OUT OF SYNCH

Olympic synchronized swimming judge Ana Maria Da Silveira Lobo, citizen of Brazil, native speaker of Portuguese, sat in her assigned seat in the box at the Olympic swim stadium in Barcelona awaiting the next contestant. The small input device to record her ratings rested on a ledge in front of her. The view below to the crystalline water in the pool was perfect. The contestants were the best the countries of the world had to offer. Next up was the favorite for the gold medal. You could feel the electricity in the air.

Unlike the classic 8-woman team event in which bronzed arms and shapely legs bloomed up from the water in synch to form intertwined patterns and woo the audience with impressive feats of aquatic athleticism in harmony with an emotional musical score, they were now on the solo event. The only synchronization was to be between the lone competitor in the pool and the music playing underwater and throughout the stadium. These were the compulsory routines, in which each competitor in the solo event had to perform four specific figures, as in figure skating, during a demanding two-minute program. The swimmer chose the music, but the compulsory maneuvers, or "prescribed elements" as they are called in the sport, were predefined. The "free routine" in which the swimmer could do whatever she wanted within the time allowed would be performed tomorrow. Each competitor had spent the better part of her life preparing for this day, and each competitor would

leave Barcelona with the satisfaction of having made it to the Olympics. But only one would be judged — more or less — to be the best in the world and take home the gold medal.

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Ana Maria Da Silveira Lobo of Brazil was a member of the panel of judges ready to evaluate the *technical merit* of the next contestant's compulsory routine. Another panel judged *artistic merit* and would be rating the originality of the choreography, the fluidity of the transitions, the aesthetics of the patterns of legs and arms — the overall beauty of the presentation. For her part, Ana Maria had to focus on the slightly less-subjective and technical side of things. Her job was to verify that each of the prescribed elements was performed and evaluate the execution, synchronization, and difficulty of the whole routine. *Execution* encompassed the strokes with arms and hands and various thrusts with legs and feet, but also the precision of the patterns and twists and turns made by the athlete's whole body. The movements had to appear smooth and effortless, as if anyone could perform them, which, of course, was not at all the case.

The next competitor was Sylvie Fréchette of Montreal, Canada, native speaker of French, the pre-games favorite to win the gold. She was not only physically attractive but also exceptionally strong in both the upper and lower body. She would have to be high in the water in the all-deep pool during upright maneuvers, all the way to her waist on many occasions. When upside down, her legs had to be entirely above the surface so they could be seen by the judges and worldwide television audience. Synchronization with the music must be maintained both above and below the water surface, and the elements performed with her head underwater required her to hold her breath for as long as a minute while keeping the giant smile on

her face for the underwater cameras.

The method used to measure athletic performance reflects the nature of the game being played, and this synchronized swimming competition was no exception. Determining which racing swimmer touches the wall first is a straightforward matter, especially with modern timing devices. The only thing that is required to determine the longest throw of the javelin is a very long tape measure, and for most team sports all the judges have to do is make sure everyone plays by the rules and then add up the number of times the ball goes into the goal. But things can get a bit tricky when *art* enters the picture, where the winning athlete is the one that *looks* the best or gives the performance that is *most pleasing to the eye*. Just how does one measure in a valid and reliable manner the thrust of a leg up into the air or a two-handed salute by a smiling young lady treading water? With a panel of judges, that's how, and a complex point system to help structure the process. Conceptually, each competitor started out with 10 points. If she was overly nervous and skipped one of her prescribed elements, a whopping two points would be deducted from the starting total of 10. The same was true for touching the bottom of the pool. Getting out of synch with the music could cost you a point, and a lesser offense like dropping the ever-present smile for a split second to get that gulp of air after a long underwater element might cost you a tenth or two if it happened to be seen by a judge. But these competitors were the best in the world and the differences between them would be a matter of hundredths and possibly thousandths of a point. *Restriction of range* is what the statisticians called it: for most competitors at this event the scores would be tightly bunched at the highest end of the scale.

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Sylvie Fréchette of Canada was now in the wings almost ready to start her performance with a ten-second ballet routine on the deck prior to jumping gracefully into the pool without so much as a splash. Somehow it was fitting that Sylvie Fréchette, the favorite to win the gold medal, was from Canada. The Canadians had, after all, invented the sport in the late 19th century. They called it water ballet and often performed it in turn-of-the-century indoor pools. For the participants it was a fun way to get some exercise and clean up at the same time; for the audience it was a pleasant and warm diversion on a cold Canadian day. But in the 20's the Canadians made the strategic blunder of showing off in the United States, and in 1934 a major water ballet exhibit was given at the Chicago World's Fair. The Americans knew a good thing when they saw it and embraced the sport as their own. Executives at the MGM movie studio in Hollywood created the aqua musical genre and made a star out of competitive swimming sensation Esther Williams. The United States Amateur Athletic Union recognized it as a sport, and water ballet was exhibited at the 1948 Olympics. Synchronized swimming made its full debut as a certified Olympic event at the 1984 Los Angeles Games, a stone's throw from Hollywood.

But as much as Sylvie Fréchette and Ana Maria Da Silveira Lobo and thousands of other competitors, judges, and spectators around the world loved their sport, it was not without its detractors. It was best left on the big silver screen, many believed, not elevated to the pinnacle of sport, the Olympic Games. Comedians couldn't pass up the chance to give mock performances on late-night television, especially during the "coming out" at the 1984 games in Los Angeles. And what was with the pounds of waterproof makeup, nose clips, glued-on grins, plastic hairdos, and high-cut sequined bathing suits? One sports columnist wrote that the *technical* and *artistic* dimensions of judging were best abbreviated, reduced to a basic form that

said what the show was really all about: "T's and A's."

But comments like these were in very bad taste and ill-advised, especially in and around the synchronized swimming venue here in Barcelona in the summer of 1992. Sylvie Fréchette was ready to perform and the music began to play. She smiled to the crowd and to the judges, moved her arms and stood on her toes, and hopped into the water and began her difficult and physically demanding technical program at the Olympics.

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All had gone well and nearly two minutes later she was in the middle of her final prescribed element: an Albatross. Her torso was upside down and the top of her head pointed down to the bottom of the pool. Her waist was bent at 90 degrees, and her long legs were perfectly straight and parallel to, and just below, the surface of the water. Sylvie Fréchette sculled powerfully with her hands to stop herself from sinking. She raised her left leg straight up out of the water and pointed it to the sky, simultaneously bending her right leg at the knee and touching the upper part of the shin of her left leg with the toes of her right foot. The end of the routine was in sight. She straightened out her right leg and pointed it up to the sky right next to her left leg. Sylvie Fréchette was now fully upside down, yet, quite miraculously, half in and half out of the water. She eased off the pressure with her hands and slowly and gracefully slid down straight beneath the surface without a ripple. It was over! The routine had been completed on time. It had been a stellar performance. She knew it and the judges knew it.

A 9.7 out of a total of 10. This was the score judge Ana Maria Da Silveira Lobo of Brazil decided the performance deserved. All five technical judges had to enter their rating within a matter of seconds of each other. Each judge's small

input terminal was connected to a central computer. Once Ana Maria entered her numbers they would be sent to the central computer and then back to the display on her hand-held terminal, verifying the receipt of her input. Long gone were the days when a judge had to pick up her stack of scoring cards, flip to the desired numbers and hold them up high at the same time as the other judges for all to see. The officials used to frantically write down the numbers, average them out, multiply a weighting factor for the technical and artistic elements, and come up with a final score while the anxious competitors and fans waited. Now a computer calculated the averages, applied the weightings, and generated the final score. It was much faster and less nerve-racking than the old manual method and, overall, it was less prone to error.

But there was still one aspect of the system where variability could creep in, where the vagaries of human behavior could play a role. Ana Maria's input device was much like a telephone keypad, with the numbers 0 through 9. There was a key for a perfect 10 and another for 1/2. There was no need to input a decimal point or press "Enter." These things were taken care of automatically. To enter a score of 9.7 she had only to enter 9 and 7. When all of the judges had keyed in their ratings the central computer would collect the values and start its calculations. What this required of Ana Maria was that she be exact and precise when she picked up the terminal and punched in her rating, just as she needed to be exact and precise when she used to flip to the appropriate numbers on the old manual scoring cards. You had only one chance and it had to be right.

She pressed the two buttons in succession. The values were registered by the central computer at the other end of the cable, and the numbers were sent back to the display on her small terminal. The display read 8.7. 8.7? 8.7 was not the score she had given Sylvie Fréchette! She had given her a 9.7. Ana Maria

must have somehow mistakenly pressed the 8 key instead of the 9, just as one might do when dialing the wrong telephone number. Unfortunately, in this case she could not hang up and dial again.

In a panic she pressed the buttons on the keypad again, trying to erase her input and enter the correct score: 9.7. Nothing happened. The terminal would not respond. It had accepted her initial input as the score and there was no going back. Ana Maria knew immediately that she had to do something. She stood up and called for the assistant referee — Nakaka Saito, citizen of Japan, native speaker of Japanese — who came to her side. Their only common bonds were the love of synchronized swimming and limited knowledge of the English language. Nakaka Saito could not fully understand Ana Maria's Portuguese-accented English. She wanted a score of 9.7. 8.7 was incorrect and she wanted it changed. But the seconds ticked by and the spectators became aware that something was awry. Ana Maria Da Silveira Lobo's voice grew louder and more agitated. Finally, Nakako Saito recognized that she needed help keeping things afloat and she called for head referee Judith McGowan of the United States. Minutes passed. The audience grew restless. A decision had to be made. The score would not be changed, ruled the referees. 8.7 is what judge Ana Maria had entered into the keypad and 8.7 is what the contestant would receive. Scores from the other technical judges ranged from 9.2 to 9.6, and all scores were to be counted.

With Ana Maria Da Silveira Lobo's 8.7 and the various weightings and averages calculated by the computer, Sylvie Fréchette was awarded a score of 92.557 for the day, 251 thousandths behind her archrival Kristen Babb-Sprague of the United States. The Canadians filed a protest that day with FINA, swimming's governing body, but FINA backed the decision of the referees. The Canadian press cried foul, claiming

that the head referee Judith McGowan, an American, had shown her true colors and bias in favor of the American competitor. Sylvie Fréchette still had the artistic performance tomorrow, but 251 thousandths was a large gap to close.

She did her very best the next day in the long free routine, scoring 5 perfect 10's from the large panel of judges, but it was not enough to make up the difference. Sylvie Fréchette graciously accepted her silver medal and listened politely to *The Star Spangled Banner* at the awards ceremony.

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Sixteen months later, after countless appeals by Canadian officials, the Olympic governing body ruled that Sylvie Fréchette, for her performance in the Barcelona Olympics, was to be awarded a duplicate of Kristen Babb-Sprague's gold medal. With her new title of Olympic Gold Medalist, Sylvie Fréchette moved on to greater heights in Las Vegas as the star of Cirque du Soleil's "O" Show, a revival of Hollywood's lavish water ballet performance of the big silver screen.

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