GS Student Balances Commitment to Figure Skating with Passion for English Literature

By CAROLINE LADHANI

Twenty-one-year-old School of General Studies (GS) student Kim Navarro often rushes to class across Columbia’s campus with two backpacks—one for her books, one for her ice skates. After withdrawing from her Santa Rosa, California high school in favor of a competitive skating career, she never imagined one day she’d be living out her skating dreams while also in pursuit of an English degree at Columbia. But today, Navarro has maintained an overall 3.6 GPA at GS amidst her busy skating schedule which includes preparation last fall for the U.S. National Ice Skating Championships.

Why would an up-and-coming athlete care to couple the rigors of a demanding workout schedule with studying Plato and Chaucer in the trenches of the Ivy League? Navarro says she’s motivated by more than just getting a degree. “It’s about expanding your mind,” said Navarro, a Jane Austen enthusiast. English has always been one of her favorite subjects. Though the U.S. Figure Skating Association is not known for encouraging its skaters to pursue higher education, Navarro says, her experience while in college has been so positive that she is trying to encourage other skaters while in college to do the same.

“I’m trying to promote skaters staying in school,” Navarro said during a special visit she made to a recent practice session of the Columbia Ice Skating Club. For the past three years, Navarro and her skating partner Robert Shmalo have driven five times per week from Manhattan to a rink in Monsey, New York, for a 7 a.m. morning workout with their coach and choreographer, Inese Bucveica. Four hours later, they drive back to Manhattan for afternoon classes at their respective universities. The 25-year-old Shmalo, now in his last year at Benjamin N. Cardozo Law School, has been skating with Navarro since 1999 and shares her passion for simultaneously pursuing a skating career and an education. “Not only did our schedule regimen us,” said Shmalo, “it has helped us keep our opportunities wide open, as skaters.

Navarro said her classes may have even helped keep her keep a positive attitude on the ice, by reminding her there is more to life than skating. “It’s easy to forget there is another world out there, especially when you’re at a competition,” she said. The School of General Studies is specifically designed to give non-traditional students like Navarro the flexibility they need to pursue other dreams while obtaining a liberal arts education. In addition, Columbia is the only Ivy League institution to fully integrate its nontraditional students, attending classes part-time or full-time, into the same classes with all other undergraduate students.

Advisors and administrators at the School of General Studies strive to address the special needs of nontraditional students to this end. That flexibility has enabled Navarro to take time off for skating competitions at short notice.

“Last year before we went to compete in Japan, we only knew a week beforehand and my professors were great about it,” said Navarro.

Daughter of an Ice Capades performer and skating instructor, Navarro said her mother exposed her to the joys of skating at a young age. Instead of daycare, the tiny Navarro sat in a snowsuit on the ice and watched. Through the years, Navarro began skating herself and though she showed strong signs of talent, her mother never forced her to pursue the sport. It was her own decision to take skating seriously after a friend of her mother’s recognized her abilities and suggested she pursue it. As a young girl, Navarro frequently traveled to Los Angeles to appear in shows, most notably skating as the character Woodstock in the Charles Reiner Christmas ice shows. She also began to perform off the ice as well, as an inline skater with Team Rollerblade. You may have seen her at age nine or ten in a “Rollerblade Barbie” commercial for Mattel, or in a public service announcement for inline skating safety gear. She also pursued dancing overall. With a possible bid to the 2006 Olympics still in the picture, Navarro said she and Shmalo are trying to determine their next step. In June, Shmalo will graduate from law school, but Navarro said she doesn’t see herself skating with anyone else. The two are “truly dear friends,” said Navarro. “We have our share of laughs for sure.”

In addition to practices, competitions and school, Navarro teaches inline skating at Chelsea Piers and skates with the Ice Theatre of New York, performing February 26 at Rockefeller Center.

Women’s Basketball Finds Success Through New Strategy

By COLIN MORRIS

Columbia’s women’s basketball team is poised for Ivy League success. With this year’s luxury of possessing size, depth and athleticism, the team is focused on a final ingredient: adaptation.

Through strategy and circumstance, the Lady Lions find themselves competing strongly against the best this year, enjoying the new perspective. But adaptation will be the key to a great season, says Head Coach Jay Butler.

“When we started off this season we were pretty blessed,” says Butler, nestled in a waiting room chair outside his office. When he speaks, one can clearly see the excitement of prospective recruits as Butler, as the coach explains, those welcome fundamentals into the team’s play and form enough to reap the benefits of a relaxed, adaptive unit.

Fidgeting alongside the coach and student Kim Navarro can often be seen carrying two backpacks around campus—one for her books and one for her ice skates. Many weekdays, Navarro and her partner have driven to a rink in Monsey, N.Y. for an invigorating 7 a.m. workout.

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