



Ilia Skates for the Queen

By Helen-Joy Kirk
Special Correspondent
Nottingham, England

Queen Elizabeth and I are very lucky people — Ilia Kulik skated for us at the International Ice Skating Gala in England's new National Ice Centre in Nottingham, my home town. OK, so he really skated for her, but I got to see him! And it was fantastic.

The gala July 31 was the largest figure skating event ever held in the U.K., a once-in-a-lifetime night, in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen and Prince Philip. Personally, I was there to see the Queen in her Jubilee year and my favorite skaters Marina Anissina, Gwendal Peizerat and Ilia Kulik live and choreographed by local heroes Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean. Oh and I should add, I was hyper!

About an hour before the show I was leaning over the wall outside when I saw a guy and thought, "he has the same hair as Ilia, how weird, he even looks a bit like Ilia as well, bizarre." I stood staring at him for about a minute, watching him pass security and walk up the stairs, then it hit me. "That IS Ilia Kulik."

I'm so proud of myself because I didn't go gaga but he is really cute in real life! (You all know that, but I thought I'd share my opinion!) Ilia was wearing a grey jumper and black trousers, and he looked very relaxed and smiling. They asked to see Ilia's pass before letting him in, I couldn't believe it! I thought, "don't you know who that is???" A scary security guard was staring at me so I couldn't take a picture.

When the Queen arrived we sang the National Anthem. It was really moving and looking at her while singing it is awesome. I had tingles down my spine. She made a speech declaring the Ice Centre open and all "us locals" were totally confused as no one told us they were officially opening the Ice Centre! It's been open since 2000, oops!

Eh Up, Mi Duck!

Torvill and Dean welcomed us to the gala. Jane had her hair in a French roll and wore a black sparkly top; Chris wore all black and used the local greeting, "Eh up, mi duck," which made everyone laugh. (That's the Notts way of saying hi — "eh up" is "hello.") Torvill and Dean are huge local and national heroes, as synonymous with

Nottingham as Robin Hood, as well as being the inspiration behind our new Ice Centre. It was fantastic to see them and the audience were going crazy! They talked about the old Ice Centre, which had mice, and Jane said it's a good job Chris can skate better than he could drive the ice resurfacing machine.

Ilia skated "Rubberband Man" and was tenth to skate. He was wearing the white shirt, black trousers with red braces and white/black arm-bands. He received a good reception from the audience and his swizzles at the beginning of the program made a fantastic sound of scraping blades on the ice, and emphasised the crispness of his movements.

I was surprised at the sound of the blades all through the evening; I didn't expect to hear them as loudly as I could. I loved his skating and was amazed at the speed at which he covers the ice, and also something that surprised me about all the skaters is the amount of ice they actually cover. On TV it looks like they just skate in the centre of the rink.

Ilia's jumps were cleanly landed and smooth. Compared to the other skaters he was very light on his feet and also his jumps were noticeably higher.

He appeared to enjoy skating for the Queen. He was smiling and looked very relaxed and happy. I especially liked the complex moves and break-dance style footwork; the precision and change of edges were incredible and looked really impressive. When he did the cantilever down the centre of the rink the crowd went manic. He ended the move and came round in a circle in front of me and I saw he was grinning and blushing a little, which was really cute. He ended the routine lying on the ice and crossing one leg, and the audience were really going crazy! He smiled and waved as he left the rink after taking his bows.

Ilia also skated in the opening and the finale with the international champions. In the opening they wore the yellow and red costumes from Stars on Ice. Sasha Cohen and Kristi Yamaguchi were the first onto the ice, followed by Ilia with Steven Cousins and Kurt Browning, Anissina and Peizerat

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All the Ilia
news that
fits, we print



Photo © National Ice Centre U.K.



Photo © Junko Suwa

The royal treatment

"It is a great honor to me to perform here," Ilia told Pirouette magazine. "I can still do everything, also the quad toe-loop and the triple axel. I have kept my technique up; it is solid." (He's on the left, meeting the queen.)

Lunch With Ilia: A Warm Atmosphere

By Sarah Cunningham

NEW YORK — Seeing Ilia up close at a lunch table is quite a different experience from seeing him skate. It is more personal. Instead of his attention being focused on thousands of fans, he is focused on the five or six at his table. No matter how close you are at ice shows, it cannot beat being five feet away from him! It is a warm atmosphere that is shared by Ilia and fans alike.

I attended my first Krew luncheon with Ilia on Saturday, April 13, the afternoon before Stars on Ice appeared at Madison Square Garden. As the Krew members waited for the man of the hour to arrive, someone noticed Ilia walking into the restaurant with Nancy. As Ilia came through the door, the group broke into applause. Ilia acknowledged his fans with his beautiful smile that lights up the room immediately.

Ilia looked absolutely wonderful. He wore dark jeans and a fleece pullover. The SOI cast had a rough night of travel and got in late the night before, but with Ilia, you could not tell. He made direct eye contact with each introduction to a fan and gave a warm smile.

We were all excited to have lunch with Ilia. Who wouldn't want to dine with an Olympic gold medalist from Russia who happens to have a killer smile and a beautiful personality? Skater-fan interaction does not get much better than this. He was very attentive to all the comments and questions that came his way. That he cared about his fans was obvious in the thoughtful way he replied to questions. His answers had depth and warmth, and he had a way of making each fan feel special. That is the mark of a performer and artist who genuinely appreciates his audience.

He talked about creating his three programs, "Rendezvous," "Pick Up the Pieces" and "Rubberband Man" for SOI. "It was just luck, I don't know, creative luck or something. It was like really three different routines, and I was

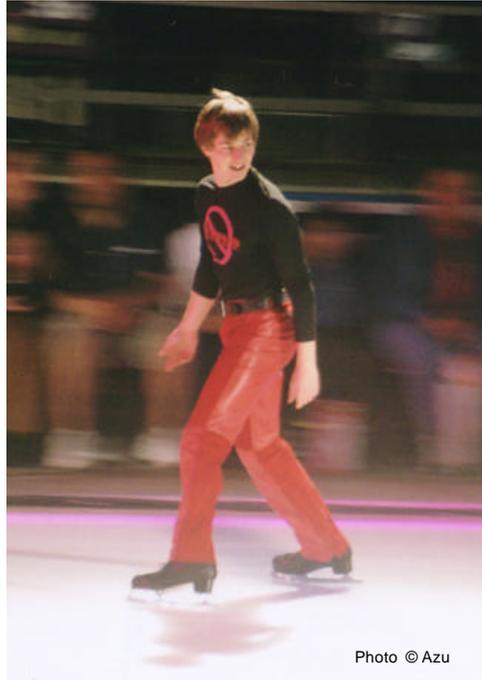


Photo © Azu

Ilia in "Black Betty," New York

theless.

We had to hustle to our next stop for dinner with the Krew at the Stardust Diner, a neat throwback to the fifties complete with live entertainment, including singers in poodle skirts! It was a fun atmosphere to start off our Ilia-filled weekend adventure, and it was great to meet all the Krew members I have been talking to for a couple of years.

After dinner, we all went different ways. Some enjoyed a Broadway play, while others toured around the city. My group headed to the Empire State Building to view the memorial lights that were shown to honor the fallen World Trade Center towers. It happened to be the last weekend these lights

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Photos © Laurie Asseo



Photo © Ann Stone

Lunch with his fans—Ilia gets a birthday cake, and Krew members gather at Bryant Park Grill

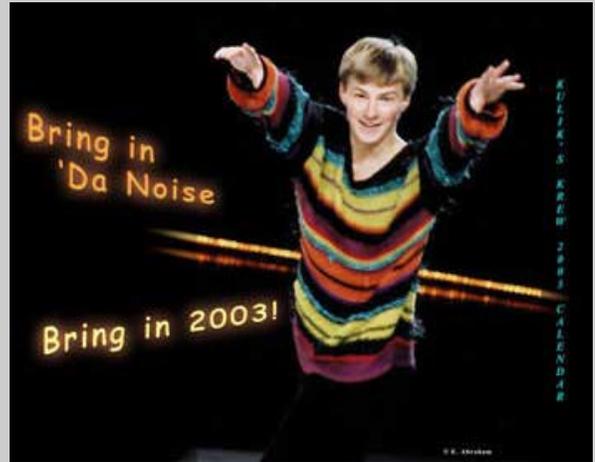
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Nottingham

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and then Elena Berezhnaya and Anton Sikharulidze. They moved around the outside of the rink, each performing lifts or spins. The men did double axels. Ilia did a split jump, very impressive! Marina and Gwendal did my favourite reverse lift from "The Man in the Iron Mask" where she lifts him and he holds his legs in the scissors position. Ilia did the cantilever down the length of the rink, and the audience went ballistic!

After the finale the skaters lined up at the end of the rink to be formally presented to the Queen. She walked from one end while Prince Philip went from the other, so they all got to meet both of them. The skaters had their backs to us so we couldn't see their reactions, but I did notice Ilia watching her come down the line.

These were the other highlights of the evening for me:

Sasha Cohen skated a beautiful routine with an artistic gymnastics ribbon. She did a scratch spin with the ribbon twirling around her and it looked really effective, especially with it spinning around her skates and not getting tangled up!

Robin Cousins has had surgery and couldn't skate. He gave Chris a note of excuse from his mum. Apparently he hurt his knee practicing the quadruple-triple in combination with the back flip, in his back garden. Yehh, right o'duck!

Charlie Chaplin and a Clown

Elena and Anton skated "Chaplin" and the audience went crazy. They stayed in character throughout and put a lot of emotion into it. I was amazed by the distance they cover when he throws her! The thing that I can't get out of my head is her height, she's really tiny, dainty, like a doll and so pretty. And when she landed the throw triple everyone went crazy, cheering, screaming and clapping. She was skating toward us, smiling, like she really appreciated the support. They are so smooth on the ice; the strength of their lifts and intricacy of the footwork was impressive.

I have to include Kurt Browning! Before the gala he came out dressed as a clown, and former British men's champion Chris Howarth told him that he couldn't skate. "We have all these Olympic champions, we don't need a clown like you." Kurt walked away with his head down, drawing a huge "awwww" from the crowd.



Photo © Susanne Kempf

Later he came out wearing skates, but when he was told he couldn't skate as he had skate guards on, he looked at his feet and fell over! He kept popping his head round the tunnel and waving and trying to sneak onto the ice, and getting pulled back with a rope!

During the gala, Chris and Jane were talking, and as they were leaving Kurt called them back and fell onto the floor with his legs up, and they had to take his guards off for him. Jane said something like "it would help." At the end of his routine

Precision footwork

Kristi came out and Kurt pretended he fancied her, squealing, "Kristi Yamaguchi, she's beauuutiffooo!" I was crying with laughter; it was classic slapstick and for me the funniest part of the whole evening! To use Notts slang, "the guy's a nutter!"

Marina and Gwendal performed their "Spanish Dance," this season's modified original dance. Their skating is powerful and emotive, and as strong and dynamic live as on TV. I saw the new "grab" move everyone is talking about. "Get your hands off me Gwendal or I'll slap you!" sort of describes

Marina's facial expression; it's hilarious. Since I first saw them at the last Olympics, it has been my ambition to see them skate live. It was a dream come true; they were mind-blowing and I will always remember that.

"She Just Got to Meet Ilia"

As we were leaving the Centre we saw the royal car so we rushed over to see the new Bentley. (Everyone in the U.K. has been talking about this car!) When the Queen came out she was about two metres away from me and got into the car on our side, looking like she had really enjoyed the evening. I commented to my friend, "so she should, she just got to meet Ilia, Marina and Gwendal." (Sorry for sounding disrespectful, but it's true!)

She looks so serene when she waves. She is really beautiful when she smiles, and her hair is so white! Prince Philip was wearing a grey suit and she wore a red dress and jacket with a chiffon scarf detailing, with a diamond and pearl brooch, black gloves, carrying a black handbag and yellow flowers. She wore my favourite color, how cool is that!

Helen-Joy Kirk is a humanities student in Nottingham, England, who wishes there were a lot more figure skating in the U.K.!



Photo © Junko Suwa

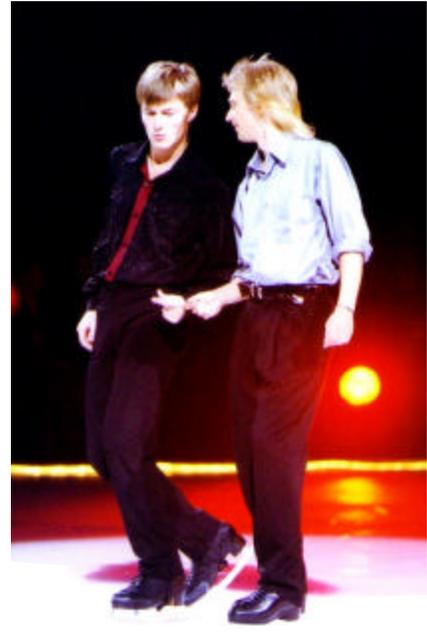
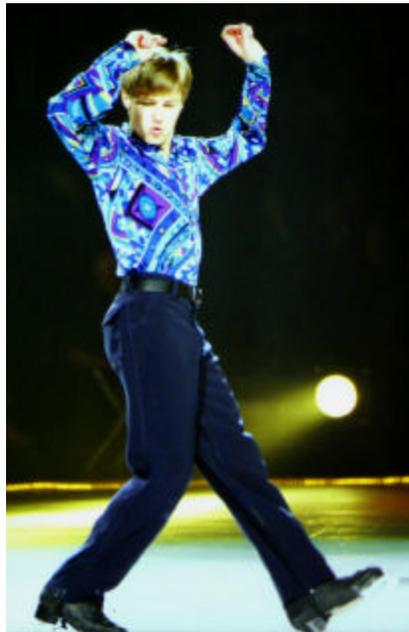


Photo © Susanne Kempf

The receiving line, and backstage in "Notts"

Scott Hamilton told Ilia to “blow the roof off this place” when Ilia skated at Scott’s CARES charity show Sept. 21 — and Ilia did! He got huge applause for “Pick Up the Pieces” with his fast footwork and huge triple jumps. “Awesome — just awesome!” Scott said afterward. The show in Cleveland benefited the Cancer Alliance for Research, Education and Survivorship. That’s Joe Sabovcik with Ilia on the right.

Photos © Rebecca Patrick



Krew Konvention

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were to be shown. Much to our disappointment it was foggy that night and we chose not to go to the top because visibility was very limited. Instead, we saw Times Square, which is quite an experience in itself.

Saturday morning came very quickly. One group of us went back to the Empire State Building to view the city. It was a spectacular day, and it was a very awe-inspiring sight. After that we headed back to the hotel to freshen up for lunch with our favorite guy.

During the time between the luncheon and the show a few of us went to see Rockefeller Center. The ice was still open that late in the season! Then, we went back to the hotel and met in the lobby to get tickets from Nancy before the show. It was just a short walk to Madison Square Garden, where we had wonderful seats just off the ice.

The Show!

What a huge arena it is! This small-town country girl was in complete awe. (I almost fainted dead away after spotting Evgeny Platov, Gorsha Sur, Jef Billings and especially John McEnroe—my goal was to see one celebrity aside from Ilia in New York, and I saw my favorite tennis player!)

We were anticipating the show, and we were not disappointed.



© Laurie Asseo

The World Trade Center memorial lights



© Laurie Asseo

The Rubberband!

When our Iliushka came out, everyone in the arena knew where the Krew sat! We cheered, cheered, cheered our guy on to three great performances. “Rendezvous” was absolutely amazing! The crowd was caught up in “Pick Up the Pieces,” and “Rubberband Man” drew an amazing amount of appreciative applause. The crowd was definitely on Ilia’s side. I had never sat with such a large group of people from the Krew to cheer on our guy.

After the show we all gathered for dinner at the Tick Tock Diner inside the New Yorker Hotel. We chatted about our wonderful weekend and lunch with Ilia, and afterward we were able to see the World Trade Center lights from the New Yorker’s Sky Lounge.

On Sunday morning, many of us prepared to leave for our homes located around the world. A group of us took a ride on the Staten Island Ferry one last time, and this time the Statue of Liberty was bathed in the New York City sun. What a way to say goodbye.

Ground Zero

I also got to pay tribute to the victims of Sept. 11 by visiting the Ground Zero site. As I walked up the platform while waiting my turn at the top, I read messages that many other people had left behind. We were allowed five minutes at the rail overlooking the disaster site. Everything was very somber, very quiet, and I reflected on the lives lost there. It was like the very air was filled with tragedy and sadness, but touches of hope and faith could be found. It was truly amazing.

During this weekend, I made lifelong friends and collected wonderful memories that can never be forgotten. It was a remarkable experience to share the joy I get out of Ilia’s skating with many others who experience the same joy. This trip was so much more than “meeting Ilia,” it was a journey of a lifetime for me.

Sarah Cunningham is a senior sociology major at the University of Tennessee-Martin and a member of Kulik’s Krew.