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What's Offline

The Price of Going for the Gold

By PAUL B. BROWN

DURING the winter Olympics, you can count on figure skaters falling during a pivotal part in their routines, some young phenom setting a record during the downhill skiing, and lots and lots of reaction shots of parents watching their offspring go for the gold.

But it seems no one ever talks about how much those moms and dads spent to help their children reach the Olympics.

Parents rectifies that in its current issue.

The magazine says that if you want your child to compete in skiing in the 2022 Winter Games, plan on spending $295,449. That includes $149,100 for private lessons, $114,000 for travel-related expenses — "by the time he's 14, he'll be jetting to Switzerland for summer competitions"— and $21,153 for clothing.

Surprisingly, the equipment itself will set you back "only" $11,196. ("His skis need to get longer, his boots bigger, and the bindings fitted as he grows.")

Training a figure skater for the Olympics will cost you a bit less. The total for private lessons, travel, skates and clothes, including "a seamstress to sew thousands of sequins into several costumes": $232,178.

ENGINEERING VICTORY The Olympics figure in two articles in the current issue of Wired, although the focus is on the science behind potential victories. Researchers in Britain spent $89,000 developing a "sensor-laden broom in the hopes of optimizing" the strokes of their curlers. Curling is the sport in which players brush the ice in front of a large sliding stone.

Writes Brett Zarda: "The women's team used an early iteration of the brush prior to winning the gold in 2002."

Elsewhere, the magazine writes about Michael S. Holden, a 67-year-old aerospace engineer who heads the Calspan-University of Buffalo Research Center. He is studying how to reduce drag on skiers, speed skaters and the athletes competing in sledding events.

"He has contributed to seven U.S. gold medals, donating time that would otherwise cost $1,000 an hour at the facility," writes Geoffrey Gagnon. "Two decades of work have rendered him the de facto Team USA physicist."

Mr. Holden keeps his work in perspective. Talking about one group of potential Olympians he has

worked with, he says, "if they can't ski, they still end up in the trees — just a little faster."

COLLABORATIVE CUSTOMERS People often point to such things as price, quality or technical shortcomings to explain why new products fail, but the reason is simpler than that, two professors write in The MIT Sloan Management Review.

"The main culprit has been a faulty understanding of customer needs," says Susumu Ogawa of Kobe University in Japan and Frank T. Piller of the TUM Business School in Germany.

Their solution is to incorporate potential customers into product development, an idea that they say is already being followed by companies like Procter & Gamble and Unilever.

Customers would be asked to submit their ideas and vote for company concepts online; concepts that received the most votes would be pursued. Then the company would ask customers for a commitment to buy the product — perhaps at a discount — before beginning final development and manufacturing. If there were not enough preorders, the product would be abandoned before major investments in final development, manufacturing and marketing.

The authors contend this process, called collective customer commitment, is more efficient than focus groups that measure whether customers like an idea, not if they will buy a product, and is less expensive than test marketing.

FINAL TAKE In its current design issue, Wallpaper names winners in such categories as best glassware (Baccarat) and best watch (Rolex.) But in a move we hopes catches on, it also names products that did not make the grade.

"This year's award for truly unappealing hotel interiors goes to London's Courthouse Hotel, which has a bar sporting three former prison cells and frightening, eclectic furnishings."

The magazine also hated the Rolleiflex MiniDigi camera, which "has a 'film advance' lever, even though there is no film. Form and function passing like ships in the night." PAUL B. BROWN