

# The French connection just too tough for skater

By **STEVE LeBLANC**  
The Champion

Elizabeth Wild has learned an invaluable lesson in her pursuit of speed skating stardom — beware of the French connection.

Last spring a wide-eyed Wild, then 15, captured gold at the North American Age Class Short Track Speed Skating Championships, entering as an unseeded long shot and ending as the Cinderella victor.

The Bishop Reding student soon learned, however, that defending the title would be far more difficult than winning it with Quebec's finest thrown into the mix.

"Quebec didn't send a team last year but since this season's event was held in St. John's, NB, almost every province was represented except for British Columbia," said Elizabeth of the March 27 to 29 cross-border showcase.

The bolstered field meant good news and bad news for the local skater — good in that she was able to say she battled the absolute best, bad because it cost her a championship repeat.

Elizabeth improved on all four distance races — including the 1,000-metre in which she trimmed a full second off her personal best — but still had to settle for fifth overall.

She was swept out of medal contention solely by Quebec skaters who took first through fourth. Leading the way was gold medalist Melody Michaud of Montreal.

Quebec's contingent continued their dominance a week later in Charlebourg at the Canadian Championships — which by Elizabeth's own admission actually represents a higher level of competition than the annual North American finals.

"Canada is much stronger overall than the U.S. but we only send certain provinces to the North Americans each year. Competition is much stiffer at our nationals," she explained.

Elizabeth placed sixth overall at the Canadians, missing a chance to medal due to a heartbreaking fall in the 500m sprint.

Her best efforts came in the 1,000 and 1,500m races



File photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Elizabeth Wild is pictured here last spring with her North American gold medal. Despite improved times this season, she had to settle for fifth.

where she clocked in at 1:43.01 and 2:41.09 respectively and took fourth-place honours in each. Her 1,000m finish was a personal best.

Despite being shut out in the medal department, Elizabeth said she made significant improvements this year — thanks mainly to a more intense strength and conditioning program through the off-season.

"The competition gets better each year so you have to work harder and harder to succeed," said Elizabeth, who's hoping to crack the top two at the World Junior Trials next season in Kitchener. She took sixth in December.

Her speed skating sibling Mark, 23, came up short in his Olympic qualifying bid this past winter.

He took 16th spot, with only the top six Canadians earning the trip to Nagano. Mark was somewhat disappointed with his finish — having hoped to place top 10 — but later took solace in the fact that he was beaten by the world's best.

"Canada has such strong speed skaters, who took nine of the 15 medals we won in Nagano," he said.

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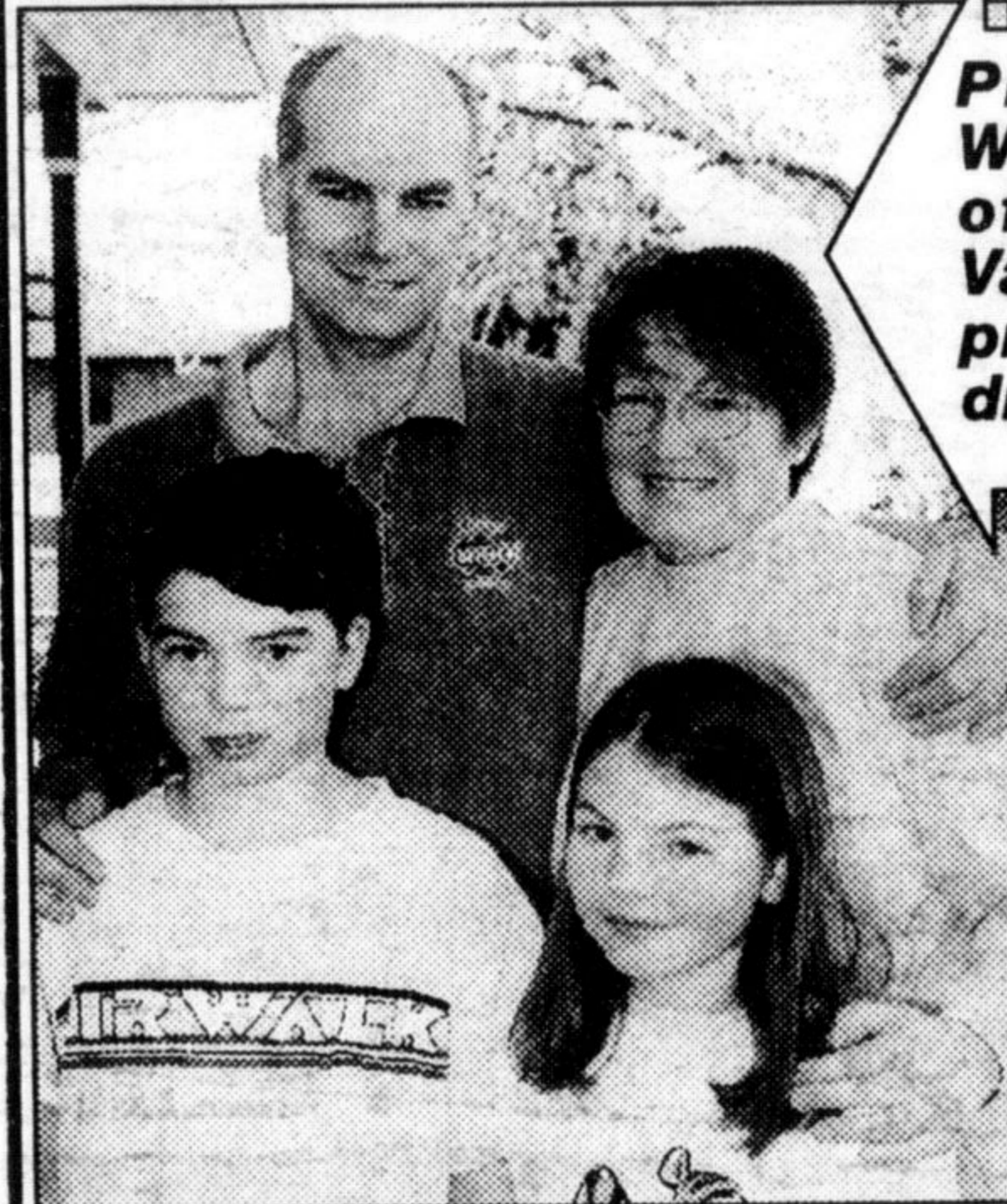
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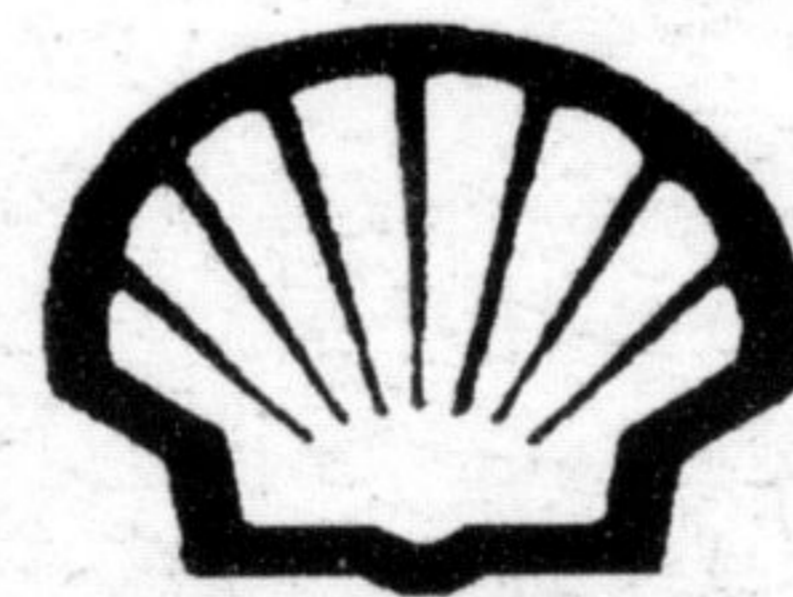
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