

Life on the ice

Olympic figure skater thanks Canada for taking her career to the world stage

By Lisa Evans

Competing in the Olympics may have seemed a farfetched dream for a skater coming from a country with only one rink and no history of producing elite figure skaters, but, in 2006, Turkey's Tuğba Karademir did just that. She was that country's first figure skater to compete in the Olympic Games.

Carrying the flag of her home country at the Torino Winter Olympics was one of the skater's proudest moments, but Karademir didn't just have the support of Turkish fans in Torino and the subsequent 2010 Olympic Games in Vancouver. She was cheered on by proud Canadian fans, as Karademir had immigrated to Canada at the age of 13.

She decided to move to Canada to train at the renowned Mariposa International Training Centre in Barrie, Ontario, and has now become a well-respected coach at the same club and an inspiration for young figure skaters.

Karademir first became interested in skating when her kindergarten class was invited to participate in a learn-to-skate program at Turkey's first-ever indoor skating rink. She fell in love with the sport and continued with her lessons. "It is the perfect combination of freedom and structure," she says of the sport.

But with only one indoor rink in the country, ice time was extremely limited. "We had to share the rink with public skating and with hockey," she says. As Karademir progressed through the ranks, she became aware of how little opportunity there was in Turkey, especially when it came to role models. There weren't any Turkish skaters to watch and emulate.

At international events, Karademir was placing in the top three by age nine, but by the time she was 12 years old, she began to slip in the ranks. "I was not improving at a faster rate than my international competitors. So all of a sudden instead of coming in the top three, I was top fifth or sixth," says Karademir.

It became clear that the only way to grow as a figure skater was to move to a country where she would have greater access to resources — namely, ice time and elite skaters. She picked Canada for the country's dominance in the sport and record of producing world-class figure skaters.

Although Karademir missed her friends and extended family, she felt completely at home on the ice — and Canada. Being part of the figure skating community helped Karademir develop a sense of belonging.

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ing in her new country. "I think figure skating actually helped me fit in," she says. "There were a lot of kids my age [at the Mariposa Club]. We would skate in the morning, walk to school together and come back together," she says.

While in Turkey, Karademir had been the top in her class, here in Canada, she was surrounded by far more advanced skaters. "Everyone around me was doing cool jumps like triples and skating at fast speeds," she says. All of a sudden, Karademir found she too was skating faster and improving rapidly.

Making it to the Olympic Games on behalf of Turkey was a dream come true for Karademir. Although the Winter Olympics aren't typically a big deal in her home country, the local Turkish radio station began a countdown to watch her take to the ice. "They would say '13 days left until Tuğba skates,'" she laughs. Karademir had become the skater to look up to; the one she was lacking as a young girl.

Karademir retired from professional figure skating in 2010 and is now a coach at the Mariposa Club, the same club she trained at. She occasionally visits Turkey to work with young figure skaters and has even hosted a couple of Turkish skaters, who come to Barrie to train with her in the summer.

Although the 29-year-old is unsure what exactly the future holds — she studied business administration at York University and is now looking into an MBA — she's sure figure skating will always be part of her life in Canada. "That's my first love," she says.



Photo by Stephan Potopnyk

Tuğba Karademir coaches skating in Barrie, Ontario.