

Twice golden?

Athlete seeks 2 Olympic berths

By Tom Panzenhagen
staff writer

Speed skater John Coyle, 16, is sharpening his blades for the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary, Alberta.

Cyclist John Coyle also is springing toward the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, South Korea.

He's confident of making both U.S. Olympic squads. In fact, he said, "If this was an Olympic year, I would have been an alternate on the speed skating team."

But cycling may be his best sport. At least that's the way he started with before following in the tracks of former Olympians Sheila Young Ochowicz of Detroit and Eric and Beth Heiden, who competed in both events.

Coyle, who lives in West Bloomfield and attends Southfield Christian High School, competed March 24 in the North American Speed Skating Championships in St. Louis.

"I did terrible," he said. "I fell in the finals with three laps to go."

En route to the finals in the 500-meter and 800-meter events, however, he set new world records. His time of 1:19.51 in the 800 broke the record of Canadian Olympic gold medalist Gaetan Boucher, and his 48.9 in the 500 established a new mark for Coyle's age bracket.

Boucher's gold medal, it should be noted, was won outdoors. It was Boucher's indoor mark that Coyle topped.

INDOOR speed skating events are run on 100- or 110-meter ovals on a track that fits within a hockey rink, John's father, David, explained. The outdoor events are run on 400-meter tracks.

Indoor meets are skated pack-style, "with six skaters going at once, racing each other rather than the clock," David Coyle said. Racers compete in heats, with winners advancing to the finals.

Coyle set his recent world records in the heats before falling in the finals. "I got my skates caught in a rut," he said.

According to his father, "David will be ready for both indoors and outdoors in 1988, but right now he's more specialized in indoors because we have the rinks here that he can skate in."

The only outdoor speed skating tracks in the United States are in Lake Placid, N.Y., and West Alice, Wis.

Coyle practices about three hours during the week, lifts weights, works out on a slide board at home and competes most weekends, his father said.

ONE RECENT, six-day "weekend" event was in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Coyle qualified as an alternate on the five-man U.S. squad to the World Short-Track Speedskating Championships, and he skated in a couple of the events.

The United States finished in the middle of a 15-team pack, though, well behind frontrunners the Netherlands, Canada and Japan.

But Coyle wasn't daunted and said he enjoyed the experience, adding that the Dutch were very friendly to the American skaters.

His father said, "At 16, John's just breaking into the top, elite group. He's not going to win a world championship, but everything is still upward."

"It was his first time in another country, and not to be treated as an ugly American but to be well liked was really a good experience for him."

Next stop on the speed skating circuit is the U.S. Olympic Sports Festival in Baton Rouge, La., in July. Top qualifiers in all Olympic sports will be on hand.

BUT FIRST comes Coyle's first love, bicycle racing.

He was only 9 when he started long-distance cycling for recreation with his father.

By the time he was 11, Coyle was competing for the Wolverine Sports Club, a Detroit-area organization of cross country skiers, speed skaters and cyclists. His cycling coach was Mike Walden.

Coyle won the Michigan cycling championships in the midjet (9- to 11-year-olds) division in 1979 and the nationals a year later.

It was after the 1979 season that Walden coaches Walden and speed skater, Clair Young (Sheila Young Ochowicz's father), recommended he take to the ice over the winter to stay in shape.

Since then, racing on wheels and ice have gone hand-in-hand.

Right now Coyle's gearing up for June cycling trials for the Junior World Cycling Championships, which will be this summer in Stuttgart, Germany.

COYLE SAID he broke out his bike a few days ago for the first time this year. "I'll be riding every day now but not far — just 20 miles or so at first," he said.

Coyle's also a member of a cycling team sponsored by 7-Eleven convenience stores. Walden said, "7-Eleven developed a national racing team for the '84 Olympics. Now they're developing riders at the other end like minor-league farms clubs, supporting good bike riders while they mature."

Walden said Coyle has a good shot at the 1988 Olympics in both sports.

"Potentially, he can make it. There's a lot of subtleties in there that take a long time to learn. He'll need international experience and more coaching before he's ready, and he needs to fill out and get stronger."

Coyle's 5-10, 135 pounds and still growing, according to his father, who said many indoor speed skaters are slender and quick as opposed to big and strong. But Eric Heiden, who won five gold medals in outdoor skating in the 1980 Olympics, "is built like a football player," the senior Coyle conceded.

IN ONE SENSE time is on Coyle's side, because he has three years to gain more experience and girth before the 1988 Olympic games.

But time is also an enemy.

"The toughest thing about competing is that I don't have that much spare time," Coyle said. His regimen, for instance, forced him to miss a recent US rock concert, he said.

But Coyle, an 11th grader, still maintains an A- average, and he has completed 18 college credits by taking night classes at Oakland County Community College. He hopes to have 30 in the bank by the time he finishes high school so that when 1988 rolls around, he'll be able to devote his time to certain other golden endeavors.



John Coyle has a shot at earning a berth on the U.S. Olympic team in both speed skating and cycling in 1988.

GARY CARKEY/staff photographer

Kara McGrath 2nd at NCAA swim meet

Kara McGrath proved she is one of the world's best women's swimmers at last weekend's NCAA championships at Tuscaloosa, Ala.

And only one thing separated McGrath and a claim as the nation's best female butterfly over 200 yards: Mary T. Meagher.

Which is nothing to be ashamed of, considering Meagher won the Olympic gold medal at that distance last August.

McGRATH, A SOPHOMORE at Texas and a Birmingham native who also swam for Farmington Hills Mercy, qualified first in the NCAA preliminaries for the 200 fly. But in the final, she couldn't match Meagher despite a team-record effort of 1:51.54. Meagher, swimming for California, won in an NCAA-record 1:55.13.

McGrath enjoyed a superb meet, which vindicated a somewhat disappointing performance during the Olymp-

pic Trials (sixth in the 200-meter fly) and at the U.S. Swimming Long Course Championships (eighth in the 200-meter fly, 10th in the 100-meter fly) last summer.

BEFORE THE SEASON began, Texas coach Richard Quick said McGrath "may be the best butterflyer in the country. She just has to learn to relax in the big championships, because no one trains better than she does."

McGrath proved Quick accurate. She also finished seventh in the individual medley (4:21.81) and was eighth in the 100 fly (55.46). McGrath teamed with Ann Cowley, Kirsten Wengler and Tiffany Cohen to place second in the 800 free relay in a school-record 7:13.38.

Her performance helped Texas win its second-straight NCAA championship. The Longhorns scored a record 643 points to 400 for runner-up Florida.

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