

# No scholarship, Olympics, or pro career ... but happiness



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(Photo: Submitted photo)

Etched into the outside of the Stanley Cup are names – many, many names – of those who dreamed together.

The Cup represents success, love of sport, hard work, belief.

There's no name-etched cup for what people like Isabella Dinelli and Kelsey Bialo do.

But Dinelli and Bialo, although just kids, know all about success, love of sport, hard work and belief.

Even if few know about them.

In February, the 17-year-old Bialo of Larchmont, a junior at Mamaroneck High School who has been skating since she was 5 and skating for the Skyliners Synchronized Skating Team for eight seasons, attended school five days. That's it.

Why?

For indelible moments.

Bialo and teammate Dinelli, a Kennedy Catholic junior and Briarcliff resident, competed earlier this month in Croatia at the World Challenge Cup.

Dinelli, 16, recalls as a highlight the team singing together at the rink pre-performance, as it always had.

Only this time, 30 seconds into "Defying Gravity," everyone began to cry. They knew, star or stumble, with some athletes aging off the 14- to 18-year-old squad and a few leaving for other reasons, including school demands, this was the last time all 20 would be together.

Not long after the last note, 16 members of the team nailed the last of their two performances. That earned the Skykiners fourth place (out of 20 teams), the club's highest ever Worlds placement.

The only squads ahead of them were Canada, Finland and Russia – countries where the joke is everyone is born wearing skates.

The Skyliners might not have been born with skates but it's only small hyperbole to say they now live in them.

From August into March, the Junior team trains three times weekly, using Monsey's Sport-O-Rama, Elmsford's Westchester Skating Academy and Chelsea Piers in Stamford, Connecticut.

The reward this year was five competitions, then Worlds after they earned the right to represent the U.S.

Wednesday practices are three hours. Saturdays are six to seven and Sundays five-plus.

"It includes lunch but it's pretty exhausting," Bialo says of Saturdays.

The schedule is almost as taxing for the Skyliners' Intermediate (ages 12-17) and Juvenile (ages 9-12) teams, which also have reason to celebrate.

The Juvenile team went undefeated this season, winning Easterns for the sixth straight year and taking gold last month in Michigan at U.S. Nationals for the third time in six years.

And the Intermediate squad took first at Nationals for the first time ever.

"Amazing," is how Intermediate team captain Angela Mercurio, 16, describes accepting the first-place plaque that represented year-round commitment as much as a great day.

Less than a week after the Juniors returned from Croatia, they and the top-level, Senior skaters tried out for next year's teams.

The competitive season over, the groups still have scattered practices until the end of June. Then members will train individually before teams reconvene in August.

And even when on a team, athletes must prove themselves each practice, since teams carry more skaters than competitions allow to compete at one time.

"It kind of prepares us as individuals to be responsible, accountable and to be, of course, respectful and hard working," Dinelli says of demands.

"Sometimes school friends or teachers might not get it – how much training time we put in," says Mercurio.

The Hartsdale resident and junior at Maria Regina High School describes becoming a Skyliner four years ago as a "dream come true." She wants to become a professional synchronized skating coach.

Sure, she laments missing "a lot of the social aspects of being a teenager," but says, "I just love the sport so much. I feel comfortable around this set of girls. ...We fight like family sometimes and we kid like sisters. But, at the end, we're there for each other."

"I love that it's a group of girls who all work for a common goal and all share the same passion," says Dinelli, who dislikes the "really competitive energy" (in other words, over-the-top, nasty rivalries) of singles figure skating.

But, like singles skaters, these are serious athletes.

Bialo, whose squad has competed five times overseas the past two seasons (a big reason for missing school), bristles at the notion her sport is all about "pretty dresses."

"It takes an underestimated amount of athleticism," Bialo says.

Dinelli, who skated for two clubs before joining Skyliners two seasons ago, said Skyliners has "athletic rigor."

No, it's not ice hockey with players slamming into the boards – at least not intentionally. But this isn't croquet or ballroom dancing, ether. Bialo mentions concussions (Mercurio has had one), people breaking bones and people "tearing things," and, by things, Bialo certainly doesn't mean pretty dresses.

The ice is "rock hard" and, referring to skate blades, she says, there are "knives flying around the place. There's a lot of blood."

She has "gotten off easy" with only chronic ankle problems but "every warrior has her story," she says with a laugh.

The stories speak ultimately of a commitment that delivers no college scholarships, no Olympics, no pro career possibility.

And certainly no names inscribed on a silver cup.

But names are etched in memories, the skaters indicate, including, from the Intermediate squad, Mercurio and other Westchester residents Lisa Asriev, Caitlyn Chapey, Katelyn Coburn, Rachel Cortese, Lauren Sallay, Erika Sipos, Kristen Tse and Paige Wilkie.

From the Juvenile squad, Westchester residents Judey DaRos, Rhianna Gold, Gracie Ossorio, Alison Quiambao, Serina Wang and Lily Young.

And from that fourth-at-Worlds Junior team, Dinelli and Bialo and fellow Westchester residents Lainey Rothschild and Serena Pratt.

Lots of memories, supplemented this year by some pretty special medals.

"Not many people can say they're fourth in the world at anything," Dinelli notes.

"It makes all the tough practices and long days worth it in the end. Now I can never even think about leaving it," Bialo adds.

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