

Q&A: Naperville's 'Sports Doctor' discusses Evan Lysacek bowing out of Sochi Olympics

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Dr. Robert Weil poses with Olympic Gold Medalist Evan Lysacek after he won his gold medal in 2010.

Young skater claims Junior Olympic gold

By Mike Harrison

At this year's Junior Olympics held just outside of Chicago, a hometown hero of sorts skated away to a gold medal in the juvenile division.

Evan Lysacek, a fifth-grader at Springbrook Elementary School in Naperville, was crowned the U.S. National Juvenile Men's Champion on April 12, only two-and-a-half years after his first time skating and still before his 11th birthday.

The juvenile division is designated as ages 12 and under. However, Lysacek was skating against boys that were nearly three years older than him due to the way the rules work. Altogether, the juvenile division was comprised of 18 boys, all regional winners from across the country.

"A lot of the kids skated well in the practices and warm-ups, and didn't do too well when they skated in the program," said Lysacek. "I was kind of nervous when I didn't have enough time to warm up. I didn't land all my jumps perfectly in the warm-up, but I knew that I had to focus and concentrate."

"Once we got to the practices, and I was able to see some of the other skaters in his event, I felt that if he skated and had a good, solid program that he should be up in the top third, and if he skated his absolute best, it depended how the other boys skated, but I felt

that he had the opportunity to shoot for a medal," said Cindy Brown Burk, Lysacek's private coach. "This was an outstanding opportunity for him to have national exposure, and his responsibility was to be prepared, stay focused, skate the cleanest program that he possibly could, and put himself in the running for the future up-and-comers."

In his program, Lysacek was able to pull off the clean program that his coach had hoped for, and was rewarded with a gold medal. "I think that was the best I could have ever done," said Lysacek. "I felt like, 'Wow! I've accomplished anything I've ever wanted to accomplish.' I didn't know I would get this far."

Lysacek qualified for the Junior Olympics by winning the regional competition in October of last year. Since then, a lot of work went into perfecting and polishing his routine. "First, we were increasing the difficulty of the jump and spin content of the program, and we were working a great deal on his consistency for skating class programs, and we were working on the jumps that we will also hope to have for the intermediate level," said Brown Burk.

The intermediate level of competition is the next step up for Lysacek, where there is no age limit. He could easily find himself skating against 16- and 17-year-olds in this last step before the

(USA photo by Pat Van Doran)
Evan Lysacek sports his Junior Olympic gold medal while practicing last week at All Seasons Ice Arena in Naperville. See SKATER on Page 34

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senior level of the National Championships, according to Brown Burk. In addition to the higher level of competition, the intermediate level also introduces a second program, so each skater must skate a short two-minute program as well as a long two-and-a-half-minute program.

"My goals that I've set are to get my double axie and at least three of my triples by next year," Lysacek said. "I think I'd do pretty well, because I have most of the jumps that I need, and the artistic will just come with experience."

This fall, in addition to trying to win the intermediate regional competition to qualify for the national intermediate competition, Lysacek will be attending the U.S. Olympic Training Camp. "It's a wonderful opportunity for the children to have a chance to go out to the Olympic Training Center and have some of the connections to the U.S. Figure Skating Association," said Brown Burk.

"There's a lot ahead of me, and I have a lot behind me, too," said Lysacek.

With respect to Lysacek's prospects as a member of the U.S. Olympic figure skating team, Brown Burk seems to think that he has a legitimate shot at being a contender.

"I feel that he is off to a fabulous start, and with continued hard work, I think he's got a very good opportunity to work up the ladder to achieve a spot on the world and Olympic team," she said. "Again, there's a lot of patience, and a lot of time that goes into this. It's not an overnight thing. You spend a number of years working and training for that end goal."

Dr. Robert A. Weil met Evan Lysacek in 1996, when the Olympic champion was then a 10-year-old kid skating at All Seasons Ice Rink in Aurora under the guidance of coach Candy Brown Burek. “Evan was already special at that age,” said Weil, a specialty-sports podiatrist, who has crafted Lysacek’s custom orthotics for nearly two decades, a vital item which helps to keep a skater’s lower body in alignment.

On Tuesday, Lysacek, the Naperville native, announced that he would not compete in the 2014 Sochi Olympics because of a torn labrum in his left hip that resulted from a fall on Aug. 21 as Lysacek attempted a quadruple jump.

When did you know that Evan wouldn’t compete in the Sochi games? I officially knew when I saw [Today]. I sent Evan a text telling him how proud I was of him and he replied with something along the lines of “Thanks Doc, tough day.” He’s a man of few words when he’s locked in.

But I knew the reality after I had been in contact with him over the last few months. His progress was slow. He was hurting and trying to fight through it.

What went through your mind when you heard the news? The end of an era. Our entire past flashed through my mind when it all became real. Specifically, I remember the picture of him as a 10-year-old boy when he said, “Thanks Dr. Weil for my new feet.”

Prior to Evan’s injury, what has the last few years been like for him after winning the gold in Vancouver? He thought he’d wait for a year or two, then he decided ‘If I lose I lose, I’m not done competing.’ That was this journey for the past year and a half: to try to get to Sochi, Russia.

What factor do you most attribute Evan’s recent injury to? Lousy luck. Had it not been for this, I think he would have made it back.

Evan had a surgical procedure to correct a sports hernia last year and he recovered well, but he was never 100 percent and was in a hurry to get back.

The three major points for whether Evan would be able to get to Sochi were: 1.) Could he hold up to super intensive training? (And he really, really couldn’t after the fall). 2.) Could he qualify? 3.) Could he win? This time, he ran out of time.

How long would Evan have needed to recuperate if he was to compete at Sochi? He needed a couple more months of time. He’s got to heal. We probably needed a month or two of slowing down. There was just too much intensity considering the injury. It was untenable.

Have you ever treated Evan for an injury? Evan had a lingering foot problem after winning the world championship and leading up to the Vancouver Olympics. Part of his visit was to update his orthotics and part was to talk strategy about not doing the quadruple jump.

On top of that was his rapid growth. He’s a tremendous lever system and we knew there would be lots of stress on hips. But this latest injury was acute and it was more bad luck than his hips wearing, which in some ways is harder to take.

Having known Evan for nearly two decades, what’s your understanding of how he made the decision to bow out of the Sochi games? Evan is tough as they come, but he couldn’t work through the discomfort.

Doctors, I think, were saying it could do permanent damage. He's had so many disruptions in his training, He doesn't want to embarrass himself.

Do you think Evan will compete again? I don't know if he'll compete. He might see that his whole reasons to compete was the Olympics. Of course he'll be back in ice shows. Maybe he'll be commentator in Sochi. We would expect if anyone can comeback, it would be Evan. The question is what does someone feel in their heart, is it worth it to compete again at 28, already old in some ways?

What is the bigger challenge of Evan's recovery, the mental or physical aspect? It's both an issue of mind and body. He has standards of excellence as does any champion. Evan has always been an overachiever in training. You have to hold this kid back. If the Olympics were in the spring...

But for him its been a question of "Hey, how much pain can you handle?" The mental side is huge and right now Evan is reeling with the reality of this situation because it's been his whole life.

If you were speaking with Evan today, what would you tell him, both as a doctor and as a friend? Listen man, we love you, we understand and you're a great champion. He's always been a tremendous optimist. He'll shine wherever he goes.