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Four Oakland students headed to figure skating nationals

By **Dave Groves**, news editor

The Oakland University community would have reason to be tremendously proud if just one of its own students was headed to the 2009 U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Cleveland this month.

In fact, Oakland has four students who've won the distinctive honor.

Jonathan Cassar, a senior majoring in dance; Laura Lipzinski, a junior majoring in psychology; Ameena Sheikh, a sophomore majoring in communications; and Melissa Telecky, a sophomore considering a major in health science; will join 18 other skaters from the Detroit Skating Club in West Bloomfield for the prestigious annual competition set for Jan. 18-25.

Five-time U.S. figure skating champion and two-time Olympian Jerod Swallow, who now serves as skating director for the Detroit Skating Club, said it's unusual for skaters competing at the this level to have the time they need to pursue a college education. Many train as much as four hours per day, six days per week.

Oakland's students, however, are making both their academic and athletic dreams come true.

"I've been very encouraged in watching these skaters develop," Swallow said. "They are certainly to be commended for continuing their education. It's definitely a balancing act, and for Oakland University to have four skaters to be able to do that is pretty unusual and very commendable."

Swallow added that Oakland University faculty and staff have a well-known reputation among skaters for flexibility and generosity in working with their rigorous training and travel schedules. He said for this reason, it's not surprising many student athletes choose to enroll at Oakland.

Given their ties to the Detroit Skating Club and the sport in general, Oakland's young skaters not only know each other, but have become friends. Telecky, a 21-year-old who will compete in the senior ladies' event, said this will make the trip to Cleveland all the more fun.

"It's extremely difficult just to make it there, so I'm just really excited that we're all getting to go in the same year," she said.

Like her fellow OU students, Telecky is hoping to make the event still more memorable by staying focused on doing what she does best.

"It's just the adrenaline rush you get when you're out on the ice," she explained. "For me, sometimes it's almost like an out-of-body experience, especially when you know you're skating your program well."

Lepinske, a 20-year old competing in the senior pairs discipline, said she and her partner, Los Angeles native Ethan Burgess, hope to build on early successes they've had after working together for just a year and a half.

We've got a full year under our belts now, so we're a lot more confident this time," she said, adding that they'll perform both a short and a long program. "We're focusing on skating two really clean programs."

Sheikh also is working with a relatively new partner, as she switched from skating freestyle to competing in the junior pairs discipline only last year.

"Luckily, my partner and I are like best friends," Sheikh said of herself and Aaron Van Cleave of Edmonton, Alberta. "You really have to mesh."

She said this year's nationals will afford her one more opportunity to succeed at what she loves most. "I can't imagine not skating. It's my life."

Oakland's skaters know that in addition to the possibility of winning national championship bragging rights, good performances at this year's nationals will put them in good stead for next year's competition, which in turn could lead to a shot at skating in the 2010 Olympics.

Cassar said his goal in Cleveland will be to place among the top 10 finishers in the senior men's competition, but like his friends and fellow skaters, he knows he'll have to stay focused.

"This is the biggest event in the U.S. ... and these are the most elite skaters in every discipline," he explained. "I'm confident I can achieve my goal, but at the same time, I know it's going to take the very best I've got."

Having friends who know all about managing the pressure will certainly help Oakland's contingent.

"It's just being there to support one another, Cassar explained. "It's great motivation knowing you're there for one another."



From left, Oakland University students Ameena Sheikh, Jonathon Cassar, Laura Lipzinski and Melissa Telecky will compete in the 2009 U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Cleveland this month.

SUMMARY

These student athletes have found that attending OU allows them to pursue both their academic and athletic dreams. Oakland's faculty and staff have a well-known reputation among skaters for flexibility and generosity in working with their rigorous training and travel schedules.

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