

# Filipino skater makes it from mall to Olympics

By **Tim Dahlberg**  
The Associated Press

**S**OCHI, Russia — Michael Christian Martinez nailed the bow at the end. Four bows, to be exact, though no one could blame him. He didn't seem to want to leave the ice, and no one was going to blame him for that, either.

This wasn't the shopping mall in the Philippines, where he learned his jumps and spins while trying to avoid parents and their kids skating by on family outings. This was the Iceberg Skating Palace and this was the Olympics, where the teenager was desperate for the skate of his young life.

He had less than three minutes to prove himself in the short program and make it to the men's free skate final.

If he didn't, he might have to be thinking about the next step, perhaps working for his family raising vegetables to sell to Japan.

The expenses had become too much. The mall had contributed some money, but in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan (also known as Typhoon Yolanda) there wasn't much the government could do for a figure skater, the nation's only competitor in Sochi.

The family home had already been mortgaged to pay for his skating. There was no more to give.

"We're hoping he makes it and some companies support him," his mother, Maria Teresa Martinez, said. "Otherwise he will just have to stop. We cannot afford it anymore. It's just so expensive and we can't do another four years."

In a sequined and braided black and white outfit donated by a designer in New York who saw his Facebook plea for proper Olympic attire, Martinez took the biggest stage of his life, skating just two spots before the great Evgeni Plushenko was supposed to go in front of a capacity crowd at the Olympic arena.

He acknowledged the polite applause, gliding to the center of the ice. He paused, struck a pose, and then began the most important skate of his career.

"I was so nervous," he said. "This was such a big event."



**GOODWILL AMBASSADOR.** Retired soccer star David Beckham interacts with typhoon survivors during his visit to typhoon-hit Tacloban city in the central Philippines. Beckham visited the storm-devastated city as part of UNICEF relief efforts. (AP Photo/Bullit Marquez)

## Beckham visits typhoon-devastated Philippine city

By **Bullit Marquez**  
The Associated Press

**T**ACLOBAN, The Philippines — David Beckham visited the typhoon-devastated Philippine city of Tacloban this month as part of UNICEF relief efforts. The central city is still struggling to deal with the impact of super Typhoon Haiyan (also known as Typhoon Yolanda) that struck November 8, killing more than 6,200 people and leaving tens of thousands still homeless.

The retired soccer star was welcomed by hundreds of survivors who have been living outside a stadium in tents provided by the United Nations.

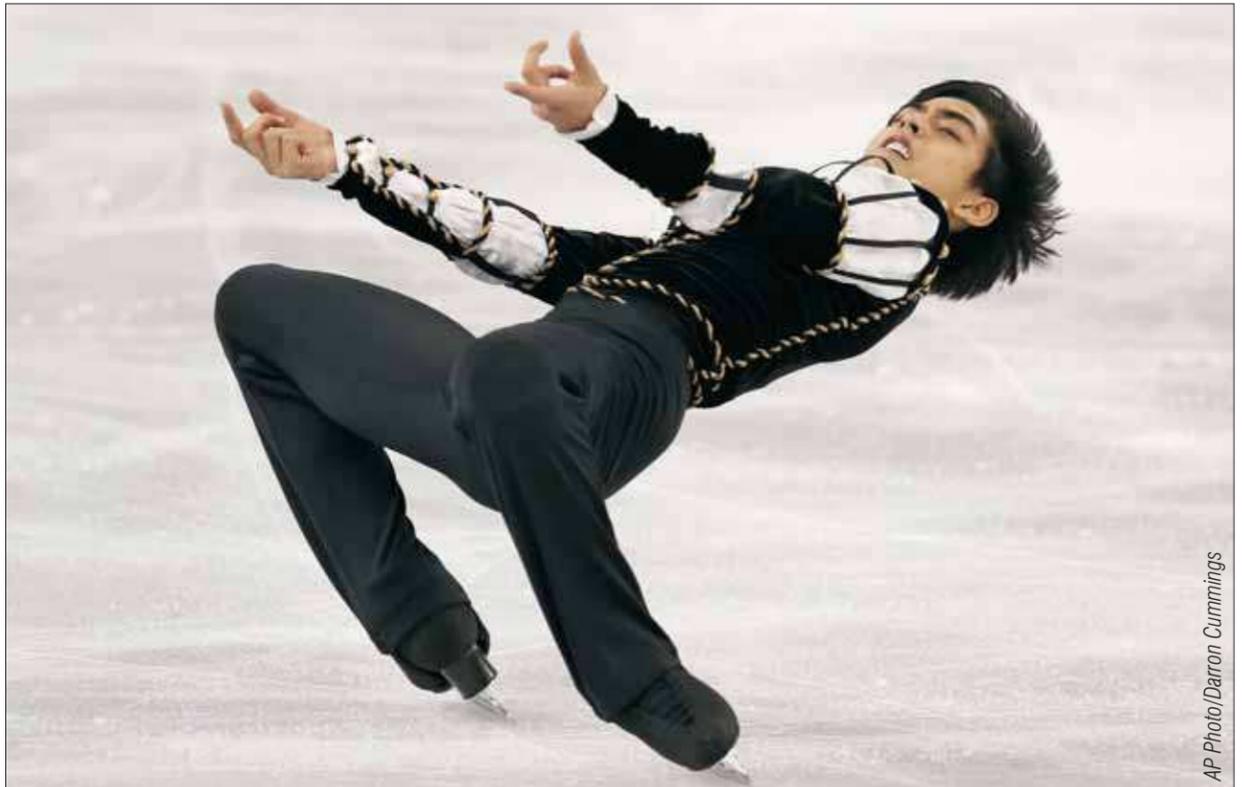
"I was humbled to visit Tacloban and see how people are still so full of spirit despite the devastation they have suffered. Close to 6 million children are affected and many have lost loved ones," a UNICEF statement quoted Beckham as saying.

Beckham exchanged high-fives and posed for pictures with children inside a large white tent used as a classroom. Some showed him their artwork.

He removed his shoes on entering a tent where a family is living, stroking a sleeping infant's hands as he spoke with family members. Officials and UNICEF staff did not say what he and the family members talked about during his 30-minute stay.

It was Beckham's second trip to the Philippines as a UNICEF goodwill ambassador. He toured a shelter for

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**PINOY PERSEVERANCE.** Michael Christian Martinez of the Philippines competes in the men's short program figure skating competition at the Iceberg Skating Palace during the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. On page one, Martinez carries his country's flag at the opening ceremony of the Sochi Games. (AP Photo/Mark Humphrey)

He had reason to be. At 17, he is the youngest skater in the program and the only Filipino figure skater ever in the Olympics.

Still, Martinez was sure he would prevail. The gangly kid with the mop of black hair had to, because this has been his life ever since he walked by the rink in the Manila mall at the age of nine, saw the skaters, and declared to his mother that this was something he wanted to do.

He fell on his behind that day, but that didn't stop him from coming back the next. Neither did the asthma that put him in the hospital many times and kept him from playing sports outdoors.

"I will make the free skate," he declared after practice the night before. "Because I am prepared."

Preparation, though, only counts so much. So on his Facebook page, Martinez asked his friends to "Please pray for me."

He began his skate by hitting a nice triple axel, drawing applause from the crowd. But on his second jump he didn't finish the rotation on a triple lutz and triple toe loop, lowering his marks from the judges.

But his spins were good, the rest of the program nicely skated. Most importantly, he didn't look like a 17-year-old making his Olympic debut.

In two minutes and 39 seconds, Martinez showed he belonged. And now all there was to do was to wait.

"I'm very happy and proud," he said. "I missed just one jump but the rest of the program was good."

In the kiss-and-cry area, Martinez waved his jacket with "Philippines" on the back to the crowd, drawing cheers. He sat with the Russian coach that his mother — who learned skating along with her son so she could save money by coaching him herself — had hired for him, flashing a thumbs-up sign as his score was posted.

It was 64.81, his best ever. But Martinez would have to wait again to find out whether it would be good enough to be one of the top 24 skaters who make it to the free skate.

"I think so, maybe half and half," he said. "I'm a little confident, but then I'm not."

Nearby, though, some of the other early skaters were struggling. Some fell trying jumps, others made mistakes that lowered their scores.

Plushenko himself fell on a triple axel in warm-ups, hurting his back and ending his bid to add another medal on home ice to the four he already won.

Suddenly, the math was starting to look good. It wasn't official yet, but Martinez had made it in.

"I feel like a real champion," he said.

For one night at the Olympics, that's exactly what the kid from the mall was.

*Editor's note: Martinez earned 119.44 points in the free skate to finish in 19th place.*

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