

# Vice President of Competitive Programs

## 2023 Report to the Board of Governors & Board of Directors

Submitted by Chris Leahy

### **2023 Competitive Season**

This season began with a tidal wave of changes to our sport. Not just changes to our scoring system but also impacting how we choreograph our routines and the organization of our competitions. Adapting to these changes would not have been possible without a massive effort from many parts of our community. These efforts started with education and training organized by Shari Darst & Linda Loehndorf. As the season progressed, numerous coaches stepped up, volunteering to be Technical Controllers, answering questions from other coaches to help everyone understand this new system, and helping train other controllers.

Meet Managers and Technical Chairs figured out what worked for their local competitions and then shared their experience to help others make their meets flow smoother. Our national championships benefited by being able to lean on the ideas and experiences of the local meet hosts. After the April championships, a large group of technical controllers, led by Victoria Anderson, produced guidance to help improve the consistency of Technical Controllers at all competitions and developed policies for decisions at USAAS competitions where the AQUA rules were ambiguous.

This year, the Board of Directors announced a Gender Policy introducing new competitive categories, including, Gender Inclusive and Boys Duet. The development of this new policy would not have been possible without an enormous amount of feedback and help from athletes & coaches. I hope this policy eliminates some confusion over what categories different athletes could participate in and encourages athletes to compete in a way that lets them best represent who they are.

### **Next season**

When developing this new scoring system, one piece of advice given to World Aquatics by Figure Skating and Gymnastics was that World Aquatics should not expect to get the scoring system right on the first go. They told World Aquatics to prepare to change and tweak the scoring system as they gained experience with how everyone adapted and reacted to the new scoring system. World Aquatics made a series of changes in June that improved some aspects of the system, but there are still potential improvements to the scoring system. Following the Olympic Qualifiers, World Aquatics is investigating another round of changes similar in scope to the June changes. However, more involved changes to the rules must wait until the start of the next quad.

More training is needed to find ways to encourage judges to have broader ranges in their scores. Athletes & coaches are making more extreme trade-offs for artistic vs. difficulty vs. execution than we have previously seen. If we do not find ways to encourage judges, at all levels, to not worry about "being within the panel," then the trade-offs of this new system will not work, and the only value that will matter is the difficulty score. If there are more substantial ranges for the artistic & execution scores, athletes & coaches will have more incentives to have different strategies in their routines. This opens up a much broader range of possibilities for routine design.

Part of the work done by the technical controller task force was starting to develop a set of expectations and norms related to how Technical Controllers should handle conflicts of interest during competitions. As we gain more experience with the roles of Technical Controllers, I think we can further develop and refine these standards of ethics while ensuring we make the best use of our controllers.

## **Organizational Structure**

Going forward, I think the Board of Governors and the Board of Directors can do more to find ways to separate the strategic work that reports to the Board of Directors from the operational functions that should be handled by or report to the national office. Even though we have recently reorganized both the Board of Directors and many of the committees, I think the Board of Directors should take another look at our governance structure, especially regarding the organization of the Board of Directors, and present their findings to the Board of Governors. To give one example, the Board of Directors should evaluate if we should follow the example of other NGBs and move away from having a President elected by a Board of Governors and instead have a Chair of the Board of Directors elected from within the members of the Board of Directors by those members.

Our committees should strive to develop written policies, both as a method of providing strategic guidance and as a way to provide consistency as members of the committees change. With the new term limits going into effect, we need to find ways to split the committee work into small pieces that different members can pick up. This way, more members get experience with all aspects of the committees. Providing the committee with a smooth transition as the members retire and move on to other roles.

## **Thanks**

As I finish my term, I want to say thank you for all of the help and support that I have received. Not only from my committee chairs and the USAAS scoring chairs but also from others who have been resources and sounding boards for me. In particular, I would like to thank Katie Wieckowski for being willing to jump in wherever needed and advocating for the views of athletes, Betty Hazle for her outstanding work clarifying & updating the USAAS rulebook, and Meredith Simpson for always being available for advice. Of course, I must thank Baylee Robinson, who always strives to find ways to improve the competition experiences for everyone involved in any aspect of the competition.

Finally, a thank you to all the members of the Board of Governors who have allowed me to serve as the Vice-President of Competitive Programs. This community has always welcomed me and encouraged my participation in all aspects of this sport, and I thank all of you for that.