

Miss Olympian joins The News

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Beauty, athletic prowess, desire, honesty and humility all packed into a slender, well-conditioned 6-foot, 145-pound frame.

Few flattering adjectives have not been used to describe Mississauga's Debbie Van Kiekebelt — possibly one of the most talked-about, publicized Canadian athletes to have jumped a hurdle, thrown the shot put or run the 200 metres in a long time!

But now, proudly for the Mississauga News and for the benefit of our city sports enthusiasts, a new dimension has entered the young, 20-year-old woman's life — that of a reporter.

As of this week, Debbie will be a regular on the sports desk of the Mississauga News and her journalistic ability combined with her knowledge and interest in just about every sport conceivable makes her well qualified for the position.

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Debbie's interest in sports dates back long before the time she used to work out with her male classmates in high school in her native Calgary home.

Ever since she could tie her own shoes, Debbie has been able to run, throw a ball, jump and catch better than the average guy.

But she never realized these innate potentials until she was forced to work out with her male classmates during her spare time because, "the girls were such terrible athletes".

One afternoon she was caught up in a competition with all the boys who like to high jump — she had never attempted a western roll or a suicide flip before but soon found herself beating everyone in the makeshift meet.

At the time she was a dedicated diver but eventually turned to track and field due to her sudden realization that she was capable of competing with the best and the fact that flopping on one's back or belly from several meters above ground never excited her.

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At the tender age of 14, Debbie caught the eyes of track followers in Calgary and the country when she walked onto the field of the Calgary International Track meet (similar to the Star Indoor Games) an unknown, and finished second in the high jump with a commendable 5'1" leap.

But it wasn't until she was 15 and her father was transferred to Mississauga that Debbie really got into track.

Upon her family's arrival to Ontario, she contacted John Hudson who was national Track and Field coach at that time and is presently director of the Gameplan '76 program.

He coached Debbie at the Scarborough Central Lions Track Club and eventually interested her into becoming a "Pentathlete".

Her first "bigtime" competition came following a 10-day crash course in which she stayed with Hudson for two weeks and trained three times a day.

Then she traveled to St. Lambert, Que. for the National Pentathlon contest where she won the 200-metre race, and set world Pentathlon record for her age grabbing second place in the competition behind veteran Jenny Meldrum and just ahead of Diane Jones.

Now that she was officially into the national limelight, it wasn't long before she caught the international eye with immediate success in tours to Europe climaxed by a gold medal in the Pan American Games in 1971.

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She continued to make headlines the same year when she went on a tour to Italy, Berlin and finally Munich for the pre-Olympic Games where she did exceptionally well.

"My best year ever was 1972", claims Debbie, "and that's despite what a lot of people may think."

Apparently the former Miss Olympian ran into some harsh criticism for her display in the '72 Games at Munich where she failed to grab any recognition for her country.

"I went to Europe three months previous to the Games and did fantastically," explained Debbie. But unfortunately, as happens with most athletes who train exhaustively for a long period of time, she peaked before the big competition in West Germany.

"Once you hit your peak, you have to hope that you compete on a good day, but when I got to Munich I hit a low point which was complicated with a swollen foot of torn ligaments."

But nobody really remembers the gold medals and world records she captured before the Games ...they only recall Debbie's dismal performance in Munich.

Last season was an up and down one for dedicated Mississauga Pentathlete. Following a rapid climb to the top of the international ladder she experienced her first series of letdowns, culminated with a disillusionment for her relatively new coach, Walter Kostic.

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By September of last year, Debbie Van Kiekebelt had made up her mind to quit Track and Field and learn to enjoy the normal lives that other people her age were experiencing.

No more hour-long Go Train rides to Scarborough to work out, followed by a return trip home and a tireless effort to keep up her grade 13 marks.

But that was six months ago, and she's finally tasted the fun and nightlife that goes with growing up...Now that the '74 track season is underway once again, her blood begins to curdle for the competition and the daily trips to Scarborough continue.

"I'd really hate myself for quitting while I have a good chance to represent my country in the '76 Olympics", admits Debbie.

Perhaps that's one of the major differences between the average, run-of-the-mill superstar and Mississauga's Debbie Van Kiekebelt — she's not willing to rest on her laurels and she won't be satisfied until she has reached her ultimate goal ...having the Canadian national anthem played while she leans over to accept the gold medal for her performance in the Olympic Games.