

TONAWANDA SPEED SKATER HOPES TO CELEBRATE LATER

By Jerry Sullivan Dec 24, 1993

SHE WON'T BE coming home for the holidays this year. There's just no time now. Tonawanda's Cory Goelz will spend them in Milwaukee, getting ready. She'll get up today, lace her skates and go out to train. She and a friend will cook Christmas Eve dinner for their fellow skaters. That'll be the extent of the celebrating.

Christmas at home would be nice, a good time for family. But it's good times on the ice that matter now. Her parents, Jerry and Marion, understand. Speed skating is the unifying thread running through their lives.

They met at the Riverside Park rink. They put skates on their daughters, Wendy and Cory, when they were barely old enough to walk. And without even giving words to it, they put the dream in the little girls' heads, too -- the dream of one day competing in the Olympic Games.

"Yeah, it's a dream for the whole family," Cory said from Milwaukee. "You put everything into it. My parents put their money into it. Wendy and I put our heart and soul into it. She was so close to making it . . ."

Wendy and Cory were the darlings of local speed skating in the late 1970s. A 1979 newspaper story pictured them -- Wendy, 9, and Cory, 6 -- skating in tandem with smiles on their faces. Even then, Wendy was a top national competitor and Cory was soon to follow. Nine years before the fact, the headline trumpeted Wendy's goal of making the 1988 Olympic team.

But Wendy didn't qualify in '88. Though she was among the favorites for Calgary, she came up short at the trials. Four years later, in 1992, it was Cory's turn. But her best finish was fifth at 5,000 meters. Only the top three made the team.

Two years later, Cory is back in Milwaukee, training under world-famous coach Peter Mueller and hoping to earn one of the eight spots on the U.S. women's team at the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer, Norway. The U.S. trials will be held over two weekends -- Dec. 31-Jan. 2 and Jan. 7-9 -- in Milwaukee.

So it's understandable if her attention is riveted not on Christmas Day, but on the Saturday that will follow it.

"It'll be lonely," said Cory, a Kenmore West graduate, "but I haven't been home all that much. I think this is my fifth Christmas away. It's hard . . . but it'll be best to celebrate after."

There will be lots to celebrate if she can finish in the top three in either of her specialties, the 3,000 and 5,000 meters. Cory says her times have been dropping consistently, to 8:06 in the 5,000 and 4:42 in the 3,000. Only one U.S. woman has skated faster in the 3,000.

She thinks back to the time when she and Wendy were little girls, when her father would dutifully get up at 5 a.m. and take them out to skate, and she thinks she has a good chance to finally realize the dream.

Maybe it's the memory of Wendy's disappointment, but Jerry seems intent on keeping his excitement in check.

"I don't really get my hopes too high," he said. "I just kind of take things in stride. But it would be the ultimate."

He'd love to see his daughter in the Olympics, but he has learned to accept the sport as its own reward. He remembers in the late 1950s, when speed skating enjoyed a brief surge in popularity in Buffalo, before the Sabres came along and ice hockey stole the hearts of the kids in the area.

"It kind of died after that," he said. "The people didn't bring younger ones into the sport. We kind of hung on and kept it going."

Jerry has been a driving force behind the Niagara Frontier Speed Skating Club for many years. Twice a week, he still runs the Learn to Speed Skate program at two rinks in the City of Buffalo. He has a fair number of skaters involved. Who knows? Years from now, he might have an Olympian on his hands.

Then again, it might happen in two weeks.