

# Study comes second

└ Talented skaters fight hard for their chances

**REPORT** They are young, talented and study at the University of Groningen. Six students who want to become top skaters – but it's not easy to combine that with studying.

By WOUTER BEETSMA

“Hey guys, keep up!” shouts Martin ten Hove across the ice at Karding rink. Ten Hove is a CIW student at the University of Groningen and one of the assistant coaches of *Gewest Groningen* (Groningen Region ice skating team). The skaters he's training hope to become the Sven Kramers and Marianne Timmers of the future. They are all talented and that's why they are in the 'Regional Selection'. Six of the fourteen skaters study at the University of Groningen. The others are nearly all HBO-ers. “This is exceptional,” says Ten Hove. “Top athletes are often above-average intelligent, but there's really a lot of them here.”

At the side, Tom Bosscher is hanging on the cushions alongside the track. He's really frustrated. It's the first time in three weeks he's come to a training session. The student of Technology Management has had a rotten summer. Thanks to an inguinal hernia, he could only train for a month before the season began. That's much too little, because skaters train harder in the summer than in the winter. It looked like things were going his way at last, but a few weeks ago it all went wrong again. “I caught some sort of virus and afterwards my heart rate would not come down.” He doesn't know what's wrong with him, and nor do the doctors. Is there something up with his lungs, or perhaps his heart? Training is simply impossible. “If I have to walk up a few flights of stairs to get to a lecture, I can't follow the first hour any more – that's how tired I get.”

The other skaters are all on the ice. What's remarkable is that during the season they only train three times a week actually on ice. On the other days they follow alternative training programmes and they have races at the weekends. Today there's interval training on the programme. They skate circuits in groups of four. Main coach Mark Wouda and his assistant Ten Hove stand next to each other, with their hands in their pockets. They shout instructions across the ice and discuss the skaters. They are pleased. Ten Hove: “You can see that Dutch skaters learn to skate well at a very young age.” After the training session he doles out compliments and discusses the material. Paul de Haan, a Social Geography student, stays to talk a little longer with his coaches. Not everything went 100 percent. “You should hang back a little bit more in the bends”, they think.

It's hard to keep up with your studies if you have to go to training camp several times a year. Mar-



*Gewest Groningen training at the Karding ice rink.*

Photo Jeroen van Kooten

got van Oosten is the only one who's managed to gain her propaedeutic certificate for her degree in Communication and Information Studies. The others are not doing so well. De Haan, for example, missed two compulsory modules last year thanks to his sport. “Officially, your degree is of course priority number one,” he says, “but when I'm training I concentrate on that completely. Then it's not so easy for me to study.”

On an average day, the skaters have two training sessions. Ten Hove: “On an ideal day you train in the morning, then go to lectures, then train again.”

“Yes, and then go to bed”, Van Oosten laughs. Getting enough sleep is just as important as training. That sometimes leads to fric-

tion with friends and fellow students who want to do fun things in the evenings. Van Oosten: “Often you can see them thinking: there she goes again with her good night's sleep. Sometimes I just say that I have to train but actually do nothing.”

Even at training camp the students have to study. The group is just back from a camp in Berlin. The books went along too, but were hardly opened. Van Oosten: “It's hardly likely that you're going to sit and study on your own when the rest are doing other things.”

“If you are going to study, I will too!”, suddenly sounds from all sides.

Most of the skaters are dependent on the goodwill of lecturers

and study advisors. They're united about one thing, too – the University's top sport regulations are a shambles. A rare exception qualifies for a top sport grant thanks to results as a junior – the rest only have a chance if they are among the best in the Netherlands. Van Oosten: “Then you have to be a professional skater and don't need such regulations any more.”

Ten Hove adds: “The second string are the people who really need the help. Hardly anything is organized for them. The regulations are much too black and white.”

Their double lives often lead to misunderstandings. Appointments with project groups have to be made weeks in advance and a training camp or race abroad can mean they fail modules with compulso-

ry attendance. De Haan was lucky when he went to the last training camp. His lecturer agreed that he could send in his assignments by e-mail and miss several lectures. It would not have been possible without the internet. “Or else I'd have had to use a carrier pigeon.”

The whole group wants to reach the top. They also support each other, however, which is unusual, according to Van Oosten. In other regions the skaters compete with each other. The Groningers even travel to races they are not entered in to support their team-mates. De Haan agrees with her: “Everyone is fighting for everyone else. What's also great is that the coaches are young – they understand us better.”

Movement Sciences student Bauke Dijkstra wants to participate in the National Championships for seniors in a few years. It may seem a small step, but according to him that's not the case. There are about twelve top athletes, which leaves about another eight places, no more. “These are shared among dozens of skaters. The second string is enormous,” he sighs.

Until that goal is achieved, the studies have to take a back seat. Their passion even emerges when standing in line at the supermarket Albert Heijn. De Haan: “Even when standing in line I'm working on my technique.” While his team-mates grin, he continues: “You get some funny looks when you suddenly start to practise skating moves next to your shopping basket.”

## Top University athletes

The students of the *Gewest Groningen* team did not manage to qualify for the first major competition of the season – the National Single Distance Championships (*NK afstanden* in Dutch). But several University of Groningen students – already skating in professional teams – did take part.

The Dutch single distance

championships were not only important for the national titles, you could also win a slot in the first World Cup races.

Rhian Ket, a student of American Studies, surprised everyone by winning the top distance, the men's 1500 metres, in convincing fashion. Thijsje Oenema, an Economics student, earned a place in the World Cup women's 500 metres.

Jan Blokhuijsen, a first-year History student, started in no fewer than three distances but didn't earn a World Cup place in

any of them. Ingeborg Kroon, an Art History student, managed eighth place in the 1000 metres. All of these skaters are supported by a top sport grant from the University.

That no longer applies to Sophie Nijman, who participated in the 500 metres. Two years ago she no longer qualified for a top sport grant because her performance did not meet expectations. At the National Single Distance Championships, she ended outside the top-10 on both the 500 and 1000 metres.