

LAW WEEK

COLORADO

'They Want Someone Who Wins First Place'

Attorney with background in figure skating draws parallels to law practice

BY **JULIA CARDI**
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Marcela Dye figure skated competitively since toddlerhood until she was a teenager and decided to focus on it again as a third-year law student at the University of Colorado. Now an associate at Fairfield and Woods in corporate practice, Dye didn't know anyone in the state, so she tried out for the Colorado Avalanche Ice Girls her first year to meet people and make friends outside the bubble of law school.

"I didn't think it was going to be as competitive as it was," Dye said, adding that the year she tried out, Olympic skater Mirai Nagasu was on the team. At the 2018 Winter Olympics, Nagasu became the first American woman to land a triple axel at the games. "I thought oh, we just skate for the Avalanche, but it's way more competitive."

By her third year in law school, Dye had stopped skating for the Ice Girls, but still had a "skating bug," so she joined CU's competitive skating team. She said she placed third in her first competition, something she took pride in after a decade-long hiatus from competitive skating.

Dye now gives lessons to young kids in Superior as part of a national Learn to Skate USA program. She said skating gives her an outlet that's outside her professional life, and she also enjoys helping "other people do something better."

Despite her motivation for getting involved in skating again beyond just for fun, her skills as a skater have informed her character as a lawyer. Competing since toddlerhood and facing judges taught her to hold her own under pressure, and she said it's something she's been able to talk about in interviews when asked what makes her stand out. "You can either keep going or you eventually fail," she said. "It taught me so much confidence right off the bat."



Dye joined the Avalanche Ice Girls when she moved to Colorado for law school. She tried out for the team as a way to meet new people, since she didn't know anyone in the state. / MICHAEL MARTIN PHOTOGRAPHY

Dye thinks her self-assuredness from skating also helps her shrug off stereotypes based on her appearance. A tiny stature, feminine voice and an affinity for impeccably applied makeup give her a typically "girly" countenance, and as a result, Dye said she may not look like what people expect of a corporate lawyer. But Dye got used to creating her own identity in skating, influenced by her South American heritage and flamenco dancing. She described her performances as "sassy."

"It helped me be O.K. with who I was," she said. She added now she doesn't feel the need to change her mannerisms to fit stereotypical expectations for her profession.

"I feel like I can still be the girly

person that I love to be, but still be taken very seriously at my job and still be confident in the work that I'm able to put out."

Jennifer Jaskolka is a mentor of Dye's who understands firsthand how athletic grit translates into strength as a lawyer. Jaskolka, an Xcel Energy assistant general counsel who met Dye through the Pledge to Diversity program for Colorado and Wyoming's law students, is a former professional ballet dancer. Jaskolka said when she applied to law school, one of her letters told her the school was accepting her because of her background, valuable both for diversity and because of the discipline necessary for dance.

Jaskolka called Dye "thoughtful"

and "even-keeled" in her approach to law. "She's a force to be reckoned with," she said. "I think you could underestimate her, because she is petite. But I really do see her as being one of the future leaders in the Denver legal community."

But she added that her conversations with Dye haven't really focused on overcoming challenges specific to minority women attorneys, and Jaskolka credited Dye's seemingly unflinching confidence.

"She's pretty steadfast in where she is and where she wants to go," she said.

Those who know Dye professionally also say her competitive streak has probably influenced her qualities as a lawyer, and it drives her to care



Dye at a skating competition in Colorado Springs in November 2017. She competed for the University of Colorado and placed third. / COURTESY PHOTO

about doing well and dedicate time to deeply understanding the legal issues her work presents.

“Which in my mind, is a mark of somebody who’s doing good work,” said Fairfield and Woods associate Ryan Tharp. “If you can understand the how and the why, that’s the first step toward getting it right.” Tharp met Dye when he recruited her to the firm through CU’s career services office as a law clerk during her second year of school.

John Leonard, who chairs the corporate department at Fairfield and Woods, said it’s important for lawyers to have outside interests because it helps them seem relatable to clients.

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John Leonard, who chairs the corporate department at Fairfield and Woods, said it’s important for lawyers to have outside interests because it helps them seem relatable to clients. A client likely cares less about where their lawyer went to school than whether the lawyer is a good personality fit, he said, especially in situations when an attorney and client will have a professional relationship for years.

“When you see somebody is out in the community ... you know that they relate well with people. And people hire lawyers that they like,” he said.

The grace and seeming ease of figure skating belie the hours of training it takes each week on and off the ice. And when Dye started skating competitively again, it turned out the signature confidence she’d learned as a child wasn’t something she could take for granted. Dye said when she got back into training, her practices went well and she seemed to still have her stamina. But at her first competition back, she said she had to overcome a deficit in self-assuredness, which she hadn’t realized she’d lost.

“Stepping back out on the ice, I felt like I was 3 again,” Dye said. “But I wasn’t 3, I was 26 competing against 18-year-olds.”

She added she felt out of place against her much younger competitors. “It was just such a weird feeling to realize I’d lost so much confidence, and it was so nice to see my training from the first competition back to the second one, and how much different my mindset was.”

Dye said she doesn’t think anyone would have judged her had she decided not to compete after all. But she pushed herself through the nerves, and she said “just doing it” was what helped her bridge the confidence gap.

The confidence her colleagues also pinpoint to describe her professionally hasn’t been effortless either. Dye said as a young attorney, she’s second-guessed herself at times when asked for her input in situations such as client meetings. But her colleagues’ confidence in her makes her realize she’s come well prepared and she knows more than she may initially think.

“I’ve trained for skating; I know what I’m doing in front of the judges from practice [and] this is no differ-

ent,” she said. “In law, I read these documents for seven hours back to front; I read the law. I am prepared for this question.”

Jaskolka said through the few years she has mentored Dye, that growth in maturity has made itself evident. “I know she’s had some great success in having difficult conversations and hitting issues head on.”

Dye circled back with one more direct analogy between skating and her law practice. “If you hesitate on the ice, you fall,” she said. “If you hesitate in a conference room in front of clients, they don’t want you back. ... They want someone who wins first place, not someone who falls.” •

— Julia Cardi, JCardi@circuitmedia.com