

Benita Rope

Born 1938 –

Benita Rope and husband Don were an athletic couple when they arrived in Galt in the late 1950s and within a decade – 1972 – would found the Cambridge Kips gymnastics club, a club that has produced several Olympians in the decades since.

Benita, a native of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, met Don when he began his teaching career in the Soo while playing for the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds.

She was coach of Canada's team for the 1978 British Commonwealth Games, the boycotted 1980 Olympic Games, and many international meets. Under her guidance, the "Kips" produced: two National Champions; four Olympians; ten international competitors; a national team pianist; and provincial and regional champions.

With Rope's leadership, a premier gymnastics training centre was opened in 1980 in Cambridge. She helped organize several international meets in Canada and developed a broad-based training program for thousands of youngsters. She also developed promotional displays, and gymnastics camps and clinics.

Among Benita's first gymnastics pupils was her young daughter Patti, destined one day to become Canada's top gymnast. Patti would go on to compete in the 1976 Montreal Olympics.

But in the early days she got her start at the Galt YMCA. Later, when her parents began the Kips, the fledgling club began, not surprisingly, at Glenview Park Secondary School, where Don was the physical education head.

Daughter Laurie was also an early member of the club, but her gymnastics career gave way to other sporting endeavours as she grew too tall. Laurie, an outstanding high school athlete, was also one of the top-ranked junior tennis players in Canada.

But Patti seemed perfectly suited for gymnastics, eventually leaving Cambridge to train at one of the top gymnastics academies – the Oregon Academy of Gymnastics – in Eugene, Oregon. In the summers, Benita and Don would lend a hand as coaches at the academy.

Both Patti and Don are members of the Cambridge Sports Hall of Fame. Although there have been a few instances where two members of one family have been inducted, this represents the first time that three members of one family have been accorded the honour.

By 1980, Benita was recognized as one of the top gymnastics coaches in Canada. The Kips had gained a national reputation, and indeed, that year three members of the club qualified for the Moscow Games.

Sherry Hawco was arguably the top female gymnast in Canada, while Patti-Jo Knorr and Linda Bartolini weren't far behind.

For all three, the Moscow Olympics was to be the culmination of years of training. But as the Olympics loomed, there was talk of a boycott due to the Soviet Union's military incursion into Afghanistan.

The boycott became a reality and both the United States and Canada, as well as many other countries, joined the political groundswell.

It was a crushing blow to the Cambridge gymnasts, including coach Rope. None of them would ever get another opportunity to participate in the Olympics.

"The boycott was a real shock," she said. "I said right up to the very end that it wouldn't happen, but when it did, it was a real letdown."

The coach and her gymnasts actually set their sights on Moscow three years earlier. "In 1976, I was looking forward to the 1980 Games because we had gymnasts like Sherry (Hawco), Patti Jo (Knorr) and Linda (Bartolini) and there was tremendous excitement about the club. It was at that point that we set our goals for these Games."

It took the wind out of their sails. "Somehow I just couldn't get back into the swing of coaching gymnastics...I actually took a few days off and I must admit, it was difficult in getting my interest back in the sport."

Even though Dick Pound, president of the COA, praised all of Canada's 1980 Olympians for their dedication and their sacrifice, it was small consolation. Instead of Moscow, Rope and her athletes went to an international com-



Benita Rope founded the Cambridge Kip with her husband Don Rope, in the 1960s. In 1980 Benita was named to the Canadian Olympic team as a coach, and was to accompany a talented group of Kips gymnasts who had also qualified for the Moscow Games. She is shown below with Patti-Jo Knorr, left, Linda Bartolini, and Sherry Hawco.



petition in Hartford, Conn.

Her contributions were many to the Cambridge sports community, and today, more than 35 years after the founding of the Cambridge Kips, her name is still front and centre each year when the annual Don and Benita Ropes Sports Contributor is named at the Tim Turow Cambridge Sports Awards.

Inducted 2008