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Juggling phenom bound for elite Swedish circus school

By Mark Hare, Staff Writer

When he was 5, Wes Peden was already juggling three balls. "At first, I did it to impress my dad," says Wes, 17, of Rochester. His dad, Jeff Peden, has been juggling since elementary school.

"I would watch juggling videos instead of Barney," he says. A chest of drawers in the Pedens' living room offers proof: Every drawer is filled with juggling videos. Instructional videos, show videos, competition videos. "I'd watch and figure out how to do what they were doing," he says.

He caught on. Jeff Peden, a former teacher (he still teaches a juggling class at Rochester Institute of Technology), has been making his living as a juggler for years — since 2004 with Wes as his partner. In a good summer month, they'll do 30 or more shows at schools, rec centers, camps, parties, you name it.



Wes Peden of Rochester, right, performs with his dad, Jeff, at Victor Intermediate School. Wes' performance in competition already has marked him as a world-class juggler at 17. Now he'll study for three years in Sweden.

But the partnership between Jeff and Wes is about to end, at least for now. Wes, the winner of more competitions than you can shake a stick at, has been accepted into the Programme in Neo Circus, which is affiliated with the Danshogskolan University of Dance in Sweden. In September, he starts a three-year degree program in circus arts. The school accepts 16 students every two years, two of whom are jugglers, and Wes is the first American admitted.

As a child, Wes was home-schooled and would work hard to complete his studies by noon so he could practice in the back yard. When the Pedens are not doing shows, Wes still practices up to six hours a day. He can do all the trick stuff you'd expect from an act in Las Vegas, including juggling chainsaws, knives, flaming torches and occasional small pieces of furniture.

Obviously, it requires tremendous hand-eye coordination, but muscle memory is even more important, he says, as he juggles three balls for me with his eyes closed.

At a recent convention of the International Juggling Association in North Carolina, Wes placed second in the senior competition. By rights, he should have competed at the junior level, but he won that title three years ago, so he went head-to-head (or pin-to-pin) with jugglers who have many more years of experience and more than held his own. He won three gold medals in the Extreme Juggling competition at the same convention — essentially inventing moves and tricks on the spot to make a really good show.

But the thrill of balancing dangerous flying objects is not what motivates Wes. "I really like to choreograph juggling to music and make it something interesting to watch," he says.

At the Neo Circus, he'll study other circus arts — aerial arts, dance, acrobatics — and learn to speak Swedish. "As a juggler, you need to be very aware of what the body is doing at all times so you know exactly how you look as you perform. This will help."

He'll study with Jay Gilligan, "my favorite juggler in the world," learning new techniques and how to be innovative.

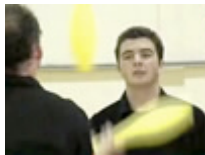
So how good is Wes?

"He's gotten so good, so fast, it's astounding," says Greg Moss, an RIT administrator who helped found the Rochester Juggling Club almost 30 years ago. "He's the real deal."

"Most people in juggling circuits say I don't give him enough credit," Jeff says. "One member of the board of the International Juggling Association told me, 'He's the future of juggling.' And I said, well, maybe, but he still doesn't pick up his room."

Kidding aside, Jeff says, "He's at a very high level." No pun intended.

Video:



[Juggling his career choice](#)

Wes Peden of Rochester is headed to Sweden to study juggling at a prestigious circus and dance school.