



# DANCING QUEEN

A “YEAR OF YES” HAS LED CANADA’S SKATING PHENOM,  
**TESSA VIRTUE**, ON A PATH TO NEW EXPERIENCES, COLLABORATIONS  
AND OPPORTUNITIES. HOW DOES SHE MANAGE THE DEMANDING DANCE  
OF DOING IT ALL? **FINDING BALANCE IS KEY.**

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BY SYDNEY LONEY

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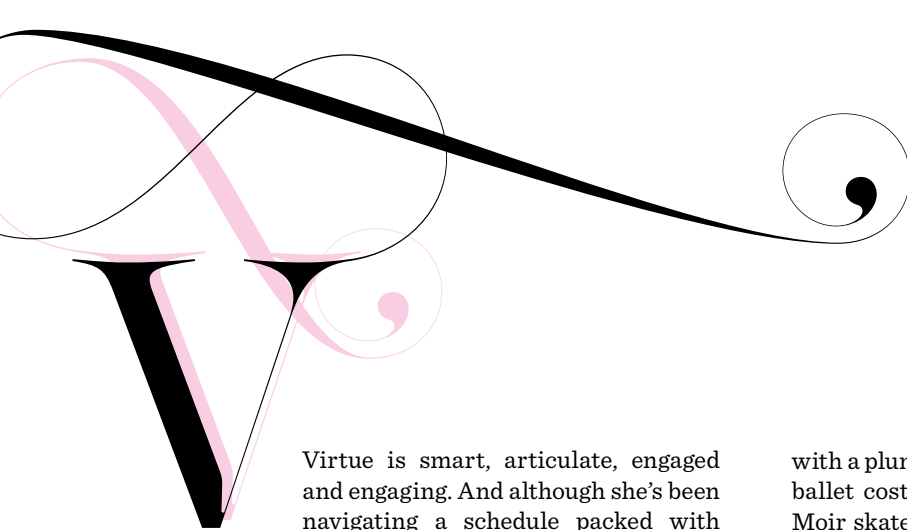
**TESSA VIRTUE STRUGGLES TO MAINTAIN EYE CONTACT, ATTEMPTING TO SEE** around the shadow brush that hovers directly in her line of vision. Her brilliant smile doesn’t falter even though a stylist is tugging at her long brown hair to create extra volume. To her left, a camera crew shoots B-roll for her next interview, while a member of her communications team closely monitors the proceedings from her right. We have her surrounded. Yet Virtue has the ability of a professional athlete to shut out everything that doesn’t matter in the moment. With a laser-like intensity that still manages to be candid and warm, she makes it feel as though it’s just the two of us having a cozy chat. She wants to know how my career unfolded, and what I do for fun. Because enough about her, what about me?

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK BINKS • STYLING BY INGRIE WILLIAMS

MAKEUP BY ROBERT WEIR • HAIR BY KELLY ARAUJO

DRESS, **VERA WANG**,  
\$329, AVAILABLE AT  
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Virtue is smart, articulate, engaged and engaging. And although she's been navigating a schedule packed with photoshoots, interviews and appearances ever since she announced her return to competitive skating in February, the three-time Olympic medalist is still glowing from what she calls her "year of yes." It began after she and Scott Moir, her ice-dancing partner of 17 years, skated their way to silver in Sochi in 2014 – then decided it was high time for some time off. "We just needed to step away from the skating world," Virtue says. "We needed a break from competition – emotionally, mentally and physically."

But for Virtue, "a break" meant getting a degree in psychology (she has one semester still to go), commenting for TSN, becoming an ambassador for adidas's "I'm Here to Create" campaign ("I love that it's women-focused and about fitness at any level"), and designing a 100-piece jewellery line for Hillberg & Berk. "I just wanted to try everything and say 'yes' to every opportunity," she says. "I was so focused on skating for such a long time, and yet I didn't feel like it defined me."

Virtue still gets emotional when she looks at the finished pieces from her collection. "I've had a jewellery line pretty much designed in my mind for about five years, and to see it come to life is overwhelming," she says. "I've always loved fashion and design and I had a really clear vision of the collection that I wanted." She describes her creations as a little bit boho, a little bit classic, a little bit beachy, and kind of art deco. One of her favourite pieces is a silver ring with the words "dream, strength, balance" engraved on it. "I wear it every single day. In lieu of getting a tattoo, I have the words on my ring!"

Rachel Mielke, H&B founder, says of their collaboration: "Tessa had a clear vision from the beginning of what she wanted this collaboration to be. It started with the belief that all women should embrace their brilliance, which is something she has always believed. From conception to design, she was an integral part of the process. She spent time in Regina working with our head designer helping to conceptualize and design the collection. The names of each piece of jewellery was also personally chosen by Tessa. They are names of people, places or things that have special meaning to her."

Virtue inherited a passion for design from her mother Kate, who has helped create her daughter's skating costumes since she first competed as a skinny, freckled eight-year-old with bangs and a bun. (Virtue's favourite costume so far was the long-sleeve, black-lace dress

with a plunging neckline, designed by a former national ballet costume designer, that she wore when she and Moir skated to Carmen during the 2012/2013 season.) "We design the costumes to help us get into character, to tell a story and to make a statement on the ice," Virtue says. "It's that balance between art and athleticism that I love most about ice dance."

### SHARPENING HER BLADES



Even though they've been performing together in shows since Sochi, Virtue says she and Moir both missed the structure and sense of purpose that comes with being a professional athlete. Still, their decision to return to the ice competitively came only after several conversations held over many months. "We made a promise to each other that we both needed to be invested and committed and wanting it for our own reasons, not feeling like we were doing it just for the other person."

Virtue, 27, attributes their longstanding success to strong teamwork and a shared commitment to their goals. "We just sort of cultivated a code of respect from a really young age." Not that it's been easy. They had to work at building trust and communicating – and they had plenty of counseling. Her biggest pet peeve over the years? Moir's punctuality problem. "When it comes to skating, he's the most focused, disciplined athlete I've ever met, but he's always late. Of course, if that's the worst thing I can say about him, then we're doing pretty well. He's also the most generous person ever, and there's no one who makes me laugh as much as he does."

The pair has already stepped up their training since they have to prove themselves all over again to earn a spot in a Grand Prix competition this fall – the first step on the long road to PyeongChang in 2018. "There's almost a feeling of giddiness when we take to the ice right now because we still have so much to learn," Virtue says. "It's cool to be in a position where you feel like we'd mastered our craft and yet now we're like the new kids on the scene again. It's a fresh start."

As a result, their training schedule is intense and all-encompassing. After a quick breakfast smoothie or poached eggs (the only thing she says she can competently cook), Virtue meets Moir at the rink around 6:30 a.m. to work through lifts, spins and footwork until 10 a.m. Then she heads home for lunch and a power nap, and is back at the rink by 1 p.m. to warm up and skate until 4 p.m. After a snack, ideally whole-grain toast with avocado and sea salt, she joins Moir at the gym for dry-land conditioning that includes everything from push-

**TESSA'S FAVOURITE PIECE  
OF JEWELLERY?**

"A SILVER RING WITH THE WORDS  
'DREAM, STRENGTH, BALANCE.'

I WEAR IT EVERY SINGLE DAY.  
IN LIEU OF GETTING A TATTOO, I HAVE  
THE WORDS ON MY RING!"



JEWELLERY ALL **TESSA VIRTUE BY  
HILLBERG & BERK**: EARRINGS "EZE" \$75;  
TOP AND BOTTOM BRACELET "BERCY" \$85;  
MIDDLE BRACELET, "TUTU" \$130



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ups (her favourite) to bike sprints (her least favourite). The day ends with physiotherapy or a massage, dinner and bed. It's her routine every day except Saturdays. "Saturdays are for sleeping in and giant cups of coffee and brunch."

### STRIKING THE RIGHT BALANCE

Given Virtue's jammed schedule (every day is accounted for, right up until the end of 2017), it's no accident that one of the words she set in silver was "balance." She acknowledges that it's something she's struggled with over the years. "I can get really focused on certain things that I want, and sometimes that can send me into an all-consuming, unhealthy place."

The only way she can ensure she gets time to unwind is to write it in her calendar, where she books everything from an evening bath with candles – her preferred way to relax – to allotting time for the people closest to her. "Breakfast dates with my friends, who are mostly outside of the skating world and are the most understanding and supportive people, are the absolute best treat. There's also nothing better than a walk along the beach at my mom's cottage, or a dance party with my niece, who's almost two."

Virtue credits her mom for reminding her – often – to slow down and be present and mindful, to set aside time when she's not connected to her phone and can revel in quiet time. "I love working, so I'll fill my days and just work, work, work. But whenever I think that I'm busy, I think about my mum. There was a time in her life when she had two kids, a full-time job and drove an hour and a half to do her MBA. She'd be going grocery shopping at two in the morning. Oh yeah, she was superwoman."

### THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT

Her life post skating? Virtue thinks about it all the time. She's a romantic – her favourite movie is *The Princess Bride*, the song that tops her playlist is Barry White's Can't Get Enough of Your Love and Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* is on her nightstand – with a head for business. Not only did she design her jewellery line, she also collaborated on everything from the packaging to the marketing, and made a point of learning about everyone's role to better understand the company's corporate structure. She plans to pursue an MBA once she's ready to leave the rink for good.



**TOP PHOTO** JACKET, \$85, BRA TOP, \$46, SHORTS, \$50 AND SNEAKERS, \$115, ADIDAS, ADIDAS.CA

**BOTTOM PHOTO** TESSA AND SCOTT PERFORMING IN GENEVA



### ON HER 2018 OLYMPIC BID WITH PARTNER SCOTT MOIR:

"IT'S COOL TO BE IN A POSITION WHERE YOU FEEL LIKE WE'D MASTERED OUR CRAFT AND YET NOW WE'RE LIKE THE NEW KIDS ON THE SCENE AGAIN. IT'S A FRESH START"

But, for now, the focus is skating. Virtue and Moir are busy tinkering with their technique and rethinking the way they skate for the upcoming season, tapping into their show experience for inspiration. "With competitive programs there's a tendency to get caught up in the technical side of things," Virtue says. "It was fun to perform in shows thinking purely about the entertainment value." When she skated in junior competitions, she always made eye contact with people in the stands, whereas later in her career she found herself tuning out the audience and the judges. "I remember as a kid feeling like I could feed off that energy, and somehow that got lost in the pressure and the stress of big competitions. I'm hoping the chance to reconnect with my love of performing will bring it back."

The final moments before she steps on the ice to compete can be excruciatingly stressful. Virtue had several pre-skate rituals that she used to help ground her in the past, although she's hoping not to rely on them as much. The one she won't give up, though, is positioning her skate guards at a specific angle on the boards, with her water bottle in between. "I think when you're in a stressful situation you just want something that you can control, but that's where I'm so grateful to have Scott. We're able to centre each other with a squeeze of the hand, or a wink, or even just a look. I can't imagine being an athlete in an individual sport, standing on the ice all by myself."

Back on set, the cameras are ready and a collection of billowy gowns and flowery summer dresses wait on a rolling rack, creases meticulously steamed out. Virtue's hair is now sufficiently voluminous and there is a faint, sparkly flush on her cheeks. The background chatter has faded. They're ready for her. Appropriately, Beautiful Now by Zedd is playing at full volume: *Wherever it's going, I'm gonna chase it. What's left of this moment, I'm not gonna waste it.*

Virtue lowers herself gracefully from the makeup chair and strides purposefully over to the spotlight with one final thought: "The biggest lesson has been that there are no shortcuts. It's just a lot of hard work and a lot of sacrifice to get what you want. That's a powerful message – and I hope I can take that into whatever I end up doing post skating. But for now, we just want to create art. We don't really have anything to prove, and that's very refreshing." *hr*