

Sidelined skater loves switch to coaching

BY JEROME WATT
Staff Writer

Mark Batka wants to prove those who can, can also teach.

Mr. Batka was on top of the figure skating game, competing regularly at the national and international levels.

But last year, a nagging ankle injury sidelined the athlete.

Following his injury, Mr. Batka, 24, couldn't watch other skaters perform in national competitions.

"It was very difficult. There were times when I would sit in the car and try not to cry for 10 minutes," he said. "Watching (the nationals) on TV, I would think, 'That's where I was supposed to be. I tried to keep away from (watching) it.'"

But Mr. Batka has found solace in passing his passion for the sport on to others. These days, rather than doing triple axles at the Elvis Stojko Arena, he spends his time coaching "his kids".

"I still want to skate. It's in my blood," he said. "(But) I kind of live through my skaters."

He spends up to nine hours a day coaching.

"They love coming to the rink and I

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love coming to the rink," he said. "We have fun. It doesn't feel like work."

Mr. Batka's experience as a skater has taught him what not to do. In the past, he had some bad coaching experiences and needed a sports psychologist to straighten him out.

'...I would sit in the car and try not to cry for 10 minutes.'

"My self-esteem was low because I was put down (a lot)," he said. "There was a lot of pressure, a lot of negative comments. That hurts a lot of kids."

Mr. Batka wants to ensure it doesn't

happen to the kids he coaches.

"I would skate and not have fun," he said. "I (coach) in a way that they have fun. I'm incorporating that into my coaching."

One of his students, Paul Poirier, said he finds Mr. Batka's coaching methods effective.

"He makes you work really hard, (but) he makes it fun," he said.

Paul said Mr. Batka has helped him improve his double jumps and taught him how to do triple jumps.

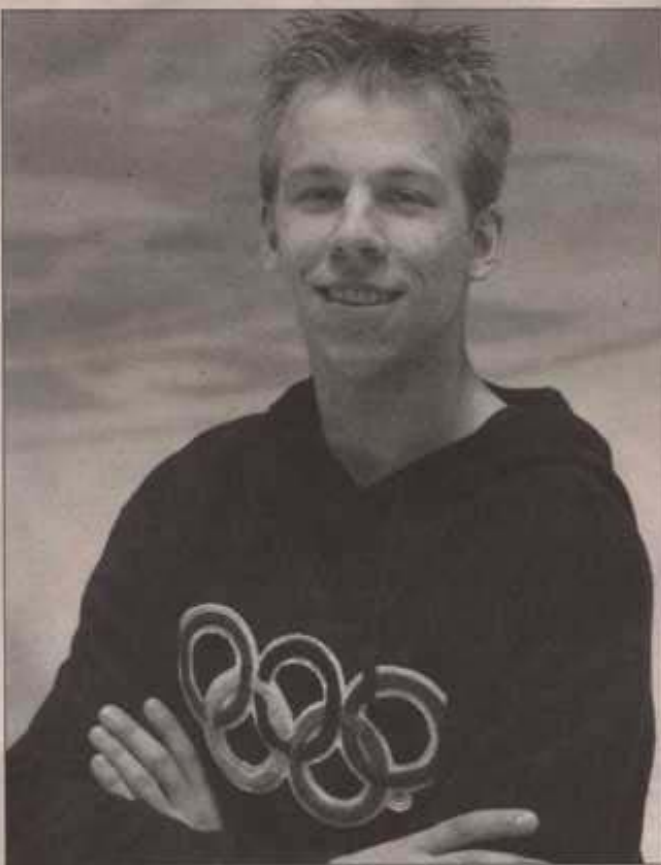
When he's not coaching Mr. Batka plays goal in local pickup games.

He has played goal since he was 13. With a Czech background, he has earned the same moniker as NHL great Dominik Hasek — the Dominator.

"I'm a very unorthodox player," he said. "Even when I'm down and out, I manage to stop shots."

Mr. Batka still yearns to compete. He's considering trying to come back in doubles competition.

Know an athlete of the week? E-mail Jerome Watt at jwatt@yrmg.com



STAFF PHOTO/BILL ROBERTS

An ankle injury forced Mark Batka to give up figure skating at the national level. Now, he coaches youngsters up to nine hours a day at the Elvis Stojko Arena in Richmond Hill.