

# If practice makes perfect, is Cohen doomed?

## Feeling pressure of leading after women's short figure-skating program, medal contender takes break



Sasha Cohen of the United States completes her short program in Turin, Italy, during the Turin 2006 Winter Olympic Games on Tuesday. Cohen is in first place by a narrow margin after the short program.

By BARRY WILNER  
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### TURIN, Italy

All the Olympic medal contenders in women's figure skating practiced Wednesday. All except Sasha Cohen, who leads the pack going for gold.

A sign of nerves? Injury? Or simply the confidence of a champion in waiting?

"I talked to her this morning," coach John Nicks said, "and she was tired and she agreed to rest today and come in tomorrow for a short practice. She has trained very hard; stamina is not a problem."

"She has occasional muscle problems and uses a lot of ice," he added, referring to questions about a possible groin injury for Cohen, who wore an ice pack and whose right leg was wrapped after Tuesday's short program. "She has a few aches, a few pains, as we all do when we get older."

Cohen is all of 21.

What Cohen does have is a tendency to tighten up in the most stressful skating situations. Nothing could be more pressure-packed than what she'll face in today's finale, the task of winning the United States' third straight women's gold.

Cohen claims she's an entirely different skater, more mature, more relaxed, which is something she'll get every chance to prove in her long program.

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Sasha Cohen  
on performing in tonight's  
women's figure-skating finale

"It's definitely going to be tough for everyone to do great long (programs) with all of the pressure," Cohen said after Tuesday night's victory. "I'm going to believe in myself and expect the best."

Cohen is ahead by the slimmest of margins, .03 points over Russia's Irina Slutskaya and .71 over Japan's Shizuka Arakawa.

And Cohen's history when she's in such a position has been spotty.

She owns two world championship silver medals, one behind Arakawa in 2004 and the other behind Slutskaya last year. Until Michelle Kwan wasn't healthy enough to skate in the U.S. nationals in January, Cohen had never won the American title, finishing second four times.

At the 2002 Salt Lake City Games, she was third after the short program before a mediocre free skate dropped her off the medals podium.

In 2005, Cohen was within three points of Slutskaya after the short program, but some sloppy jumps and an off-balance landing on a triple flip cost her. The pre-

vious season, she had shaky landings on her opening jumps in the free skate, including two-footing a triple salchow.

She led after the U.S. short program in 2004, then faded in the free skate and Kwan passed her.

The previous year was worse, with Cohen doing only five clean triple jumps and falling once in the free skate to drop to third behind Kwan and an inconsistent Sarah Hughes.

Cohen was an immediate sensation as a 15 year old in 2000, her first senior season, winning the short program at nationals. But she fell on a triple toe loop, the easiest triple jump, in the free skate to wind up second.

But maybe those past disappointments — or, more precisely, her solid but not great achievements — have hardened Cohen to the point of fearlessness.

"It's not always about being the most talented; it's about sticking it out," she said Tuesday. "This sport rewards the tough people."

The toughest at recent Olympics have been U.S. women Kristi Yamaguchi in 1992, Tara Lipinski

in 1998 and Sarah Hughes, who jumped from fourth place to win at Salt Lake City even as Cohen and Slutskaya were faltering.

"Salt Lake was very different for me," Cohen said. "It was my first major international, and I had something to prove that I was out there. I was a different person, a different athlete. I've learned and matured so much, and learned how to handle the nerves I think a bit better since then and just evolved."

If Cohen comes through, it would be the eighth time a U.S. woman took Olympic gold.

And it would sidetrack Russia's potential sweep after its skaters won the men's, pairs and ice dancing competitions.

Of course, with such a tight race, any of the top three could skate away with the title. It will take a spectacular performance by Fumie Suguri, nearly five points behind Cohen, or Americans Kimmie Meissner (fifth overall) and Emily Hughes (seventh) to challenge for a medal.

But Suguri's run-throughs have been steady all week, and this day was no different, even though she was forced to stop when the PA system interrupted her program music with blaring disco.

When she resumed, she immediately hit a combination jump.

Emily Hughes, the replacement for the injured Kwan, hasn't even been in Turin a week, yet came through with her personal best in the short program.

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