

Personal Best: 7-year-old figure skater has 'all the ingredients'

By David Liepman

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SAN FRANCISCO – Dinh Tran was in costume on Halloween night, but his tricks and treats were all on the ice.

The 7-year-old Tran spent the evening at the Yerba Buena Ice Skating Center preparing for Skate San Francisco 2008, a U.S. Figure Skating-sanctioned non-qualifying competition. More than 300 skaters of all ages from across the U.S. and Canada will have performed by tonight's conclusion of the three-day event.



Going for gold: In his short career, 7-year-old Dinh Tran has won seven gold medals.
Mike Koozmin/Special to The Examiner

Dinh & his 3 brothers all started ice skating through BAWCC's Youth Sports Initiative. Hundreds of Tenderloin children participate in ice skating, bowling, & other BAWCC Sports Programs every year.
-Midge

Dinh, a Tenderloin Community School second-grader, began skating at the age of 4, and now has seven gold medals. He lives with his parents and three brothers in a studio apartment in downtown San Francisco.

Having emigrated from Vietnam, Mimi Hoang pursued opportunities for her sons to skate as a result of her association with the Bay Area Women's and Children's Center Center. Hoang never dreamed that she'd one day be the mother of a champion figure skater.

Dinh's earned his most recent medal this year at the Central Pacific Regional Championships last month in San Jose, where he beat two competitors, who were 11 and 12 years old.

"Very few skaters come along in your coaching career that have all the ingredients. Dinh is one of them," his coach, Don Corbiell, said. "He has natural talent, a love of the sport, a love of practice, family support, financial support [from the San Francisco Skate Club] and an amazing work ethic. And he's always smiling."

Dinh also carries that smile off the ice as well, even when described as a "total ham" by his coach.

"I am a showman," Dinh said. "I kind of feel happy for the people that clap for me."

Cuong Tran supports the family by working at a hotel, and is forced to miss many of his son's competitions. Hoang works part-time for the Bay Area Women's and Children's Center while managing her four boys' various extracurricular activities.

"Dinh never complains, no matter how early in the morning I wake him for practice," Hoang said. "He really loves it."

Corbiell works with Dinh five days a week. Tran is "very advanced for his age," he observed. "I think that he has all of the potential to be a high-level skater."

The diminutive athlete agrees with his coach's assessment. Dinh has high ambitions and is eager to move on to tougher and longer routines: "I want to do big jumps. I want to add some axels. I want to make my shows big and loud."

Dinh is one of the skaters performing in multiple events during the competition, including today's routine at the 9:30 a.m. freestyle session. "A fun and playful hip-hop routine" accompanied by Justin Timberlake's "SexyBack," the performance is certain to elicit audience response, Corbiell said.