

Aiko Uemura

The Years I Spent Striving for an Olympic Medal Were Truly Valuable



Aiko Uemura is a five-time Olympian who competed in women's moguls. Although she never reached the podium, her determination to keep going in the face of challenges in an attempt to reach a higher level of mogul technique left a lasting impression on many people.

Without a Strong Will, You Will Never Reach the Place You Want to Be

From childhood, defeat was never an option for Uemura. Alpine skiing was the sport she first took up, but because she failed to make it to the podium during her elementary school years, she abandoned the discipline altogether, acknowledging her competitive limitations.

What changed her was a visit to Canada, where she had a chance to watch women's moguls at the Freestyle Ski World Cup. She was astonished to find that a skiing technique such as moguls existed. This was four years before the 1998 Nagano Olympic Winter Games. Fascinated by the new skiing style, Uemura took up moguls and quickly made it to the National Team.

At age 18, Uemura competed in women's moguls at the Nagano Olympic Games, achieving the great feat of finishing seventh, at the same time witnessing National teammate Tae Satoya becoming the gold medalist in women's moguls. It was then that the specific goal of winning an Olympic medal took shape in Uemura's mind.

"Unless you start making a move toward your goal, you will never reach it," comments Uemura. "As an 18-year old, I was led by Ms. Satoya's gold medal to my subconscious desire to achieve a gold." For the next four years, she devoted herself to tackling challenges in reaching a higher level of mogul skiing. Her efforts, however, were not rewarded with a position on the podium in either the 2002 Games in Salt Lake City or the 2006 Games in Torino, although she came very close. Yet the Torino Games became another opportunity for Uemura to seek higher ground.

Recalling the time immediately after the Games, she says, "Thinking about how people had rooted for me, I became so sad that tears welled up in my eyes, but I was already thinking about my next move on the night the competition ended. I analyzed why I hadn't won and what I should tackle next to improve myself. During my career, I repeated this cycle again and again."

The 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver were the ones at which Uemura thought she had her best chance of winning a medal. After focusing for four years solely on winning that competition, abstaining from everything that might have gotten in her way, she earned fourth place. Every four years, she had changed her strategy for winning and tried everything she could to overcome her challenges, but she still fell short.

"I thought to myself, if I keep on doing things the way I have been, I will never be able to win. However, this time, 'four years from now' did not come to my mind as a goal, like it used to. I wasn't thinking about quitting, but the desire to go forward just wasn't there. I struggled hard over this, because I didn't know what to do."

After a time of self-assessment, she decided to take a year off. During this time, she even stayed away from training and kept on searching for an answer within.

"I Never Want to Regret Anything in My Life"

"This had been my life's motto during my years of solitary pursuit, but I realized at that moment that I had actually been supported by a great many people. Objectively speaking, I had been a very blessed person," Uemura says. "It would have been easy for me to just quit, but I decided to go back to skiing, thinking I should not make a decision which I might regret even slightly somewhere down the road in a long life."

Her physical condition was no longer supportive of the goal, but she knew how to

train herself to compete again, and she knew that she had three years left to make it to "that day." What other people thought of her renewed aspirations was not something she had time to worry about.

"So at the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, I was standing at the gate absolutely care-free. At the Vancouver Games, I had been in better shape physically, but at the same time so scared that I felt my strength was escaping through my mouth each time I breathed. The start at Sochi was the moment I wholeheartedly felt, 'I'm so glad I stuck with it.'"

Asked if she is happy about finishing fourth, she is not sure. However, she thinks she was able to truly "fight fiercely to win a medal" and she is happy with her performance. If she hadn't had this sense of satisfaction, she would not have been able to become a mentor to younger skiers in the years since then.

"I haven't decided what to do next, but I'm looking forward to seeing how young skiers will perform. Personally, I love any snow-covered locale, so I'd like to tell people how enjoyable it is to be in such places. It would probably hinder them from getting involved if I said to someone on our first meeting, 'Let's go skiing,' so maybe I should first suggest to them how they can enjoy the snowy mountains casually."



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Born in Hyogo Prefecture, Japan, in 1979. Began skiing after she moved to Nagano Prefecture when she was two years old. After winning a spot on the National Team in her third year of junior high school, she competed in the Nagano Olympic Winter Games and finished seventh in mogul skiing. As a result, she was hailed as Japan's future ace freestyle skier. During her career, she won the overall World Cup title during the 2007-2008 season, followed by two gold medals in the FIS Freestyle Ski World Championship in 2009. She appeared in five Winter Olympic Games, finishing 7th or higher in all of them. She was the first to perfect the "3D Air" (Corkscrew 720) and excelled at carving turns, which led her to be called the "global pioneer of women's mogul techniques."