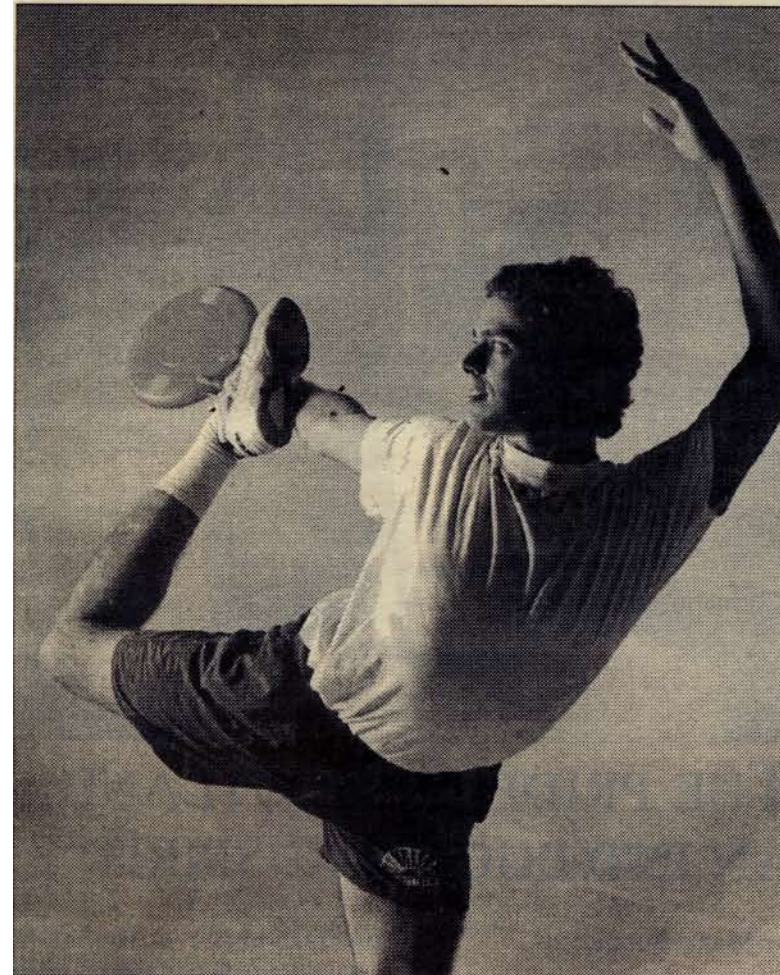


ATHLETE OF THE MONTH



▲ GARY AUERBACH DEMONSTRATES HIS STYLE

THE 'ULTIMATE' FRISBEE PLAYER HELPS KIDS SPIN

BY GEOFFREY LA PRAIRIE

Just as Sonja Henning revolutionized ice skating with the introduction of music and dance, Gary Auerbach has set the Frisbee world on fire with his combination of ballet movements and freestyle tricks.

"The first time I saw ballet I knew it could help me become a better freestyler," says Auerbach. Little did he know that it would make him the best in the world.

A resident of the Steeles Avenue and Don Mills Road neighbourhood, Gary is a former professional ballet dancer and the

1995 World Freestyle Frisbee Champion. He is convincing parents and teachers that encouraging their kids to throw the disk around can make them healthier and happier.

"Frisbee is something that is the perfect recreational activity for today's multicultural schools," says Auerbach. "It is a genuine cultural leveller. Not many kids today have experience throwing Frisbees — it's unlike baseball or basketball where many of the kids in our schools did not grow up playing those sports and can't play at the same level. Almost all the kids are starting off new at the sport so there is an equal chance for everyone to excel," he explains.

Before Auerbach became Thornhill's Frisbee guru he was a ballet dancer and toured the Americas and Europe for ten years.

"It is somewhat ironic how Frisbee has come in and out of my life. Originally, I took up ballet only to help with my freestyle. Then, to my surprise, I gave up Frisbee for ten years to become a dancer."

While Gary gained much from dance, he was once again drawn to the disk. "There came a point two years ago where I said to myself, 'There is something left to accomplish; I am going to be the best freestyle Frisbee player in the world.'"

With gutsy determination and an excellent partner, Auerbach prevailed at the 1995 World Freestyle Frisbee Championships in Jacksonville, Florida.

"We had only practiced together for about two weeks and it was my first tournament in more than ten years. We brought the dance influence into our routine, which was an innovation that, I think, won the championship for us," he says.

"It was my greatest moment as an athlete," Auerbach recalls. "People started swarming us and going crazy — it was awesome."

With that goal achieved, Gary wanted to share some of the passion and joy he has for his sport with local kids. He first came across the idea of spinning stories and Frisbees in the classroom while teaching English in South America.

"I love teaching children and telling stories. That's what my Spinning Bees Frisbee clinics are all about."

Gary's "favourite part of the job" is the smiles and happy faces he sees when he is telling his stories and playing Frisbee with school children.

"Gym teachers love Frisbee because it's inexpensive and promotes fitness, and parents love it because they can play it with their kids just about anywhere," he says.

"And, of course, kids love it because it's really fun."