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Easthampton teenager takes national yo-yo title

By CATHERINE BAUM
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What started as a recess pastime on the Center Elementary School playground has resulted in a national title for one Easthampton teenager.

Eric Koloski earned the 2008 National Yo-Yo championship title over the weekend, and he's not done yet.

"I guess my goal this year is winning it all," said Koloski, 18, a student at American International College in Springfield.

He is now gearing up to compete in August at the 2009 World Yo-Yo Contest in Orlando after winning the 20th annual U.S. National Yo-Yo Contest in Chico, Calif., Saturday. The AIC freshman earned a spot in the nationals by winning one of the National Yo-Yo League's 10 regional contests in April.

Among the judges was University of Massachusetts graduate student Andre Boulay, 23, who was honored at the competition as a national yo-yo master, an award given to yo-yoers who advance the sport and help the development of competitors. The award hasn't been given in this country for a couple of years, according to Boulay. He said there are only 13 national yo-yo masters in the world, most of whom are in the U.S., with two others from Japan and one from Brazil.

Boulay works and teaches yo-yo at Northampton's A2Z Science and Learning Store, which sponsors a yo-yo team and offers yo-yo classes.

"The Northampton area is really on the yo-yo map ... we have such a wealth of yo-yo talent," said Jack Finn, owner of A2Z. "There's a lot of people in the world of yo-yoing who know about us and we are always well-represented at the world championships. It's pretty amazing."

A winning routine

A 2008 Easthampton High School graduate, Koloski placed first in the 1A one-handed yo-yo division, besting 15 final contestants including the reigning champion out of the 60 or so original contestants. Koloski's three-minute freestyle routine to a rock-techno song earned him a 93.5 score.

The outdoor national yo-yo contest is normally two days long, but due to rain on Friday all the events started and ended Saturday. Koloski competed sometime in the middle of the contest, and was eager to hear the results after watching several competitors perform their routines.



COURTESY OF STEVEN KOLOSKI

Easthampton teenager Eric Koloski is shown competing in the National Yo-Yo Championships in 2007, when he placed second. This year he won the national title.

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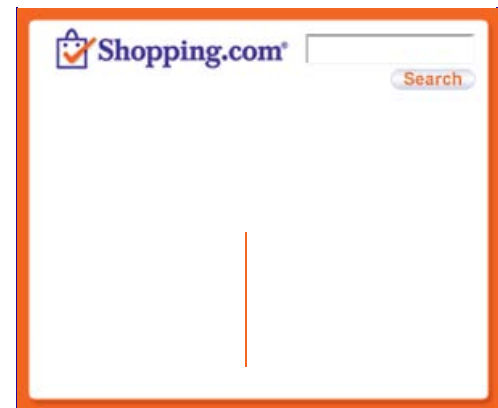
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"They called the finalists up and they called the third-place guy up and he was the previous world champion," Koloski said. "I thought I had a good shot."

The \$48 Dark Magic yo-yo Koloski used Saturday was designed by Boulay. Boulay hasn't competed in four years, but is active sharing tricks on his Web site, www.yoyoexpert.com, marketing for YoYoJam and managing the company's international team, of which Koloski is a member.

When he isn't adding new tricks to his 200-plus Web site yo-yo videos, Boulay is answering questions on message boards and in emails.

"The whole yo-yo community is almost entirely based online," Boulay said.

Boulay noted he is set to release a new design, The Legacy, which will be \$28.

Koloski signed the Dark Magic yo-yo he used to win the national championship and donated it to the National Yo-Yo Museum in Chico, Calif.

Prior to Saturday's contest Koloski had competed in four national and world championship competitions. Last year he placed second in the national championships and third in the world championships. This year was the first he took home the national trophy.

"I was speechless," Koloski said. "Nationals is a huge contest to win."

Finn, an international yo-yo judge, has watched Koloski persevere over the last nine years. As an A2Z yo-yo team member, Koloski performs with the team at Northampton's First Night as well as at area library and school events.

"Eric's amazing," Finn said. "He doesn't make very many mistakes; he's very consistent, and that makes his style very smooth and helps him score a lot of points."

Koloski started yo-yoing in elementary school, where he said he learned tricks from friends in a small yo-yo group at recess. The year before that, Koloski immersed himself in his cats cradle book, which provides instruction for hand activities using string.

"I think that helped him with yo-yoing ... because the pictures were so familiar he just picked it up," said Theresa Koloski, his mother.

"He's kind of a quiet and shy person until he gets a yo-yo in his hand and then he'll seem to talk to anybody."

Jon Curtis, an EHS 2008 grad and friend in that recess yo-yo group, gave Koloski his first yo-yo at his 9th birthday party.

Now a physical therapy major at AIC, Koloski yo-yos between homework sessions, describing it as a "stress reliever," while waiting in line at the movie theater, and watching TV with his roommate, who is giving the hobby a try.

The college freshman is set to teach yo-yo classes once a week as a part of the campus's recreation program, according to Chris Mercurio, director of intramural sports at AIC. Koloski described his yo-yoing style as "completely insane tricks that people have never done before."

Koloski said his peers at AIC already knew of his national championship title when he returned to school this week.

"Word spreads pretty fast here - I didn't tell anyone and the whole campus already knows," Koloski said.

Meanwhile, Koloski said he plans to practice frequently between now and the world championship competition in August, but he'll keep schoolwork his main priority.

"That's a long ways away," Koloski said of the championship.

Meanwhile, back at A2Z where Boulay and Koloski have spent a lot of time practicing over the years, Jack Finn spoke like the proud teacher that he is.

"My wife Priscilla and I are just thrilled because you see these young players start," Finn said. "Now I look at young players in the store and realize that they could be a world champion."

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