

By Eve Sullivan, The Advocate of Stamford, AP

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Stamford skaters dream of Sochi Olympics



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In this Jan. 3, 2014 photo, Caitlin Chan, 11, takes a figure skating lesson with her instructor, Ekaterina Gvozdkova, left, at Twin Rinks in Stamford, Conn. Chan isn't old enough to make the Olympics this year, but she's laying the groundwork and hoping to qualify at some point in the future.

STAMFORD — Eleven-year-old Caitlin Chan is laying the groundwork to become an Olympic figure skater and seems to be doing everything right.

The Darien girl practices almost daily, enters local competitions and has three coaches — one of whom is former world-class Russian figure skater Ekaterina Gvozdkova.

"She's probably on the ice six or seven days a week," her mother, Jessica Yep-Chan, said while watching her skate at Twin Rinks on Hope Street.

With the 2014 Winter Olympics coming up next month, it's an exciting time for Caitlin and other figure skaters. While she isn't old enough to make the Olympics this year, she's hoping to qualify somewhere down the road.

"Of course that's always a little girl's dream, but we'll take it as far as it goes," Yep-Chan said. "She loves skating. She's been doing it since she was five."

Yep-Chan watched through a window at the rink recently as Caitlin practiced with Gvozdkova, whom they call "Katya." She said they're working on a routine for an upcoming competition in New Haven.

Wearing a pink headband and black outfit embroidered with sparkly skates on the back, Caitlin gracefully swirled and twirled around the ice, frequently stopping to receive instruction from her coach.

Among her many impressive moves, she mastered the one-foot glide, stretching one leg behind her and holding her hands in the air.

Keeping an eye on the duo, Yep-Chan said they hired Gvozdkova as a third coach in July to improve her skills.

"Katya has been such an inspiration," she said.

When the practice ended, Caitlin said she enjoys skating, calling it "really fun." She said she particularly likes to spin and is working on a "camel lay-back spin combination." She also wants to work on her axels.

Asked how the practice went, Gvozdkova doesn't mince words in front of the youngster, saying, "Some things good, some things not so good."

Caitlin admitted that Gvozdkova can be tough, adding, "But she's nice though."

The coach said Caitlin needs work on her spins and jumps, like every other skater, as well as her facial expressions and arm positions.

On the plus side, she said she's gaining more speed and power.

"We're going to show this in New Haven for the first time," Gvozdkova said. "Each time, it gets stronger and stronger."

Caitlin said she's excited to show off her new routine, as well as a new dress she just bought for the competition on Monday. She said it's lilac with sequins.

"That's the best part," Gvozdkova said.

Caitlin also looked forward to attending the U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Boston, which last week determined who made the final cut for the Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, from Feb. 7 to 23. She idolizes some of the past and present skaters who were there.

"I used to look up to Michelle Kwan and now Yuna Kim," she said, referring to the American and South Korean Olympic champions.

Gvozdkova competed in couple's ice dancing, making the Russian National Team and narrowly missing her chance to skate in the 2004 Olympic Games. She then began training others in the sport.

"I really like working with the kids and transferring my knowledge," she said. "It's nice to see them win medals."

Gvozdkova said some of her students are skating for fun, while others such as Caitlin will have a "big future" if they don't give up.

"The ones that become the Olympians are not always the most talented," she noted. "They are the ones with the most drive."

Along with private coaching, Twin Rinks offers advanced figure skating classes, where skaters of all ages can learn jumps, spins, artistic moves and footwork.

At Chelsea Piers, about 30 young students attend a beginner's figure skating class on Wednesday afternoons.

Rinks director Matt Stack said skating is becoming more popular and people are excited about the Olympic Games.

"It's definitely growing around here. That's why we built two rinks," Stack said. "There's a demand for it and quality programming for skating and hockey."

Atara Iuri, 8, of Stamford, said she started taking classes two years ago and enjoys figure skating. She also likes Michelle Kwan and watches her old footage.

"It's my hobby and I also want to do it when I grow up," Atara said.

"She's improved a lot, she really has," her mother Maruja Iuri said. "She needs more practice, I think once a week is limiting."