

Ritter named top Illinois speedskater

By Dan Long
Staff Writer

Deerfield native Jessica Ritter started her athletic career as a member of the Coho Swim Club. For years, Debbie Ritter tried to get her daughter to take up her former love of speedskating.

"I tried to get her out there once when she was five and then again when she was seven," Debbie said. "She had one lesson, and I guess she didn't like it at all, so she went back to swimming. But then I guess she got tired of swimming and she tried speedskating again. And look what happened."

What has happened is that 12-year-old Jessica is a budding star in the world of speedskating. At the Amateur Skating Association of Illinois awards banquet Sunday night, Ritter was named the overall Illinois Skater of the Year. The skater of the year selection is based on a point system that includes performances at national meets as well as local competitions.

AND TO THINK she's only been competing in the sport regularly for the past two years. Her coach, Sam Poulos, who heads the Mid-American Club of Northbrook, thinks he knows the reason behind Ritter's meteoric rise in the last 24 months.

"She didn't have any bad habits that we had to work against," Poulos said. "She was starting from scratch. Jessie has been able to latch on to what were teaching, and that has enabled her to become a top skater."

But the real basis for Ritter's being named Illinois' top speedskater can be found in two national meets. Skating as an 11-year-old in the Midget Division (10-11), she captured the overall division point titles in national speed track meets held in Butte, Mont., and Cleveland, Ohio. And that's not all.

At the Butte meet, Ritter set two national records. Her time of 49.05 set a new standard in the 500 meters, and she followed that with a record time of 58.43 in the 600.

TWO MORE RECORDS fell at the Cleveland meet. Her times in the 444 (40.83) and 333 (37.55) also set national marks. Poulos also wants to see Ritter working more toward the outdoor tracks.

"We're aiming for long track, and Jessie has put in a lot of time training at the outdoor track in West Allis (Wisc.)," Poulos said. "She's been doing very well."

Ritter's development wouldn't be anywhere near where it is now if it weren't for Poulos, according to Jessica's mother.

"I can't say enough about Sam Poulos," Debbie said. "He takes the time to really work with Jessie, and he's always making the trip up to West Allis to work with the kids. There's nothing like Sam Poulos. He's the best."

That might be a sentiment Jessica shares. She has competed at the national team trials for both the long and short track squads. Here's an 11-year-old girl competing with future Olympic skaters. Why?

"It's a great experience for her," Debbie said. "There isn't much you expect from an 11-year-old who's going against Olympians, but Jessie got a chance to see what those meets are like. And she did very well." 6-8-89

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