

Cool constant

by Various Sports Writers

Rachael Flatt was 3.

She and her father went to the mall to buy a birthday present for her grandfather when they wandered past the mall's ice-skating rink. Rachael was transfixed, and they came home with a package of introductory skating lessons instead.

Grandpa didn't get a gift.

Skating did.

Flatt is one of two U.S. women's singles skaters at the World Figure Skating Championships this week at Staples Center in Los Angeles, and she is perfectly positioned to contend for a medal at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, British Columbia.

It's a long way from introductory lessons at a mall rink to the World Championships. Not surprised, though, is Tiffany Mayes.

Mayes was Flatt's coach until 2001, when the family moved from Del Mar, Calif., to Colorado for her father's job. Mayes was there the first day Flatt laced on skates and ventured onto the ice.

Did she have any inkling Flatt might be special?

"Uh, yeah," Mayes said.

The 3-year-old newbies are placed in a group class and, to hear Mayes explain it, "you have a 50-50 chance whether or not they'll be crying, and the other ones are barely standing."

Not Flatt. She noticed a class of 8-to 10-year-olds at the other end of the ice working on jumps and spins. That looked like more fun. So she left.

"She kind of escaped class," Mayes said. "It was like, forget these crying kids, I want to be with these other kids."

It would become a theme. Flatt was the U.S. novice champion at 12 but couldn't qualify for the international junior circuit, the next level up, because she was too young. She finished second at the U.S. senior nationals last year, but at 15 wasn't eligible for the senior World Championships.

She instead went to the World Junior Championships in Bulgaria, where she landed seven triple jumps in the free program and won.

This year she finished second again at the U.S. nationals and, at 16, is old enough to compete at worlds. More importantly, in the fickle and largely subjective world of figure skating, it gives Flatt invaluable exposure in front of the international judges — which is another way of saying you probably aren't winning a medal in Vancouver next year if the judges haven't seen you skate on a global stage before.

Flatt, who lists Del Mar, Calif., as her hometown in her official biography, is part of a post-Michelle Kwan generation of American skaters that includes Caroline Zhang and Mirai Nagasu. All three, though, hit the dreaded dead zone of female skating, the puberty-fueled changes that routinely derail even the most promising phenoms.

Sprout 3 inches over the summer, add half an inch to your hips, lose the laser focus required for daily 6 a.m. practices, feel the gnawing tension of an impending Olympics, and the ice can get mighty slippery.

Of the three skaters, the 5-foot-tall Flatt emerged the least scathed. Her hallmark is jaw-dropping consistency more than flashy jumps or spins, and she has had a few uncharacteristic spills this season. But those who know Flatt aren't about to bet against her.

"No matter what Rachael is doing, she definitely wants to get it right," said Tom Zakrajsek, her coach in Colorado Springs. "In some respects, that makes her kind of unique. A lot of athletes I have worked with in my career, and I have some who are very good, I think a lot don't do it to get it right.

"They try to do the best they can, which is a different mind-set than getting it right."

Here's how Flatt puts it: "There's always work to be done. The days you come off the ice when you know you have not worked your absolute hardest, I don't know, I don't like it and I always want to go back and do more. But that doesn't happen very often."

Not in skating, not in the rest of her life.

In an era when many elite skaters are home-schooled or take classes online or have diluted curriculum at special academies tailored around practice schedules, Flatt is a junior at Cheyenne Mountain High School in Colorado Springs.

Her current class schedule looks like this: Advanced Placement English, Pre Calculus II Honors, AP Biology, French 4 Honors, AP Chemistry.

Her grades look like this: A, A, A, A, A.

On weekdays, Flatt is up by 4:45 a.m. and at the Colorado Springs World Arena for a 6 a.m. training session. School is from 7:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Then it's back to the rink – she eats lunch in the car – for three afternoon sessions. Some days she has a stretch class as well. Some days it's a ballet class. Tuesday and Thursday evenings, she goes to the nearby Olympic Training Center for recovery work.

"I try to fit in homework between those times," Flatt said. "It's just a busy schedule, but it's a lot of fun. It's a challenge. Time management is a good skill to have."

It also helps that Dad is an MIT-educated biochemical engineer and Mom is a molecular biologist. AP Biology and AP Chemistry suddenly don't seem so daunting.

"I have tried to say to Rachael and her parents, 'Why don't you take something like photography?' " Zakrajsek said. "They're just not going to hear it. I certainly value education. I have my master's degree. I certainly respect where the Flatts come from as a family in valuing education, but I do have to sometimes say, hey, let's shift the priorities here a little bit more to skating."

The only casualties so far have been piano lessons, and a free skate that Zakrajsek admits was too "conceptually abstract" and "probably a little more than Rachael could handle this year," her first full season at the senior level.

Instead, Flatt dusted off last year's program to "Romantic Rhapsody" by Andre Mathieu. She had six weeks to re-choreograph it with her latest upgrades in spins, spirals and other technical elements.

No problem. It's ready for worlds.

"She doesn't cut corners," said Jeremy Abbott, the U.S. men's champion who trains under Zakrajsek in the same rink. "There's no slacking, which I guess you can't do when you're an AP student and a two-time national silver medalist."

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