

Feature

Apolo Anton Ohno

Overcoming insecurities and having ‘Zero Regrets’

By KRISTEN SATO  
Nichi Bei Weekly Contributor  
In the midst of his West Coast tour for his *New York Times* best-seller “Zero Regrets: Be Greater Than Yesterday,” Apolo Anton Ohno, an eight-time Olympic medalist, took some time out to talk with the *Nichi Bei Weekly*.

*Nichi Bei Weekly: It’s no doubt that you are a world-class athlete and international celebrity, and even a phenomenal dancer — but as a new author, what were some of the challenges you came across in writing this book?*

**Apolo Anton Ohno:** First off, I really had to open up in the book. It’s not about who I was as an athlete but really who I was as a person. My relationship with my father on a deeper level, and how I was brought up and how I’ve overcome some of those insecurities. So when writing the book, it was kind of like self-therapy in a way. You have to... relive some of those moments, some of those past experiences when I was a kid.

*NBW: On starting the book with “I have almost no memory of my mother” — why did you choose to talk about this at the very beginning of the book?*

**AAO:** I think it was important to show everyone that everything [in the book] was going to be organic, that I was speaking from my heart, and that I was speaking directly to [the readers]. They aren’t just reading the pages but I was the one telling them the story, you know, about the cabin, etcetera. That was very important to me because it set the stage to let everyone know this is about me and like anything, you have to confront those things you’re uncomfortable with.

*NBW: It’s obvious that while you are so accomplished, you always remain very humble. Many would describe humility as a very Japanese cultural trait. Do you feel that this is a trait your father instilled in you?*

**AAO:** Absolutely. I think there’s something to be said about the Japanese and Japanese Americans that I really relate to. When they do something, they really try to make it an art form. When you look at something so simple and delicate as the tea ceremony, it’s just a really beautiful thing to watch — how every single move is calculated, precise, very deliberate. And that’s the same way I wanted to approach the sport, my dedication to the sport... really full-forward, and really dedicate myself so that I have no regrets. Try to be a master of my craft. Just like master *sushi* chefs who have spent a lifetime understanding the fish, the quality, all of that, it’s so very important for sure. In speed skating I really tried to do a 100 percent complete immersion so that I could fully understand everything, from the ice to the cultures of other skaters I would skate against. I wanted to know everything about it.

*NBW: In the book you discuss the meaning of your last name, Ohno (“great” and “field”), as well as the origins of your family’s roots in Japan, including having some samurai blood in you. How has learning about your ancestry impacted you?*

**AAO:** I would definitely say that I’m very, very proud to be Japanese, very proud to be Japanese American. And the other thing is, having *samurai* blood in me, I understand, you know, that that might be the reason I have so much fight in me [laughs].

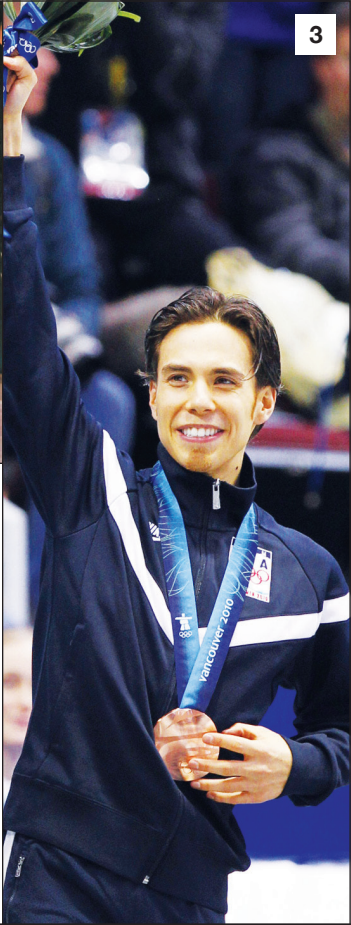
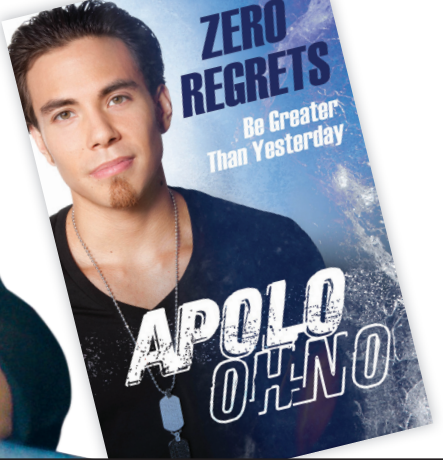
**1. MEET AND GREET** — Ohno signing autographs during his West Coast tour for his *New York Times* best-seller, “Zero Regrets: Be Greater Than Yesterday.”

**2. GETTING DOWN** — Ohno dancing with his partner, Julianne Hough, in the fourth season of the “Dancing with the Stars” reality TV show.

**3. RECORD BREAKING** — Ohno celebrates with teammates during the medal ceremony for the Olympic men’s 5,000-meter short track speed skating relay at Pacific Coliseum in Vancouver on Feb. 26, 2010.



photos courtesy of the Sato family, copyright © 2007 ABC TV Studio/Carol Kaelson and Kyodo News



There are no athletes in my family, but I think when you have that [*samurai* history] in your bloodline, it definitely makes you wired differently. I’m a huge fan of Japanese culture and I never get to go back enough, and I only wish I could spend more time there and spend more time learning about the culture.

*NBW: Do you have a favorite Japanese food that you can’t live without?*

**AAO:** It depends on what mood I’m in. I love *soba* and obviously I love fish. It also depends on what area I’m in, what the specialty is.

*NBW: Hard to pick just one favorite!*  
**AAO:** Yes, definitely!

*NBW: I know you have been to Japan and also have relatives in Japan. When was your first trip to Japan?*

**AAO:** My first trip was when I was 14 years old.

*NBW: And how was that for you?*

**AAO:** Oh, amazing. It felt like I was coming home! [laughs]

*NBW: I’m a fourth generation Japanese American and my first trip to Japan was sort of like an awakening in a way.*

**AAO:** It really is. I’ve been all over Asia, and Japan is just a very special place. I don’t know how else to describe it, it’s just a very, very special place.

*NBW: Eastern traditions such as Chi Gong and Tai Chi are discussed in your book. As an Olympic athlete, how important is it to be mentally and physically connected, and do you feel that you put these meditations to practice on and off the ice?*

**AAO:** I think whether you’re in sports, whether you’re in business, whatever pursuit you’re doing, when you’re able to utilize both that mind-and-body connection into one complete unison, your progress as an individual is going to be so much greater, I think. I think the efficiency and full passion and commitment in whatever you’re doing, it really comes forth when you’re able to make that connection. I know that I perform at my best when I’m at that level so, it’s a pretty amazing feeling.

*NBW: Did your dad ever use Japanese words or phrases when you were growing up? If so, which ones?*

**AAO:** Yeah, he did. You know, my dad still counts in Japanese. He speaks fluent English but he can’t help it. The other day I sent him a picture of a persimmon, and he says, “Oh, this is *kaki*.”

*NBW: As you’ve been on tour promoting “Zero Regrets,” what can you say so far about the places and people you’ve met along the way?*

**AAO:** The tour is just absolutely phenomenal. It’s a time for me to connect with a lot of fans. It was an unbelievable experience for me because I was able to be out there in person just talk-



Nikkei of the Year

The *Nichi Bei Weekly* is proud to announce our first-ever Nikkei of the Year, recognizing a person of Japanese descent in America who left an enduring mark on the past year. This year’s honoree, as chosen by the editorial team, is Apolo Anton Ohno, who in 2010 became the most decorated Winter U.S. Olympian of all time. The 28-year-old native of the Pacific Northwest, who was raised by a single father, Yuki Ohno, is an eight-time Olympic medalist. He won two gold medals, two silver and four bronze over the course of three Olympics — 2002 in Salt Lake City, 2006 in Turin, Italy and 2010 in Vancouver — and won the fourth season of ABC-TV’s hugely popular “Dancing with the Stars” competition in 2007. He is the author of the recent book “Zero Regrets: Be Greater Than Yesterday,” published by Simon & Schuster.



Kyodo News photos

ing to people. Did some Q-and-A, did some signings. It’s just been an incredible opportunity to connect with people one on one — I loved it.

*NBW: One of your new initiatives is reaching out to kids through the nonprofit Century Council’s “Ask, Listen, Learn” program. Can you talk a little about the program and your involvement with Century Council?*

**AAO:** Well, you know, what it is is an initiative to get kids on a positive track, and help them learn about the dangers and some of the negative obstacles they’re going to face when in school — underage drinking, alcohol and drugs in general, and also the challenges they’re going to face when they get older. Just to get kids motivated, get them hungry to be more. I’ve lived through some of those same struggles and I want to share those experiences that I’ve had with those kids. Get them excited about trying to be more than they are.

*NBW: And Century Council is going to be joining you on some of your West Coast book tour dates?*

**AAO:** Absolutely, absolutely yeah. We encourage both parents and teachers to visit *AskListenLearn.com* to learn more about the initiative. It really is a great program.

*NBW: So, “Dancing with the Stars” champion — have you been watching this season?*

**PUT YOUR HANDS UP** — American Apolo Anton Ohno celebrates after winning the silver in the men’s 1,500 meters speed skating in the Vancouver Games at the Pacific Coliseum in Vancouver on Feb. 13, 2010.

Kyodo News photo

**AAO:** [laughs] I did watch. And I’ll just say, I think Jennifer Grey smashed it. She did an amazing job. Everyone did amazing, but she’s out of this world.

*NBW: What did you learn about yourself in participating in “Dancing with the Stars”?*

**AAO:** Well, I had to learn how to create inner confidence in myself. I mean, you’re dancing in front of millions of people, wearing some very uncomfortable outfits, and you know, it just gets a little funky. It’s a lot about doing it to have fun, doing it to open up, and not being afraid to fail. There’s going to be mistakes, it is a live-filmed show, you just have to go full-fledged and not hold back.

*NBW: And from the get-go, you told your agent, “I have to win.”*

**AAO:** Yes, and he’s like, “Well, I don’t have control of that.” And I’m like, “Well, can you make it happen?” [laughs]

*NBW: Now that you’ve checked eight Olympic medals, a “Dancing with the Stars” championship, and writing a book off your “to-do list,” what else can we expect from you in 2011 and beyond?*

**AAO:** Well the first couple things you can expect is me to be with my book while I’m concentrating heavily to promote it. I want to do a lot of film and TV, do a lot of speaking in front of kids, get them motivated. I’m involved in the health and nutrition industry, I have a supplement company called 8 Zone, which I’m very passionate about. Helping people to lose weight, be focused, reach all of their fitness goals and just get people to have a higher quality of life in general. But I have a lot on the menu, everything from TV opportunities to actual film in the Hollywood film industry, so I’m very excited.

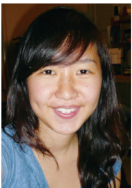
*NBW: Thank you very much for this interview, and know that the Japanese community here in the Bay Area is so excited for you in all of your endeavors!*

**AAO:** I appreciate that very much. Thank you!

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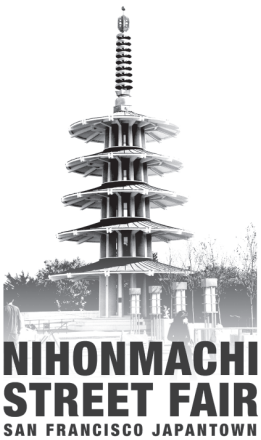
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