

Your Relationship With Your "Pro"

Your "pro" is your skating instructor. Your coach. How do you get one? When do you need one? What should you expect from your pro?

Your relationship with skating instructors usually begins when you take your first group lesson in a Learn-to-Skate program. Group lessons are generally taught by several of the instructors at any given rink, and during your time in these programs you will have the opportunity to meet and work with several different instructors. Use this time to observe them -- their techniques, their personality, their teaching and interpersonal skills, their compatibility with your interests.

When you are ready to advance beyond the group lesson environment, you will select a pro to become your teacher. Do not make this decision lightly -- skating costs a lot of money, takes a lot of your time, and you only live once. Hopefully, your group lesson time will have helped you to form some initial ideas. Talk to other skaters (and parents) who have been skating a while to see what their experiences have been like, "interview" those pros that you have an interest in, watch them working one-on-one with their students. Ask about their membership in the PSA.

Be aware that there is a limited amount of ice time at all rinks, and instructor's schedules will fill up. You may not be able to make arrangements with your first choice. Some clubs or rinks have their own "rituals" or methods of matching pros and incoming students. At almost all rinks however, the "business relationship" between a pro and student is a personal contract. You deal directly with the pro, not the club or rink to make your arrangements. You will be billed by, and pay, the pro directly, not the rink or club. So when you have made your decisions, talk directly to the pro involved to see if you can "get together".

What to expect from your Pro

Your pro will become your personal instructor. When you first contract with a pro, you should have a long talk about your goals and expectations in skating. Working together, you should build a general plan for how you will achieve those goals. But then you should trust the pro to work out the day-to-day lesson plans and "order of attack". They know best how to teach the elements, and in what order they should be learned. Don't be afraid to revisit the "goals and expectations" discussion once in a while, but don't try to micromanage the pro's method of getting there either.

Your pro will help you to establish an appropriate lesson and practice schedule. The pro will help you to balance the appropriate amount of lesson time with practice time. A general guideline is that for each 15 minutes of lesson time, a skater should have at least 30 minutes of practice time to reinforce those lessons. Some skaters will need more, some will need less. In particular, younger skaters may need a higher ratio of lesson time because they will likely have a harder time "self-directing" practice time. Usually, pros give lessons of about 15, 20, or 30 minutes duration. This will vary according to the needs of the skater, demands upon the pro's time, and the length of ice sessions.

Your pro will help you to make decisions about testing and competing. They will prepare you appropriately for these events. When it is time for a "program", they will generally make your tapes ("cut your music"). The pro often will suggest music that they think is appropriate to your skills, level, and interests. Do not be afraid to give them suggestions in this area. Your pro will choreograph your program to suit the music and meet the technical requirements of the event.

When you test, your pro will usually be present at your test session to help you warm up, and to provide support / guidance as you need it. Similarly, when you compete, you

should expect that the pro will go to the competition with you to guide your warmup and provide any last-minute support you need (they usually call it "putting you on the ice").

You should expect the pro to respect you both personally and as a skater. Your pro may be a demanding "yelly" kind of pro, or might be a soft-spoken "cuddly" type. Either way, you should expect to be fairly and professionally treated. Your pro may have to make you work hard when you don't want to, or when you just can't seem to get a new concept, and may have to yell or demand a little to get you to do it. But you should never be "demeaned" or made fun of. Your pro will almost certainly have to touch you, and position and move your body parts around a little bit to show you how to do the elements, but should never take liberties with your private parts or do anything to make you feel personally uncomfortable.

Finally, expect to be billed for the pro's time. As mentioned earlier, your business relationship will probably be directly with the pro. S/he will bill you directly, usually on a fixed schedule. You should make your payments directly to the pro. Rates will vary in different areas, and according to the skill level of the pro. In my area, non-elite skaters generally expect to pay somewhere between \$30 and \$60 per hour. The pro will bill you for cutting music. Expect a bill for time spent with you at a test session or competition. If the test/competition is not at your home rink, you should expect a fee for travel, and room/board if it is an overnight competition (often pros will divide their expenses among the students they have at a competition -- sometimes they just have a fixed fee).

What your pro should expect from you

Your pro should expect your attention and your best effort. No pro expects every student to do everything right the first time, but they do expect you to TRY, every time. Do not waste your pro's time, or your parents money, through lack of effort.

Your pro should expect you to respect them, just as you expect them to respect you. Treat them with courtesy on and off the ice. Do not speak badly about them when they demand things of you. Do not give them "attitude" on the ice. Leave your personal troubles behind you when you step onto the ice and focus on the skating.

When you will be unable to attend a lesson, try to notify the pro in advance. Remember that for many pros teaching IS their "job", and the income they derive from it may be paying their bills. If you are unable to attend a lesson, they may be able to fit in an extra lesson for someone else in the time you're not there -- but they need to know in advance to make those arrangements. Many pros will charge you a regular lesson fee if you are an unannounced "no-show".

Pay your bills in a timely manner.

Finally, trust your pro. Sometimes they'll ask you to learn things you can't see any need for. Or they'll want you to wait on some elements until after you've perfected other skills. As long as you've jointly set out your long-term goals, trust them to get you there...

Team Teaching

In many rinks, you will find some pros that "team teach". This means that two or more pros will get together and accept students "jointly". The pros will coordinate their lessons with you, and on any given day you might get one or the other. Sometimes this is done for scheduling purposes, sometimes it is done because the pros are working together to make a stronger package (say one is really strong on jumps and the other is strong on spins), sometimes its done when a long-term pro is helping a younger pro to get started. If your pro offers you this arrangement, be sure to understand it before you agree to it (who gets paid what, when and how many lessons with each pro, who goes to competitions, etc), but don't be afraid of it as long as you understand it.

If your pros don't team-teach, you may still find it to your advantage to select different pros for different disciplines. You might choose one pro for dance and another for freestyle. Or sometimes a different one for moves, etc. This is not uncommon, but like team teaching, it should be entered into with a full understanding on everyone's part of what the arrangements will be at test or competition time, and when scheduling conflicts arise.

Choreography

And then there's "choreography". Often, especially at the higher levels, skaters will contract with a "choreographer" to help "set" (design) the program, and to work with the presentation elements associated with that program. When this is done there needs to be a good understanding and working relationship between the choreographer and the freestyle coach. Usually, these relationships are entered into upon the advice of your freestyle pro.

Ballet / Aerobics

Competitive skaters often take off-ice training in ballet. The discipline, balance, and body-awareness that ballet teaches are of great help to skaters in controlling their jumps and spins. The presentation skills that ballet teaches can significantly improve the "appearance" of a competitive program. Off ice aerobics and workout programs are similarly of great value to skaters and should be considered for all competitive performers. Your skating pro should be able to help you find ballet and workout programs that are oriented towards figure skaters. You may even have such programs right at your own rink.

When it all fails... Changing Pros

You should expect, and be willing to work through, hard times in any relationship. There will be times in your relationship with your pro that you'd just as soon never see him/her again, and you'd just like to hang it up. Try to work through those. But if it all fails, and you can't work it out, don't be afraid to change pros. It's your money, and your career. But don't forget to pay all your bills when you leave. Even if your arrangements haven't worked out, don't forget that it's usually a 2-way street, and the same problems might not exist for other skaters -- don't spread bad stories and "bad will" for the pro.