

Written by dwight normile  
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Kohei Uchimura's goal has always been to perform beautiful gymnastics. He simply wants to entertain the audience with complex and beautiful gymnastics. The judges are merely an afterthought. That's probably why he's been so successful. "I think the performance that touches people's hearts is beautiful," he says.

So when he injured his left ankle on vault, his second event during the qualifications at the 2017 World Championships in Montreal, he was devastated. Uchimura had won an unprecedented six world all-around titles, starting in 2009 and ending in 2015. He was going for his seventh.

"I am very frustrated with myself that I could not compete in all six events," he says. Uchimura competed on three events in Montreal: rings (14.000); vault (15.166); and parallel bars (14.033). He landed his vault a little low (Li Xiaopeng: roundoff half-onto the table, front layout-21/2 twists). He had only a small hop forward, his left ankle absorbing most of the force of the landing. When he turned to leave the podium, however, he lifted his tender left ankle and leaned over to rub the outside of it. (After an MRI and X-ray, he was diagnosed with an incomplete tear of the anterior talofibular ligament.)

After competing a somewhat loose parallel bars routine, he limped off the podium after his double pike dismount. He tried warming up high bar but was forced to withdraw from the competition.

"My ankle is recovering well," says Uchimura, who competed on four events at the Doha (Qatar) World Cup in March: pommel horse (where he fell), rings, vault and high bar. He did not make any finals.

But competing in Doha will enable him to get a feel for the Aspire Dome, since the 2018 World

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Championships will also be held in Doha in October. And will he compete in the all-around at those Worlds? "Yes, of course," he says.

Japan was still represented on the podium at the 2017 Worlds, with Kenzo Shirai winning the all-around bronze. He was .017 shy of the silver. Uchimura said that if his teammate had stuck more landings, he might have won the gold.

Uchimura was born Jan. 3, 1989, near Nagasaki, where his parents, Kazuhisa (father) and Shuko (mother) owned a gym. His younger sister, Haruhi, is also a gymnast. Little Kohei grew up in that gym. "[My father] just told me to enjoy the sport, and if I can't enjoy it, it means nothing," he says. "I think this was very good for me."

When Uchimura was 15 he left his parents' gym to train in Tokyo with is role model, Naoya Tsukahara, son of the great Mitsuo Tsukahara. "At first [my parents] were against me, but I was a child that never listens to somebody once I made up my mind firmly," he says. "So in the end, they said OK, reluctantly."

Asked what he liked most about his streak, Uchimura says, "My proudest competition was the 2011 Tokyo World Championships." Uchimura won the all-around by more than 3.0, and he also won the gold on floor exercise and the bronze on high bar. It's interesting that he would name those Worlds. After Japan dominated the team competition in qualifications, his team placed second to China in the team finals.

The majority of Uchimura's career has been under the open-ended Code of Points. Given how it has been constantly changed since it was implemented at the 2006 World Championships in Aarhus, Denmark, Uchimura does not want to return to the 10.0 judging system. "I personally believe that the current rules are good for me, because I have won a number of titles using this system," he says.

Since only one component of the Code of Points is open ended (Difficulty), would he like to see the Execution deductions also subtracted from the Difficulty score? "It would be great if beautiful execution were rewarded in this way," he says.

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And if he could change the Code? “I’d like to bring back the bonus for virtuosity,” he says. “I would like to see excellent scores for excellent performances that nobody can equal.”

Few gymnasts can match Uchimura in terms of pure technique, perfect form and virtuosity. In that respect, he’s a tuxedo in a rack of tweeds.

Uchimura was married after the 2012 London Olympics, where he won his first Olympic all-around title. (He placed second at the 2008 Olympics.) His wife, Chiho, is a former gymnast, and the couple have two daughters, born in 2013 and 2015.

With regard to having two kids, Uchimura says, “I feel a greater sense of responsibility. It positively affects my performance.”

Even at 29, Uchimura says he is not training fewer hours than he did when he was younger. “It hasn’t changed much,” he says. But the aches and pains are always a factor. “As a gymnast, everyone has nagging injuries. In my case, it’s back pain.”

He’s also working on a few new skills, such as a Bretschneider (double-twisting Kovacs). He may need it. In April 2017 he won his 10th straight All-Japan Championships, but he beat runner-up Yusuke Tanaka by only .05. He defeated bronze medalist Kenzo Shirai by .25.

It may seem odd that Uchimura has won zero event titles over three Olympics, and only three event titles at World Championships: floor exercise, 2011 (Tokyo); parallel bars, 2013 (Antwerp); and high bar, 2015 (Glasgow). But it is really a testament of his balance as an all-around gymnast.

The 2016 Rio Olympics must have been satisfying for Uchimura. He won his second Olympic all-around title, but more importantly, Japan won its first team title since the 2004 Athens Games.

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As Uchimura looks ahead to the new year, he understands his ultimate goal. “The serious part is the (2018) World Championships,” he says. “I have to consider what kind of routines I’ll do at Worlds. The things I’m hoping for are fairly big. That’s a battle against myself. I do it to battle on the world stage, after all. It’s not about what happened last year. More than reclaiming a title or getting revenge. I just want to get back out there; I’ve kept everyone waiting.”

Regardless of what aspirations Uchimura has, or what his future goals are, he has already written his chapter in the history of gymnastics. Until some other amazing gymnast comes along — and one day that may happen — he will always be considered the greatest gymnast the sport has ever seen.

Father time remains undefeated, but he’s definitely given Kohei Uchimura a few years more to work his magic.

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