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Columnist Lisa Ferguson: It figures: Ryan skated into stand-up spotlight

Lisa Ferguson's Laugh Lines column appears Fridays. Her Sun Lite Column appears Mondays. Reach her at imsferguson@yahoo.com.

You don't often hear comparisons drawn between the worlds of stand-up comedy and professional figure skating -- unless **Nancy Ryan** is doing the talking.

The former-skater-turned-comic, who performs through Sunday at The Comedy Stop at The Trop, says working in comedy is "not so much different" from the cutthroat competition she experienced during her years on the ice.

In both professions, "Everybody's talking about you behind your back; people are doing this and that," she explained during a call from her Long Branch, N.J., home. "So you just have to keep your chin up and do what you know that you do best."

Ryan began skating as a kid. "I started taking lessons and it kind of snowballed from there." She competed from 1977 through 1980 as a singles skater before making the switch to ice dancing in the mid-'80s.

Though she says she dreamt of winning an Olympic medal, **Ryan** is the first to concede she never quite fit the

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stereotypical ice-princess mold. "I'm not the small, little, tiny 80-pound skater," she explains. "I'm 5-foot-5; I've got a broad frame, so that kind of put a damper on things."

Add to that a slightly rough-and-tumble personality: "I wasn't Tonya Harding, no, but I smoked cigarettes and I drank coffee."

She recalls being backstage at a skating event "waiting to go on, and I was squatting down on the ground smoking a cigarette and watching Katarina Witt doing laps (around the rink) and drinking her water, and I'm blowing smoke at her."

Cigarettes weren't **Ryan's** only vice.

"I started partying in my teens," she says, and abused drugs and alcohol. "I just wanted to be a normal kid, and I wanted to be accepted by my peers ... It started that way and just continued."

During the late '70s and again in the late '80s, **Ryan** says she lived in a boarding house in Lake Placid, N.Y., near similar residences where some of the sport's biggest stars -- Scott Hamilton and Peter Carruthers among them -- also stayed. "They were all around," she says.

In 1982, **Ryan** switched from amateur- to professional-skater status. Two years later, however, she took a break and began teaching the sport to students in New York, Connecticut and Vermont.

Ryan returned to competitive skating later that decade as an ice dancer, alongside skating partner Philip Piasecki. The pair skated together for five years before competing in the 1991 U. S. Professional Figure Skating Championships. It turned out to be **Ryan's** final skating competition.

"Philip wanted to quit (skating) and I wasn't ready to quit," she explains. Instead, **Ryan** moved to Connecticut in search of a new skating partner. "I just wanted to start all over again."

To make ends meet, she took a job waiting tables at a comedy club. During an open-mike night in 1992, at the urging of a comedian, **Ryan** took the stage. "I went up there in an apron, with a tray and I talked about how it sucked to be a waitress in a comedy club, and I was horrible."

The experience was reminiscent of her skating days, however, in that she was quickly bitten by "that performing bug. I loved being up there."

Once and for all, she says, "I put the skates away and that was it. I became a comedian."

Still, "It took me awhile to kind of get the whole idea of what (stand-up) was all about. I mean, it's such an art form to create a joke, to make people laugh, to make things universal so everybody understands, but to keep it true to yourself."

In her act, the 41-year-old **Ryan** references her skating years, as well as her battle with addiction (she's been sober for 18 years). "I make it funny to the point where it's just ridiculous," she explains, joking, "All the other kids were making figure eights, and I was making 7 and 7s."

Ryan, who has previously appeared on Comedy Central's stand-up series "Premium Blend," also riffs about her second marriage, which ended in divorce more than two years ago.

"My act used to be about how happy I was in my marriage -- a good 20 minutes of it was all about how in love I was and how great my marriage was," she says. "When it came to be that it was all a lie, and I came home and my apartment was empty ... I had to change my entire act. So, it became this whole 'you-never-know-what-you're-gonna-get'-type of thing."

The adversity **Ryan** has faced has "made my act better," she insists. "I would say that my life experiences and the pain that I've experienced in the past three years has pushed me to write and to change my whole persona onstage."

Finding the humor in such weighty topics has proved challenging, especially since "I am one of the most serious people you'll ever meet," she says, "and it took awhile before I was able to make things light enough where I could do it."

It helps that "about 90 percent of the audience out there has gone through something that I've gone through with drinking, the divorce, the pain of it all. I'm able to touch that and then create a punch line where they're like ... 'That made me feel better about my life.' "

Later this year **Ryan** is scheduled to release a DVD of her

stand-up show. A portion of the proceeds from its sales will be donated to Any Solider Inc. (www.AnySoldier.com), which posts requests from deployed servicemen and women on behalf of their units for much-needed items that civilians can purchase and send directly to those troops.

Ryan, whose beau is a deployed Marine, serves as Any Soldier's director of publicity and fundraising. She has coordinated several comedy shows in New York benefiting the organization, and says she hopes to stage similar events in Las Vegas. "I can't think of a more meaningful way to support a very important cause."

Somebody, get this woman a medal, already. "I'm not Tonya Harding," **Ryan** jokes. "I don't believe in hitting people in the knee for any reason -- well, there might be one or two reasons -- but not to win a gold medal or anything. I can think of much better things."

Out for laughs

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When Laugh Lines interviewed Ron White in December, the "Blue Collar Comedy Tour" co-star chatted about his upcoming WB sitcom pilot, "The Ron White Show," which will be taped at 4 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Stardust. The show, set to air April 21, will also feature an appearance by comic Dave Attell. Tickets to attend the taping (ages 18 and older only) are free, and are available at the Stardust box office.

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Meanwhile, at 10 p.m. Sunday, catch White when he serves as Roast Master, alongside Bill Engvall and Larry the Cable Guy, on "The Comedy Central Roast of Jeff Foxworthy," airing on Cox cable channel 56. Also scheduled to skewer Foxworthy is Lisa Lampanelli, who was profiled here in October.

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New York-New York headliner Rita Rudner is featured in the March/April issue of Golf for Women magazine. In the Q&A piece, the funny lady recalls the time she hit one of her pink

golf balls into a hot tub near the old Desert Inn golf course.

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