

# SPORTS

Can you imagine Jacques Lacan doing a double lutz? And other athletic manoeuvres...

by

Gary Genosko

## THE TWO ELVISES

Leather and ice-skating are uneasy partners. Kurt Browning, one may recall, reached on occasion for his leather — but only a jacket. Elvis minor — the Canadian figure skater Elvis Stojko — however, appears in a body-hugging, sleeveless leather pantsuit, with dramatic — one wants to say fetishistic, with a clear nod to bondage rather than motorcycle chic — drawstrings on the pant legs. Stojko's outfit evokes Elvis Presley — Elvis major — circa 1968, neck-to-toe in leather for his comeback television special, cookin' with his small-combo — not to mention the famous photograph of him taken from *Jailhouse Rock*: the dancing, sneering, leather-clad prison rebel. Indeed, Elvis minor's Elvis Presley routine was not unveiled until after he had captured the World Championship in 1994. He had already startled the European competition with a martial arts–based routine choreographed to the music of Bruce Lee's kung-fu films.

In *Dead Elvis* Greil Marcus contends that Elvis tends to be buried under cultural ephemera, explained away, figured as an absence, as white trash, as someone who could not have meant to do what he did, on the grounds that he was not a “con-

Nokia gives Elvis the edge.

Since becoming world champion, Elvis Stojko has needed a little help with his routine — he's off the ice, after all. He's never been back: what is this strange exhibition meant to prove? personal appearance, flashy work and extreme skating for his own enjoyment. That's why he relies on his Nokia Cellular Phone to coordinate his schedule and stay on track with his coach, family and friends. Whether he's on the ice, at the airport or in the arena, Elvis gives you the edge because just the facts were recognized across the world as an innovation leading the way with the development of the first digital cellular phone, with features like one touch dialing of important numbers, one touch access, user friendly menu and dual-band capability. We've also made a real artistic impression on the judges, as our phones have received numerous awards for innovation and design excellence as well.

Nokia Cellular For Elvis, no more than just a phone. As the secret to keeping his off ice routine as fluid as on the ice he performs on his skates.

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paraphernalia? How does he remain, as it were, “conscious”? To be manipulated by the symbol of the King — especially as a namesake and a favourite performer for one's parents — is a dangerous business, for the risk is that a few souvenirs will lead to an associative avalanche: all of sudden, the fat jokes appear, the junkie motif gets bandied around, someone remembers the German rendezvous with fourteen-year-old Priscilla, the jelly donuts . . . . Sure, when you're the 1994 and 1995 World Figure Skating Champion, all of this seems unlikely. Elvis minor: always in basic black, a martial arts expert able to master the pain of his twisted ankle, never quick with a smile. He is already widely known as the king of figure skating. It was, after all, the young Elvis

major — the King — who appeared by popular demand on the U.S. postage stamp. And it will be a young Elvis minor who sooner than later turns pro — possibly after the next Olympic competition — and replicates Elvis major on the entertainment circuit. Viva Las Vegas?

scious cultural agent” (195). It is the impossibility of Elvis as such an agent that Marcus challenges with the claim that he was a conscious actor. There is something shaky about this possibility, something mysterious, and less than Cartesian.

How, then, does Elvis minor keep himself from being buried under heaps of

## Analytic Escapade:

### PSYCHO-SKATER

**M**y colleague Todd Dufresne and I have recently completed an investigation into the figure skating exploits of the well-known British psychoanalyst, Ernest Jones. Jones's book, *The Elements of Figure Skating*, was published in 1931, and a much expanded edition appeared in 1952. Long out of print and forgotten by historians of skating and psychoanalysis, Jones's *Elements* is testimony to his extraordinary para-professional passion for the sport. Besides the detailed, technical descriptions of skating figures, Jones ventured a psychology of skating in which psychoanalytic categories mixed with an erotics of the figures.

As Jones's son Mervyn has confirmed, his father was a bit of a rink rat. He was a member of and skated at The Ice Club on Grosvenor Road (which folded in 1939) and at Golder's Green in London. The elder Jones skated a great deal in the two years before the first edition of *Elements* appeared. A reading of his date books, which are found in the archives of The British Psycho-Analytical Society in London, reveals the rigours of his schedule and his failures. What is remarkable about Jones's work on skating is his innovation in the area of mistakes. For instance, Jones invented the phrase "life-saving stamp" — bringing one's free foot down to prevent a fall — and

**"a race of 'animals' can be treated as such — as victims or pets."**

Patricia Hill Collins,  
*Black Feminist Thought*

placed considerable emphasis on "the art of falling," that is, of "slithering" on ice. This interest without question reflects his own experiences. His date books record with astonishing exactitude his falls (their number and the injuries resulting from them) during his sessions. All of this practice, it should be said, was in preparation for the Third-Class National Skating Association Test. As he awaited the publication of his skating book, Jones, while complaining of "bad hips," took the test for the first time in June 1931. He scored 19 points. He took the test again on December 17, and scored only 19.5 points. *Elements* was published on December 23. What Jones did not mention was the fact that a score of 20 (of a possible 36) was a passing mark! Jones's love of the "ecstasy of motion" on ice outstripped, it is fair to say, his own mediocre technical skills. He was, however, by all accounts, an excellent judge.

## Bestiary:

### ATHLETES AS PETS

**I**n *Landscapes of Modern Sport*, John Bale advances the provocative idea that "the sportscape or athlete to which we show affection is the athletic analogue of the garden or the pet." Maple Leaf Gardens, Toronto, he points out, doesn't contain any shrubs, but it nonetheless remains a garden, if only euphemistically, as a sportscape aestheticized through horticultural and architectural imagery. This garden is full of "pets" — disciplined, functionalized, steroid-enhanced, and exhaustively trained to perform. These athletic pets are dominated so that they may best receive the affection of the spectators, their owners, their parents, etc.

Hockey net-minders often adopt animal motifs when having their masks painted. Toronto Maple Leaf goaltender Felix Potvin is nicknamed The Cat, for example. Like the use of animals in military contexts, a single attribute is abstracted from a given species,

exaggerated, and reconnected to a new thing or activity. Not all animal motifs are to be used positively.

In his "Sports Chatter," discussion of the ambiguous healthiness of sports, Umberto Eco maintained that one of the "first degenerations of the contest" involves "the raising of human beings dedicated to competition. The athlete is already a being who has hypertrophied one organ, who turns his body into the seat of an exclusive source of continuous play. The athlete is a monster." The dedication to "total instrumentalization" makes the athlete a monster or, better yet, to follow Bales, a pet. But pets, while often distorted through selective breeding, are also dearly loved, especially when they "perform" for their "caretakers." While Eco recognizes that the athlete is dedicated to sports training regimes, however brutal or unhealthy they may be, Bales elides the matter of dedication. Many people do, however, submit to exhaustive and repetitive training routines. By changing the register of the analogy ever so slightly, however, we are thrown back to the identification of black slaves with domesticated farm animals, and slaveholders with wild predators, poignantly employed in the classic of 1845, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written By Himself*. What this autobiographical narrative reveals is the prevailing nineteenth-century image of the black slave as a healthy animal, who, if needs be, will be broken through labour, tortured and/or murdered, and selectively bred. It is not very far from the racism of the Old South to contemporary stereotyped representations of black athletes, that is, from animalization to the "petishism" of focussing on the so-called naturally expressive black body. Indeed, consciousness, as we learned in the case of Ben Johnson after the debacle in Seoul, was denied to the sprinter insofar as he was figured as an animal-machine. Race (as well as gender oppression and economic exploitation) functions through animalization. As Patricia Hill Collins puts it in *Black Feminist Thought*, "a race of 'animals' can be treated as such — as victims or pets."