

SPORTS AND LEISURE

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Root vegetable soup

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Boycott eager to compete on world stage

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Staff Writer

As well as being a Team Canada gold-medal hopeful for this week's Special Olympics World Summer Games in China, Emily Boycott has enjoyed some celebrity status as she's diligently trained for the big event over the past few months.

The 24-year-old rhythmic gymnast served as a co-master of ceremonies with TSN's Vic Rauter back in May when the Canadian team uniform was unveiled at a ceremony that drew 130 media organizations in Toronto. She welcomed California governor/Hollywood superstar and special guest Arnold Schwarzenegger, presenting him with a red and white Maple Leaf training outfit.

Boycott, who shows as much composure speaking in front of large groups of people as she does while competing in the gym, impressed Schwarzenegger with her wit and speech about the importance of Special Olympics sports for athletes with intellectual disabilities.

"A lot of politicians I know could take some pointers from Emily," Schwarzenegger noted.

"He was very nice. I hope I can meet him again in China," Boycott said in an interview last week from her family's Acton-area home.

A member of the Oakville Butterflies' rhythmic team for the last seven years, Boycott qualified for the World Games in July 2006 by earning four gold medals at the Canadian championships in Brandon, Man. Since then, she's rubbed shoulders with household names such as *Hockey Night In Canada's* Don Cherry and Ron MacLean, the Olsen twins, and had dinner with Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty.

Boycott also appeared in full-page Special Olympics appreciation advertisements in *The Globe and Mail* in the spring sporting a t-shirt that read on the front, "People are always pointing at me," and on the back, "I'm on the top of the podium when they do."

Rhythmic gymnastics involves four disciplines—the rope, ribbon, ball and hoop.



Acton's Emily Boycott is one of more than 7,000 athletes from 169 countries, including 89 Canadians, who are competing this week at the Special Olympics World Summer Games in Shanghai, China. The Oakville Butterflies' Rhythmic Gymnastics Club member plans on making a visit or two to the podium and some new friends during her two-week stay.

Photo by Eamonn Maher

Boycott is in the Level 4 Special Olympics category, which is the most challenging as the athletes must select their own routine and music. Although there were no major competitions in 2007, she has kept competition-ready by performing in front of community groups, training at least three times a week at the Burlington Gymnastics Club.

To become better prepared for the World Games, Boycott has increased the difficulty of her routines under the choreography of former national team rhythmic gymnast Andrea Schlegel, while also eating meals with chopsticks and brushing up on proper Chinese etiquette.

"The training program that Special Olympics Canada has for its athletes is

outstanding," said her mother Debbie, who coaches the Butterflies and will be an assistant coach for the Canadian rhythmic gymnasts.

"We'll be competing on an artistic floor over there, which is different from what we're used to, but Emily's been practising a lot at gyms with that surface and she's confident she'll be ready."

Of some concern for Boycott is how her nerves and feet will react in front of thousands of spectators and fellow athletes in the Shanghai International Gymnastics Centre.

"I'll see how my legs will feel when we get there," added Boycott, also a competitive swimmer and figure skater who works three or four days a week performing office duties at the Darling Home For Kids in Milton.

"We're going to do exercises on the plane ride over."

In an e-mail from China this week, Debbie Boycott said they were welcomed warmly during their three-day stay at host community Hangzhou and that Tuesday's opening ceremonies in front of a capacity crowd of 70,000 people at Shanghai Stadium was spectacular. Preliminaries for rhythmic gymnastics were held yesterday (Thursday), providing Emily a preview of her competition.

"We saw Emily's competition at the training day (Wednesday) and she'll need to be in top form," said Debbie. "There is one athlete in particular who has more difficulty than Emily but I'm not sure she executes as cleanly. It'll all be up to the judges."

Emily's dad David has also made the trip overseas, hoping to visit the Great Wall of China before her event's finals are held this Monday.

"It would be nice to win a medal," Emily said. "I can't wait for the opening ceremonies and to meet some new friends...I don't know anything about China. It should be fun."

For updates on the competition, visit the website www.teamcanada2007.ca.

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