

SHOWS & TOURS

Kristi Yamaguchi Friends & Family: Unites Multi-generations On and Off the Ice By Amy E. Tucker

On October 25, 2005, two decades of skaters, who dazzled us with National, World and Olympic medal performances, united in Albany, NY, to strut their newest stuff—their children. *Kristi Yamaguchi Friends & Family* brought the skaters together for the first time on the ice, not just as performers, but as people. For many of them, it was the first opportunity they'd had to see each other's kids. And, for Olympic gold medalists Katia Gordeeva ('84 and '88 with first husband Sergei Grinkov) and Ilia Kulik ('98), it brought their blended family together for the first time ever on the ice.

"I saw Kristi with Keara at one show last year," said Katia Gordeeva. "But, I never saw Kurt [Browning's] baby, and I only saw Scott [Hamilton's] baby once."

"Jozef [Sabovcik's] son was born a few days before mine," said Browning, "but I haven't seen him yet!"

"It's nice for us [the skaters] too," Gordeeva continued, "that I can come and skate with Daria, and she can perform."

Friends and Family is Yamaguchi's fifth Disson live entertainment production, and country legend Kenny Rogers was the perfect choice as the father of 13-month twin boys with his third wife, Wanda. Rogers performed four of his classics and debuted the single *I Can't Unlove You* from his forthcoming album.

Yamaguchi's daughter Keara Kyomi was born 10/1/03 and she was eight months pregnant with her second child with husband and Carolina Hurricane Brett Hedican at the time of the show.

Co-hosting the show with Yamaguchi was 1984 Olympic gold medalist Scott Hamilton whose wife Tracie gave birth to their son, Aidan McIntosh Hamilton, 9/16/03.

The skating lineup included Jozef Sabovcik, who with wife Jennifer Verili welcomed Jozef Jaden on 7/6/03.

Sabovcik also has a 13-year-old son, Blade, with his first wife and former Canadian champion Tracey Wainman.

Kurt Browning and wife Sonia Rodriguez welcomed son Gabriel on 7/12/03 and Tonia Kwiatkowski and husband David Ralls welcomed their daughter Madison Mary Ralls on 3/24/05. Five-time U.S. dance champions Elizabeth Punsalan and Jerod Swallow's son Gavin James was born 11/11/03 and Jenni Meno and Todd Sand added their bundle of joy, Jack Henry Sand on 12/1/04.

1994 Olympic silver medalist Nancy Kerrigan returned to the ice after the birth of her second son Brian on 4/14/05. Kerrigan also has a son Matthew (8) with husband Jerry Solomon.

The biggest difference between this production and other performances by these skaters was in their choice of child-oriented music and the presence of their kids near and on the ice.

Kerrigan skated to *Zippy Doo Da* a rendition of the Walt Disney Classic. Browning performed to a percussion number that featured Gabriel's voice called *A Child's Rhythm Basket*, and Kwiatkowski skated to Martina McBride's *In My Daughter's Eyes*. Meno and Sand choreographed a playful number to *Look at You for Jack*.

"It's on a CD of silly little songs that's personalized to Jack," explained Meno. "He used to scream in the car non-stop unless we played it for him. The show will keep him up late, so we thought it was a good choice."

The highlight of the show came at the close of Act II when Gordeeva and daughter, Daria, skated to Amy Grant's *Children of the World*. Gordeeva skated solo for the first third of the number, but the audience erupted when Daria joined her and they performed side-by-side spins, spirals and jumps wearing sequined tangerine and hot pink outfits, respectively. At two points in the choreography, Gordeeva struck and held a pose and watched her daughter perform a maneuver. And, the observant bystander would have also

noticed the protective mother subtly glance behind her, after the side-by-side jumps, to see if her daughter completed hers.

"It's a little bit of mixed feelings — skating with my daughter," Gordeeva explained. "It's good in one way and very nervous in other ways. I don't like to push very much on her. But, at the same time I have to make her understand that you have to work a lot to get a good result."

Mother and daughter seem to be communicating fine, for Daria Grinkova finished fifth at the 2005 New England Regionals after skating competitively for only about four years. She's currently being coached by Vladimir Petrenko at the International Skating Center of CT, after two years of being coached by Kulik. As for Kulik, he's still coaching at the Newington Arena in CT, and he trains in Simsbury with Gordeeva and Daria. The whole family thinks the coaching switch was a good move.

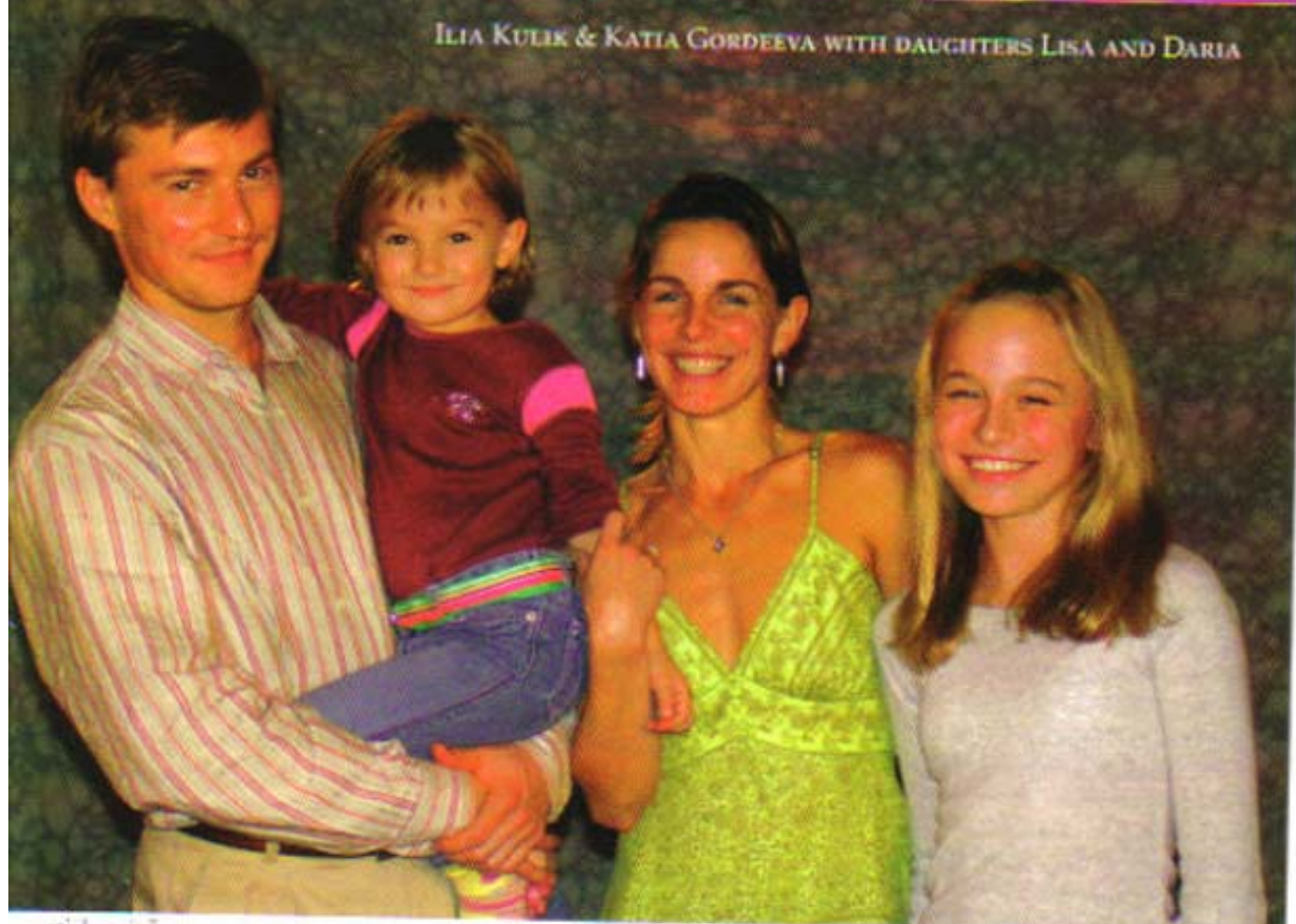
"It's hard for Daria to listen to us at home and also on the ice," said Gordeeva. [Daria smiled behind her mother shaking her head in whole-hearted agreement with mom's statement.]

"I'm honored to have parents who are Olympic champions," chimed in Daria. "I look up to them and their medals. But, it also puts a lot of pressure on me to do well. But, it's good, too," she acknowledged.

"She's a very sensitive girl, but she's also a teenager," mom laughed. "I want her to do whatever she wants, and if she likes it, then continue to skate. But at the other end, I understand that I have to put some pressure on her, to make her train properly and be disciplined and everything."

"Sport is very important for developing character," Kulik added, "but it also teaches you good sportsmanship, focus and discipline. I think it's important for all kids to be involved with sports to keep the mind and the body strong. We don't care what sport our kids choose, but we want them to decide on something and

ILIA KULIK & KATIA GORDEEVA WITH DAUGHTERS LISA AND DARIA



stick to it."

As for four-year-old Liza, she can't wait to grab the spotlight and will most definitely steal the show when she finally does! Born Elizaveta Ilinichna Kulik on 6/15/01, Liza's a ham with natural showmanship abilities which, growing up surrounded by professional skaters, will only be developed and encouraged. "She's hyper," said sister Daria lovingly. "We're both hyper!"

Liza giggled on her sister's lap and grinned photogenically as the TV and still cameras snapped her picture. During the taping of their NBC vignette, her parents and sister were each coached to say various things. Not wanting to be left out — Liza mimicked her sister and piped up, "My sister!" the way Daria had done — only she hadn't been instructed, or cued! It was a priceless moment and the family and camera crew all laughed at her comic timing.

"The little one just started skating six months ago," said Kulik. "It's a good time [to learn] because they're not scared of falling when they're young."

"I have skates," announced Liza. "I'm going to skate in a show when I'm bigger, but not this show."

Liza was integral to the show, however, as the skaters dressed as clowns, played to her and the other skater's children seated along the rink. In the second act, the children were plucked from their seats after the performances and joined their parents on the ice, in chairs stage left of Kenny Rogers.

Kulik and Gordeeva didn't perform a pairs number this time around, but they did skate together during the intro to Rogers' *Islands in the Stream* and in the closing medley *Through the Years, You Deconstructed My Life* and *She Believes in Me*. Choreographer Lea Ann Miller did a marvelous job of exposing their

affection for one another during these brief couplings on the ice.

"We've skated together in the past," Gordeeva continued, "but we didn't have time with the kids to put together a pairs number this time around."

The family clearly comes first in both of their lives and that's what made *Friends and Family* such a special show for everyone involved.

"Kristi means a lot to me," Gordeeva explained, "because we've been together in *Stars on Ice* for many years. We're good friends and I was very happy and proud when she had her first baby... So, it means a lot for all of us that she had this show and everyone can come with their kids. It's just fun to see how everybody changed over the years and having kids now."

(Note: Kristi and husband Bret Hedican are proud parents of their second daughter Emma Yoshiko Hedican, born November 17, 2005.)