

NEWS

FLYING HIGH

By Steve Stanek. Special to the Tribune
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Ron Dillow is a young man on a roll. He's also in a hurry. He proved that last August when he persuaded his wife, Jenifer, 29, to ask her doctor to induce labor rather than wait for the natural birth of their baby, which could have occurred at any time.

Jenifer's doctor obliged, and on Aug. 4, 1994, Hayley Nicole Dillow was born. What was the rush? The 1994 National Roller Speed Skating Championships, which began two days later in Lincoln, Neb.

"My wife was ready to deliver right around the time of the national championships, which I didn't want to miss," said Dillow, a 29-year-old Carpentersville resident and production supervisor at Duplex Products in Elgin. "I didn't want to miss Hayley's birth, either, so we got the doctor to induce labor."

There was a good reason Dillow didn't want to miss the skating championships. He was the 1993 national roller speed skating champion, and he wanted to defend his title. He also didn't want to let down the nearly 70 members of his roller speed skating team, the Dundee Flyers of West Dundee, one of the top roller speed skating teams in the country.

Hayley's induced birth guaranteed that Dillow would be on hand both for her birth and for his title defense. As it turned out, Dillow finished in sixth place. But he and other members of the Dundee Flyers will be skating for championship titles again this year.

An important step will be July 1-4, when the Flyers host the Midwest regional championships of the U.S. Amateur Confederation of Roller Skating at the Roxy Wheels Roller Skating Center in West Dundee. The national championships will be held six weeks later in Syracuse, N.Y.

Even without skating on their home floor, the team figures to perform well in the regional championship races.

"We've had people win national championships and what seems like hundreds of state and regional championships," said Andy Cicero, 19, of Rockford, a Flyers team member the last three years. Cicero is one of those champions; he was one-half of a two-man relay team that won the 1993 Junior Olympic U.S. Championship relay race.

In 1992, 11 of the top Flyers competed in the national championship meet in Orlando and won the overall team trophy.

If you've ever watched Olympic speed skating on ice, you have a good idea of what Dillow, Cicero and the rest of the Flyers do. The only difference is that instead of skating on blades on ice, they skate on wheels on a hard maple floor. It's not roller derby, either; it's individuals competing against the clock. Team scores are cumulative.

Top roller skaters aren't quite as fast as ice skaters, because roller skaters have more friction to fight. But their times are still blazing fast. Dillow said he covers 100 meters in less than nine seconds, faster than Olympic runners cover the same distance.

Roxy Wheels has had a speed skating team for about 15 years, but the current version has been in existence about four years, said Dean Hohl, 38, of Bull Valley, the team's coach and Roxy Wheels owner. Hohl knows what it takes to be a champion roller speed skater. He has been skating competitively for 23 years and holds the 500-meter national roller speed skating record of 51.96 seconds.

Hohl's wife, Phyllis Maglio, is a five-time artistic roller skating champion who also races with the Flyers. Their 6-year-old daughter, Kemberly, already is skating competitively and last year placed in the national speed skating championships for her age group.

The team practices together four days a week, about two hours each session. After two hours of sprints, quick starts and other drills to perfect their skating techniques, the Flyers are a sweated-up bunch of skaters. They are an eclectic bunch as well. Team members range in age from 5 to 45 years old.

Competitive racing classes are determined by sex and age.

"You don't want 10 steps, you want eight!" Hohl shouts as a group of about 30 skaters glides around the Roxy Wheels rink, one behind the other in a sort of rolling conga line during a recent practice session.

The skates flash as the skaters lean into a turn and practice cross-over scissors steps. Other than the occasional instruction from Hohl or his wife, who also helps at most practices, the only sound is a buzz that rises and falls in pitch as the skaters approach, pull even and pass by a given point at the edge of the rink.

"Sometimes I like to stand at the edge of the rink and listen to the whiz of the ball bearings as everyone skates past," says Cicero, who attends Rock Valley Community College in Rockford. "That is one of the coolest things about skating, the sound of bearings whizzing by."

Moments later, back on the rink, Cicero leans a little too hard into a turn, loses his balance and ends up with a nasty floor burn on his knees and elbows. He shrugs it off. "That happens--a lot!" he says, smiling.

He and nearly every other team member wear in-line skates. In-line skates differ from traditional "quad" skates; the traditional skates have a wide wheel at the four corners of the shoe bottom, while the in-line have five narrower wheels placed in a line from the front of the shoe to the back. The in-line skates the Dundee Flyers use also are different from those you typically see for sale. Their skates do not have a hard plastic outer shell. Instead, their skates are leather. The skaters say the flexibility of the leather gives them more maneuverability and helps them generate more speed than they could with hard-shell skates.

Still, a few of the Flyers prefer traditional quad skates, including Dan Keegan, 35, of Geneva. Keegan has been a team member for four years. He works as a computer systems analyst in the Schaumburg office of Netframe Systems of California.

"When I started four years ago, everyone was wearing quads," Keegan said. "Quads are a little slower than in-lines, and you need to use some different skating techniques. But I think quads are more comfortable and smoother than in-lines. I skate on both, but my preference is for the quads."

Keegan's job involves lots of travel, and he said he takes his roller skates on nearly every business trip.

"I love to skate, and I've skated in rinks all over the country," he said. One of the favorite aspects of the sport for him is its family appeal. He has two sons--Cory, 13, and Kyle, 12-- who also skate on the Flyers.

To join the Flyers, it costs \$30 a month per person. The monthly fee pays for the rink time. But the costs don't stop there. A good pair of racing skates can cost several hundred dollars. And there are entry fees for competitive events, the cost of trophies, insurance and other expenses.

"I have about \$1,000 on my feet right now," said Dillow during a practice break. "An average skater probably goes through a set of wheels every couple of months. A set can cost \$100, so there can be some big expenses."

At 5 feet 9 inches tall and 160 pounds, Dillow looks to be in great shape. He gives the credit to Hohl for that.

"I started skating in 1983 but never reached the championship level until after he started coaching me," Dillow said. "He has brought weight training and other conditioning to us, and that's helped a lot. And he's a top skater, so he knows what it takes to win. He knows what a person who has gone 19 laps flat-out and has one lap to go is feeling, because he's done it."

Hohl said he views himself as more of a teacher than a coach.

"So many coaches yell, but I don't like to do that. I may shout a little to be heard, but that's the only reason. I don't have to yell. If you watch our practices, you see that even the younger kids behave. They listen, because they want to do well."

Seeing a youngster who may be shy in school or among other neighborhood kids join the team and do well is especially satisfying to Hohl.

"In so many sports, you compete as part of a team, but this is really an individual sport," he said. "Some kids who are kind of wallflowers when it comes to team sports excel here."

The U.S. Amateur Confederation of Roller Skating, the governing body for competitive roller speed skating, estimates it has about 20,000 members in nearly 1,000 roller speed skating clubs around the country. The Flyers are the only club in northern Illinois. They regularly skate against several clubs, most of them in Wisconsin.

Not all or even most of the Flyers skaters aim to reach national recognition, which is fine with Hohl. Many of the Flyers are happy to be the standouts at Roxy Wheels' public skating sessions, when hundreds of people at a time may skate. Several times during the public sessions the floor is cleared for races.

"The Flyers are the heroes of the session races," Hohl said. "Winners get a free Coke, and a lot of the kids are happy just to win the free Coke. And that's OK. I want the kids to have fun. I try to help them reach whatever level of skill they want to attain."

And even for racers like Dillow, who push themselves to be the best, there is an element of pure fun. In addition to the Flyers' formal practices at Roxy Wheels, Dillow also stays in racing form by skating along a bicycle trail that runs from Elgin to Crystal Lake and back, a distance of about 21 miles. He said it takes him less than an hour from start to finish.

"I like it when there are some bikers on the path," Dillow said. "They can't believe I can chase them down. Sometimes they'll try and outrun me, but they can't do it. A lot of times they'll look at their speedometers to see how fast we're going. Probably the fastest we've gone is 35 miles hour, down a hill. I figure I average about 22 to 23 miles an hour, hills and all. I love to be on my skates and going flat out. I can't get enough of it."



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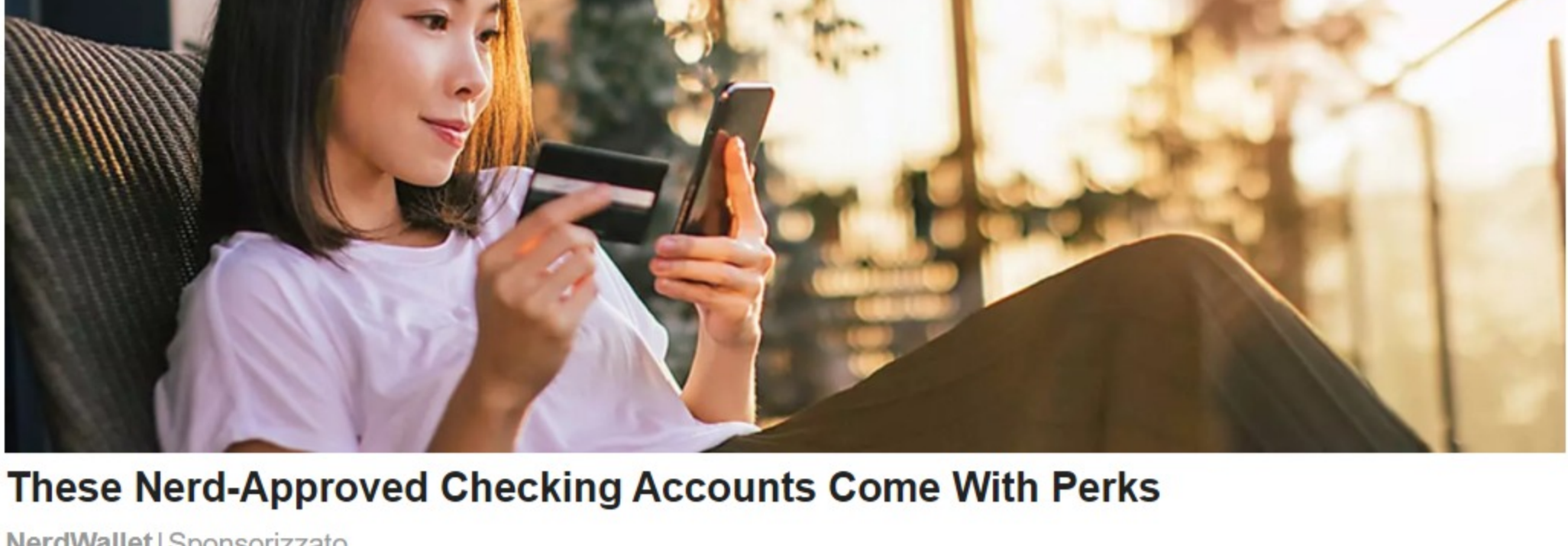
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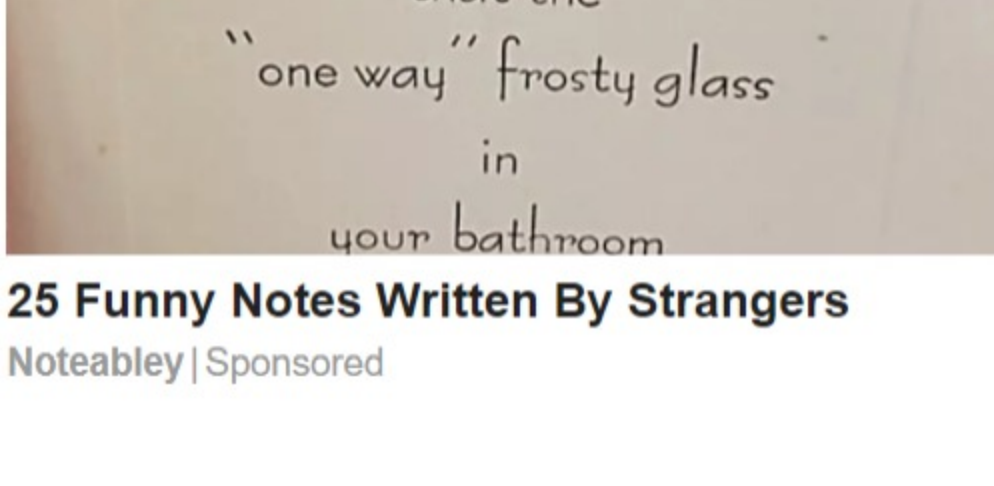
Madeleine Albright, the first female U.S. secretary of state, has died of cancer, her family said Wednesday. She was 84.

Chicago Tribune



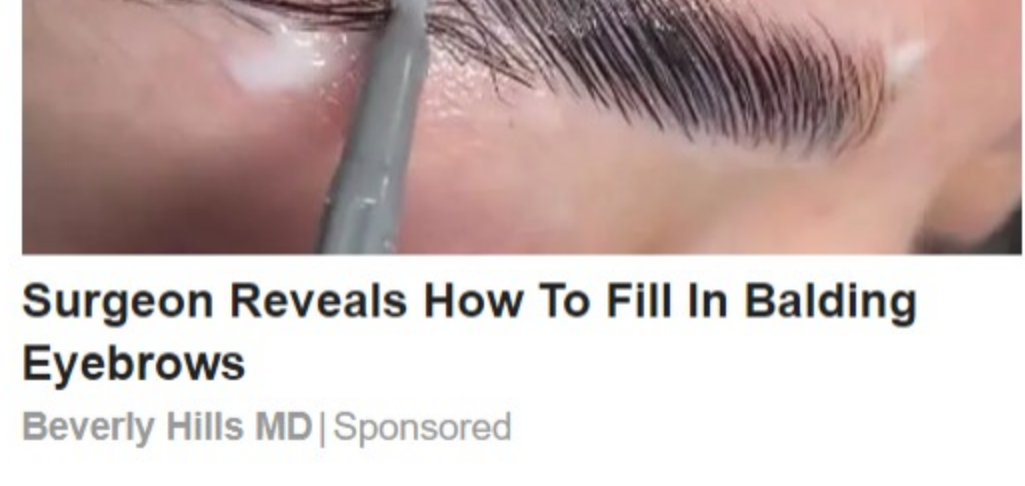
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