

Softball pitchers complete 'double'

There are not many people who can lay claim to winning a softball world championship and Pan American Games gold medal in the same year.

To be more precise, within weeks of each other.

But Paul Koert, 36, and Andy Skelton, 28, can proudly proclaim they were a part of that select group.

The two Stouffville residents played vital roles in helping Canada capture the WBSC Men's World Softball Championship title in Saskatoon earlier this month and the Pan Am Games gold medal.

They went undefeated during the Pan Ams that culminated with a dramatic 2-1 win over Venezuela in the final before a jam-packed pro-Canadian crowd on a hot, sultry Saturday afternoon at the President's Choice Ajax Pan Am Ballpark.

"It's pretty awesome, it's amazing," said Skelton, who saw duty as a designated hitter and pitcher, recording two of Canada's wins on the rubber. "Now Canada is back on top of the softball world."

"It sure feels pretty good," added Koert, a veteran left-handed pitcher who made his national team debut in 1997 with the junior squad and has been with the men's team on and off since. "We've solidified our position in the softball world in winning gold."

This month's Pan American gold-medal run extended Canada's streak to eight consecutive in men's softball. The sport made its return to the Games this year after last appearing in 2003 — Canada has won all eight gold medals handed out at the event.

Skelton felt a big part of their success stemmed from what they accomplished at the world championships, where the team won its first gold medal in that event since 1992.

That began to fuel momentum for the team and showed what the



METROLAND PHOTO/JASON LIEBREGTS

Andy Skelton salutes the crowd following gold-medal softball victory.

team was capable of doing, he suggested.

"Our team was peaking at the right time and we began to fulfil our full potential," Skelton said.

Along with that, Koert felt another important ingredient was in their mental approach entering the Games just days after winning the world championship.

See **KOERT**, page 12.



STAFF PHOTO/NICK IWANYSHYN

Medallists Karen Cockburn (right) and Rosie MacLennan accept congratulations from Pan Am Games' fans.

Medal has Karen thinking Rio

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Karen Cockburn could not have asked for more after jumping and somersaulting to a bronze medal in the women's trampoline competition at the 2015 Pan American Games at the Toronto Coliseum Sunday.

Especially since the 34-year-old Stouffville resident and three-time Olympic medallist had just three months of serious training after incurring a broken ankle last November while training in preparation for the world championships in Daytona, Florida in November.

It also filled a void of sorts after she was forced to withdraw from competing in the finals at the 2011 Pan American Games in Guadalajara, Mexico due to an illness. She probably would have medalled.

"I was hoping to make the podium here (in Toronto)," Cockburn said Monday. "It's awesome."

Making Cockburn's performance even more satisfying was Saturday's qualifications in which she

placed first. While that placement did not count towards Sunday's final routine, which saw her long-time SkyRiders Club mate and King City resident Rosie MacLennan take the coveted gold medal after being sixth in qualifying, it allowed Cockburn to be the final competitor.

'THAT CRAZY'

Citing the long wait can be advantageous in allowing the judges to save room for better performances, but at the same place added pressure after watching your rivals compete and endure what feels like a long period, Cockburn drew from her past experiences of being in that situation to put forth an effort deemed worthy by the judges to reach the podium with a final score of 51.560.

"These experiences help you for the Olympics," she said. "It's always a learning experience."

"I actually performed better in the qualifier than in the final. But I'm still happy with the bronze."

As an added bonus, Cockburn

said to reach the podium with her good friend MacLennan, who recorded a gold-medal score of 53.560, was even more enjoyable.

"To be up there (on the podium) with Rosie made it even more special," she said.

What might have also spurred Cockburn in her comeback was the support from those in attendance.

Having competed in her early days before just a handful of people to these games with a near packed house that was quite vocal was a bit overwhelming for Cockburn.

"I didn't expect it to be that crazy," she said. "It was insane. Just to see how far the sport has come to have that many fans in attendance, it was awesome."

Cockburn receives plenty of inspiration from her daughter whenever she takes to the trampoline. "She (Emilie) is sitting right above the judges, so I get to see her little face watching me. I'm going to cry. And it just means everything,"

See **COCKBURN**, page 12.

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