





PHOTO BY TATJANA FLADE

EVGENI PLUSHENKO

Rising to the Challenge

By Tatjana Flade

When Evgeni Plushenko announced he was returning to the amateur ranks in 2009 with the intention of competing at the 2010 Olympic Winter Games, most people believed it was just empty talk.

But the 2006 Olympic champion was true to his word. After winning a sixth European title in early 2010, Plushenko claimed his third Olympic medal (silver) in Vancouver, a feat no other living singles skater can lay claim to.

COMPETITIVE SPIRIT

Four months later the International Skating Union (ISU) banned Plushenko from amateur competition after the Russian superstar, who had withdrawn from the 2010 World Championships citing injury, performed in exhibitions in March and April without the sanction of his federation.

Plushenko did not appeal the decision at that time, but 11 months later the Russian Skating Federation petitioned the ISU for his reinstatement. Plushenko's amateur status was restored in June 2011.

His desire to return to competition now begs the same question as it did before Vancouver: What motivates this decorated athlete to return to grueling practice sessions and tough competitions when he could enjoy life, making a good living performing in shows?

"Shows are nice, but they are lacking the extreme," he explained. "I look for the extreme. I went to classes for extreme car and motorcycle

**"I KNOW I WILL BE 31 IN 2014,
BUT PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY
I'M STILL YOUNG."**

driving and I started to play paintball, but all this wasn't enough. Figure skating is an extreme sport. When you are competing, you feel this adrenaline. I wanted to come back in 2010 and test myself one more time, and I think it went well. That whole season was great.

"That the judges gave me second place in Vancouver doesn't matter. I skated well and I did everything I had planned, and therefore I am happy with that," the 28-year-old added.

It is the hunger for that adrenaline rush that still drives Plushenko, who has now set another ambitious goal for himself: competing at the



2014 Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, Russia. "It is my dream to compete in my fourth Olympic Games in my home country and assure my spot in the history of figure skating, so I will try," he said.

"Yes, I do already have my place in the history of figure skating, but I can confirm it again at a very high level. The first season maybe won't be so good, but I still have time to prepare, train and experiment for that most important season. I want to train and I want to compete and to show good programs."

RENEWED MOTIVATION

Plushenko knows that the competition will be tough three years down the road, but he remains undaunted. "The main

thing is to be injury-free," he said. "Right now I have injuries and that worries me a little. My left knee was hurting again, and I had meniscus surgery in June. But apart from that my mood is good, competitive."

He attended the 2011 World Championships in Moscow as a spectator and watched Patrick Chan, 20, claim his first World title in a convincing manner over Japan's Takahiko Kozuka (22) and 18-year-old Artur Gachinski.

"Patrick skated really well and did quads and all the triples," Plushenko said. "Everybody is developing, and right now I'm learning a lot from the young skaters. Artur has been skating very well and I think training with him is good for me."

"Competition is always good; remember there was a time

PHOTOS BY SUSAN D. RUSSELL

when (Alexei) Urmanov, (Alexei) Yagudin and I all trained together. We pushed each other. With Artur in the group, I have a sparring partner. He does a quad and I have to do a quad as well." Both skaters train under the guidance of coach Alexei Mishin.

Plushenko plans to include the quad Salchow or Lutz jumps (which he landed in practice a few years ago) in his new programs. "I like to jump and I like new quads," he said with a smile. "Obviously it is different now from how it used to be. When I was like 18 or 20 I just jumped and rotated without thinking, but now my body needs more work, more training. It is not easy."

The Russian star has canceled most of his show appearances in order to focus on training and preparation for the upcoming season. He planned to attend the summer training camps Mishin held in Europe from mid-June to early August.

Plushenko said he is working on his new programs and has invited ideas from new choreographers. "I've already chosen the music for the free skate. I won't make it public yet. All I can tell you is that it is something tragic," he said. At press time, the theme for the short program was still a work in progress.

His main choreographer this season will be Marina Iatsevitch, a former ballet dancer who performed with the Bolshoi Theatre. He will still continue to work with longtime choreographer David Avdish.

Plushenko also wants to get direction on transitions from Kurt Browning. "I really want to work with Kurt. We've basically agreed on working together for two weeks this summer," he said.

NEW HORIZONS

When asked what lies ahead once he retires from competitive skating, Plushenko said he is already making plans for the future. "I want to open my own skating school here in St. Petersburg." He wants to continue the work of Mishin, his longtime coach and mentor, and collaborate on a project with him.

"I have this dream to build a school, not just a skating school with an ice rink, but maybe with a place where the young skaters can live, train and study," Plushenko explained. "I also would like to produce my own skating shows. I have a lot of plans. I want to stay involved with skating and help to educate new athletes."

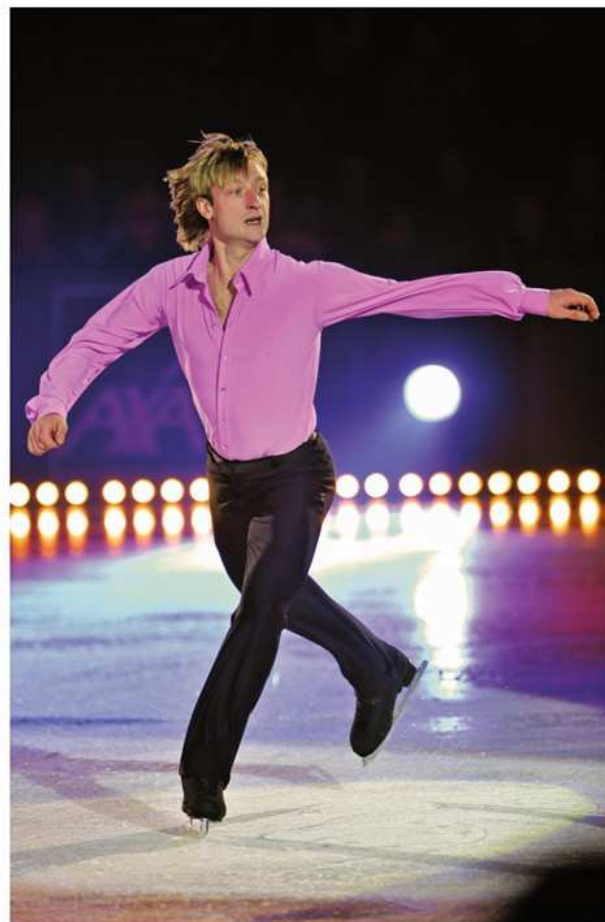
He has already sought out private investors for his skating school project and is also hoping for support from the Russian government. "We still don't have enough ice rinks in St. Petersburg. We need to invest now," the three-time World champion said. "Everybody is talking about building for Sochi in 2014, but what will happen after 2014? We need to look further into the future as new kids are growing up and figure skating continues to develop."

But right now Plushenko is looking forward to the new season. He is on good terms with the Russian federation, which has agreed to sponsor him. "They already paid for the new programs and the choreographers."

His wife, Yana Rudkovskaya, is supporting his comeback. "She said she's going to travel with me everywhere," Plushenko said.

"The most important point is to overcome this barrier in yourself, and this is hard. It is hard to wake up in the morning and to drive from home to the ice rink. The first practice is fine, but then in the middle of the week it gets more difficult and

"THE EASY WAY WOULD BE TO HANG UP MY SKATES. ANYONE CAN DO THAT, BUT NOT EVERYONE CAN OVERCOME HIMSELF."



there is the need to overcome myself," he explained. "On the other hand I like that. This is another challenge for me.

"Like my Latin tattoo *Viam supervadet vadens* says: 'The path will be overcome by the one who walks it,'" Plushenko said as he pulled up his sleeve to show the tattoo on his right forearm. "You have to overcome yourself and this you only can achieve if you are trying, moving forward and working hard." □