

www.baltimoresun.com/sports/bal-sp.meissner18mar18,0,3259587.story

baltimoresun.com

World Championships

Meissner's confidence jumps

Bel Air skater, thinking positively again, has high hopes in Sweden

By Candus Thomson

Sun reporter

March 18, 2008

The beginning of Kimmie Meissner's spiral from the pinnacle of figure skating began, cruelly enough, two years ago after she was crowned world champion.

As everyone from network producers to [White House](#) handlers lined up to get a bit of her time, the fear of giving an imperfect performance began gnawing at her confidence. Despite brave talk about her skating progress, Meissner was just whistling past a graveyard of self doubt that grew with each missed jump, stumble and fall.

She lost her world title a year ago in Tokyo, finished last in the Grand Prix Final in December and then lost her national title in January during a disastrous performance that included three falls.

"It was a lot for me to handle and I was trying as much as I could," she said of the pressure and doubt. "Obviously, I wasn't skating at the level I know I can."

By changing coaches and practice sites, Meissner, 18, hopes she has tapped into a new reservoir of confidence that will lift her into contention this week at the world championships in Gothenburg, Sweden. The women will skate their short programs tomorrow, and the top 24 will advance to skate their long programs Thursday.

Her task won't be easy. The field is formidable, and right now, Meissner isn't even considered one of America's top three women. Judges this season began downgrading deficiencies they used to let slide, which only exacerbated Meissner's lack of confidence.

Caroline Silby, a sports psychologist, author and former member of the U.S. figure skating team, said Meissner's miseries are not unusual for an elite athlete.

"When you're coming up the ranks, there's a broad range of what's an acceptable performance, which gives [a skater] freedom to grow and succeed and fail. Once they reach the top, they narrow the target, and [success] becomes so small and so far away, and sometimes they begin to skate so as not to mess up," Silby said.



After Meissner's seventh-place finish at nationals, top names in the sport such as [Michelle Kwan](#), Kristi Yamaguchi and Todd Eldredge rushed to console her and offer advice.

At home in Bel Air, Meissner spent nearly two weeks dealing with the shock and embarrassment of her televised topple from the top before taking control. She parted with longtime coach Pam Gregory, gave up the chaotic comfort of the University of Delaware practice rink, put college on hold and moved to Florida - her first extended stay away from home.

"There were a lot of things going on, and it really needed to be addressed," Meissner recalled. "I finally made the decision. I stepped up and made the decision."

Meissner began working with Richard Callaghan, who coached Tara Lipinski to Olympic gold, Eldredge to a world title and six U.S. championships, and Nicole Bobek to a U.S. title.

Silby said it's encouraging that Meissner acted decisively.

"Once you get passive, you're done," Silby said. "A skater has to get past the noise and reconnect with what made them successful and stop worrying about someone else's report card."

There is a lot more than redemption riding on Meissner's performance. To qualify three skaters for the 2009 world championships, which determine how many slots each nation gets for the Winter Olympics, the top two U.S. women have to earn a combined placement of 13 or less (fourth and ninth, for example, as Meissner and Emily Hughes did last year).

Although teammates Ashley Wagner and Bebe Liang finished ahead of Meissner at nationals, only Meissner has experienced the pressure of competing for the world title.

However, unlike last year's worlds, in which Meissner was defending her title, the spotlight has shifted to champion Miki Ando, 20, of Japan, and two 17-year-olds: silver medalist Mao Asada of Japan and 2007 bronze medalist Yu-Na Kim of Korea.

"I don't feel any pressure. I feel like I've taken pressure off myself," Meissner said.

Meissner said Callaghan, known for his ability to dissect and repair jumps, is a good match for her personality and "has been great for my confidence."

"We have a lot of fun on the ice," she said. "He's a great coach to have around, and he makes sure every day is positive. He helps me just to relax and have fun."

Callaghan said they have been trying to quicken the timing on her triple jumps and getting more altitude on the second jump in her triple-jump combination.

"I really don't have to train her because she trains herself," he said.

Certainly, Meissner has the experience.

As a 15-year-old at the 2005 U.S. championships, she got the skating world's attention by landing the first triple axel by a U.S. woman since Tonya Harding 14 years earlier. She won the bronze medal and followed it up the next year with a silver and a spot on the Olympic team.

Meissner finished sixth in the 2006 Winter Games, just her third competition at the elite international level, then shocked the figure skating community by winning the world title.

Now, she has to find her way back to that level, something Callaghan said he is confident she can do.

"Her strength is the total package," he said. "Her previous training and her age difference has developed a more polished performance. We're working on that right now and showing it off. Her jumps and spins are excellent, but she has developed a personality on the ice that I think will make a big difference."

Callaghan's upbeat assessment, apparently, has rubbed off on Meissner.

"I feel very confident I'm a lot better," she said. "Hopefully, everybody else will see what I feel."

candy.thomson@baltsun.com

Copyright © 2008, [The Baltimore Sun](#)