

The McMaster Times, Spring 1995 Editor - Susan Welstead

He can juggle five balls while riding a unicycle, he can toss five clubs while balancing on a teeter-totter, he can balance a baby carriage on his face and he's one of the world's few masters of the difficult diabolo, or Chinese yo-yo. But for Bob Cates '94, that's the easy part.

Commerce grad that he is, Bob is constantly analyzing his act, studying the competition and increasing his promotional efforts.

People see only the show, says Bob, who says his family always saw him as the Alex P. Keaton type. I'm running my own business -- I have to market myself, look after finances -- it requires some business skill. And job performance sure improves when you love your job!

In the short space of two years, Bo transformed himself from a weekend performer to the 1994 winner of the Western Canadian Juggling Championships, was named Best Novelty Act at the 1994 Kingston Buskers Rendezvous and was invited to perform at the prestigious 1994 International Jugglers' Association's Cascade of Stars in the U.S.

But it's one thing to juggle for other jugglers and another to entertain a crowd. People would rather see you juggle three fire torches than Seven balls, even though it takes years to learn to juggle seven balls says Bob. It's important to come up with a unique act. No matter how bad you juggle, it's how you look.

Bob says he learned to embellish the raw juggling with comedy and audience participation, and can tailor the show to suit every kind of audience, from children to senior citizens. His developments have been a success - last summer, between buskingfests, fairs, festivals, television appearance and work at the Canadian National Exhibition, he had only three days off.

Despite the emphasis on all-round entertainment, Bob does enjoy the technical challenges of juggling. A high point was making 60 catches with his eyes closed; in recent months he has managed 90 catches with six balls and with five clubs and also broke the official barrier of 16 catches in order to claim to be able to juggle eight balls.

They were flying high -- it was like a dream, he says. My hands and my eyes, together in perfect harmony, sustained the beautiful sight until I thought to myself, 'Wait a minute! I can't do eight balls!' I was suddenly standing in a short hailstorm of balls.

Bob discovered juggling six and a half years ago. Shy all his life, he dropped OAC physics on the third day of Grade 13 and took drama. It was the best course choice I have ever made, he recalls. I began to come out of my shell. I decided to be more outgoing and get involved in things. That year, I ended up winning the overall school prize for Toga Day, '50s Day and the air band competition.

It was that Christmas that he took up juggling and within four months was hooked, taking his fledgling act the school talent show. For the next few years he developed his abilities as best he could by reading books and practicing constantly. He started a juggling club at the bible college he attended for a year after high school and started teaching other people how to juggle (he estimates that 25 to 35 per cent of the population can learn juggle the basic three-ball cascade within one lesson).

I also learned to ride a unicycle that year and, at graduation, surprised my parents by juggling three eight inch butcher knives, says Bob. When he came to Mac for the commerce program, he started the McMaster juggling club and began to get weekend gigs. By his fourth year he decided that he would take up the challenge of making his living juggling rather than returning to his secure summer job with the TD bank.

The championships and media attention prove he made a wise business decision.

