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Why Plushenko Called It Quits in Sochi

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Yevgeny Plushenko, Russia's only representative in men's singles figure skating at the Olympics, withdrew from the competition due to a spinal injury and announced the end of his athletic career.

The story behind these events has less to do with the Olympics than it does with the overall situation in Russia today.

Plushenko is a stunning and brilliant figure skater who took the Olympic gold in 2006 and the silver in 2002 and 2010.

But Plushenko is now 31 years old — a young man by your and my standards but over the hill in the world of figure skating, a sport that places almost inhuman physical demands on the body. The oldest man ever to win an Olympic gold medal in men's figure skating was the 28-year-old Swede Gillis Grafstrom back in 1928, when the physical demands of the sport were laughable compared to now.

In addition to his age, Plushenko has suffered a serious spinal injury, carries four bolts and a plastic vertebra in his spine, and has competed in only one international tournament since 2010.

Moreover, Plushenko is an influential public figure in Russia. He seems to be everywhere with his wife, Yana Rudkovskaya, a socialite and former wife of businessman Viktor Baturin. However furiously Plushenko might train and however much pain he pushes through to achieve victory, the life of a high society maven takes its toll.

But that is not the most important factor here.

At the 2013 European Championships in Zagreb, Plushenko was trailing fellow Russian figure skater Sergei Voronov after the short program and then withdrew from that competition because of a spinal injury.

Plushenko did not compete in the World Championships in 2013 and finished behind Maxim Kovtun in the 2014 Russian Figure Skating Championships in Sochi. Plushenko also did not compete in the 2014 European Championships. Of course, if 18-year-old Kovtun had won all of those competitions, no one could have helped Plushenko.

But fortunately for Plushenko, that did not happen. Kovtun tanked at last year's World Championships by placing only 17th, and because the results of that competition determine the slots for the Olympics, Russia received only one spot for a men's singles figure skater. What's more, in the 2014 European Championships, Kovtun placed 5th, finishing behind fellow Russian figure skaters Sergei Voronov and Konstantin Menshov.

Then what happened? Officials held an amazing, unprecedented closed-door "trial skate" for Yevgeny Plushenko in Novogorsk. There were no spectators, no judges and no competitors. Nobody was allowed to go up against Plushenko — not even Kovtun and Voronov.

The result: the great athlete, high society figure and Putin favorite was named the one person to represent Russia in the men's singles figure skating competition at the Sochi Olympics.

The personal drama behind Plushenko's struggle is clear. We can imagine how furiously he trained to come back after a serious injury, the pain he endured to secure second place in the short program, and how much he wanted to win a fourth Olympic medal.

But that story does not ring completely true for one very simple reason: A champion is someone who wins. Champions are not appointed during closed-door reviews before empty bleachers. Russian officials appointed Plushenko champion, and in his "administrative" competition with Kovtun and Voronov, he is the uncontested leader.

But it turned out to be a little more difficult for Plushenko to best Japanese figure skater Yuzuru Hanyu and Canadian Patrick Chan in open competition.

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