

This week in
News

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Community

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display their art



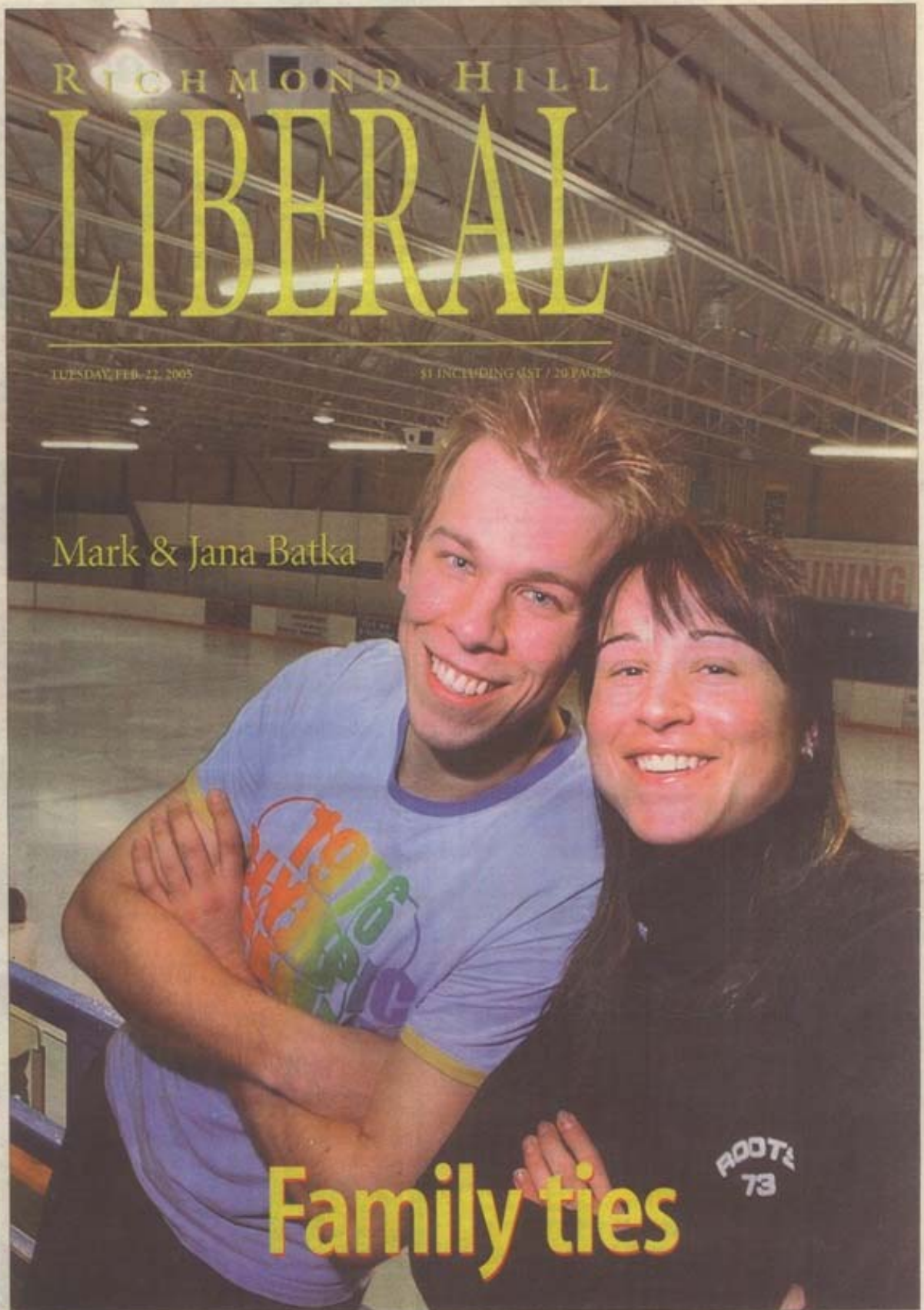
Sports

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in his blood



People

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student to Ukraine



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TUESDAY, FEB. 22, 2005

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Mark & Jana Batka

Family ties



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Skating siblings teach together



BATKA BIOS

Jana Kim Batka, 30

- At eight years old, her father would rent ice at midnight and wake her up to practise figure skating routines;
- Attended Langstaff Secondary School;
- Loves to run;
- Coach at Richmond Training Centre for two years

Mark Batka, 25

- Attained his driver's licence before his sister;
- Attended Langstaff Secondary School and York University;
- Plays recreational league hockey;
- Coach at Richmond Training Centre for three years

• STORY BY AMY LAZAR • PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE SOMERVILLE •

The Batka siblings haven't hung up their skates yet. Mark and Jana have blades on eight hours a day while they coach up-and-coming figure skaters.

"I wanted to stay within the sport since I couldn't do what I had planned," said former national competitor Ms Batka, 30, whose skating career came to a devastating halt when injury led to internal bleeding in her hip.

"I was hoping to keep skating and get into ice shows and travel or compete more," she said.

Instead, she joined her brother at the Richmond Training Centre, now based out of Elvis Stojko arena. Soon the figure skating club will be moving to the new arena at Richmond Green.

The coaching duo works with 15 skaters and one became a junior champion earlier this month.

Vanessa Crone has been competing for six years, three with the guidance of the Batkas.

Together, they attended the junior national championships in

Quebec earlier this month.

Walking into the competition sent a tingly feeling up her spine, Ms Batka said, admitting the large rink with a perimeter of blue boards and seats full of spectators brought her back in time.

Both coaches have taken bows at centre ice, so they can relate to their skaters during high stress moments.

'Our relationship is odd. We're not normal brother and sister because growing up we never fought. I was always protecting him.'

"At one point during the junior championships I was really overwhelmed by being there, but they helped me get through it and focus," 14-year-old Vanessa said.

Ms Batka recalled a time when her brother was in a similar state. He had been off the skating cir-

cuit with an ankle injury in 1997, but was preparing to return and compete at a national event.

With his sister coaching, both were under pressure.

"I was her guinea pig," said Mr. Batka, smiling and avoiding a sideways glare from his sister. She was learning how to flip from a competitor's mindset into a coaching role, he explained.

Warming up at the practice skate with Elvis Stojko and Emmanuel Sandhu put Mr. Batka in a nervous trance.

"He was white as a ghost. I couldn't watch anymore so I called him over, grabbed his collar and screamed 'wake up'. I was trying to snap him out of it," Ms Batka said.

Shaking her head as she recalled the memory, she said any other coach could not have treated him that way.

"Our relationship is odd. We're not normal brother and sister because growing up we never fought," Ms Batka said. "I was always protecting him."

A young Mr. Batka aspired to be

a hockey player so his parents enrolled their second child in figure skating to sharpen his skills.

"I used to get teased because I was in the National Ballet of Canada while skating," he said with a slight waver in his voice.

It took a long time and many sessions with a sports psychologist to work through those self-esteem issues, but he said sharing the journey serves as inspiration for young skaters.

'Most of our students want to win. Of course, some have more drive than others but the most important part is that they all have fun.'

One of them is Paul Poirier, the 2005 Eastern Canadian pre-novice men's champion.

The 13-year-old skater is also an ice dancing medallist.

For flexibility in choreography, Paul enjoys ballet and jazz as off-ice training, which Mr. Batka encourages.

"Without strength and conditioning, the skaters will fall behind others," he said.

Mr. Batka was a six-time national competitor who also graced international rinks before retiring. Four years after the ankle injury stalled his career, his condition was growing worse, so he had surgery. He coached during his recovery, but his skating goals remained.

"I wanted to do pair skating but I tried it for a few months and it wasn't working out," he said.

Mr. Batka was spending more time and energy on other skaters' routines.

Just as his competition dreams were fading away, his sister joined the coaching staff and the path to the podium became clearer.

"Most of our students want to win. Of course, some have more drive than others but the most important part is that they all have fun," Ms Batka said.

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