilities were such that I wouldn't question what he was doing."

One crucial ingredient to their success is that Carroll and Congemi are very similar when it comes to technique. Although he did not have Carroll's extensive resume of World and Olympic medalists, Congemi has had a good deal of success - most notably with 1991 U.S. junior men's figures champion Laurent Moore, 2002 U.S. junior

Coaches Frank Carroll and Ken Congemi bring different qualities to their partnership, but the same message is delivered to their skaters.



men's champion Nicholas LaRoche and 2004 U.S. junior men's champion Christopher Toland. Congemi was also the skating director of Disney Ice in Anaheim, Calif. for five years.

"In this day and age, you almost need to have a coaching team because sometimes events are at the same time," Congemi said. "Someone needs to be home while someone is away at an international.

"We complement each other. Any student is going to relate to Frank in a certain way and relate to me in a certain way. They get great information from Frank and get the same information from me, but it comes out a little differently. It's really good reinforcement. We might be saying the same thing, but just the way Frank puts it across or the way I put it across makes the impact. It's kind of neat. We see out of the corners of our eyes, or by osmosis, what's going on with each other. We kind of have this innate sense to know what to do on the next lesson."

Bebe Liang began working with Carroll and Congemi in May 2005. Both she and Lysacek use the word "complement" to describe their two coaches.

"They always ask each other's opinion," Liang said. "They work really well together. They each help me in different areas of my skating.

"Ken is, for me, a little more technical. He also helps me work on my focus. Frank looks at more of the overall program. He really works on the details a lot."

Carroll seconds that assessment. He says Congemi is brilliant when it comes to jumps and spins. Carroll, who performed with Ice Follies and was a professional dancer and lifelong dance aficionado, says he obsesses about little details.

He also credits Congemi, 43, with injecting a sense of youthful enthusiasm into their work.

"We can be someplace and I'm thinking, 'This is really the pits,'" Carroll said. "He'll say, 'Did you see how beautiful that was?' I have to stop and think, I never noticed that. I have to take more time and smell the roses because obviously this is a younger person who's already doing it."

They do not partner on all skaters. Some students divide their time equally between the two coaches; others may work primarily with one or the other.

While Carroll and Congemi say they talk about virtually everything, one subject that has never come up is Carroll's retirement.

"My idea of retirement would be to not go to the rink every single day," said Carroll, 66. "I don't think I'll ever



get out of skating."

That suits Congemi just fine.

"Frank has this vast amount of knowledge of the sport and experience to draw on," he says. "I have a lot of experience in psychology and do a lot of study on a daily basis, such as mental toughness. I work on how the skaters are thinking, how they see their accomplishments or how they see what they are looking to accomplish.

"Frank draws from his knowledge and experience, and I try to work from the other side and try to get into the skater's head."

Liang experienced this firsthand at the Nebelhorn Trophy in Oberstdorf, Germany, in September. After falling on her triple Lutz attempts in the warmup for the free skate, Congemi refused to allow her to follow an old pattern of missing the jump in her program.

"Ken helped me think of what I was there to do and not be worried," she recalled. "He told me I know what I can do. When I compete, I have to do what I'm able to do.

"All the things that Ken and Frank have been drilling into me for the past few months, now I know I can rely on what they say, and it really works for me," she added. "I have so much more confidence. I know that in the next competition, they'll be there for me no matter what."

Congemi thanks Carroll for teaching him so much about the sport of figure skating, and Carroll thanks Congemi for being a confidante and spark plug.

"The three of us are so real," Lysacek said. "What you see on TV, that's us. You can see their personalities right in the kiss and cry. Frank is very serious, and he's analyzing the marks. He's the first one to come in from the technical point of view. And Ken is always smiling. I'm feeling both emotions. People have two sides, and they're like my two sides. Ken is my excited emotional side, and Frank is my logistical technical side." ■

Skater Bebe Liang is all smiles as her scores are read. Her coaches are a perfect complement to each other, she said.