

Acton skater, partner strike gold

By **STEVE LeBLANC**
Metroland Media Group

Hayleigh Bell isn't about to argue with her coach.

But when described as being immediately fearless by Lee Barkell, the budding pairs figure skater is quick to clarify that assessment.

"Well, I was kind of afraid at first of being dropped. It didn't last long, but there was a bit of fear at the start," recalled the somewhat shy 14-year-old rural Actonian, who now trains out of the sport's southern Ontario hotbed of Barrie. "I was glad they do the throws off-ice at first."

These days, it's Bell's opposition that has reason to fear. Her ability, that is.

Less than 10 months after their partnership was initially forged, she and 16-year-old Alistair Sylvester now sport BMO Skate Canada Western and Eastern Challenge gold—having taken top honours in the pre-novice pairs division earlier this month at Mississauga's Hershey Centre.

Stepping up their routine—in particular their double twist overhead throw—the duo bested its class with a personal-best performance in the short program and near personal best in the long program to reach the top of the podium.

Not too shabby for two skaters who'd been together for significantly less time than most of their competition.

"This is a huge success, especially for a pair that's been skating for less than a year. But I'm really not surprised. I figured if they both stayed healthy and pursued their goal, they'd have an opportunity for something like this," noted Barkell, whose team won by a fairly comfortable five points. "They really executed their elements well and showed a lot of speed and power out there."

Added Bell, "It was really exciting (to win). I couldn't believe it."

On the heels of their latest victory, Bell and Sylvester were named to the Skate Ontario squad that'll be part of the Canada Winter Games in Halifax in February.

Fittingly enough, this will mark the one-year anniversary of the local teen's introduction to pairs skating.

At the time, Bell was soaking in the magic and drama

of the Vancouver Olympics, while her soon-to-be-coach was looking for a partner for an already recruited Sylvester.

"I saw her in competition and she seemed to be the good fit (for Sylvester). She was obviously the right size, petite, but she also had a lot of skill and spark."

Within a few weeks Bell was pulling double duty, continuing her singles training with her hometown club and traveling to Barrie twice a week to start practising with Sylvester.

This made for a hectic spring, but the long-time figure skater wasn't deterred—even when realizing just how much work is required for pairs prosperity.

"It takes quite a while to really gel. We're only just starting to perfect it (routine) now," she said.

Echoed Barkell, "Timing is so important in pairs. It's hard enough to learn how to skate on your own, but when you're with a partner, if you don't have the timing down it's going to create real problems. Hayleigh and Alistair were in unison almost immediately, and that's hard to teach."

Rivaling chemistry on pairs figure skating's 'must-have-to-succeed' list is, of course, trust. That came fairly quickly for Bell, but not so much for her number-one fan.

"Seeing her being thrown out there, no I didn't like that," said mother Darlene, with seriousness masked by her light-hearted tone. "But I could see how much she wanted this."

Throughout the summer and fall, which saw a transfer to a Barrie-area school and club for her singles skating to eliminate the taxing commute, Bell and Sylvester gradually increased their routine's level of difficulty.

Showing improvement with each passing meet, they've enjoyed a golden sweep so far this season. The Thornhill, Isabelle Hendersen and Octoberfest competitions were all met with first-place finishes in both the short and long program, as was last month's Central Ontario Sectionals in Midland.

Bell secured overall silver in pre-novice singles at sectionals, and despite battling through illness, placed 19th out of 54 skaters at the Western/Eastern Challenge.

While appearing to have found her calling on the pairs scene, the young skater isn't about to give up her singles career anytime soon—despite the rigorous schedule that dual commitment entails.

"It's worth the effort," said the Stewarttown Middle School graduate.



Good as Goldham

The Dr. Suzanne Niwong Orthodontist Maple Leafs earned the inaugural Bob Goldham Championship trophy as champions in the pee-wee white division with a thrilling 2-1 overtime victory over the Sharks during the Georgetown Minor Hockey Association's Bob Goldham Memorial Christmas House League Tournament. It was the 15th anniversary of the tourney, now named in memory of the all-star defenceman who won two Stanley Cups with the Toronto Maple Leafs and three more with the Detroit Red Wings. Pictured above, Goldham's daughter, Whitby resident Barb Loynachan, presents the championship trophy to Leafs (from left) Mike Preston, MacGregor Fair and Trevor Haines. Back row: Goldham family friend and former NHLer Ivan Irwin, GHMA junior house league director Gord Campbell, Barb's husband, Rod Loynachan, and their daughter, Alli. The championship trophy was donated by the Georgetown Hockey Heritage Council and an extensive collection of Goldham's memorabilia will be on display at the Halton Hills Sports Museum until the end of February.

Photo by Eamonn Maher

Raiders rally for win

Four unanswered goals during a nine-minute span during the second period gave the Georgetown Raiders a much-needed 6-4 victory Tuesday evening in Buffalo over the Jr. Sabres.

After falling behind 4-2 midway through the contest, the Raiders pulled starting goalie Michael Nishi, who had stopped nine of 13 shots, and the visitors responded by rallying for just their second win against the Jr. Sabres in five tries in this Ontario Jr. Hockey League season.

Sixteen-year-old backup goalkeeper Michael Stiliadis blocked all 18 shots he faced to improve his record to 8-0-1 this year.

Duston Hebebrand (2), Evan Rodrigues, David Friedmann, Travis Fulton and Josh Burnell scored for the 26-12-3 Raiders, who'll host Aurora this Saturday starting at 7:30 p.m. at the Alcott Arena.

Acton-area resident Hayleigh Bell and her pairs' figure skating partner, Alistair Sylvester of Stratford, will represent Ontario at next month's Canada Winter Games in Halifax. *Submitted photo*

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