

Two sisters' rink dreams

They shared the same vision of world competition, but while an injury has sidelined one, the Berkeley Prep duo are still side by side on the ice.

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HARBOUR ISLAND

Not even the sun was awake early Tuesday morning when the Leonov sisters twirled across the rink at the Ice Sports Forum in Brandon.

Masha landed a triple toe loop. It wasn't perfect, so the 13-year-old from Berkeley Preparatory School tried again. And again. Her Achilles tendon throbbed with pain, but her ache for world recognition as a figure skater burned stronger.

Masha won first place in her division at one of the nation's most rigorous tournaments this summer - the Liberty Summer Competition in Philadelphia - and will compete in the South Atlantic Regional Championships next month.

Rank high and her chances of going to the 2010 Olympics go up. Rank low and her chances dwindle. But she's still got time, and a lot can happen.

Her big sister, Katya, once shared that dream until she caught her skate while practicing weeks before the regionals last October and broke her leg. Two surgeries later, the 16-year-old glides cautiously but still practices as often as she can. She loves to choreograph and is qualified to coach.

Since Masha was 5 and Katya was 7, the Leonov sisters have trained in one of the world's most unforgiving sports.

"You go out there, and you only get one chance. You can lose your trip to the Olympics because of one fall," said Katya, who lives with her family on Harbour Island.

Now, Masha will have to excel at the upcoming competition for both of them.

"Don't let me down," Katya told her.

The Russian family bleeds excellence, ambition and discipline. What they don't have is time.

One of their biggest obstacles: "the speed limit," said their dad, Andrei Leonov, as he zoomed along the Lee Roy Selmon Crosstown Expressway en route from the rink in Brandon to Berkeley Prep., where they both attend.

Andrei Leonov and his wife, Elena, who also have two boys, Nikita, 11 and Andrei, 3, take turns shuttling their daughters to and from skating classes. Because Tampa doesn't have a rink, the girls practice in Brandon and Oldsmar on weekdays and in Kissimmee, where their coach lives, on weekends.

High-level figure skating training is limited in Florida and confined mostly to the Kissimmee area, Andrei Leonov said. Many of the serious Florida figure skaters move north for better opportunities.

As Masha's competition level increases, so does her travel, which takes time and money.

"For us, it's increasingly difficult to give her this chance," said her dad, whose job at a fertilizer trading company brought the family to Tampa 14 years ago. Now, he owns several small businesses.

There's gasoline to buy, plane tickets and hotel rooms for competitions around the globe. This month it's Boston, next month Pennsylvania.

Last month, the sisters attended an elite summer skating workshop in Spain. There, they studied under Alexei Mishin, the renowned coach of several Olympic champions, including one of Masha's heroes, 2006 gold medalist Evgeni Plushenko.

Most high-level young figure skaters the girls' age are home schooled to accommodate practice and travel, but both of them love the classroom. Shortly after 5 a.m. Tuesday, Masha was perfecting her paper on *The Old Man and the Sea*.

School was Katya's best outlet after her devastating injury. It gave her a chance to discover the extracurricular activities she had missed out on because of skating. Katya's favorite is the debate team, and her new dream is to go to an Ivy League school and study international relations.

Masha tries to keep up with nonskating school activities and jokes about the time the science and Latin clubs were competing in the same city as her figure skating competition. She juggled the three competitions the same weekend.

But Masha has no time to watch television or go to her friends' birthday parties. She can't eat bread or sweets or drink soda. She eats her cereal at 5 a.m. and isn't in bed until after 11 p.m.

All for excellence.

"That's what it takes," Masha said.

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