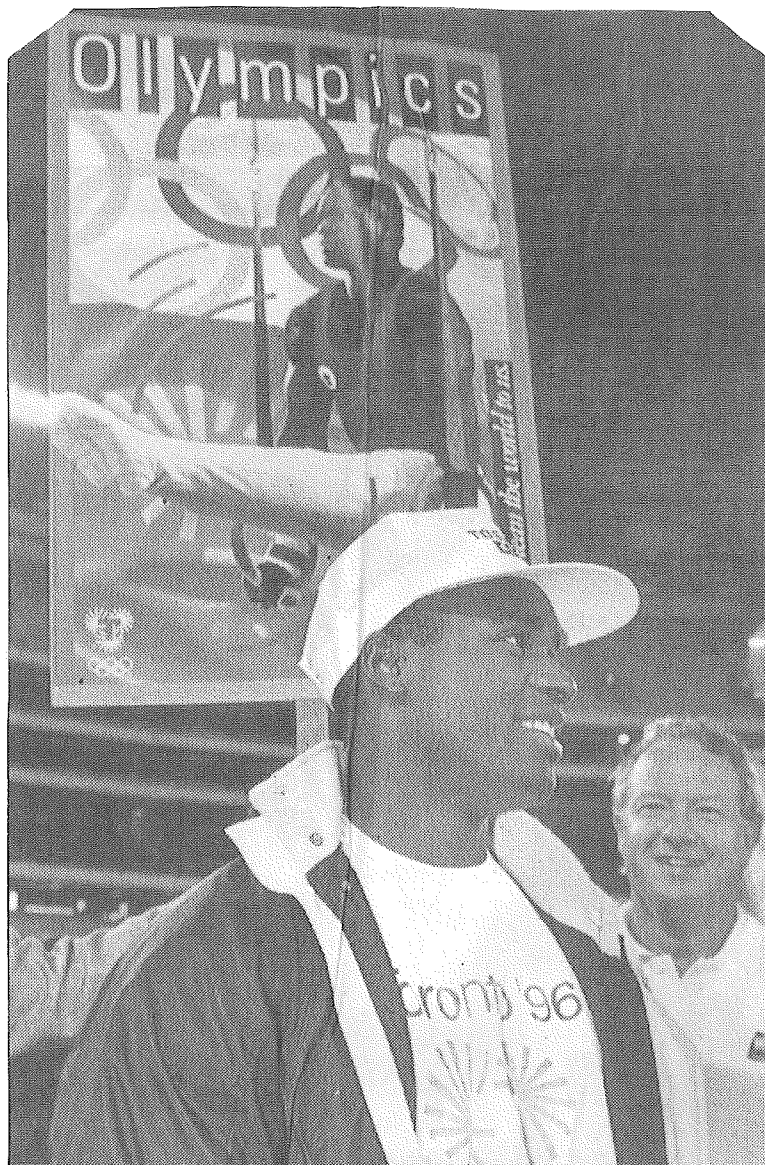


Hibbert hopes to retire a champion

David Bizon - Rb.



Curtis Hibbert, one of Canada's most recognizable amateur athletes, has decided to retire after next month's national gymnastics championships in Calgary.

It has been a difficult year for the man who has meant so much to gymnastics in this country.

And at the ripe old age of TWENTY-SIX, a combination of nagging injuries, loss of sponsorship, conflicts with the Canadian Gymnastics Federation, and on the bright side, the announcement he is to wed this summer, has led Curtis Hibbert to call it a day.

After this week's World Championships in Birmingham, England and an attempt to capture the Canadian championship for the sixth consecutive year, Hibbert will make the move from competitor to coach.

"Around Christmas I started thinking about retiring," said Hibbert as he completed his packing for the flight to England where he, along with fellow Mississaugans Stella Umeh and Stacey Galloway will vie for medals. "I'm getting married in the summer so I had to think about my future.

"It was a tough decision. I never thought I'd finish gymnastics this way," he added. "I wanted to compete at the Commonwealth Games in the summer of '94 in Victoria. But I weighed the pros and cons and it seemed better to finish off this year."

Waiting on tables at a restaurant, receiving funding from the Canadian government and earning some sponsorship money from Toshiba, enabled Hibbert to stay in the sport the past few years. But after the money from Toshiba dried up for a number of prominent Canadian athletes, Hibbert's nagging injuries became that much harder to cope with.

"My body had a hard time dealing with the injuries," said Hibbert. "You can only do it for so long."

Hibbert plans to return to York University and complete his degree in Psychology.

While he is part owner of the Academy of Gymnastics where the York University gymnastics teams are tenants, Hibbert hopes to become a full-time coach in western Canada to take advantage of skiing the mountains, upon graduation.

Speaking of the Academy of Gymnastics, trouble continued to follow Hibbert this week when it was rumored the York University gymnastics program would be cut, meaning the end of the line for Stella Umeh's sister Anastasia and former Mississauga Gymnastics Club member Janine Rankin. Both are prominent members of the program and have two years of education remaining at the school.

As a coach of the future, Hibbert is concerned about the possible closure of the York program. With high schools dropping the sport from their curriculums, Hibbert is hoping the trend doesn't continue at universities, resulting in clubs being the lone avenue for young tumblers to take.

"It will be a major blow to the (Academy) club and Canadian gymnastics in general."

But for now, Hibbert will concentrate on adding to his medal count on the international scene into which he bolted in 1987 when he became the first Canadian to ever win a world championship medal collecting silver on the high bars. Hibbert was the only non-communist bloc athlete to win a medal at the meet.

It would have been nice to match his showing from the 1990 Commonwealth Games, when he captured seven medals including five gold, in Victoria next year. Instead, Hibbert will attempt to add a third, and perhaps fourth medal at this week's worlds and follow that up with his record-breaking sixth consecutive Canadian title May 19-23 in

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