

Hard work pays off for top gymnast at York

By KARIM HAJEE

If you love what you do, you'll most likely excel at whatever it is, simply because it gives you so much pleasure. A perfect example is Risa Litwin of the Yeowomen gymnastics squad. While this graceful sport has remained in a state of anonymity at York, Litwin has quietly continued to perfect her skills under the guidance of Yeowomen coach Natasia Bajin.

Litwin was inspired at the age of 9 by Olga Korbet, while watching the legendary gymnast on television. "I saw Olga Korbet on TV, and said, mom I wanna do this," she explains.

After Korbet's inspirational performance, Litwin began to train seriously as a gymnast. Her intention wasn't to reach the Olympics, but simply to do something she enjoyed. Her love for the sport saw her practice two days a week in the beginning. Later she joined the Seneca Gymnastics Club while she was in grade six, and soon after she was on the Canadian National team. After putting in 35 hours-a-week training, the young grade niner thought it was simply too much.

"35 hours-a-week, you have no social life, you're in the gym, you're out of the gym and you're home

sleeping after doing your homework," she says. "It was getting really scary, and it was getting ridiculous."

Eighteen months before the Olympics Litwin reached a number ten ranking in Canada, decided it was enough, and retired from the sport. But it would be a short lived retirement. "I was tenth, I decided that's good enough, I'll take it and have no more injuries," says Litwin.

Just a year later Litwin was back doing what she loved most, gymnastics. This time Litwin stayed closer to home, joining the provincial team. Her hard work and dedication took her to the Maccabiah games at the ages of 13 and 17, where she placed fourth, while the team finished second on both occasions. After the second Maccabiah games and a rather energetic gymnast. About the only disappointment for Litwin at York was the fact that gymnastics was dropped from the CIAU's. "It was a great time, we got to meet the girls from Calgary and everywhere, and the level of competition was much higher. It's more exciting to see and know that all of Canada's there," she says. Perhaps someday they'll put gymnastics back on the national sore hip, Litwin called it quits once again. "My only goal when I was young was to reach the Maccabiah games, and I went twice, she says.

The deciding factor for Litwin in choosing between York and UoT after high school was the gymnastics programme. "I came to York because I didn't want to leave home, I didn't want to travel all the way downtown, but the toss up between York and UoT was the gymnastics programme," explains Litwin. "I only do it because I love the sport, and because I love the competition. If I don't do well at a meet, there's always tomorrow," she adds.

Doing poorly at a meet is something that rarely happens to the tiny, championships list, until then, the Ontario championships (OWIAA) will have to do.

Aside from being a part of the women's gymnastics team, the 20-year-old Physical Education major is also part of the Alpha Epsilon Phi sorority. The sorority is two years old and contributes to the community by doing social work, raising money for various diseases, and providing study sessions for all the members.

"We come out and support each other, we go to the hockey games, and basketball games. I originally wanted to go to Michigan because they have so much spirit over there compared to over here. Here we have absolutely no team spirit," she says.

If all of the above isn't enough for Litwin, she is also President of the Newmarket Gymnastics Academy for which Tom Zivic is the head coach. Doing something she truly enjoys has allowed Litwin to excel, she only wishes everybody else is given the opportunity to enjoy her sport as much as she has.

"Since the CIAU's were cancelled, Calgary has decided to hold a meet in Calgary, I think we should get funded for that. We don't have any money for it, and at least three girls should go. There are some girls that are really good and should be given a chance to compete."

Sharing the flame a lifetime memory

By MARIO PIETRANGELO

By the time the Olympic Torch reaches Calgary on Feb. 13, it will have been carried by over 7,000 runners a total distance of 18,000 kilometres, during an 88 day journey.

Two York students, Jim Beatty and Sean Rice, were given an opportunity of a lifetime to be involved in this historic run; Beatty as a participant and Rice as an organizer.

For Rice, a 3rd year physical education student, the Torch run meant a lot of hard work. Rice was responsible for contacting all of the local radio stations as the flame was passing through each region.

Rice also flew participants to designated locations in a hot air balloon. "You get a lot of satisfaction from organizing an event of this magnitude," Rice said, "But there are also a lot of problems involved."

A prime example occurred during the Christmas break, when Rice got caught in a snow storm, and was blown off course during a flight back from Niagara Falls. Rice was forced

to make an emergency landing into a farmer's field.

For Beatty, a graduate student in Urban Studies, the run was a family affair, as both he and his father Bob, took part in the run. "It is a great feeling to be part of something like this," Beatty said. "It was a great idea, and it is something that I will remember for the rest of my life."

The Torch run has also inspired many Canadians to take part in regular physical activity, which hopefully they will continue long after the Olympics are over. There will be something lost, if the awakening of this athletic consciousness in Canadians, soon disappears once the media hype dies down.

The Torch run has brought with it a heightened awareness of the upcoming winter olympics, and this will mean that many of the amateur athletes will finally get some of the attention that they richly deserve. Also, with outstanding Canadians such as Brian Orser, Laurie Graham, and Gaeton Boucher, we will definitely have something to cheer about.



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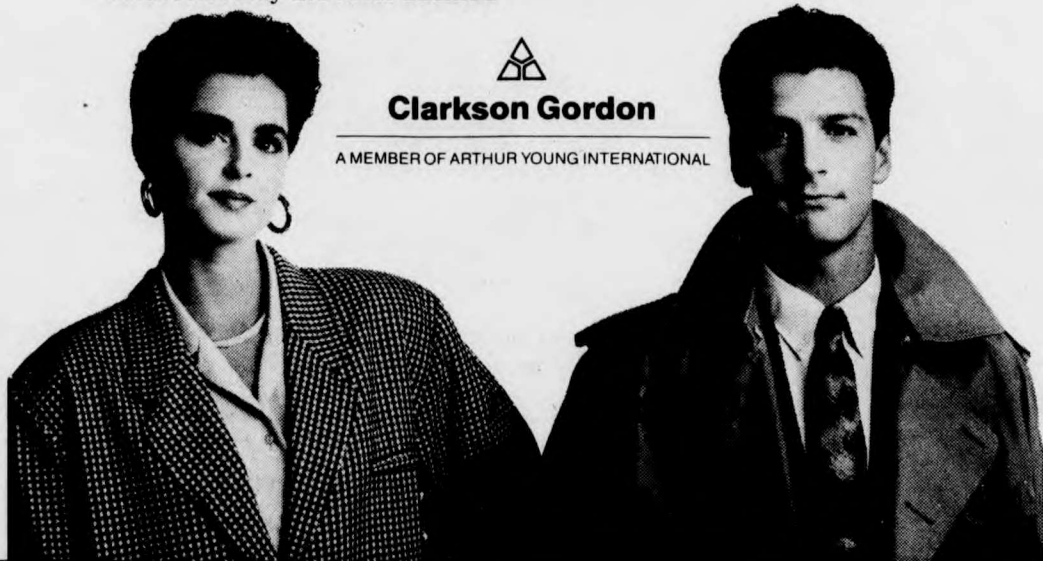
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