

Jill O'Connor wins Bay State Games figure skating title



Courtesy photo
Sit-spins like this one earned Jill O'Connor a national championship in her class last year at Lake Placid.

By Don Sherlock
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CAPE COD — Olympic-mania is less than a year away. The 2010 Winter Games will be in Vancouver, British Columbia next February and figure skating once again will get its share of prime-time television.

With the gold, silver and bronze medals go fame and fortune, much of it to youngsters still looking forward to their high school graduation.

But the recently concluded Bay State Games competition at Williams College's Lansing Chapman Skating Rink in Williamstown belies that mindset.

"We have a fantastic collection of adult athletes who add a unique element to our figure skating competition. The passion they display on the ice, and sportsmanship they show off it, are great examples for all of our young skaters to emulate," says Bay State Games Executive Director Kevin Cummings.

Jill O'Connor of Centerville is a 47-year-old waitress at Wimpy's Seafood Cafe in Osterville. She grew up in Smithfield, R.I., and as a child spent a lot of time at the Skating Club of Rhode Island, which is now defunct.

Her mother taught dance and figure skating, and O'Connor dabbled in both during the '70s, participating in her mother's "Ice Crystals" show and ballets on ice including "The Nutcracker" and "Swan Lake."

A year-and-a-half ago, the 5 foot, 110-pounder decided to try her hand competing in skating after 17 years away from the sport. She started practicing at Tony Kent Arena in South Dennis under the tutelage of Johanna Coggeshall and Renee Roos.

"Mrs. C teaches freestyle; she's strict, doesn't let you get away with anything," says O'Connor. "She expects you to do the same as the really advanced skaters ... nothing flimsy."

Coggeshall, who has been teaching 47 years, calls O'Connor "a very good student. I'm pleased she came up the way she did in that competition. She dreams of winning and her face was lighting up [after winning]. She really wants it."

Roos put together a program and choreography and last April O'Connor entered the U.S. Adult Figure Skating Championships at Lake Placid, N.Y., site of the 1980 Olympics. She won a silver medal in the Bronze IV competition, which consists of all single jumps and no flying spins. You'll see no triple jumps or Hamill Camels in this class.

"Between those two and my mother, they've made me a good skater," says O'Connor. "They taught spins and moves I didn't do as a child and thought I'd never do."

That was until last month when she went to Williamstown and won the Female Adult Bronze competition.

O'Connor's mother chose the music for her performance – "Grenada" – and a friend edited it into a 1 minute, 40 seconds program.

"It's a testament to Jill's dedication to figure skating that she travels more than four hours from the Cape to northern Berkshire County to compete against her peers in the Bay State Winter Games," says Cummings.

O'Connor moved to the Cape in 1992. Her interest in competitive skating was rekindled a few years ago when she went skating with a friend and her children. Next came a few lessons.

Her workouts include a small amount of cardio fitness, free weights and yoga at home and bicycles, weather permitting.

For relaxation, there's reading and movies of other cultures – "I thought 'Slumdog' was great; a fun movie," she says. She could relate to the conditions because when she was younger, she backpacked through Europe and Southeast Asia off and on for four years.

She skates three days a week at Tony Kent's public skating session, six hours a week "working on the basics — edges and turns, forward stroking and forward and backward crossovers," she says. "It's important because the judges watch for that and credit it."

A friend asked her if she didn't wish she could skate every day. "I'm on my feet a lot as a fulltime waitress, so no, that's plenty for me."

But next year she plans to move up to the Adult Silver competition, which requires higher jumps, a new program and new music.

“Probably Bay State again, maybe the Adult Easterns and maybe the Nationals [in 2010],” she says. “The Nationals are in Michigan this year and I can’t afford to go; last year I had to take a week off to do it.”

It’s not unusual to see older people competing at Nationals, says O’Connor. “There was a lady who was 82; she did single spins and sit-spins and did it all. It was very inspiring.

“I know I’m not going to the real Olympics, but you find out where you stand with your skating; know what judges think of you; what competition is all about,” she says.

Woody Allen once said 80 percent of success is showing up, but that won’t be the case in Vancouver. Winning won’t be everything, it will be the only thing.