

The Road to Recovery

By: Olivia Li

On your marks, get set, beep. My heart was racing at a million miles per hour. I could feel the adrenaline rush into my body as I became pumped with energy from head to toe. Everyone in the crowd was watching. It was the finals of the girls' 15-16 500-meter speed-skating competition. I had to win. I could see the eyes of the millions of people staring at me from the stands and through the livestream. This was the most important moment of my life so far. Stroke. Stroke. Crossover. Stroke. A flash of golden brown whizzed past me, and another one, and another one. Within a few seconds after the race began, I was already behind. There were six people in the finals, and I was in fourth place already. Four laps left. Three laps left. I sped up my strokes and passed the girl in front of me. Two laps left. I glided as close to the line as I could with all my attention focused on the girl in second place. During the bend, I stuck to the cones along the race-track and once again sped up my pace. I narrowly progressed my way to second place. The whistle blew, signaling that there was one lap left. I had my eyes on the finish line. I was so close to the girl in front of me. So close to victory. I used all the remaining strength left in my body and sprinted towards the finish line. I inched closer and closer to my competitor. With the two final pushes, I gave it my all. My legs were burning, and my breath was getting faster and faster, but I had to win.

Suddenly, a moment of panic hit me. It was all too fast, and I didn't know what was going on. By the time I had finally realized what had happened, it was too late. The back of my blade hit the blade of the girl behind me as I flew through the air. I tumbled towards the walls of the ice rink and crashed into them. The girl who was in third place came tumbling after me. In a split second, I felt a sharp pain in the back of my leg. My opponent was lying unconscious on the ice next to me, having knocked into the walls with so much force. The tip of her blade was coated in a layer of red. I stared as the other racers passed the finish line one by one. I lost. I didn't even finish the race. My vision started getting more and more blurry. The lights were flashing in my eyes. The pain in my leg worsened, and a huge pool of blood formed under me. Suddenly, my vision cut out and everything went dark.

I wasn't sure how long I had been unconscious, but the next time I woke up, I was lying down in a hospital bed. There were tubes attached to my nose, and a doctor stood beside me along with my parents. Everyone had a concerned look on their faces. The pain in my leg had gone away. I couldn't even feel my leg anymore. I peered down at my leg to discover that there was a huge gash across my skin. It had been stitched up by the doctors, but it looked like the stitches were barely holding my skin together. All I knew was that every time I moved my leg or tried to put weight on it, I felt immense pain. I felt so pathetic. I couldn't even stand upright anymore. From eavesdropping on the conversations between my parents and my doctor, I found out that I needed to be hospitalized for at least four months. For four months, all I could do was lay in bed and watch videos. For four months, I would have to sit in a wheelchair and be moved around constantly by other people. My teammates came to visit me occasionally, but they stopped showing up after a while. We could only resort to talking online through texting and Facetime. For the first time in my life, I felt so helpless. I felt so lonely.

Every day was the same. I woke up miserably, checked the number of days left until I could be discharged from the hospital, and ate. At first, I couldn't even get out of my bed without assistance from a nurse working in the building. My legs got weaker and weaker as the days passed.

Eventually, after around a month, the doctors got me started in a physical therapy program. I thought I would be able to recover quickly, and that it wouldn't take much effort for my leg to heal, but I was wrong. In the first session, the worker gave me a pair of crutches that I would use to move around

when I needed to, and a bulky cast on my foot to prevent further injuries. Walking was painful and extremely tiring; to go the same distance as a regular person took me double the amount of time and double the amount of energy. We practiced walking every day, and gradually, I felt improvement. Little by little, I was able to walk further distances without getting as tired, and the stinging from the scar started fading away. We transitioned from two crutches to one, and then none. I still had to wear the cast, but moving from place to place felt natural and easy for me for the first time in weeks. I could see some of the muscles in my leg being replenished as I was able to stand and walk more and more. I could see the hope of being able to recover soon.

By now, I could stand and walk around by myself. I no longer needed someone constantly to be next to me just in case I had to go somewhere. Now that I had gotten better, I started doing simple workouts every day to improve my strength. Even though this injury cost me months and months of practice time, I could not quit speed skating. Not after the 11 years of hard work it took me to get to where I am now.

A few days later, I woke up to something different. My parents along with my doctors all stood over me as my eyes opened to the sound of a party horn. I wasn't quite sure what was going on yet. "Congratulations! You're getting released today!" the doctor announced warmly. I felt like crying. I had been waiting for this day for months and months. I raised both of my hands in the air and laughed; so did my parents. Together, we packed up my belongings and headed out of the hospital. I tried taking deep breaths to calm myself down, but this news was too great, I couldn't believe I was finally getting released. I could finally go back to the ice rink, where I belonged. I could finally visit my old teammates after being separated from them for what seemed like forever. I could continue my dreams of winning the championships once more.

Although I no longer had to stay in the hospital, I wasn't completely healed yet. The doctor still suggested that I wear the cast for another week or two. Originally, I had planned to go straight back to the rink and practice as soon as I got discharged, but I guess that couldn't happen now.

After persuading my parents for 30 minutes, I finally got the approval to visit my old teammates. Everybody welcomed me. It was almost like we hadn't been apart at all. I still got along well with everybody, and talking to them wasn't as awkward as I thought it would be. "You came back just in time. We were just about to go to the annual speed skating championships," my teammate exclaimed. *The annual championships?* I had been in the hospital for so long that I lost track of time. I couldn't believe I had forgotten the date of a tournament as important as that one. I had to go watch it.

"Bring me along too!" I gushed energetically. I couldn't wait to see the races.

Together, we drove to the stadium where we purchased the best tickets available. They were expensive, but this was an important event. Eagerly, I moved through the stands and found my seat in the front row where the view was best. My former teammates sat alongside me. "And next up, our third event of the day, the girls' 15-16 500-meter short track!" the commentator announced. All of a sudden, the crowd went silent, and the atmosphere became tense. The skaters lined up one by one at the starting line. "On your marks," the countdown started as all the competitors lowered into their ready stances with their arms in a running position and their legs bent. Their eyes narrowed as they focused on the track ahead of them. "...Get set, go!" In the blink of an eye, the racers sped away from the starting line and bolted into the distance. The audience immediately started cheering for their favorite skaters as they passed lap after lap. As they were getting closer and closer to finishing, I sat at the edge of my seat, not daring to breathe. Anything could happen. At the last 50 meters, the blonde girl who was in second place started accelerating at a rapid pace and inched closer and closer to the person in front of her. After just a second

or two, they were even. They stuck nose to nose as they neared the finish line. They continued at around the same speed and they finished the race almost simultaneously. The crowd went silent once more. We all peered up at the big screen above, intently watching to see who won. The blades crossed the finish line, and just by an inch or two, the girl who was in second place before surpassed her competitor. The whole rink burst into cheering, and screaming, and victorious music played in the background.

The medals given were gorgeous shades of silver, gold, and bronze. The design for this year's medal was incredibly intricate, with different patterns around the sides and a figure speed skating in the center. The three racers on the podium grinned delightfully as they got their pictures taken, especially the one in first place. Her eyes filled with tears of joy as she held her medal and certificate in her hands. It reminded me of the awards I had won previously, and how overjoyed I was every time. Those wonderful memories came rushing back in that moment, and I couldn't help but smile as well.

I stared at the ice and back at the cumbersome brace still on my leg. I then glanced back at the girl who won and envisioned myself on that same podium next year, beaming proudly just like her. I knew that it would take a long time for me to fully recover, but I would keep working. I would persist through all of the hardships. I would try my hardest to continue the sport that I loved so dearly, and that I had been doing for the majority of my life, speed skating.