Frisbee for the Masses

By Lori Littleton

Review Reporter

NIAGARA FALLS – Teaching children lifelong skills and an alternative to traditional sports,has taken 1995 world freestyle champion Gary Auerbach away from competitions and into small, elementary school gymnasiums."It (competing) occupies a lot of time and this (teaching) is my passion," Auerbach said. "Competing is fun, but until there are some large crowds, I don't see the point in getting together against those who know me.

"If there's a competition at the school, the kids all come and so do the parents and grandparents," he continues. "I'd like to change the competitions to make them more accessible to those who are excited about it."

Auerbach stopped in Niagara Falls yesterday to show St. Gabriel Lalemant students some basic skills in the growing sport.

"I'd like to see the sport played at all intramural levels," he said. " At the public school level, there might be some kids who say, 'I don't want to play basketball, I did that'. My job is to educate those who will be coaching frisbee teams. I'd like to see frisbee teams in schools, in community centres. For frisbee golf and frisbee baseball, it's all the same equipment."

Ultimate frisbee, played like soccer without the ball, has no referee, which teaches children self-control and sportsmanship, Auerbach said.

Another growing branch of frisbee-sports is 'disc-golf', which is played on an 18-hole course. Competeitors throw the frisbee towards a target and through some chains, which then drops the frisbee into a basket. The closest course is in Lewiston, N.Y.

Auerbach will be heading to the United States this week to begin a 100-school tour introducing children to various techniques, such as throwing,spinning and catching.

He works full-time at promoting the sport through educational tours, summer camps such as Fort Erie YMCA's and his website: www.spinningbees.com.

Auerbach, who grew up in Toronto and still lives there, was first introduced to the sport at a summer camp when he was 11.

"We played frisbee baseball and I got excited about the games," he recalled. "When I was 13 or 14 years old, I saw freestylers and I went home and practiced. Even though I was younger, they would play with me a little."

In the 1995 world championships, Auerbach had to perform a choreographed four-minute gymnastic-type routine with a partner.

"Contestants are judged on execution, the number of drops, the difficulty of the moves and precision," he said. " I'm trying to introduce frisbee-sports to the younger kids to give them a taste of it."

As a sport, frisbee can help people develop and fine-tune athletic skills, phys-ed teacher Les Potapczyk said.

"It complements activities that we do in phys-ed. The traditional things, such as hand-eye co-ordination throwing and catching skills, creativity with their own tricks and also balance," Potapczyk said.

"The kids just love it. It's like he (Auerbach) said, 'who won the game? The team who had the most fun'"