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Lee sparkles in her role as an alternate

Cheltzie Lee

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In Vancouver, Australia's Cheltzie Lee exceeded everyone's expectations, using the spirit of the competition to skate to her career personal best score when it counted most.

In late January, as most of the Olympic-qualified figure skaters were putting the final touches on their programs, Australian Cheltzie Lee was instead competing in the Four Continents Championships in South Korea.

Having already missed her chances to claim an Olympic berth for Australia, Lee thought that she would have to put her dream of competing in the Games on the shelf for another four years.

As she was wrapping up the competition in South Korea, however, Lee heard from a skating friend that Tamar Katz, a qualifier for the Olympic Games from Israel, had not met her Olympic Committee's qualification standards.

"I really didn't think of it in terms that Australia was next in line to qualify for the Olympics," Lee explained recently. "At the time I had too many things to focus on. School and assessments were due, and I was studying whilst in Korea. I was also preparing for Junior Worlds at the time."

A few days after returning home from Korea, Lee received a phone call from the Australian Olympic Committee congratulating her on her nomination to the 2010 Australian winter games team.

"I returned home from Korea to continue training for Junior Worlds and received the phone call for nomination to the Games right before the competition," Lee remembered with an easy smile. "The choice was mine- Olympics or Junior Worlds. Of course I chose the Games!"

Lee had two opportunities to qualify for the Olympic Games outright- a 33rd place finish at the World Championships last season eliminated one of those chances. Her final shot, Lee understood, was placing in the top seven at the Nebelhorn Trophy in September of 2009.

"Two weeks outside of Nebelhorn, I had some niggling problems with my back, took six days off training, and then returned to the ice and nothing seemed to work," Lee recalled about her training heading into the Olympic qualifier. "My coach's father in law passed away, and she advised she wouldn't accompany me to Nebelhorn. No other coach was available, and the Zamboni at my rink continued to break down randomly during that time. It just didn't

feel right going into the event. I was physically and mentally exhausted, with a mounting load of school work, stepping up my training and fighting the urge to sleep every chance I had."

But when it seemed that things could not get worse, they did.

"I was diagnosed with glandular fever a couple of days prior to the event," said Lee. "This explained a lot as to how my body felt leading into the event. Nevertheless, I made the decision to persevere."

Lee finished in a disappointing fifteenth place in the competition, but because several of the ladies who placed ahead of her had already earned berths, Australia was named as the third alternate for the Olympic Games.

"I've never been one to cry over spilled milk, but my results at the Olympic qualifying event were not as I expected them to be. So many things went wrong leading up to the event."

The 2008 Junior Australian champion signed on scholarship with the Olympic Winter Institute of Australia in 2006. The plan from that stage was to develop Lee to compete well for 2014, so at least in theory, she was on track for her development plan.

As the Games approached, however, an interesting sequence of events occurred that would change Lee's life forever. The Swiss Federation, which qualified two skaters for the Olympic Games at the 2009 World Championships, decided to utilize only one of their allotments, leaving one spot available for the alternates determined at the Nebelhorn Trophy. The first alternate nation was offered the vacancy, but declined to nominate a skater to their squad. As per protocol, the second alternate- Uzbekistan was offered the spot, and they claimed it for their long-time competitor, Anastasia Gimazetdinova. Finally, just days before the Opening Ceremonies, the Israeli Federation declined their spot as well, opening the door for Lee.

In Vancouver, the young Australian champion exceeded everyone's expectations, using the spirit of the competition to skate to her career personal best score when it counted most. Lee placed twentieth in the competition, but became somewhat of a sensation in the United States after having both of her programs broadcast by NBC in prime time.

"I was totally unaware of the amount of coverage (I was receiving) in the USA, Australia or Canada," said the reigning Australian ladies champion. "Family in the USA rang mum in Vancouver excited they had the opportunity to see me during the opening as well as performing my programs. Of course, I was only told upon my return to Australia, being totally unaware whilst living in the Olympic village."

Since her triumph in Vancouver, Lee has been going full speed ahead. Upon returning to her home country after Games, Lee began to prepare for the World Championships, where she ultimately finished in a career high 17th place. Meanwhile, the year twelve Higher School Certificate student was trying to keep up her studies so that she can keep pace with her educational goals.

"My final exams are due in November," Lee said with a little tension in her voice. "The next few months will be very busy studying in preparation. I attend a Distance Education High School, which actually sets me more work than a normal school. When I'm not traveling, I have one-on-one lessons with my teachers in Sydney. Fortunately there is some flexibility in scheduling my schooling, which does help balance my busy life a little."

Lee's family is a combination of east meets west in terms of culture. Her mother is African American and has American and Australian citizenship, while her father was born in Bangladesh, is ethnically Chinese, and is an Australian citizen. Lee was born, raised, and lives in Australia, but also carries an American passport.

"I have the most amazingly diverse family, truly the best of all worlds," Lee said rather proudly. "Most of my relations on my father's side live in Australia, whilst mum's family is spread out across the USA. Australia is home to me, but I just love visiting the US and spending time with my American relatives; they are very outgoing and great fun. By contrast, Dad's family is more quiet and reserved, but they share a strong and happy bond."

An only child, Lee takes advantage of her beautiful surroundings in her hometown of Sydney. Outside of the rink, she enjoys working out on the beach, running through the sand dunes, and of course, surfing.

"I'm really into fitness," Lee explained, "But I also like reading a good book and having quality time with friends and family."

Skating has been in Lee's blood since she skated on a family outing during school holidays at the tender age of five. From that day forward, Lee began to skate each Saturday for nearly an hour and then started more intense training when she was eleven. She still remembers when she realized that she might have the talent to compete at the top level of elite skating.

"In 2007 after my first Junior Grand Prix in Vienna," Lee remembers fondly. "I had no expectations. I just wanted to skate well, and I did. It was so exciting."

But skating on the elite level is not easy in Australia, a developing nation in terms of figure skating, with little competition to push promising skaters such as Lee.

"Probably the biggest challenge is juggling education and sport," Lee explained. "Unfortunately, figure skating is not recognized by school as a sport, and there are no exemptions or provisions for elite athletes. You have to keep up in school or you fail, and sometimes the pressure to perform well in sport and school can be very exhausting."

Education is not the only hurdle in Lee's way in terms of training, however.

"Travel to my local skating rink for training is quite a long distance and sometimes that becomes an even greater problem," Lee explained. "The Zamboni at my rink often breaks down and that means having to travel even further away to get ice. So, I'd say without a doubt, a lack of ice time and time in general are my greatest challenges; especially the school and sport balancing act."

But none of these roadblocks are enough to make the Olympian reconsider her journey as an elite figure skater.

"I love Australia, and I am proud to represent my country in competition," Lee said rather patriotically. "Sometimes when I compete, people mistakenly identify me as being from Austria. Nobody believes that skaters come out of Australia."

To keep up with her international peers, Lee turns to her mother's home country for help.

"Short training stints in the USA help me considerably" admitted Lee, who spends about six weeks each year training in the United States. "The opportunity to skate in sessions with other elite level skaters provides a great environment to hone skills and elevate my development over the season."

This summer, or winter in Sydney, Lee has made it a priority to work on her fitness level, and has plans to further develop her jumping.

"I am sure that my coach has a long list of things that I need to improve," Lee said with a giggle.

Kylie Fennell, a former Australian competitor and show skater, is charged with leading Lee's support team as coach. The 2010 Olympian also works regularly with coach Gloria Pracey on spins, and with Belinda Noonan from the Olympic Winter Institute of Australia. To keep her mind and body competition ready, Lee looks to Sports Psychologist Richard Bennett, Physiotherapist Jason Power, and Sports Scientist John Marsden for guidance.

Last season, Lee worked with Catarina Lindgren in Colorado Springs on her short program choreography. This season, however, Lee has confirmed rumors that she may be working with 1980 Olympic Champion Robin Cousins on choreography.

"My programs for next season are still in the planning phase," Lee confessed. "It should all come together in the next couple of months. At the moment we're starting to plan for the season. Nothing confirmed. It's a long process with many people involved; meetings will start (soon), but you can expect to see me competing internationally throughout the year."

Lee is still unsure of what her international schedule might hold for her this season, but being ranked in the top fifty on the season's best list bodes well for Grand Prix invitations.

"It would be great," Lee said of the possibility of competing on the senior circuit for the first time. "I welcome the opportunity to compete as this is an area which will assist in further development of maturity on the ice. I don't compete enough, which I expect to change in the coming seasons."

Ranked 68th in the ISU standings, Lee believes that even if she does not get a Grand Prix invitation, her support team will work diligently to earn entry into other international competitions such as the Junior Grand Prix.

"My team will actually look at this option during planning over the next week or so," Lee shared. "It's most likely that my first formal competition will be Australian Nationals, and I am looking forward to it."

Lee signed on scholarship with the Olympic Winter Institute of Australia in 2006. The plan from that stage was to develop her to compete and compete well for 2014. The steps along the way was to be chalked down as experience. So she feels still lots of work to be done but she's a few steps ahead of her plans.

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