

"Muscle Memory"

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9 May 2019

Coach Bob is a very patient man. He has spent the last twenty years repeatedly trying to explain the dynamics of muscle memory to me. There have been times when I was convinced that he felt that his lessons had fallen on deaf ears because I was either unable or unwilling to convert his words into action. In reality, I just didn't want to shatter his world by telling him the truth—my muscles suffer from terminal amnesia! My brain clearly knows what my muscles are supposed to do, but my muscles don't seem to get the message!

Coach Dick, on the other hand, never refers to "muscle memory." He just quietly guides me through my lessons with the patience of a saint, approaching instruction from different angles as I frequently fail at executing the basics using the proper techniques. Once again he introduced something new for me to try today. My lesson started with Dick watching as I skated two patterns of the "City Blues." (It takes two patterns of the dance to go around the floor one complete time.) Instead of commenting on my skating, he asked, "When you were teaching, did you ever teach dancing to your students?"

"Hmm," I thought, "what was he getting at?" I replied, "Yes, sometimes I did make up routines for my students for school programs and P.E." My answer seemed to reinforce the validity of his new approach; and he explained, "Would you be willing to try adding a few simple arm movements to each dance? You know the dances well enough now that arm movements might enhance the skating."

Proper technique for both dance and figures involves maintaining a slightly arched back while holding the arms outstretched from the shoulders with no discernable movement. That absolutely, positively, had never been *my* style! I was known for saluting judges, bending at the waist, and flapping like a bird, among other things. My unspoken reaction was, "Would I like arm movements? Does he know who he's talking to? Of course, I want arm movements!" So, to Dick's relief, I agreed to give them a try.

He demonstrated what he wanted me to do in the center lobe of the "Double-cross Waltz." I skated into the center lobe in the middle of the rink, just as he had. I raised my left arm straight above my head while crossing my right foot over my left onto a right-outside edge, just as he had. I came out of center lobe and raised my right arm straight above my head while crossing my left foot over my right onto a left-outside edge, just as he had.

Dick was delighted! "That was so easy for you to do! Can you try it again?"

So I did it again...and again...and again! Dick praised the results, "Your rock-overs are stronger, your edges are cleaner, your posture is better, and so is your timing!"

I was proud of my improvement, especially since it happens so rarely; but Dick decided to press our luck! "There's one more thing I want you to try," he said cautiously. "I want you to move your right arm forward like this when you do the cross-behind," he suggested calmly while demonstrating the move.

"Okay, now he's gone too far!" I thought to myself. "My cross-behinds are the weakest part of my dances, and now he's adding more difficulty—has he lost his mind? Calm down! He's the coach, he's aware of your potential—just trust him!" So I mustered up every iota of my athletic courage, and did my best imitation of a proper cross-behind with arm-movement enhancement.

Dick's reaction caught me totally off-guard! "That worked!" he cried. "Did you notice how much better your inside edge was?" "Try it again!" I tried it again...and again...and again. Then I tried it in the dance. Not only did my success reinforce the previous improvements I had made, it also allowed me to demonstrate a consistently proper dance pattern! That gave Dick the encouragement he needed to add arm movements to my other dances as well—with the same positive results!

The more I practiced, the more I was aware of how much better I was at controlling my body positions than I had ever been before. Then came a strong sense of déjà vu—it was the same physical sensation as the one I had experienced marching in my high school band forty-eight years ago! We were a military drill team with sharp precise movements done in specific patterns and unwavering unison with the beat. How could I have the same feeling and coordination almost half a century later? Coach Bob's voice was in my head, providing me with the undeniable answer;

“Muscle memory!”