



STARS ON ICE: Thirteen-year-old Saki Jimbo (left) aspires to match the skills of her idol, Mao Asada (above).

Mao's ineligibility for Turin stirs row

MAO Asada, at age 15, is old enough to fight her way to the peak of figure skating but too young to compete in the Turin Olympics two months from now.

The Japanese girl won the women's title at the figure skating Grand Prix series final in Tokyo on Saturday, sparking a debate because she is just three months too young for Turin.

An age limit was imposed by the International Skating Union for medical reasons in 1996.

Sports dailies yesterday demanded that Mao be allowed to go to Turin. "Mao, why can't you compete despite being world No 1," the Sports Hochi said.

Japanese Senator Seiko Hashimoto, the 1,500-metre speedskating bronze medallist at the 1992 Albertville Games, complained: "If she doesn't compete this time, she cannot be sure four years later."

The diminutive Mao seemed the least upset of anyone.

"I feel a little bit like competing in Turin," she said. "But it will be great if I can compete in Vancouver (2010)."

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TERENCE LIM

SAKI Jimbo, 13, looks like a typical Japanese schoolgirl in her sailor uniform and knee-high socks. But, based on competition results and skating tests, she is the highest-ranked figure skater in Singapore.

Saki has won the events she competed in at the Singapore National Figure Skating Championships for three years in a row.

She was the champion in the juvenile group in 2003 and topped the pre-novice category in 2004 and this year.

The Japanese Secondary School student performed in *Holiday on Ice* earlier this month and did a solo act. She was one of four local acts who per-

formed in the show.

"I was really nervous and I felt like throwing up," she said. "But in the end, I did it."

Her performance was so good that afterwards she was offered a full-time job with the show. She had to turn it down this time, though, as she is too young and her dad says studies must come first.

Said her mum, Tomoko: "Her father is very supportive but insists that her studies are most important. If her grades fall, then he will pull her out of figure skating."

Saki is so devoted to figure skating that she has lessons five days a week and practises at the rink every day.

"Even if she's tired, she still goes for her practice. She doesn't give up so

easily," her mum said.

Saki is grateful to friends for introducing her to skating when she was seven, "and I thought it was very good fun".

Now she performs jumps, spins and turns without showing fear, mum says. "Some skaters have that worried look when they do their jumps, but Saki just goes all out and does it."

Saki idolises Japan's Mao Asada and is now working on her double axel, which is a jump and 2¼ rotations before landing.

"This is not very easy as it requires a lot of force and speed and perfect execution," Saki said.

Any advice for budding skaters?

"Don't be afraid and ganbatte (go for it, in Japanese)!"