

Soviet Champions See Russian Skating Legacy Restored

By [The Moscow Times](#)

February 23, 2014



Tatyana Volosozhar and Maxim Trankov performing in the Figure Skating Gala Exhibition in Sochi on Saturday. **Alexander Demianchuk**

SOCHI — Half a century after starting their country's Olympic gold rush in figure skating, Lyudmila Belousova and Oleg Protopopov were out creating a stir at the Sochi Olympics.

The white-haired couple in matching sweaters had come to the Iceberg Skating Palace to watch what the class of 2014 could produce on the ice. But once the double Olympic pairs champions were spotted, they turned out to be the star attraction.

American Michelle Kwan wanted them to pose with her for a picture, while 2002 Olympic ice dance champion Gwendal Peizerat rushed up to say how much he admired them.

But the real thrill for the couple, who married in 1957, was to be rinkside to watch Tatyana Volosozhar and Maxim Trankov produce a dazzling performance to continue the long line

of successes. Belousova and Protopopov first started for the Soviet Union in 1964.

Since then, Soviet or Russian competitors have struck gold in pairs skating at all but the 2010 Vancouver Games.

"It was a big present for us because it was the jubilee of our win," Belousova said in an interview at the Iceberg Skating Palace.

"When children get a present, they are very happy, they are burning inside. We felt the same way. We ran to congratulate them."

In a Games at which Russia had sought to smooth over the rough edges of its history, the couple have been celebrated alongside other Soviet-era heroes such as Vladislav Tretyak and Irina Rodnina, the ice hockey goaltender and figure skater who lit the Olympic cauldron during the opening ceremony on Feb. 7.

For Belousova and Protopopov, this was an emotional homecoming to their motherland.

They had defected to Switzerland in 1979 after being told by Soviet officials that they were too old to keep skating and did not return until a decade after the Soviet breakup.

So being invited to join in with the celebrations as Russia hosted its first Winter Games was totally unexpected.

"We were surprised that they even invited us ... It was wonderful," said Belousova, a sprightly and elegant woman who wears her hair pulled back in a balletic bun.

She and her husband are now Swiss and split their time between Grindelwald, Switzerland and Lake Placid, New York.

"We are not Soviet anymore, we are not Russians," she said. "This is a different Russia but in our hearts it is ours."

For Olympic champions Volosozhar and Trankov, having the skating legends cheer them on was a memory to cherish.

"Fifty-years ago, they beat the German world champions in the Olympic Games," Trankov said, drawing similarities with his victory over German pair Alyona Savchenko and Robin Szolkowy.

"So it is like a new circle in the story."

The two Olympic gold medals Belousova and Protopopov won are lying forgotten in a box of chocolates at their home.

"We never prioritized getting medals, our main goal was to give pleasure to the audience," Protopopov said.

Despite their age — he is 81 and suffered a stroke in 2009, while she is 78 — the pair still skate almost daily and participate in ice shows.

"Skating is our life," Belousova said. "The ice is the continuation of our life."

But the sport has changed radically since their golden days, when they first brought graceful, classical dance choreography to the ice.

"They were the initiators of bringing artistry to our sport," said Tamara Moskvina, who has coached four pairs to Olympic gold medals and beat Belousova and Protopopov at the Soviet national championships in 1969 while paired with Alexei Mishin.

"They made skating attractive not only to sports fans but to a wider audience, to people who love art."

Since then, many feel the pendulum has swung the other way and artistry has taken a back-seat to jumps and other athletic elements.

In an effort to claw back credibility after the 2002 Salt Lake City Games judging scandal, an accumulative scoring system replaced the old 6.0 method — and skaters are now rewarded for performing a number of elements.

But Belousova feels the need to chase points by checking off a multitude of strictly defined skills has stripped creativity from the sport.

"Everything has gotten much more difficult for today's skaters," Belousova said. "In addition to being artists, figure skaters have become counting machines."

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/02/23/soviet-champions-see-russian-skating-legacy-restored-a32382>