

Slutskaya Focuses on Skating, Not a Medal

By AMY ROSEWATER

Giuseppe Arena rarely cracks a smile when he is working with a skater. An Italian ballet dancer who has performed with Mikhail Baryshnikov and is now a figure skating choreographer, Arena is impressed with nothing less than perfection. Away from the ice rinks, he is a charming man, but he doesn't want his skaters to see that side of him.

Irina Slutskaya, however, has been able to break through Arena's sometimes icy demeanor. In February, she could become the first Russian to win an Olympic gold medal in women's figure skating at the Winter Games in Salt Lake City.

When asked about Slutskaya, Arena grins slightly. But soon, a few tears well in the corner of his eyes. His 22-year-old son, Nolia, died in a motorcycle accident four months ago.

"My life has been in a black cloud since then," Arena said. "But Irina, she has helped take me out of that fog."

Slutskaya, an apple-cheeked Muscovite with an omnipresent smile, seems to have that effect on people. When other skaters talk about her, they almost always bring up her

Most of the Olympic pressure is still on Kwan.

passion for the sport before they mention her technical skills. Kristi Yamaguchi, the 1992 Olympic champion, said she sees joy when Slutskaya skates. Tara Lipinski, the 1998 Olympic gold medalist, enjoys Slutskaya's sweetness. Slutskaya, who helped open the ice arena at Rockefeller Center in October, had Britain's Prince Andrew smitten.

Evin Michelle Kwan, who is considered Slutskaya's biggest rival, can't help but like her. Kwan and Slutskaya most recently competed over the weekend of the Grand Prix of Figure Skating Final in Kitchener, Ontario, with Slutskaya narrowly edging out Kwan for the title for the third straight year. They will not compete against each other again until the Olympics.

"On the tour, we're friends," said Kwan, the 1998 Olympic silver medalist, who occasionally went out to

dinner with Slutskaya during the Tom Collins "Tour of Champions" last summer. "It's a lot different than the way the media portrays it."

But no one should be fooled by Slutskaya's outgoing personality. Although she might not always show it, Slutskaya is one of the toughest competitors in the sport. Slutskaya, who will turn 23 on Feb. 9, the day after the opening ceremony in Salt Lake City, has a demanding program packed with triple-triple jump combinations. In practices, she has dabbled with a triple-triple-triple as well.

Last season, she beat Kwan in every head-to-head competition except the world championships last March, when she executed a triple-triple-double, but still fell short. Slutskaya, who captured her third world silver medal, stormed out of the so-called kiss-and-cry area when the marks were announced.

Looking back on it now, Slutskaya can cope with the defeat. "It is just sport," she said. "Sometimes she wins; sometimes I win."

Her loss to Kwan at the worlds made Slutskaya realize she needed to make a concerted effort to improve the artistic side of her skating. Since she began working with Arena this summer, Slutskaya has reaped the rewards of focusing on her choreography. Slutskaya will skate to music from Puccini's opera, "Tosca," in the Olympics.

"She understands every movement in this program," said Arena, who will be in Moscow in January for one last pre-Olympic session with Slutskaya.

Judges who previously gave her 5.7's (out of 6.0) for her artistic presentation are now doling out 5.9's. In this sport, a tenth of a point can mean the difference between gold and silver, especially when competing against a known artistic gold like Kwan.

"I'm more serious when it comes to practice," Slutskaya said. "I have

changed my practice so I work harder. Instead of doing five jumps before, now I do 10. I don't sleep late. I have a schedule."

Slutskaya has beaten Kwan all three times they have faced each other this season. Slutskaya beat a shaky Kwan in the Goodwill Games in September. They also met at Skate Canada in early November, not long after Kwan's career went topsy-turvy as she fired her longtime coach, Frank Carroll. Although Skate Canada was hyped as an Olympic battle between the two, Sarah Hughes of Great Neck, N.Y., topped them both. Slutskaya won the free skate but finished second overall; Kwan was third.

Slutskaya has still not performed to her potential this season, and that includes the Grand Prix final, in which she skated well in her short and long programs on Friday, but skated a ragged program Saturday. She gained the benefit of the doubt from one judge, however, and stayed ahead of Kwan. She remains a strong Olympic contender, but as Slutskaya knows, there are no guarantees in this sport.

Slutskaya placed fifth in the 1998 Olympics, then won the silver medal at the world championships that year, but she had a disastrous showing the next year. She was fourth at Russian nationals in 1999 and failed to make the world team. Ashamed, Slutskaya said she didn't even watch the world championships on television. Her Russian rival Mariya Butyrskaya won the world title, making Slutskaya's disappointment all the more painful.

She contemplated quitting the sport, took a two-week vacation visiting relatives in Israel, and said the experience was "like starting a new life." Slutskaya got back on track in August 1999, when she married her longtime boyfriend, Sergei Mikhov. She lost 13 pounds and returned to the only coach she has ever had, Zhanna Gromova. Finishing second at the next two world championships and capturing her fourth European



Irina Slutskaya has been receiving higher scores for artistic presentation since she began working with the choreographer Giuseppe Arena.

title were evidence of Slutskaya's renewed determination.

Now she is primed for a spot on the Olympic podium. Slutskaya, who has been working with a sports psychologist, is trying to tune out any Olympic hype. Fortunately for her, most of the pressure is on Kwan, especially since the Games will be held in the United States.

Slutskaya, an only child whose father teaches automotive engineering and whose mother works for a trucking delivery company, is just trying to concentrate on skating.

"If I go in thinking I can win, I will have lost," she said.

"I just try not to fall down," she added, flashing her trademark smile. "Not just in sport, but in my life."

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