

**Michael Sasaki, Torrance, Calif.
A Winning Edge**

Michael Sasaki began his skating career wearing rental skates and dreaming of the 2002 Olympics.

For the past four years, I have been working hard as a competitive figure skater. I began in the summer of 1994, wearing little green rental skates at a local mall.

What made me want to skate was watching Kristi Yamaguchi win the gold medal at the 1992 Winter Olympics. I wanted to know how it felt to win a gold medal. So I vowed that I would be at the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City.

After a week of fun-filled skating, I asked my mom if I could join the group classes. She said no at first, but after a couple more days of skating, I guess she saw the determination in my eyes. She finally said yes.

I enrolled in a group lesson. I was so eager — I was the first student on the ice that day and the first one to try everything. I think I bothered the teacher a bit. I kept on saying: “What’s next! Can we move on?”

After the class, my teacher pulled me aside and told me that I was too advanced to be in that class, so she put me in a more challenging one. After two days, she said that I was still too advanced. She suggested that I take private lessons.

But my mom was reluctant to pay for private lessons. Buddhism teaches that it’s important to have a big dream for your life and a strong determination to fulfill it. So I chanted for my mom to see how much skating meant to me. Finally, she agreed to let me take private lessons.

One day, I went to the Skating Edge ice rink where I saw everyone doing double and triple jumps all over the place. I was amazed. So many young people were such good skaters! It encouraged me to work even harder, but at the same time I started questioning myself: “Now how am I going to the Olympics?”

Later that day, I sat down in front of the Gohonzon and started chanting. As I was chanting, I saw myself accepting the gold medal in the 2002 Olympics. Right then, I knew I had the strength to work hard, compete and win.

I started skating at the Skating Edge more often. I also got a new coach, Tina Palica. For a while, I only took one lesson a week, but eventually I worked my way up to three a week.

I joined the U.S. Figure Skating Association. As a pre-preliminary or first-level USFSA member, I participated in my first competition. I did very well and placed first. I was so happy. I slept next to my trophy that night.

As the months went by, I took more tests in the USFSA. By the end of 1995, I was participating in the regional championships. I placed fourth, which made me second alternate for the U.S. Junior Olympics. And I had only been skating for one year! I felt that this was proof of all my hard work and determination.

My goal was to pass the next level, which was intermediate, and to qualify for the U.S. Junior Olympics. But through the 1996 season, my skating went down hill. I participated in four competitions and expected to finish first in all of them, but I won only one.

At school, I got involved with bad friends. More social life, less chanting. I drifted away from skating. Soon, it was time for the regional championships again. Despite my less-than-winning attitude, I won the bronze medal and qualified for the sectional championship, which was in Utah.

But in Utah, things didn’t go right. Especially, the night of my long program (known as

the freeskate), I had a lot of bad thoughts in my mind: What if I fall? What if I mess up? What if I don't make it to the Junior Olympics?

I placed fifth in that program and did not qualify for the Junior Olympics. I was so disappointed. After the competition, I called my mom. She told me that she knew this was going to happen.

"How?" I asked.

With all my partying and socializing, she said, she knew I wasn't going to make it. She told me that I needed to come home and chant and think about why I was skating.

When I arrived home, I chanted for about 30 minutes. Afterward, I noticed that I was starting to feel good inside again. Then, as I was walking up the stairs, I missed a step and fell. Thump! I started to laugh. I thought, this is what I need: to relax and have fun. I am doing this sport because I love it, not because I am told to. I need to skate the way I used to — when I first started, when I really loved it. I went back to the Gohonzon and chanted another 30 minutes. My determination again was to go to the Junior Olympics and skate my very best!

1997 was really relaxing and fun, just like I wanted it to be. That year, I won seven competitions out of eight. My double axel was as solid as a rock. My self-confidence was high. In November, I won the regional championships. At sectionals, I won the gold.

I was on my way.

As I practiced for the Junior Olympics, which were to be held in March in Dallas, I landed two triple jumps for the first time! My confidence soared.

Actually, I think my head got too big. After about a month of practice and a week before the Junior Olympics, I could no longer do my triples. I was so angry. I wanted to just skate for 10 hours and get my triples back. My problem was that I thought I could do everything without effort, winning every competition with ease. I guess I forgot one of the most basic concepts in Buddhism: determined effort based on prayer to the Gohonzon is what makes dreams become a reality. I even forgot about my friends.

I left Los Angeles with a BIG question mark over my head. Even after I arrived in Dallas, I still couldn't get over the fact that I had lost my triples.

The day before my short program (in which eight required elements must be completed), I had a practice session. When I stepped on the ice, I felt chills running down my spine — but those chills were good chills, not the chills you get when you watch scary movies. They were the kind of chills you get when you know something good is going to happen. Still, I was frustrated because I didn't land any of my triples. I almost lost my double axel.

The next day, I had to wake up at 5:00 a.m. to go to practice — it was 3:00 a.m. Los Angeles time, so I was dead-tired. My practice went bad. NO triples and NO double axel.

Later, I went to the hotel and chanted for an hour. I asked my mom, "Why is this happening to me?"

My mom made a very good point. She said that this religion is not magic. You can't wish for something and hope it will appear someday. You have to make the effort; you have to work hard.

I thought about what she said and felt really good about it. So I vowed to work hard — and I placed first in the short program.

The night of my long program, two days later, I was really nervous, but chanting an hour calmed me down. As I stretched, I heard the crowd go wild for the other skaters. Every time I heard cheers, I felt more butterflies in my stomach.

In my warm up, I did every jump — except the triples. My coach and I decided that I could still do well without the triples.

To music from Lawrence of Arabia, I began to skate my program. I landed my double

axel. I singled a double at the end, but I skated as if everything were going perfectly. I got off the ice with a big smile on my face, knowing that I had just done a great long program.

I took my skates off and watched the other skaters in my group. They were really good. The thought of winning first place was erased from my mind. But I knew I would get second or third.

I said to my mom, "It really doesn't matter what I get, as long as I did my best."

I usually don't like to see my results get posted, so I go to the dressing room to be isolated. As I waited there, my mom walked up to me in tears. I asked, "Did I do that bad?"

She raised her finger. "First!"

It was a dream come true. During the awards ceremony on the ice, I received my gold medal and silver plate. I skated a victory lap.

As I was going back to the hotel, I told my mom that through my struggles I had learned to appreciate everything. Without my parents, I would be nothing. Without my coach, Tina, I would be lost in the skating world. My brothers have supported me every step of the way. And especially, I appreciate the Gohonzon: I feel that Buddhist practice is my foundation.

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Title: A Winning Edge

Subject: World Tribune 06/19/98 n.3196 p.1 WT980619p01 Torrance, California

Author: Michael Sasaki

Keywords: California Career Edge Experiences News Torrance Winning Youth