» SKATING from 1

Local ice skater to compete for national title

Special to the Times

Masha Leonov skates at the U.S. Eastern Sectionals in Atlanta, where she placed third overall.

total, hundreds of hours of practice, mornings of waking up at 4, friends' parties she missed, sleep she lost, thousands of dollars her parents paid in transportation and lessons and travel — will all boil down to less than six minutes of competition.

"I can't wait," Masha said.

On the couch in her parents' Harbour Island home, the eighth-grader in a ponytail was cheerful and well-spoken.

She shared her excitement about seeing her friends, other competitors she knows from skating camps and tournaments. She can't believe she's staying at the same hotel as the nation's best senior skaters.

She quoted the competition's brochure, saying it's the largest sporting event ever to visit Spokane, and she mentioned tickets had been sold out for months. But she said she wasn't nervous.

"If I have nerves, I just breathe them out," she said.

It's a family thing

Excellence doesn't stop on the ice for the teenager who was born just after her family moved to Tampa from Russia.

In school, she belongs to five clubs and juggles math, science and Latin competitions with homework and hours of skating practice per day.

Most figure skaters at her level are homeschooled, but Masha refuses to leave Berkeley Preparatory School. She wants to be a scientist when she grows up.

So her parents, Andrei and Elena, have conferences with her teachers and ask for homework in advance. Her dad shuttles her to practice before the sun comes up and rushes her to school in Town 'N Country by 8 a.m., while she changes in the back seat of their blue van.

Her mom gets so nervous before Masha competes that she can't sit still. So she stands.

Her 16-year-old sister Katya hopes Masha will achieve what they dreamed of since they started skating together when Masha was 5 and Katya was 7.

Katya broke her leg just before the regional championships in 2005 and now glides cautiously on the ice.

It makes Masha's drive stronger to win. Her coach said that just before she goes on the ice Sunday, he'll remind her to stick to what they practiced — if she does it perfectly, she'll get the maximum number of points possible.

Masha tends to get so pumped while competing that she attempts moves beyond her choreographed number. Masha can already do every triple jump except for the triple axel.

'The whole package'

During practice, when Berekhovski brought a new gadget that measures the speed of spins, Masha beat the world record on her third try. The *Guinness Book of World Records'* fastest documented speed is 308 rotations per minute. Her co can do 329.

Her coach says th on the same track good chance of com 2010 Olympics.

"She has the age," he said. "She cally good jumps, s tation, her shape no fect. Her personali in school — everyt really good girl."

Masha is just ex the chance to com to do well," she said the best I can."

Alexandra Zayas can reached at (813) 226-3 azayas@sptimes.com