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Hard Pivot: The Reinvention of Olympian Apolo Ohno

By: [John Donovan](#) | Jan 21, 2022



Apolo Ohno, now 38 and living in Los Angeles, is the most decorated American winter Olympic athlete, with a total of eight medals. He admits the transition to life as a non-athlete, however, was difficult. **PERSONAL CAPITAL**

Apolo Ohno spent half of his life dashing around the ice earning Olympic glory, fame and a good amount of fortune as one of the world's most recognizable short-track speed skaters. And then he stopped.

The **most-decorated** American Winter Olympian ever — two gold, two silver and four bronze **medals** over three Olympics — put the brakes on a long and high-profile career after a silver and a bronze at the Vancouver Games in 2010. He had plenty of reasons to

quit. He had reached the pinnacle of his sport. He was getting older, certainly, which is a bad way to get when you're in a young person's game. Vancouver, widely expected to be his last competition anyway, could have gone better. In many important ways, the decision was made for him.

Still, **Ohno** was just 28 years old when he stopped competing. Skating was all he knew. It's how people knew him. He was a successful product pitchman because of skating. Because of his success in the Olympics, he was on "**Dancing With the Stars**" in 2007. (He won that, too.) Through skating, Ohno became a phenomenon, a long-haired, **goatee**-rocking star.

But as the saying goes in sports, Father Time is undefeated. It was time to move on.

And as it turned out, retiring at 28 was a lot slipperier than Ohno could have figured.

A 'Hard Pivot'

Ohno, now 39, has written a book — it's his third — due in February 2022 titled "**Hard Pivot**." The name is a short-track skating term describing a low, strong, hand-to-the-ice lean into a turn. Done correctly, the move harnesses the athlete's momentum to slingshot the skater around a curve and into a straightaway with little or no loss of speed. Done poorly, valuable time ticks away or, worse yet, the skater careens wildly off course and crashes.

Apolo Ohno's new book, "Hard Pivot," is due out in February.

SOUNDS TRUE

Ohno's pivot from his athletic career was no wreck. But it wasn't particularly smooth, either.

"It's taken me 10 years, I think, to feel much more comfortable, vulnerable and empathize in ways I didn't have when I was an athlete," Ohno says from his home in Los Angeles. "I trained with *brutal* intensity and obsessiveness when I was an athlete. I didn't have that level of empathy for many of both my teammates and/or my competitors. And so I realized that living my life in that way was a bit too militant, right?"

"Look, this is an ongoing process. It's not something that you can achieve overnight ... but finding that purpose gives you real, internal power."

Ohno often talks in Zen-like flourishes, influenced, [The New York Times](#) said back in 2010, by his Japanese-born father Yuki, who raised Ohno on his own. Ohno's insights,

though, are genuine, and come both from his successes (he was a state champion swimmer at 13, and a national speedskating champ at 14) and his failures.

Once he retired, he jumped into roles as a commentator at both the 2014 and 2018 Olympics. He appeared in various TV spots. He dove into the world of business, with [mixed results](#).

He was searching. He is, as he says, still searching.

"I always thought for the longest time that I was put on Earth to only be a speed skater. That's all that I had an interest in," he says. Not until Ohno stopped, looked around and did some hard thinking about what was next — until he leaned into that "hard pivot" — did he consider all the other possibilities.

"Life sometimes has different ideas and throws us curveballs and challenges that, perhaps at the time, you don't understand the life lessons that are within," he says. "But the better that we can embrace those life lessons, and basically brace ourselves for the challenges ahead, the much more fulfilling experience we can have."

Showing the Way

These days, among his many professional outlets, Ohno is a partner in a [venture capital](#) firm, [Tribe Capital](#), and a spokesperson for [Personal Capital](#). But his real passion, he says, is communicating with "organizations, programs, teams ... people all over the planet on how they can become more aligned, confident and engaged with the world around them, regardless of all the change, in a way that allows them to show up fully."

The question Ohno aims to answer in motivational talks, in podcast appearances, in interviews and in his book: "How do we operate in a world where chaos and uncertainty is the new norm?"

It's a question he had to answer in what he has called the "great divorce" from his athletic career. And it's one now that millions of others throughout the world are grappling

with in the "[Great Resignation](#)," the voluntary mass exodus of people from the workforce since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020.

Ohno's experience may provide a blueprint.

"The silver lining of COVID, it's the world's great reset," Ohno says. "It's not the world's great reset in terms of what's normal and what the new normal is. Instead, it's a great reset of our minds to say, 'Hey, I do recognize that life is fleeting, it's limited, and I want to make sure that I'm spending this time in my life experience doing the things that perhaps are a little bit more important to me that resonate both with myself and my family.'"

"Human beings typically don't make these decisions until we are faced with complete loss, we have our backs against the wall, and we feel like there's no other option. What COVID did was say, 'Hey, here's the reminder; you actually are in the driver's seat.'"

China's Wenhao Liang (right) chases Apolo Ohno in the men's short track 1,000 meter heat during the XXI Winter Olympics in Vancouver in 2010. Ohno went on to win the bronze medal.

SAEED KHAN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Beijing 2022

COVID is, however, still present. And because of the virus — and the restrictions around the [Beijing Olympics](#) (which begin Feb. 4) — Ohno will not be in China. Instead, he'll be watching it with sponsors and support teams in Park City, Utah. He expects a much different show than the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.

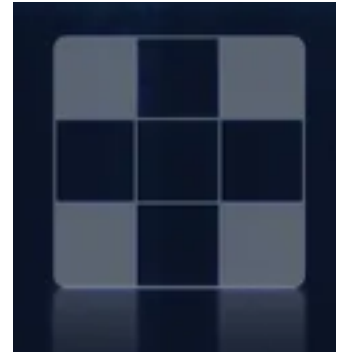
"Everyone knows not only the economic power that China has brought, but also the geopolitical tension that exists between China and the U.S. That's been very real, and that's been placed sometimes on the athlete's shoulders," Ohno says. "The reason why these Games are so important is that people, for two years, haven't been able to really operate in any sense of normalcy, in any capacity. The athletes, hopefully, they'll be able to signify the foundational truths, the reasons we love to watch the Olympic Games. The human spirit. Perseverance. The grit. The backstories. That to me, that triumphs over all other agendas. That's what I want to see."

In life transitions, the road ahead is rarely smooth. But instead of shying away from the inevitable curve, Ohno has taken a different route, one he enthusiastically suggests for others: Lean into it.

Now That's Interesting

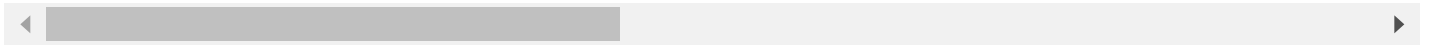
The 5-foot-2-inch (1.5-meter) [Ohno told Us Weekly](#) in 2017 that he has always been captivated by power sports and originally wanted to be a running back in football. But his father put a nix on that, and instead he took to the ice, and the rest is history.

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