

# Why not from Arizona?

## Winter Olympic training is option for those in state

By Jeff Metcalfe

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**VANCOUVER** — Geoff Eaton still is striving to put a gymnast from Desert Devils, which was founded by his late father Stormy 35 years ago, on the U.S. Olympic team.

But now it's something of a race at the training facility in Mesa to see if its first Olympian is a qualifier for the Summer or Winter Games.

Eaton's sons are among the nation's premier 12-under skateboarders. They train at Desert Devils in a skateboard park that includes a 13½-foot vert ramp in a space formerly used for boys gymnastics and swim lessons.

Starting in December, the plan is for Jett Eaton, 11, and his brother Jagger, 9, to begin elite snowboard training in Park City, Utah. Their path could be similar to that of Shaun White. White emerged out of Carlsbad, Calif., near San Diego and became an X Games star in snowboarding and skateboarding and now is a two-time Winter Olympics halfpipe champion.

"Snowboarding is scary, but not to kids used to having a board one-third that size with no boots on it and hitting concrete if you fall," Geoff Eaton said. "Unless they just want to stay with skateboarding after doing snowboard for a couple of years, they have a very good shot (at the Olympics). They're very hard workers, and we're committed to letting them pursue what they want to do."

And why can't Winter Olympians come from Arizona?

Ryan O'Meara, who grew up and did his formative figure skating in Arizona, was 16th in ice dancing at the 2006 Turin Olympics.

Gea Johnson took up bobsled in the summer of 2001 and made it to the '02 Games in Salt Lake City, finishing fifth despite competing with a ruptured hamstring.

"Training for winter sports in Arizona has its challenges," Johnson said. "However, a significant portion of physical training for many of the winter sports can be done here. The warm weather is actually advantageous for the speed work, which is required in these (sliding) sports."

"Many of the facilities that are required for specific sport training are located in very specific areas of the country. So even if you live in snowy Minnesota, you still have to go to Steamboat Springs (Colo.) to train for ski jumping, so you're really at no disadvantage being in Arizona."



GEOFF EATON

The skateboarding Eaton brothers, Jett, 11, (left) and Jagger, 9, who train in Mesa, are scheduled to begin elite snowboard training in Park City, Utah, in December.

There are alpine-skiing and snowboarding opportunities in the White Mountains and in Flagstaff, which also has a Nordic-skiing center.

Certainly in figure skating and hockey, there is coaching and systems in place to produce elite athletes with national-team aspirations.

"The level of youth hockey has really climbed the last five years," said Mike DeAngelis, a three-time Canadian Olympian and Coyotes Amateur Hockey Association director at Alltel Ice Den in Scottsdale. "We're seeing more players get college scholarships at big-time schools."

Such as Philip Samuelsson of Scottsdale, a second-round draft pick by the Pittsburgh Penguins who is a freshman defenseman for No. 7 Boston College. His father Ulf, a 16-year NHL player, is a Coyotes assistant coach.

Lyndsey Fry of Chandler recently scored four goals for the gold-medal-winning U.S. women's team at the U-18 World Champion-

ships in Germany.

In figure skating, coaches Jill Watson (Polar Ice Peoria) and Doug Ladret (Ice Den) are coaching championship-level U.S. skaters planning to continue toward the 2014 Olympics in Sochi, Russia.

The Eaton brothers are among Arizona's more-intriguing possible future Winter Olympians because of their skateboarding prowess at such a young age.

Geoff Eaton believes Jett will be capable of landing a backside 900-degree jump on a vert ramp in competition by age 13. Only four, including Tony Hawk, have completed that trick, the youngest being 18.

"We're molding these new hybrid skaters (with his Kids That Rip skateboard school at Desert Devils)," Eaton said. "Our 8- and 9-year-olds can skate everything. They're being brought up under the influence of gymnastics mentalities and taught by skateboarders."

"We're on the cutting edge of kids development in action sports. It's just going to get bigger and better."