

Auerbach's back in spin as world frisbee champ

By Paul LUNGEN

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TORONTO – Manipulating a frisbee must be something like riding a bike – it's something you never forget. How else to explain that Gary Auerbach could give up freestyle frisbee throwing for 10 years, resume practising for two weeks and then go on to become one-half of the 1995 Freestyle Players Association (FPA) world pairs champions.

Auerbach, 29, achieved the milestone last summer at the FPA event in Jacksonville Beach, Fla. His last freestyle competition before that was in 1985, after which "I took my frisbee and hung it on the wall." In the intervening decade Auerbach travelled the world, studied dance, performed in a national ballet company, taught English, took up story-telling and enjoyed "Ultimate Frisbee" before getting back to freestyle performance.

A modern-age Renaissance Man, Auerbach has decided to make freestyle frisbee his career. That includes participating in top-level tournaments, holding clinics to spread the gospel on frisbee skills and opening a store where frisbees and their accoutrements will be on sale.

Auerbach believes there's a market for such a shop, particularly in the Riverdale area where most of Toronto's top frisbee players reside. Playing with a frisbee and inventing games as you go allows the sport to cross generations and cultural lines, he says.

Freestyle frisbee – as opposed to just playing catch with it – involves using the spinning disc in a choreographed routine and manipulating it much like a rhythmic gymnast uses a ball.

Demonstrating the sport for The CJN, Auerbach spins it on his finger, tosses it in the air and catches it while contorted so his catching hand is under his leg. He can roll it across his chest, fling it in the air while doing a couple of spins below. He's not world champ for nothing.

Auerbach was introduced to frisbees while attending summer camp as a kid. The camp's athletic director happened to be a freestyle champion and he wowed the kids with tricks they'd never seen before. Auerbach eventually learned the "flick" (a sidearm throw), the "overhand wrist flip," the (traditional) backhand throw and even the "overhead (hammer) throw."

Then one day, while attending a Nylons concert at Ontario Place, he was doing tricks on the grassy knoll, when another frisbee enthusiast invited him to "jam" with him and others. They were really adept and Auerbach was so impressed he spent the next few months with them in Kew Gardens in the Beaches learning new tricks and routines. He was hooked. At his first competition in 1982 on Toronto Island, his team finished fourth.

His partner at the time encouraged him to get greater leg extension and point his feet during the routines; so to get better, Auerbach decided to sign up for martial arts training. When the course was

cancelled he decided to enrol in a ballet class.

He also studied jazz and other genres and visualised incorporating dance routines in frisbee performances.

In 1984 he competed in the Mazda U.S. Open in La Mirada, Calif., and in 1985 he went to a competition in Paris. That summer he was part of a cross-Canada tour sponsored by Mac's Milk, in which a group performed in Ottawa on Canada Day and then visited five Western cities in five weeks.

Then, infected with the dancing bug, he decided to hang up his frisbee and devote himself to dance. He auditioned for the School of American Ballet and was accepted in 1986.

For five years, he danced with professional companies in Germany, Hartford and Venezuela and didn't touch a frisbee. In 1990, living in Caracas, where he danced with the National Ballet, he quit dance because "I wanted to be happy. I didn't see anybody who was. Too many people lived and died at the whim of a director."

He started teaching English and met people who played ultimate frisbee. That's a seven-on-seven game played on a football field in which the frisbee is advanced only by passes and one point is scored when the goal line is crossed.

In 1992, he returned to Toronto where he taught ESL students privately and worked in a sporting goods store.

Last summer, he again took up frisbee freestyle. Using his stage experience and dance movements, he choreographed the winning routine at the world championships. "The innovations blew away the competition," he said.

In October, he started his own business, the Spinning Bees Professional Frisbee Team, whose goal is to spread the message of enjoying life through frisbee games. Your imagination is your only limitation, he says.

Auerbach plans to compete in the next world championships in September and open his own store in the near future.