

BLADE RUNNER

// A Richmond teen triple-jumps to the top of the United States women’s figure skating pack.

By LeeAnne Jones

IT’S UNDERSTANDABLY CHILLY IN THE OAKLAND ICE CENTER. Alysa Liu is gliding around in a knee-length navy puffer jacket. She marks some jumps and practices a spin, pulling her leg up within inches of her face. A large poster of Liu holding a gold medal looms over the rink, the text congratulating her on her 2018 junior national championship title. But it’s out of date: She is now the 2019 senior national champion.

In January, skating to “Don’t Rain on My Parade” and the *Witches of Eastwick* soundtrack, the 13-year-old Richmond resident broke the record set by Tara Lipinski in 1997 and became the youngest woman ever to win the senior national title. Liu is so young, in fact, that she can’t qualify to compete internationally as a senior for another two years—nor as a junior, either, until her August birthday.

“I’m practicing,” she says with a grin. “Working hard for when I get there.”

That work is focused on faster spins and more difficult jumps. Liu is the first woman to land two triple axels in one program at Nationals. The complicated jump consists of three-and-a-half revolutions beginning with a forward-facing leap, which requires more strength than other jumps that use the toe pick to push off the ice. Liu is also practicing quads—four rotations—which only three women have ever landed cleanly in international competition.

“I like jumps; they’re fun,” says the four-foot-seven Liu, noting that they happen so fast, there isn’t much time for nervousness. “I think about it leading up to it, and then I just let muscle memory take over.”

Liu will be eligible for the 2022 Winter Olympics, and her competitors are certainly on notice. She practices five hours a day at the downtown Oakland rink, where she started skating at age 5. Even as a kindergartner, Liu took to the sport quickly—she loved speeding past everyone—and her rise as a competitor followed suit. She scored her first national title at age 10.

“It’s a combination of factors,” Liu’s dad, Arthur, says of her early success. “The right coaching, the financial sacrifice of the family, her passion for skating, her hard work, and talent.”

Liu’s journey so far has led to some surreal adventures, like teaching Jimmy Fallon how to do her pre-competition ritual on national television and tackling all her ninth-grade coursework online. But chatting between practice sessions, Liu is very much a typical teen. She loves riding bikes with her four younger siblings, takes frequent photos of her best friend for Instagram, and talks excitedly about the joys of slime. Her favorite way to relax before competition? Browsing vlogs on YouTube.

“I don’t really think of myself as famous,” she says. “I feel like a normal kid. And I don’t really think about it too much.”

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