

Change of partners, no big deal

By KAT HASENAUER CORNETTA

For some figure skaters, winning an Olympic medal of any color would be enough to send them into another career. For Sudbury pairs skater Simon Shnapir, the Olympic bronze medal he earned in Sochi last February signaled a new beginning.

Three months after returning from the Games, he and partner Marissa Castelli, a Rhode Island native, dissolved the eight-year partnership that earned them two national titles.

On Thursday night, Shnapir and Castelli will compete with new partners in the short program of the senior pairs event at the U.S. National Figure Skating Championships in Greensboro, N.C., Shnapir with last year's seventh-

place finisher, DeeDee Leng, and Castelli with accomplished Canadian pairs skater Mervin Tran.

"We have no ill will towards each other and no hard feelings," said Shnapir after a practice at Brighton's Skating Club of Boston last week. "It's very professional. We're very excited for her and her partner Mervin. He seems like a great guy."

Castelli and Shnapir's partnership, while long in an inpatient U.S. pairs scene, was dotted with disagreement. They put their differences aside enough for stellar performances in Sochi, finishing with the bronze in the team event and ninth in pairs.

However, a change was needed. In came Leng, a former junior singles champion looking for a

change herself.

"We definitely hit it off right away at our tryout," said Leng of Shnapir. "We have a lot of the same views, perspectives and goals."

What wasn't needed was a change in their coaching staff. Both Castelli and Shnapir's new partnerships train with Boston-based coach Bobby Martin, and have arrangements that work for them. Castelli and Tran train primarily in Montreal and visit Martin at the Skating Club of Boston sporadically, while Leng and Shnapir call the legendary Quonset hut on Soldiers' Field Road their training home.

Martin prepared his pairs to face each other, while acknowledging there are more teams to worry about than each other.

"It's not tennis. They aren't really going against each other," he said. "They just need to go out and do what they can do to the best of their ability. We'll talk about anything like that may be at play during a competition."

Shnapir is viewing his former partner as just another competitor.

"Of course, skating with



STAFF FILE PHOTO BY MATT STONE

PARTING WAYS: Sudbury's Simon Shnapir and Rhode Island native Marissa Castelli have dissolved the partnership that earned them two national skating titles.

Marissa for eight years, there is no denying that it may appear like it is going to be tough or challenging," he said. "I can see why it would absolutely be a ques-

tion, but we are so focused on getting our own job done."

That focus will be key for Leng and Shnapir, who are recovering from injury. In September, Leng fell from a lift, breaking her hip and leaving Shnapir concussed. After determining she wouldn't risk further injury, they competed in their two November international assignments in Russia (where they finished eighth) and Japan (sixth.)

"There was a time where we thought was it worth it

to get out there?" said Shnapir. "Should we scratch the international season and just focus on getting healthy for nationals? As a unit — our coaches, trainers and medical staff — we felt like the best option was to get out and compete."

Though the first nine months of their partnership might not have been the smoothest, Martin is convinced that Leng and Shnapir will impress at this weekend's championships.

"I want DeeDee and Simon to say they are here for the long run," said Martin. "I am fully confident that they will. It's a very different partnership."

Also, the city of Boston, last year's U.S. championships host, will maintain a strong presence at the senior competition at this week's U.S. championships. Three pairs (Leng and Shnapir, Castelli and Tran, Alexandria Shaughnessy and James Morgan) train at least part-time at the Skating Club of Boston, while Hingham's Gretchen Donlan will debut a new Florida-based partnership with Sochi Olympian Nate Bartholomay.

In senior ladies, Harvard student Christina Gao will look to improve on her eighth place from 2014. Watertown's Ross Miner and Wakefield's Stephen Carriere will contend in the senior men event, while Saugus native Colin McManus looks to move up the ice dance rankings with partner Anastasia Cannuscio.



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