

Test of Mettle Wins More than Silver

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Adults get just as nervous about competing as kids do - and reap just as many rewards.

by Rebecca Russell

I'm not Sarah Hughes. Heck, I'm not even Sarah Bishop. Unless you skate at the same rink that I do, you probably don't know her, but she's a friend of mine who, at almost 40, actually finds competitions fun and enters as many as she can.

If you're like me, and most adult skaters that I know are, you shuddered as you read that sentence and thought to yourself, "She's nuts!" When my coach first suggested that I sign up for a small, local competition, I was simultaneously filled with fear, dread and the urge to laugh. Compete? Me? At my age? And my ability level? Sure, I'm proud of the work I've put into skating, but I've only been doing it for three years. I've got two single jumps, a mediocre scratch spin and a laughable spiral. Why would I want to do that stuff in public - and pay money to do it?

Then I started thinking about the dresses. And the music. And suddenly my mental audience filled itself with cheering skating enthusiasts, not just a bunch of parents there to see their own little darlings. Suddenly, in my head, my spiral became that of Sasha Cohen, and my spins were as fast and centered as Todd Eldredge's.

"Sure, why not?" I said.

At least, I think it was I who said that. The part of my brain that does its best to protect me from embarrassment and public humiliation was shaking its head in dismay while my sense of competition was already planning and choreographing and finding a spot for the trophy. I suspect it was the latter that actually agreed to this.

Two months seemed like an awfully long time to prepare. I mean, how hard can it be? Find music, buy a dress, practice a little and I'm ready to go, right? The truth is, it's a lot harder than it seems. That toe loop that's so easy in practice is a lot more difficult when it's preceded by footwork and has to be done in time to the music. And whose idea was it to put footwork after a spin when I am so dizzy that I am lucky if I can stand up straight?

As the competition loomed closer, I began to doubt my sanity. What was I thinking when I agreed to this? I have a hard enough time doing my program well at 6 in the morning with only a few spectators, and those being people I've shared the ice with for years and who understand the challenge ahead of me. How was I going to handle it in front of a bunch of strangers and skating parents who don't know a Salchow from a dairy cow? What if I fell? When a 6-year-old falls on a simple waltz jump, she's cute, right? Not so cute when you're 30. I can handle the bruised knees and elbows, but the bruised pride heals much more slowly.

I woke the morning of the competition with a sick feeling in my stomach. I forced down some breakfast and paced nervously in front of the TV until it was time to leave. I grabbed my bag and dress and headed out the door, humming a funeral march as I walked to my car.

When I got home that night, I was singing a different tune. It wasn't that bad. I finished second in a group of six. I didn't fall on my butt, I didn't forget my program and I finished in time with the music. My memory of my time on the ice is a blur, but I do remember smiling in the middle of my

program because it was actually - dare I admit this?- fun.

Looking back on it now, I have to say that, while I can't recall actually skating, I do remember what was really important about the day. I remember getting to know my coach better on the ride there, laughing with my friends at the rink and meeting new adult skaters who felt the same thing I did about competing but decided to try it anyway.

What I probably remember most vividly are the words of a friend of mine whose daughter skated in the same competition. She came up to me and said, "You did great." When I scoffed, she said, "No, really. I admire you guys so much. I'd never have the courage to get out there and do that. I have so much respect for you."

Suddenly something shifted. The feeling of simple relief in having survived changed into pride in what I had done. I worked really hard to learn the skills I have, and it was a huge stretch for me to put it all together into that little program. I started skating with the goals of meeting new people and learning as much as I could, and I accomplished both of those things that day - and so much more that I can't put into words. I will definitely compete again.

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