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Former Olympian now helps youngsters nurture their gold medal dreams

BY **Susanne Tso** PHOTO BY **Anna Peña**

OLYMPIC ICE DANCER Ryan O'Meara, who overcame a slew of setbacks to fulfill his dream of competing in the Winter Games in Torino, Italy, last February, is helping young Scottsdale skaters work toward their dreams.

The 22-year-old Phoenix native is taking a sabbatical from competition and working as director of dance at the Alltel Ice Den, 9375 E. Bell Road, which boasts the largest learn-to-skate program in the nation. More than 800 youngsters are enrolled in skate classes there and another 40 names are on a waiting list, O'Meara said.

"I really enjoy coaching and teaching the kids how to compete, and it's really nice for me to be able to give back to skaters," said O'Meara, who knows firsthand how bumpy the ride to skating success can be.

He began ice dancing at age 10 and quickly proved he had the grit to deal with grueling practice schedules, injuries and disappointments. But a string of dance partners who seemed to quit at pivotal times finally wore him down.

He summed up his feelings in a call to his mother in 2005.

"I told her I never wanted to skate again. I was emotionally dead and the goal of the Olympics was dissolving in front of my eyes."

But then Jamie Silverstein skated into the picture and after practicing seven hours a day for months, the duo won a spot on the U.S. ice dancing team and a ticket to the 2006 Winter Olympics. There they placed 16th out of 24 teams, which suited O'Meara just fine.

"Our goal was to not come in last," he joked. ■

