

PROFESSIONAL SKATER

Dick Button

Interview by **Kimberly Paetzold**, Editor

Richard “Dick” Button was born July 18, 1929 in Englewood, New Jersey. A Gold Metal Olympic figure skater and television analyst, Mr. Button has also been the National Spokesman for the Brain Injury Association of America.

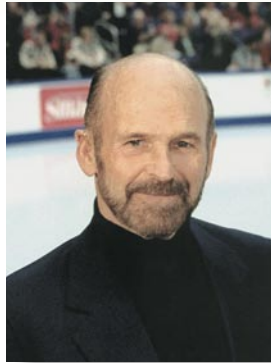
A five-time world champion, Mr. Button won the figure skating Gold Medal at the 1948 and 1952 Winter Olympics. In 1949, he won the Sullivan Award as the outstanding amateur athlete. In the US, Button was the first skater to successfully land the double axel jump in competition (1948), as well as the first triple jump of any kind – a triple loop (1952). He also invented the flying camel spin, which was originally known as the ‘Button camel’.

After his competitive career, Mr. Button toured with *Ice Capades* and *Holiday On Ice*. He also completed a law degree at Harvard University. Mr. Button has been a figure skating analyst for ABC Sports since 1962. As founder of Candid Productions, he created a variety of sports events that were widely seen on television including *The World Professional Figure Skating Championships* as well as other non-skating sports events such as *The Superstars*, *Battle of the Network Stars*, *The SuperTeams*, etc.

Dick Button has been inducted into the *World Figure Skating Hall of Fame* and the *Olympic Hall of Fame*.

It was New Year’s Eve of 2000 when Dick Button took a spill on the ice and incurred a traumatic brain injury. Throughout his hospitalization and to this day, he has no recollection of the fall or what happened thereafter. In order to restore his health, he required extensive inpatient and outpatient rehabilitation.

Dick Button has made a remarkable comeback.



Thank you for interviewing with Visions. Mr. Button, would you tell us about your skating accident in December of 2000?

It was New Year’s Eve, and I was planning on attending a party. Before the event, I went to get some exercise at a public rink near my home in upstate New York. At first I felt a little stiff, but as time wore on I felt I was moving quite well. I kept thinking, “I should try something a little more difficult,” and that’s the last thing I remember. I fell, was taken to a local hospital, and from there was transported by helicopter to the Westchester (Brain Trauma) Medical Center.

Were you diagnosed with a mild brain injury?

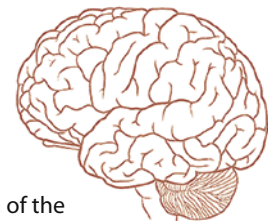
My injuries were not considered mild. I suffered from four brain contusions

and a skull fracture. I lost the hearing in my left ear, damaged the hearing in my right ear and developed meningitis while in the hospital. I developed blood clots in my left leg and also lost one of the nerves in the same leg. I don’t remember anything of the four or five weeks after my accident, and then my memory slowly returned. My hospital stay lasted from January through the first part of March, and then I transferred to Burke Rehabilitation Hospital. From there, I was accepted into the Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine Program in New York City as an outpatient client. My rehabilitation lasted for several more months.

Do you continue to have problems related to your traumatic brain injury?

I continue to have problems such as imbalance, but this has improved over time. I use a hearing aid in my right ear to address my hearing loss. But despite these issues, I feel fortunate that I was able to recuperate and am able to have a functioning life.

I attribute much of my ability to recover to being a professional athlete. It never occurred to me that I could not do what I



WHAT IS MENINGITIS?

Meningitis (mə-nīnjī’tīs) is acute inflammation of the meninges – three membranous layers of connective tissue that cover and protect the brain and spinal cord. Bacteria, viruses, fungi or other organisms, usually introduced via the bloodstream from infections elsewhere in the body, can cause meningitis. Viruses are the most common cause.

The classical symptoms of meningitis are headache, neck stiffness and photophobia (an abnormal sensitivity to or intolerance of light, especially by the eyes). Fever and chills are often present along with myalgia (muscular pain or tenderness). An altered level of consciousness or other neurological deficits may be present depending on the severity of the disease. Meningitis may occur in outbreaks in communities that have close contact with each other, such as in dorms or military establishments. □

set out to do. Let me explain; when I was skating I always knew that if I practiced hard enough and got the right instruction, I could accomplish my goals. It always seemed to work. Therefore, after my accident, I assumed that I would be able to fully recuperate if I had patience, did the exercises and received the appropriate instruction (rehabilitation). It truly never occurred to me that I would not get better. I now believe that was one of the reasons I was successful. I encourage everyone, especially the families who are the most important factor in rehabilitation success, to take this approach. Expect your loved one to get better and have patience.

How long did it take you to get back to a level of functioning that you were comfortable with?

I was able to function at a fairly high level by the end of 2001, about one year after my accident. I did my first narration nine months post injury in Madison Square Garden. Commentators at these events

normally sit at a desk with a Teleprompter. ABC said they wanted me to stand out on a platform with no podium, no notes, and no Teleprompter and deliver my speech. I remember standing out there with my feet positioned in such a way so that I could stand without rocking back and forth. In addition, I had to avoid the spotlights because they blinded me. On the way up to the platform, I told another Olympic champion, Hayes Jenkins, "I don't know if I'm going to be able to make it." When I finished, he told me I did a good job.

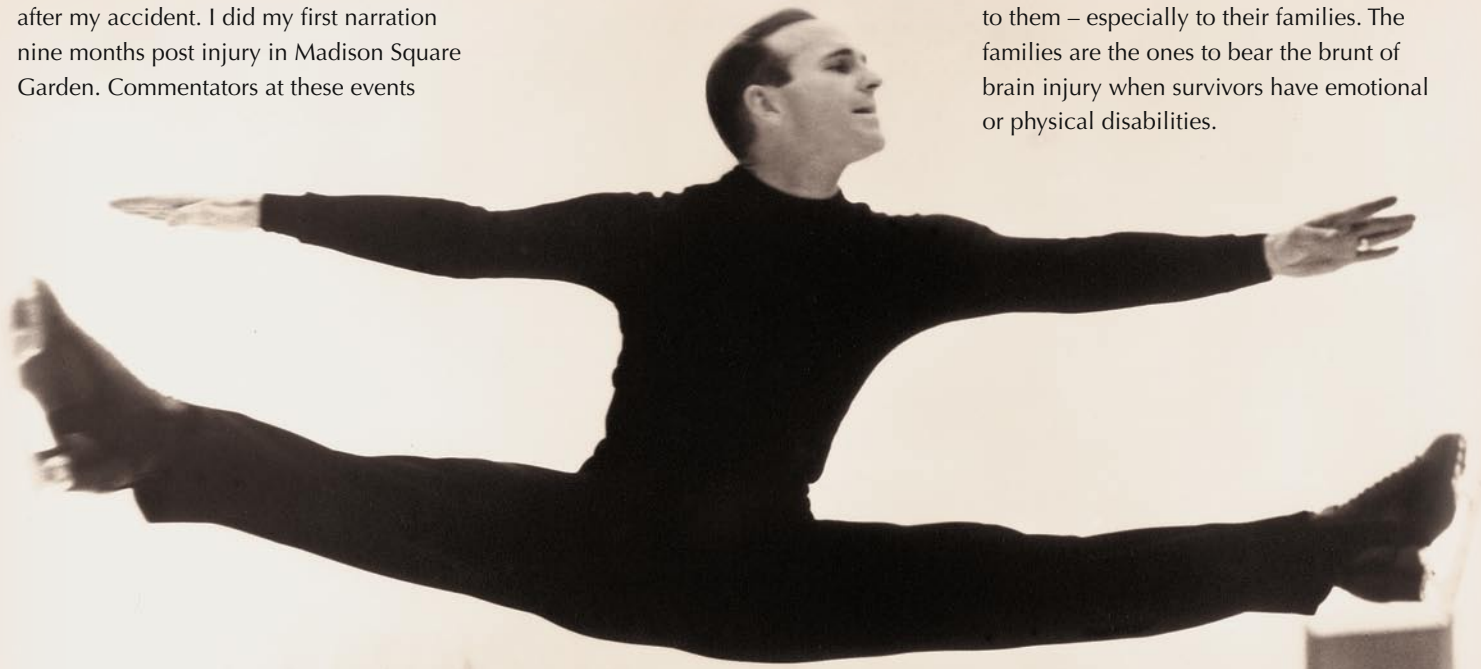
I do remember making a mistake, but when I heard myself on tape, I realized it was only minor. I had stumbled on a word. It was one of those experiences where I could barely hold my balance, but I got through it in front of 18,000 people. Although a disquieting moment, it was a challenge I was able to take on.

Did you feel that your rehabilitation process was essential to your recovery?

Absolutely! Look, I really don't know all the things that were essential in getting me back to this level of functioning. All I know is that I am thankful that I was able to get back to where I am now. The doctors were wonderful. At the low point, they told my daughter that I would never be able to balance a checkbook again or be able to narrate for television. My daughter told the doctors, "*He never could balance a checkbook anyway and you don't know his determination.*"

Do you have any advice for survivors and their families?

I consider myself exceedingly lucky with my recuperation. There have been many people I've met who were not able to recover like I did, and my heart goes out to them – especially to their families. The families are the ones to bear the brunt of brain injury when survivors have emotional or physical disabilities.



I must have been atrocious to the people trying to help me, but I am deeply grateful for that help now.

Support from family and friends during rehabilitation is essential. What is needed most of all is patience. It takes time to recuperate. I am grateful for what I did get back. My advice to family members is to have patience, but let your loved one know what's expected of them. If someone is not returning to an acceptable behavioral level, they need to know that you expect them to improve. It's not OK to stay where they're at. I highly recommend letting ABI survivors know that there are expectations of behavior and recovery, that there are limits on what's acceptable. Obviously each patient must be handled with sensitivity, because they may have limits on how much they can accomplish.

What is your current involvement with the world of figure skating?

I comment and do narration for ABC on five of their programs including the National Championships (January 2006) and Skate America (late October 2005). In addition, I will be co-hosting a talk show at the Winter Olympics in Torino, Italy this February. It will be produced by NBC for USA Cable Network, which will air live every day an hour before the NBC coverage starts. I'm looking forward to it. ♦