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Almost perfect

On Sunday, Masha Leonov's dream of skating in the national championships will take shape in Spokane, Wash.

By ALEXANDRAZAYAS
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[Times photo: Chris Zuppa]

Masha Leonov, 14, stretches during a recent practice at the Ice Sports Forum in Brandon. Masha is competing in the U.S. Figure Skating Championships.

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Every spin has to be perfect. Every jump just right. Every landing graceful and smooth. If not, 14-year-old Masha Leonov won't rest. She won't smile.

"Rest," her coach Andrei Berekhovski pleaded in a thick Russian accent, as Masha slid toward him on the rink at the Ice Sports Forum in Brandon.

Her face screamed frustration and determination. Her triple lutz was flawless, but the easier double axel was giving her trouble. On top of that, Masha had to dodge other skaters on the crowded ice to execute her jumps.

She took a deep breath and started back onto the ice. No rest until perfection.

"She will calm down after a good landing," her coach said.

On Sunday, Masha will compete for the first time at the U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Spokane, Wash. She will be up against 11 other novice skaters from around the country.

At her level, the 12 are the nation's best. Two levels away is the senior level, whose skaters are chosen for the Olympics.

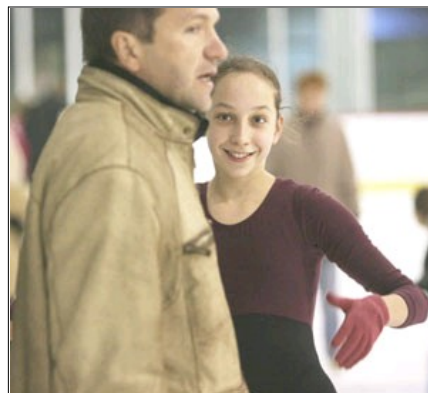
To get there, Masha placed second among 70 skaters in October at the South Atlantic Regional Championships in Philadelphia.

Then, on her birthday in November, she placed third in the U.S. Eastern Sectionals in Atlanta. The 12 skaters at Sunday's national championships were taken from the top four from the country's three sections.

Finally, time is here

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[Times photo: Chris Zuppa]

Andrei Berekhovski, left, of Kissimmee coaches Masha during practice. Masha is one of 12 women skaters competing as a novice in the national championships in Spokane, Wash., on Sunday.

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Out of Masha's section, the three others are from New York, New England and Washington, D.C. A Florida skater with the Tampa Bay Skating Club, Masha had to work extra hard to secure her spot in nationals.

High-level figure skating resources are limited here, and she has to travel several times a week to Kissimmee, where her coach lives, for adequate practice.

Sunday, she will compete in the short program. Monday, she will compete in the long program. In 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.



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

[Special to the Times]

"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 Berezhkovskii 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 coach says she can do 329.

Her coach says that if she stays on the same track, she's got a good chance of competing in the 2010 Olympics.

"She has the whole package," he said. "She has technically good jumps, spins, presentation, her shape now is just perfect. Her personality, she's good in school - everything. She's a really good girl."

Masha is just excited to have the chance to compete. "I want to do well," she said. "I'm trying the best I can."

Alexandra Zayas can be reached at 813 226-3354 or azayas@sptimes.com.

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