

Skating coach turns out Olympic contenders

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SAM POULOS, father and trainer of two-time Olympic speedskating medalist Leah Poulos, and coach of the Northbrook Speedskating Club, extends his foot to the large puddle that was once an outdoor skating rink in West Allis, Wis.

Poulos is grim. Under his direction, the Northbrook Skating Club has had a history of Olympic stars. This year, however, the unseasonably warm weather—it is 60 degrees in November—threatens to cut short his club's practice on the Midwest's only 400 meter rink, by far the region's largest.

On the ride back to Northbrook trainers.

"Training is like religion," he said. "Everybody thinks their own brand is the best."

According to Poulos, physical talent can make a good skater, but the combination of physical talent and confidence make the great skater.

"YOU HAVE to convince yourself you can do well and get the most out of your body. The ability to concentrate...that separates the good from the great," he said.

Poulos' own interest in sports began when he was 12, living in what he calls a tenement near Ashland and Jackson on the near West Side of Chicago.

"My brother and I joined the Off

later that afternoon, Poulos has already regained his good humor. Never mind that the Northbrook Club has lost a weekend of practice only weeks before tryouts begin for the national speedskating team.

"YOU ALMOST HAVE to learn to enjoy problems to enjoy life," Poulos said. "It's not as if one day you're going to stop having them; if you think you will, you'll never be a content, happy person."

Poulos is a small, husky man born 62 years ago to Greek immigrants in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

He became involved in Northbrook's speedskating club 19 years ago, two years after the club was formed. His first pupils were his the Street Club, which for 10 cents a year offered children everything from soup to nuts: tap-dancing, boxing, coin-collecting, visits to the theater. It was fantastic."

The eldest son in a poor family, Poulos recalls worrying about what he would do when he graduated high school.

"MY FATHER wasn't working because he'd had an accident and hurt his head. My mother was earning \$6 a week."

Poulos said his mother helped him get a job assisting the foreman in her sewing factory in the mid-1930s, and by 1947, after "fiddling with" the sewing machines in his spare time, Poulos was able to go

children, and Leah, his second daughter, became an Olympic star.

Poulos spent hours every day training with Leah on equipment he'd built in the backyard. In 1974 and 1979, Leah won the world championship overall title, and in 1976 and 1980, she won silver medals in the Olympics.

"SHE BECAME a different girl," Poulos said. "She came out of her shell. Competitive sports help you do that."

Poulos is modest about his accomplishments as coach of the nationally famous Northbrook club. He attributes his skills as a trainer to experience and to absorbing what he has learned from other into business for himself, servicing industrial sewing machines.

Poulos volunteers three nights a week to train his speedskaters. As winter and the speedskating season approach, he spends up to five days a week watching, teaching and encouraging the 44 members of Northbrook's club, some of whom, he said, are Olympic material.

"It's a bad habit I got into," he said with a grin.

Poulos has never accepted money for his work, he said, because he is grateful for the chance to feel involved:

"Being involved is very important if you want to stay healthy. If you're not involved, you decay."