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Paired up, moving up

City skater, partner find each other, then success

Aubree Reichel The Journal Gazette

Olivia Allan didn't tell anyone she wanted to skate in pairs. The 14-year-old from DuPage, Illinois, has been figure skating since she was 5 but had done only singles.

Austin Hale, who moved to Fort Wayne from Richland, Washington, four years ago, had skated pairs but his partner was getting too tall, and after 21/2 years of skating together, the pair had to split up.

Luckily, Allan had caught the eye of Hale's coach Alena Lunin, and they arranged a tryout.

"There was a competition in Salt Lake City in September 2013, and I was a novice," Allan said. "I'd skated singles. There was a team leader for all the novice level and he was novice pairs, and I think his coach contacted the team leader of our group, and she contacted my coach and coach talked to me about it and asked me if I wanted to do it.

"I never told anyone, but I kind of wanted to do pairs for like a year or two before that, but I never told anyone or went out looking for a partner. But then he came to me and we had a tryout, and it went well, so we were teamed up."

Last January, the pair started training together. It was Allan's first time skating pairs, so she had a lot of work to do.

"We were learning simple things – how to not kill each other, basically," Lunin said. "Then they (Allan and Hale) had a lot of hard work to do because he was a pairs skater before and he passed his tests and she wasn't. So she needed to go all the way through the beginning tests. We had five tests down the way, which was pretty challenging.

"At the same time, we knew we had to rush to get them ready for Skate Detroit, which was in July. That's where all Canadian and United States teams, the majority of them, come in.

"This is the biggest competition right now in the U.S. for pairs."

The pair placed third at the U.S. Figure Skating Championships in January in the junior pairs division, which seemed like an improbable task coming into the competition.

"We got there, and there were lots of really good teams and we competed our short Tuesday night, and it didn't go that great because we threw in a new element the night before," Allan said. "We weren't planning on doing it or anything, so we hadn't trained it with music.

“We were in fourth after the short program. Our long program is stronger and more trained, so going to long I think we were more confident than going into the short because the short program that we skated wasn’t what we trained to do. We went out there and put out a much stronger long.”

The goal was to perform well at Skate Detroit to qualify for sectionals or to be chosen to the International Selection Pool.

The chances of being selected to Team USA were slim because of the pair’s lack of experience together.

“This team has potential, but it was a 30 percent chance compared to 70,” Lunin said. “If they had one mistake, it would be different story. Stars lined up the right way.”

But following the Detroit competition, officials requested that the pair remain in town for one more day.

“They did a very good job at the Skate Detroit, they got third out of 17 teams for the long program,” Lunin said. “Right after their long program, U.S. Figure Skating found us and asked if we could stay until the next day because they’ve been selected to the International Selection Pool. They have to go into a mentoring session with the USFS officials before they go back home.

“We stayed one more day in Detroit and we came back to Fort Wayne to continue training, and after a couple of days we received an email saying they’d been selected to go to Croatia and Estonia to represent the United States.”

During the remainder of the season, the pair traveled to Estonia and Croatia and around the U.S. to train and compete.

“From Detroit, we (went) to Florida to train,” Hale said. “In Florida, we had three weeks of strict skating and off-ice, and then straight from Florida we went to Salt Lake and did that, then went to Estonia and then Croatia for international competitions.

“Straight from Croatia we went to sectionals. We had a couple weeks off. Sectionals was in Chicago. Then we had about a month and a half before nationals. So this past four or five months has been so crazy. We haven’t really got a break.”

The pair took a week off following nationals and have started preparing for the 2015 season.

“We already have our music and stuff for next season,” Allan said. “We had to work on our new elements for our new program and probably within the next month or so put together our new programs for next season.”