

## Disappointing performance strengthens girl's resolve

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As her dream chance at the U.S. Figure Skating Championships drew closer, Masha Leonov practiced with fervor. The 14-year-old novice skater wouldn't rest until every move reached perfect.

But last week, at her final practice before the big event, trouble struck. While practicing in the Spokane, Wash., championship rink, she smashed into the boards hard, hurting her leg.

"She was saying it was okay and everything," mother Elena Leonov said, "but she could not push off really well with her left leg, and she did not feel comfortable doing the jumps."

The fall set in motion a disastrous performance. In Sunday's short program, she dropped her leg during a spiral. She missed another jump. She did two really good triples, but the little errors in the short program landed her in last place.

"After the short, she was so upset about it, she told me she wanted to do really well in the long," the mother said.

She had a fine warm-up, but when they called her name Monday, Masha's legs started to shake. Everyone could tell Masha wasn't skating like herself, and Masha could, too. The first jump was really good, but she fell on the second jump. With it crashed her chances of catching up in round two.

"She felt horrible, absolutely horrible," her mother said.

Mother and daughter left for Tampa on Tuesday, earlier than they had planned. But Masha said she had some great experiences at the competition, too. Her fellow competitors are now all her friends, she said, and she has never signed so many autographs.

Masha said she will focus on preventing injury and work on her mental strength for next year. And she will be at nationals in St. Paul, Minn., next year, she said.

"No matter how hard it's going to be, I'm definitely going to make it," Masha said. "I want to be a champion, and I'm going to be a champion."

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