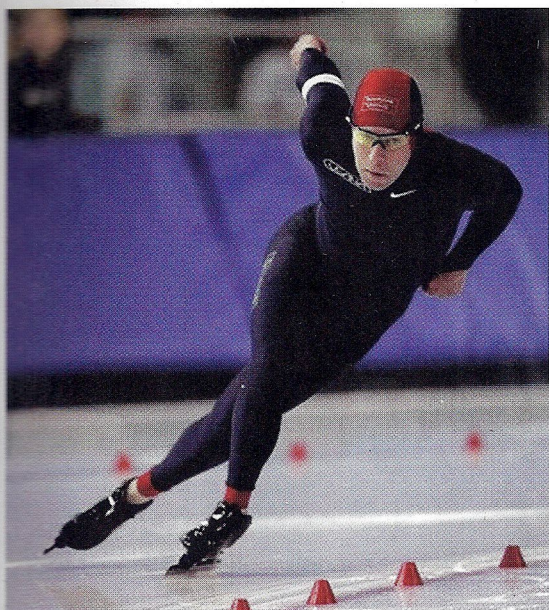




Fire & Ice

Last year, Bruce Conner achieved a speed-skating feat that no one over 50 had ever achieved. Now, he's hoping his passion can help others follow their own dreams.

This much we know: The most incredible speed skating performance of the season won't come this February in Vancouver. Exciting as it may be to watch young athletes skate for the gold and push themselves to break world records, it's nothing compared to watching a 53-year-old man literally skate his way *back in time*.

All you have to do is log onto YouTube, type in the name of your North Shore neighbor, Bruce Conner, plus the phrase "speed skating" and you'll see the United Airlines pilot from Kildeer jetting 500 meters in just 39.35 seconds.

It's a feat that not only makes Conner the oldest skater ever to compete in a World Cup long-track speed skating trial but also proves that he's skating faster now than when he was an Olympic-bound 19-year-old.

It's a fascinating 85 seconds of film — made all the more touching by the exclamations of his closest brother, Olympic gold-medal gymnast Bart Conner, and 12 other friends and family members cheering him on as if he were in position to shatter the sound barrier. But the more interesting discovery might be the motivations that are hinted at on Conner's Twitter page.

"Each man's life represents a road toward himself," he writes, "If I can figure out who I really am, it is a gift to me and all those around"

That first phrase comes from the poet Hermann Hesse, but the second intriguing little maxim belongs entirely to Conner, who grew up skating on the flooded plains of Austin Park Morton Grove. By 1975, he found himself in position to make the Olympics, only to finish a few slots short of earning a spot on the team.

Physically drained from what he now considers to be overtraining, Conner decided to trade one seemingly impossible dream for another, earning his wings as an airline pilot despite

admonitions from eye doctors and the air force that he could never fly. "I've always enjoyed breaking down barriers," says Conner. "I've always competed with myself."

He didn't return to the ice until a fateful trip in 1988 took him to Calgary, where his old friend, Olympian Nancy Swider-Peltz Sr., helped him do a few laps around the Olympic Oval. "I looked around and said, 'This is Mecca.' I need to find a way to get back here."

A couple years later, with his children grown, he decided it was worth another go. He hired a coach, worked tirelessly on his technique and found himself splitting 30 hours a week between the Midtown Athletic Club in Palatine and Petit National Ice Center in Milwaukee. By March of 2008, he'd skated 500 meters in just 38.47 seconds, topping a personal best of 41.8 when he was 19. That meet earned him a spot at the Olympic trials, where he raced well but fell during his second 500 meters, placing 35 out of 37.

He says the trials were his Olympics and is now dedicated to helping others, via counseling, a new book and motivational speaking seminars, help turn back the clock on their goals.

"Really what it gets down to, is breaking down barriers," Conner says. "People think we're supposed to get slower as we age, and I've just blown that completely out of the water. Now, think about how many other self-limiting beliefs we have. I broke those down. And I want to help other people do the same."

You can monitor Conner's speed-skating exploits or contact him for motivational speaking at his Web site, brucewconner.com.

BY THE WAY . . .

Speaking of local athletes, Deerfield's own David Brenner, a former director of promotions and corporate sales for the Chicago Bulls during the first half of their championship run, recently launched CSLInsider.com, a "one-stop shop" for our local Central Suburban League athletics. The site offers schedules, information, photos and stories about every high school sport you can imagine — from basketball and football to wrestling, badminton and field hockey. "We want to focus on all student athletes, not just the best teams and the best players," says Brenner, who was the 1978 captain of New Trier's baseball and basketball teams. It's a passion that he carried into his new position at Paragon Marketing, the agency responsible for bringing high school basketball games to ESPN during LeBron's teen years and doing corporate consulting for Gatorade and Sharpie. "We want to keep it local and provide depth of coverage," says Brenner. "I always felt, not having been a great student, that I got a lot more from an educational point of view from my athletics as opposed to just being in a classroom. We want to shine a light on that, to show the value of hard work, of competition and how to win and lose gracefully."

-Peter Gianopulos

