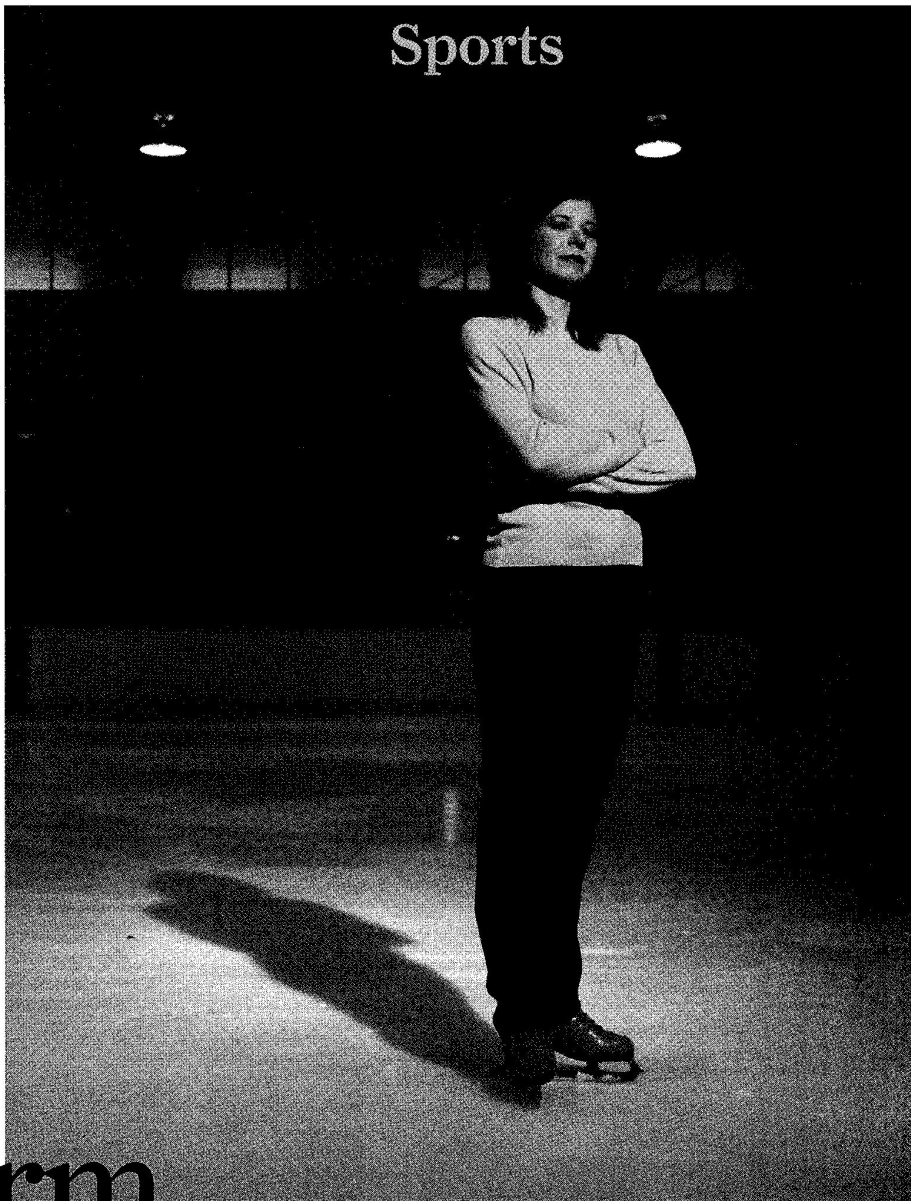


When 12-year-old Tracey Wainman emerged on the scene, little girls were big business in sport, and Canada was hungry for a new skating star. It got one, and placed its Olympic hopes on her shoulders. The turbulent life of a child prodigy
By Hugh Graham



Ice Storm

THE APPLAUSE WAS THUNDEROUS. Tracey Wainman, the 12-year-old Canadian figure skating phenomenon, had just completed her debut performance at the 1980 World Championships in Dortmund, West Germany. And the audience wouldn't let her leave the ice. Showering the rink with flowers and stuffed animals, the crowd (some 10,000 people) couldn't get enough of the tiny, dark-haired girl in the red sequined dress. The feeling was mutual: clutching a giant teddy bear, she lapped up the attention, hugging strangers at the boards and waving to the gallery. Sitting at the edge of the rink, CTV commentator Johnny Esaw was effusive: "That's the most sensational debut I've seen, in any sport, anywhere, at any time," he cried.

Twenty-five years later, at the Ed Sackville Arena in Richmond Hill, Wainman is performing again, only this time, the audience is a dozen children on skates. Gliding slowly across the ice, a pink streak in her jet black hair, she demonstrates a series of moves, and her protégés follow her every step, like ducklings trailing their mother. Canada's youngest ever figure skating champion is now 38, and coaching at the York Region Skating Academy (where she is co-director). But to skating fans, Wainman is remembered as a child

Go figure: Wainman, now 38, is coaching young skaters at the York Region Skating Academy

star who went off the deep end. Her story has become a textbook cautionary tale.

I was 10 years old when she made her international debut. As an aspiring skater, I watched her perform with a combination of awe and yearning. I also watched her spectacular crash. Wainman hit a wall at 14. She'd sprouted almost six inches in two years and had grown curves everywhere. She couldn't adapt to her new size and shape. By 1984, the year she was expected to win Olympic gold, she had quit—washed up at 16. Or that's how the media told the story. The truth is more complicated.

CANADIANS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN MAD for figure skating. In terms of television ratings, it's the country's most popular sport after hockey. Four million Canadians tuned in to