

Mercy skater aims for next year's nationals

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Most high school students are either still asleep or just getting out of bed at 6 a.m. on school mornings.

Not Our Lady of Mercy High School's Erika Eichelberger.

Three days a week, Eichelberger is already at a local ice rink by 6 a.m., ready to begin a two-hour workout. She later returns to the rink after school for another two or three hours of additional work.

And she puts in even longer hours on weekends and summer vacations.

Eichelberger, a sophomore, has become one of the top-rated junior women's figure skaters in New York state after she won the junior ladies' gold medal in the 1990 Empire State Games last February. After finishing second in the North Atlantic championships last fall and fourth in the Eastern championships in January, she just missed a trip to the national championships.

Next year, Eichelberger has her sights set on the nationals.

"My goal now is to make it to the nationals and do well there," she said.

Her coach, Jenny Bond, is confident Eichelberger has a realistic chance of making it to the nationals.

"If she continues to progress the way she is, she could definitely make the nationals," declared Bond, who along with her husband, Craig, has coached Eichelberger for the past eight years.

Since discovering figure skating while watching the 1980 Winter Olympics,



Erika Eichelberger practices a dance routine with fellow figure skater Rob Caldwell at Rochester Institute of Technology before taking to the ice. In addition to hours of skating, a regimen of dance classes and weight training helps to strengthen her routines.

Lynn A. Thornberry

periods when local ice rinks were not open, her parents and coaches even began driving her to Buffalo for practices.

Such a regimen puts demands on a young skater, acknowledged Bond, who was the 1974 British Junior Ladies Champion.

"You don't have much of a social life, but it's a choice you make," Bond observed. "You have to be dedicated. You have to give up a lot of things."

Bond said that she does not regret the time and effort she committed to her skating career, but acknowledged, "I don't know if I had a child I'd put her through it."



At left, Eichelberger gets ready for a day on the ice. A member of the Genesee Valley Skating Club, she spends approximately five hours on the ice every practice day. Above, Eichelberger does 'patch' work, a rigorous routine where the skater attempts to trace the same figure eight pattern consistently.

appear to be suffering any ill effects from the long hours she puts into skating. In addition to being an honors student, she has a busy social life as well.

Eichelberger herself acknowledged that she had to sacrifice some activities, but still found time for friends and school. The key, she said, was discipline.

"I've been skating for so long (that) it's trained me to know that if I want to skate, I'd better get my work done," Eichelberger said.

As an intermediate four years ago, she advanced to the North Atlantic championships. Currently competing as a junior, Eichelberger is on the verge of advancing to the top level — the seniors. Her coaches, however, are holding her back from completing the qualifications to better prepare her for the stiffer competition she would face against the top women skaters.

Bond observed that Eichelberger is a strong skater. "She's more of a technical skater," she said. "Very solid. Very consistent. A good jumper. She needs work on her posture and her style. That comes from not being (physically) mature enough yet."

That immaturity showed up last January in the Eastern championships. Eichelberger was in first place after the preliminary rounds, but in part because of fatigue and excitement, she fell several times during the long program and dropped out of contention for one of the three slots available in the nationals.

Ironically, an accident this spring may — in the long run — help Eichelberger to be better prepared for the next round of competition.

During a practice session, she felt one of her knees pop. At first, the injury appeared

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Eichelberger has been "progressing" for the past decade.

Only five at the time of the Olympic games, she asked her parents to take her skating. Starting out that winter on an outdoor rink, she remained interested enough to want to continue. During the fall of 1980, Eichelberger began going to Rochester Institute of Technology to take lessons offered by the Genesee Valley Skating Club. She joined the club shortly thereafter.

Her father, Jerry Eichelberger, said early on she showed signs that skating was not just a passing interest. "There was never a single time she said I don't want to do it anymore," he noted. "She wanted to do more and more of it."

Soon the Eichelberger family began to make adjustments to support Erika in her efforts to skate.

"It's really a huge commitment," her father said. "The family life tends to totally revolve around it. You plan vacations around ice time."

By age seven, Eichelberger was skating competitively and achieving success.

But the price of continued success was more work. In addition to the regular workouts on ice, Eichelberger added dance classes to help with her routines. During



A Mercy sophomore, Eichelberger is one of the top-rated junior women figure skaters in the state.

The Eichelbergers are aware of the demands put on their daughter by skating. But Jerry Eichelberger observed that his daughter is not under any more pressure than other young people involved in sports or activities.

"One of the interesting things I found out is that the kids who are seriously involved in a sport have to be self motivators," he said.

He also pointed out that Erika doesn't

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