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GOING FOR
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GOLD
THREE-PEAT
IN 2010,
SPEED SKATER
AND
"DANCING"
CHAMP
APOLO OHNO
IS ALWAYS
A LEG UP.

BY CHRIS MANN

ten years before winning five Olympic medals, numerous World Cup titles and a "Dancing with the Stars" disco-ball trophy, a not-so-lean-and-lithe 15-year-old Apolo Anton Ohno hit his "lowest of lows." While training with the 1998 U.S. Olympic team, the unruly rebel would often ditch the U.S. team's five-mile sprints for Pizza Hut runs, eventually earning him the nickname "Chunkie." It also earned him 16th place — dead last at the '98 Olympic trials. While Ohno's peers made the Olympic team and glided to Nagano, Japan, the unfocused wild child stayed home on thin ice.

"It was a horrible feeling not making the team. That was the big turning point for me," Ohno says. "I went from being number one in the United States to being dead last within a year."

But despite being "mad — really mad" to learn in August '96 that he had his training group's highest body-fat percentage, the defiant wunderkind still lacked the discipline to maintain a taut, 5-foot-8 physique and shed his weighty nickname.

It was time for an attitude intervention.

FATHER KNOWS BEST

"I thought, *OK, Apolo, you need to get your ass in gear,*" he recalls, after flunking the body-fat test. "I didn't want to be that [last-place, out-of-shape] guy. I wanted to be the best."

At the time, the young upstart with the endless potential didn't know where to turn. "I didn't have a single clue as to what it took to become an Olympic athlete. Nobody had taught me. I don't think I had the training or the drive that I really wanted. That was the biggest problem. I had this perspective of being an Olympic athlete, when I was something totally different."

He thanks his Seattle-based Japanese father, Yuki — whom Ohno calls the longtime "backbone of my success" — for turning him around at his lowest moment. After the disaster of the '98 trials, Yuki took his son to a secluded cabin three hours north of Seattle. There, away from modern conveniences and the distractions of televisions, computers and telephones, Apolo contemplated his recent disappointment. He had too much ability, too much drive, to have fallen so low. It's while he sat in the wilderness ruminating on lost opportunity that he decided he would dedicate himself to the enormous task of becoming an Olympic champion.

It's small wonder that the gold-medal winner credits his father with forcing him to find his passion, harness his untamed energies and stay on track. "I don't know what I'd do without my dad. We've been through so much together," he says. "He's sacrificed a lot for me. He's such a friend and an inspiration. He's there for me regardless. And he put up with me when I was at my worst. I don't know who else could have."

Fast-forward to 2007. Ohno is the owner of five Olympic medals (two golds, a silver and two bronze)



SKATE EXPECTATIONS

Here are some highlights from Apolo Ohno's incomparable speed-skating career.

- » Was a national champion and record-holder in indoor inline skating. Began speed skating in 1995 at age 13 after switching over from inline skating.
- » Youngest American (at age 17) to win a World Cup event.
- » Five-time Olympic medalist (2002, 2006), tying Eric Heiden for most winter medals by a U.S. male Olympian.
- » Earned a gold (1,500m) and silver medal (1,000m) in 2002; and a gold (500m) and two bronze medals (1,000m, 5,000m relay) in 2006.
- » Three-time World Cup overall champion (2001, 2003, 2005).
- » Seven-time World Cup event champion, including the 500m, 1,000m and 1,500m in 2001 and 2005; and the 1,000m in 2003.
- » Seven-time U.S. short-track overall champion (1997, 1999, 2001–2005).
- » Won 3,000m gold, 1,000m silver at 2002 World Championships, 3,000m silver at 2003 World Championships.
- » Won 23 individual World Cup medals in 2005 (11 golds, 11 silvers, one bronze).

and is determined to use his rock-solid legs and intense drive to reach the podium again in the 2010 Winter Games.

One thing's for sure: Dad will be there. Yuki has a permanent seat cheering for his son from the sidelines. "He's at every game," Ohno says. "Now people come up to him in his [hair] salon and give him a thumbs up. It never ceases to happen."

He'll need the support. Repeating a medal triumph at consecutive Olympics is a rare feat, and Ohno knows it. "For the next Games, I need to become stronger, faster, leaner and meaner," he says.

Citing "competitive reasons," he'll reveal only that he weighs "a little less" than the 165 pounds listed in his official Olympic bio. "I'll be much lighter and leaner for the next Olympics. We're all trying to get our body fat at 4% and under. I suppose I'm a little higher than that after the dancing show, but it'll come off fast."

MAKING BALLROOM COOL AGAIN

Oh, yes, the dancing show. Despite the demands of Olympic training, Ohno left no doubt that he's up for new challenges when he rhumba'd and cha-cha'd his way to the top spot last spring on the reality competition show "Dancing with the Stars." This

consummate competitor squeezed 12 hours of daily dance lessons into a sports-training and nutrition regimen that itself is a full-time job.

At the end of his "Dancing" stint, he was in a familiar spot: winner. But it wasn't easy. Exposing oneself to millions of people nationwide while tripping the light fantastic — in tights, no less — may overwhelm many crossover celebrities, but it actually played to Ohno's strengths: agility, stamina, leg power, telegenic charisma and grace under pressure. It gained the Olympic star a new and enthusiastic fan base that will surely be rooting for him during future on-ice competitions.

Although he still jets to Hollywood tapings, award shows and A-list parties, Ohno remains an athlete first. Most of his life is spent training at the Utah Olympic Oval in Salt Lake City.

"I'm up at 6:30 a.m. and I'm in the rink from about 7 or 7:30 a.m. till about noon," he says. "I come back home for lunch, I rest a little bit, make a few phone calls. Then I'm back at the rink from 2:30 till 6:30 p.m. I come home, work on my skates, take care of e-mails and more calls. Then after dinner it's pretty much time for sleep. It's hardcore, baby, very hardcore."

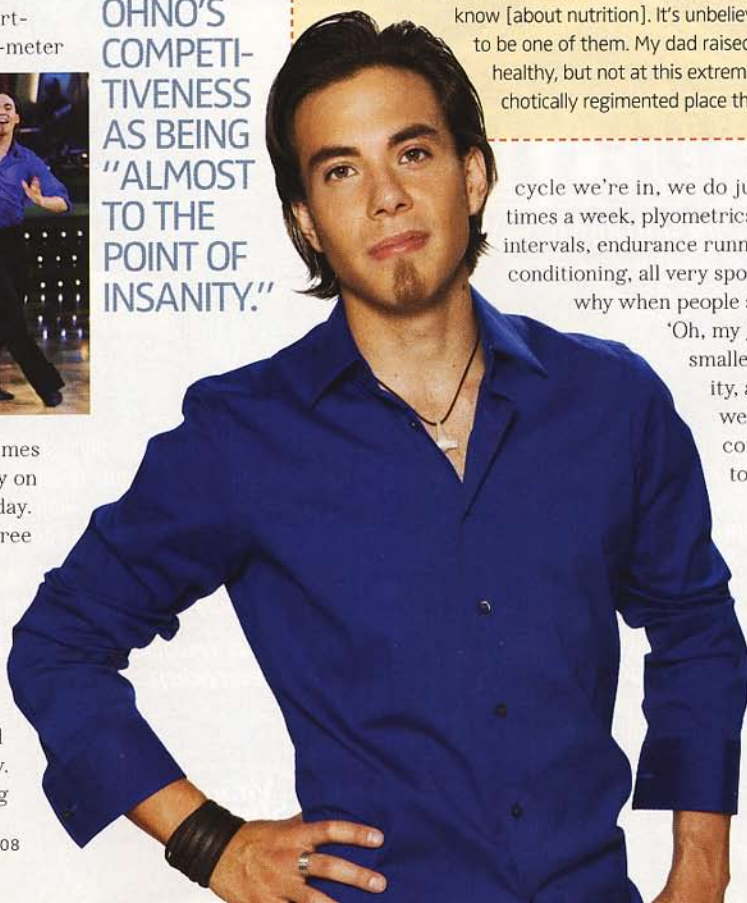
Ohno and his fellow short-trackers hit the Oval's 400-meter



speed-skating rink three times a week, twice a day, usually on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. They lift weights two or three times a week at the Oval's state-of-the-art gym. Saturdays are half-days mostly spent in massage or the sauna; Sundays are off.

"We do a ton of dry-land [exercises] every single day. Depending on what training

**HIS COACH
CALLS
OHNO'S
COMPETITIVENESS
AS BEING
"ALMOST
TO THE
POINT OF
INSANITY."**



NUTRITION AS GOOD AS GOLD

Olympic champ Apolo Ohno's nutrition plan, which includes "quite a bit" of supplementation, is designed to keep his body in top form for years.

"My diet plan is very high in protein, but I eat for my activity. Depending on what type of workout I'm doing — interval, threshold, aerobic endurance, lactate threshold, sprints, aerobic capacity — I'll eat for that type of workout. Which is the only way to go, especially if I'm trying to become very efficient and lean."

Ohno's strength and conditioning coach John Schaeffer has also taught him a thing or two about eating. "John says that if you're going to perform where you need to perform in the next couple of years, you can't put anything in your body that doesn't churn the muscle or help it recover, give you greater performance or keep you at the body weight you need to be," says Ohno. "That sounds intense, but that's what it's all about. Nutrition is fuel. If you can fuel your body and your body can come back and recover, then you're on the right track. You can train harder and harder. When I am totally dialed in to my nutrition program, I know when I need to add 5 g of protein or 10 g of carbohydrates to my diet. I can feel it. It's freaky. And when I dial down my nutrition, in only a week I can see an actual physiological change that's perceptible. You can absolutely see a difference."

Ohno finds inspiration in the world of bodybuilding. "Some of these bodybuilders have an almost psychotic diet. You take what they know about nutrition — about protein, absorption, mineral balance and pH levels in your body — and apply that toward sports. You'd be surprised to know how many athletes in the world don't know [about nutrition]. It's unbelievable. And I used to be one of them. My dad raised me to eat healthy, but not at this extreme, almost psychotically regimented place that I'm at now."

cycle we're in, we do jumps about three times a week, plyometrics, sprints, biking intervals, endurance running. We do a ton of conditioning, all very sport-specific. That's why when people see me, they say,

"Oh, my gosh, you're a little smaller in person." In reality, all of the power and weight comes from my core all the way down to my toes."

MISSION APOLO

The lighting-quick speed skater has his workouts down to a science thanks largely to John Schaeffer; his

strength and conditioning coach since 2004. Ohno credits the five-time powerlifting world champ with developing a proficient and intensive training program that continually challenges the fierce Ohno competitiveness level that Schaeffer has called "almost on the verge of insanity."

In Ohno's opinion, that intense focus is essential. "The speed in my sport is exhilarating and crazy," he says. "How fast we skate, how hard we train, it doesn't seem human to me. We're defying these angles and competing really hard. There's racing, there's excitement, there's every single thing that a sport could possibly have. I absolutely love that."

Schaeffer's program speaks to the skater's winning spirit. "What I was doing before worked, but I needed something new," Ohno says. "I needed a new outlook. And [Schaeffer] definitely brought a new perspective. He always tells me, 'You know, Apolo, you're a champion because you've trained at levels others can't; because you sacrifice at levels other people are not willing to; and because you try to accomplish what others can only dream about.' It's the motto we live by."

Their training strategy: to make Ohno's massive legs and his core — lower back, hips and abs — more powerful than ever by tightening his strength-to-weight ratio.

"What John teaches me and what we focus on is strictly neurological muscle recruitment," Ohno says. "Rather than gaining size, I'm gaining strength, becoming the most efficient athlete I can possibly be. It's all about muscle recruitment and neurological response."

It's a specific type of training for his rigorous but unique competitive demands. "A lot of guys do a lot of overload training, which is great for football players and other athletes," he explains. "Those techniques work for only a couple of reps, 5 reps or less of 12. You can literally work your muscles to fatigue. We have a different philosophy for my sport. We don't do a ton of overload work. Our stuff is very precise and we've each had a lot of success with it."

For the nationally celebrated athlete, the Olympian stakes require the total commitment that Schaeffer's mind-body approach teaches.



"WE ALL HAVE OUR STRUGGLES, BUT WE'RE ALL HERE TO CARRY THE TORCH FURTHER."

"Every single day, I get on the ice for competition," Ohno says, "I'm facing my own fears. I have to. Every time I represent the U.S., there's no backing out. You go head-to-head with your own fears, your own reservations."

The Olympian's quads, calves and hamstrings bear the brunt of his workout. "I haven't maxed out on my leg press in quite a long time, [but] I can do about 700–800 pounds on one leg. And we're doing long reps. We're doing intervals on one leg. I can probably do a max on leg press of 1,850–2,000 pounds. For my body weight, that is really, really high. But to me there's too much risk for injury [in pushing these limits] versus the benefit."

He keeps his arms and chest lean, as they're consistently tucked into his hunched speed-skating form during a race.

"Imagine a sprint cyclist crouched over his handlebars — that's me all the time on the ice. I don't do any upper-body work unless it benefits my legs."

FIRE ON ICE

Pushing his strength and endurance levels keeps Ohno's torch lit as he aims to debunk the popular notion that speed skaters peak at age 24. How does he plan to keep ahead of the competition at age 27?

"That's the question of the day," Ohno says. "But honestly, I think my peak is 27. I thought I was at my strongest in Torino [in 2004], but I think there's a whole other level I can reach. It's awesome to have that feeling."

Ohno is committed not only to physical training but also to a healthy mind-set. "You can be anybody you want to be in sports," he notes. "And nobody can tell you you've failed or tell you otherwise. If you've prepared your body and prepared your mind and it's not your day — you know what, it's just not your day. But you have the satisfaction of saying, 'I gave my all today.' That's what's important."

"In speaking engagements I always finish with a quote from philosopher Nikos Kazantzakis: 'Do not ask whether you will win or lose. That is not your challenge. What you need to think about is carrying the struggle further. That should be your focus.'"

"We all have struggles," Ohno adds. "We're all here to carry the torch further." **MB**