

Icenetwork about Shibutani

Shibutanis guided by close family connection

Strong bond helps brother-sister duo earn bronze medal in Korea

GANGNEUNG, South Korea - It began so simply in 2004: Alex Shibutani was tired of having his 12-year-old butt kicked by rivals in singles skating. His 9-year-old sister, Maia, was having more success, so Alex decided he would be better off trying to skate with her in ice dance.

"When we came up as a sibling team, it was just so natural, and we thought, 'OK, this is going to be a great journey we can be on together,'" Maia said.

She also quickly discovered it was more fun to be on the ice with Alex than to be out there by herself. And they were good together, good enough to start winning medals in national competitions the next year and keep winning medals as they moved up through skill levels, from juvenile to intermediate to novice to junior.

And then it got complicated.

"As you start to move forward and people start to take your skating more seriously, you stand out because you're different -- two Asian kids that are also brother and sister," Alex said. "People start to take notice of your ability and potential and they start asking, 'When the cuteness fades, what is the ceiling of their career?'"

The consensus was a pretty low ceiling. There was a discipline in which love stories play a part in such a huge percentage of programs, in which no Asians or Asian-Americans -- and only one brother-sister team, Isabelle Duchesnay and Paul Duchesnay of France -- had ever won an Olympic medal until the Shibutanis took the bronze Tuesday.

Alex could have said "I told you so" to all the doubters. He dismissed that as an "easy and cheap" reaction.

"It has never been about other people," he said.

But the sibling issue clearly had hung like an albatross over them for years, even if they never let anyone know how heavy a burden it was. That was clear when first Maia, 23, and then Alex, 26, choked up when describing what it meant to get past

misconceptions and preconceptions and how that familial bond helped them stand up to the competitive pressure of the Olympics.

"Along the way, there were a lot of people who told us you shouldn't be doing it, that siblings shouldn't be a team," Maia said, with tears leaking from her eyes.

They made it their calling card. They chose "ShibSibs" as a Twitter handle. They emphasized the relationship at every chance in tweets and vlogs and YouTube videos. Their interactions became so appealing that Minute Maid, Ralph Lauren, ICE BREAKERS, Intel and Milk-Bone signed up to sponsor them, and NBC made them a big part of its pre-Olympic promotion.

Marina Zoueva never thought their being siblings would be a problem when she began coaching them 11 years ago.

"Just because she didn't have a team like us before doesn't mean she didn't believe it was possible," Maia said.

Their teacher-student bond is so strong that Zoueva proudly showed off the gold infinity bracelet the Shibutanis gave her to mark their 10th anniversary together.

"It's not necessary to have a love passion," Zoueva said. "Any passion is passion. Their passion is in how they worked to reach their goal."

They rejected the notion that ice dance had to be romantic or sensual.

"That's probably hurting ice dance's feelings," Alex said, then apologizing for his personification of the discipline. "Ice dance can be whatever it can be. Don't put people in boxes."

With an impassioned, electric free dance to the Coldplay song "Paradise," the Shibutanis shook off the albatross and their disappointment over being fourth in a short dance in which they felt deserved better scores. It left them just 0.02 points behind teammates Madison Hubbell and Zachary Donohue.

Hubbell and Donohue made mistakes on two free dance elements, and the near-flawless Shibutanis wound up beating them by 4.9 points for third place. The top two teams, Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir of Canada, and Gabriella Papadakis and Guillaume Cizeron of France, were in a league of their own, as expected -- nearly 19 and 18 points ahead of the Shibutanis, respectively.

Seven years after becoming surprise bronze medalists at the 2011 World Championships, the Shibutanis gave the United States ice dance medals in four straight Olympics. Tanith Belbin and Ben Agosto broke a 30-year U.S. dance drought with a silver in 2006, and Meryl Davis and Charlie White added silver in 2010 and gold in 2014.

"Maia was 16, and we win a medal three years before the Sochi Games, and it's, 'Wow,'" Alex said. "We thought the future was exceptionally bright for us. We never stopped believing that."

It was often cloudy. They dropped to eighth in the world in 2012 and did not get back on the world podium until 2016. They finished ninth at the Sochi Olympics.

"We knew we had to make changes," Alex said. "We had to be more personal, more ourselves, not taking on a role (in programs), not playing a part."

The big change came with a free dance to Coldplay's "Fix You" in the 2015-16 season. They made it about themselves, about their comeback. They realized the psychic risk of doing a program that, as Maia said, "meant they were judging you on you, not on that they didn't like your portrayal of a story."

They won their first two U.S. titles in 2016 and 2017, and returned to world podiums with a silver in 2016 and bronze in 2017.

They left the Gangneung Ice Arena very upset after the result of Monday's short dance. They needed to find a way to forget that feeling.

"Maia did an awesome thing," Alex said.

She pulled up old home videos on her computer, videos of them as little kids dancing together off the ice, having goofy fun. It was the perfect reminder of who they are and what they mean to each other.

"The family bond we have is something no one else has," Alex said, his voice cracking with emotion. "It sets us apart. For the people who think it's a deficit, we made it a strength."

The Shibutanis, who led by more than three points after the short dance, had great moments in their free dance to Coldplay's "Paradise," including spectacular twizzles and a free-wheeling rotational lift. But Maia's slight trip during the

diagonal step sequence cost the team valuable GOEs and, perhaps, dropped the element to a Level 3. They placed third in the free dance with 114.60 points, and their 196.93-point total was just 0.19 less than that of Hubbell and Donohue.

"Today we had a mistake in the diagonal, which was unfortunate, but we had each other's backs out there," Maia said. "There were a lot of things about the program I'm proud of. We're going to keep working hard."

Of the two U.S. teams battling for bronze, the Shibutanis appeared to be at a disadvantage: they had lost the free dance to Hubbell and Donohue the last two times the couples met. But the siblings performed by far their best outing of Coldplay's "Paradise" of the season, with more speed and abandon than even their team event performance earlier in the Games. They earned Level 4's for six of their seven elements, with their rotational lift gaining Level 3, and gained 114.86 points to finish with 192.59 in total.

"We were disappointed where we were (fourth place) going into the free dance, but we've been around long enough, and been competitors long enough, to know that the competition isn't over until it's over," Alex said. "We had a great free dance performance in us, and I'm so glad we laid it down."

"There have been a lot of people who have told us that we couldn't do it, or that siblings shouldn't be a team, but we believed in ourselves and we accomplished this together," Maia said. "I'm so proud of all of the work we've done."

Maia Shibutani and Alex Shibutani lit up San Jose's SAP Center on Friday with an intoxicating Latin short dance to Perez Prado rhythms that coursed through the crowd like a jolt of espresso, mixed with a dash of rum.

Exhilarating from start to finish, the routine exploded midway through with an intricate four-part twizzle sequence, its 20 revolutions executed in perfect time to Prado's "Mambo No. 8" countdown. That, plus the event's highest program

component scores, helped give the two-time reigning U.S. champions a solid three-point lead heading into Sunday's free dance.

"We are always trying to push the boundaries," Alex said of the high-risk maneuver. "Obviously, we are only required to do four rotations per set for twizzles. We thought it would be clever and fun and entertaining for ourselves and the audience throughout this season."

Thinking ahead to the PyeongChang Games in February, he added, "The Olympics is all about pushing yourself; it's not about being careful."

The judges were nearly as entranced as the crowd, awarding the siblings 82.33 points, a shade below the record U.S. short dance score they set last season. The technical panel awarded them Level 4's for all of their elements except the rumba pattern, which notched a Level 3.

"I think we made a big statement skating the way we did," Alex said. "Obviously, there is room for growth."

"This is really where we want to be right now, considering this is our last competition before the Olympics," Maia said.

Marina Zoueva, who coaches the skaters in Canton, Michigan, thinks the performance was leaps and bounds above their effort at the Grand Prix Final early last month.

"We worked a lot with video -- it doesn't just happen," she said. "We're working slowly, step by step, to make little adjustments and improvements after each competition. We have a plan for the Olympics that may work -- I mean, it worked here."

For ice dancers in an Olympic season, the key words are "build, build, build."

That's just what Maia Shibutani and Alex Shibutani did at the Lake Placid Olympic Center on Sunday. With a compelling and powerful free dance to Coldplay's

"Paradise," the siblings won a second straight Skate America title, doing so with a personal-best overall score of 194.25.

"We've been working so hard since [Rostelecom Cup] in Russia, and the program really felt like it built, and it is so much stronger now," Maia said. "Heading into the Grand Prix Final, this is exactly the kind of program we wanted to have."

"Each competition is a stepping stone to making certain the programs -- and we -- are at our very best in February (at the Olympic Games)," Alex said. "We did exactly what we needed to do this week."

The judges and technical panel in Lake Placid agreed, awarding the brother-and-sister team five Level 4 elements and all +2 and +3 Grades of Execution (GOEs). They earned 115.07 points in the free, a considerable uptick from the 111.94 points they gained in Russia four weeks ago.

"Each season they are better and better, and each competition they are better and better," said Marina Zoueva, the Shibutanis' coach. "They have two competitions before the Olympics, and three (if you count) the Olympic team event. Each competition, they get a little bit better, a little bit better, so you can see what the final result can be."

With this season's free dance, the Shibutanis seek to bring to fruition not only their day-to-day work with primary coaches Zoueva and Massimo Scali but three years of consult with a wide range of dancers, musicians and skating luminaries like Stéphane Lambiel, Peter Tchernyshev and Renée Roca.

"I know the word 'process' sounds really boring, but we've become process oriented, and we really care about our craft and the way we deliver our material, not just about how much each element is worth," Alex said. "Focusing on the

process and continuing to grow every day has led to results that got better over this quad."