



[First African-American Ice Dancing Team to compete in US Figure Skating Nat'l Championships](#)

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First African-American [Ice Dancing](#) Team to Medal at US Figure [Skating](#) Sectional Championships in the Novice Division; Kassy Kova and Justin Ross, Novice Ice Dancers, Strive to Open Doors



Kova and Ross

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Here we are in 2009, with an African-American president of the United States, and yet we are still setting firsts for African-Americans in the field of nationally-competitive ice dancing!

January 2010 will be yet another first, with Kassy Kova and Justin Ross, the first African-American ice dancing team to compete in Novice Dance at the 2010 United States Figure Skating National Championships in Spokane, Washington.

This young ice dancing team just captured the Pewter Medal at the 2010 US Figure Skating Pacific Coast Sectional Championships in Jackson Hole, Wyoming in November, against all odds.



Kova and Ross

Six months ago, Kassy and Justin were not even sure that they were going to be able to compete this year, their fifth season together as a team. In late May, Kassy had a terrible fall while she and Justin were working on setting the footwork to their new Free Dance with their coach, Christine Fowler-Binder. Rounding a corner with her arms outstretched to link with her partner, her feet slipped out from underneath her. Kassy's body twisted and pulled as she turned and fell. She knew immediately that something had gone terribly wrong. A sharp, burning pain in her right shoulder told her that she was in trouble. As she gingerly lifted herself up off the ice, she realized that any movement of her arm caused the same excruciating shoulder pain. A few days later, an MRI confirmed the worst news: Kassy had suffered a tear to her right rotator cuff. Then came the order from her sports physician, Dr. Casey; "No using the arm for at least three months to begin healing the tear, coupled with an intense regimen of physical therapy". The Doctor's prognosis was unclear; maybe she would regain full range of motion and strength, if she worked very hard at it, but he could make her no promises! She fully understood the challenge that faced her. Kassy and her dedicated partner, Justin, skated and trained for three long months – all of June, July, and August – with Kassy's right arm held straight down and stiff at her right side, unable to use it at all. It was out of the question to practice the couple's Free Dance, with all the lifts, which require the use of both arms.

Kassy began an intense regimen of physical therapy, with Sharp Rees Steely Physical Therapist, Grant Sinnock, M.S.P.T., three times a week, augmented by a laundry list of exercises to do at home. Kassy's home transformed into a physical therapy studio with bands and pulleys suspended from various door jams and medicine balls scattered about. Kassy dropped one of her three summer college classes, to give herself more time for the intensive home-based therapy regimen required by her therapist to supplement

what they did in the thrice-weekly sessions. The young [athlete](#) threw herself into the therapy, knowing that it would be the key to recovering the range of motion and strength she would need to perform a Free Dance again, and hoping that it would do its magic in time to compete at US Figure Skating Sectional Championships in November!

Kassy and Justin took this major setback in stride, transforming it into an opportunity to focus their energies on the footwork of the compulsory dances this year, selected by US Figure Skating for the competitive season – the Killian and the [Tango](#). By September, with both athletes' nerves beginning to [fray](#) from frustration, Kassy's range of motion had improved to about 60% and she had finally regained enough strength to bring her arm up into a dance position. With but six weeks to go until Sectional Championships, the team could now begin to run regular compulsory dance patterns with both arms up.



Kova and Ross

The last achievement was a “Bielman” (where the girl’s hand grabs and holds her boot high above her head), an easy task for Kassy before the injury, but an impossibility during the first four months after the accident. Kassy was ecstatic when she was able to do her first Bielman in early October, only five weeks before the start of US Figure Skating Sectional Championships. The team began to do their first lifts again in October too. With it clear now that there was indeed a light at the end of the tunnel, Kassy redoubled her efforts in an attempt to strengthen her shoulder to regain her initial strength and flexibility.

With her physical therapist beaming at her achievement, Kassy (age 16) and Justin (age 19) departed for Jackson Hole, Wyoming in mid-November, to compete in the Novice Division of the US Figure Skating Pacific Coast Sectional Championships, more than six months after the accident occurred. “It’s not always when you can help an injured athlete make the dream of full recovery come true”, he said.

This dynamic duo, who look like they could be brother and sister, competed well enough in the Novice Division to capture the Pewter Medal at Sectional Championships. Their strongest finish – second place overall after the compulsory dances – was the silver lining to the dark cloud of injury – the result of all the time and energy the team had poured into one-armed compulsory dance training during the summer months. For both Kassy and Justin, the Pewter Medal finish almost felt like a miracle, against all odds.

Now Kassy and Justin are preparing for their first appearance at US Figure Skating National Championships, the first time an African-American ice [dance team](#) will compete in the Novice division. The two young athletes are honored to follow in the footsteps of some incredible precedent-setters; namely Franklyn Singley and Tiffani Tucker, the first African-American ice dancing team who blazed new territory when they captured the [Bronze medal](#) in the Junior Dance event at the 1993 US National

Championships. However, since Singley and Tucker, no other African-American team has emerged on the national ice dance scene until Kova and Ross began together in 2005.

Kassy knew what she wanted when she was [hunting](#) for an ice-dancing partner in 2005. “I really wanted to find someone who would enjoy training and competing in ice dancing with me, but I also hoped to find someone who would be a good physical match for me, and who would share many of the same values I have”. She lucked out when she found Justin Ross. In Justin she found not only a great matched-pair look, but she also found someone who came from a similar background of mixed-race, international ancestry. Kassy is half West African – from Ivory Coast — and half European-American while Justin is a mix of Black American, Syrian, Indonesian, and European-American. Their shared, multi-cultural heritage framed their childhoods in a rich tapestry of ethnic foods, music, and diverse family networks, and has proved to help build a strong bond of friendship and trust.

Over their five-year partnership, they have climbed through the ranks, finishing 7th in the nation in their last year in the Intermediate Division (2008) and 5th at US Sectional Championships their first year in the very competitive Novice Division (2009), and now capturing the Pewter Medal at Sectionals.

Competing and training at this level, Kova and Ross still fit in time to pursue their educational objectives. Kassy and Justin are both in their second year at San Diego Mesa College. Kassy will pursue a B.A. in Political Science at the University of California, San Diego, where she will transfer after completion of her GEs at Mesa. For Justin, it's all about dance! He is after an Associate's Degree in Dance which will help him with his chosen career of professional skating coach.

Follow Kassy Kova and Justin Ross on-line at <http://www.kovaandross.com>.

The team's email is kovaandross@gmail.com and visit Flickr to see their photostream: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/kovaandross/>

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