

SKILLS CHAMPION

WorldSkills Calgary 2009

September 1-7, 2009



Jeff Oakes

Trainer, Automotive Technology
Conestoga College

Trainer/Coach for Dan Van Holst
Competitor, Automobile Technology

The trainer as learner

Jeff Oakes has been teaching automotive apprenticeship at the Guelph Campus of Conestoga College in Ontario for seven years. His areas of specialization are body electrical and drivability. Each summer, he takes time to work in a GM dealership "on the shop floor as technician, to keep up with current technology," he says. Before returning to the shop floor each summer, the instructor turns student; reviewing the features of the latest GM models. This helps him determine what knowledge and skills he needs to upgrade. He then takes any available "new model" courses and reviews technical service bulletins to get "up to speed" on current vehicles.

Student success

When asked to describe the skills that students need to work in today's automotive industry, Jeff says, "You really need to be both a kinesthetic learner, someone who learns hands-on, as well as someone who can easily read and interpret information and put that information into practice." He ascribes that to the tremendous changes the industry has seen over the past 10 years. In addition, beyond skills, students need to have a certain drive or desire to succeed.

Greatest challenge in teaching

Given the increasing complexity of automotive technology, Jeff finds his greatest teaching challenge lies in "making complicated things logical, presenting them in a logical sequence, so that students can build on each layer and

master their own problem solving and diagnostic sequences" for any future challenge that comes along.

WorldSkills, what's that?

Jeff himself had never heard of the WorldSkills competitions until he came to Conestoga College. He thinks that for Canadians in general to get excited about these competitions, it may require Canada winning a gold medal. "If we start seeing competitors being successful, then I expect we might start to see some excitement, just like Olympic events don't register until people start winning medals." Dan Van Holst, Canada's competitor in the automotive service technician category, might just be one of those who'll be able to change people's perspective on what is important and worthy of recognition.

WorldSkills Calgary 2009

During four days of intense competition, hundreds of young competitors compete against the best from 51 countries in 45 skill categories in skilled trades and technologies.

Hundreds of thousands of visitors attend including industry leaders, delegates and technical experts from around the world.



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Why compete?

Completing an apprenticeship and becoming an automotive service technician is a challenge in itself. What do students get out of taking on the additional work of competing at regional, national and even international skills competitions? "If you're good at something, you should have the ability to showcase that talent," says Jeff. In coaching Dan, Jeff has seen first hand that training for competition has made Dan a better technician than he was even eight months ago. Jeff adds, that by holding the competitions, "we're not only showcasing existing talent, but we're making better technicians and improving skilled trades overall." To illustrate his point further, Jeff describes how Dan recently spent a Saturday at his father's shop, where he works, disassembling an engine and putting it back together by himself, just for practice. Even though Dan was already at the top of his apprenticeship program at Conestoga College when he competed at the national level, when Jeff sees him now, he sees someone with that much more "confidence in his abilities, someone with more initiative and who is a little more hungry for information".

Becoming a competitor's coach

Becoming Dan Van Holst's trainer for the WorldSkills competitions is something that evolved out of Dan's tremendous talent. Having seen other students from Conestoga compete at Skills Canada competitions, Jeff could tell that even at the first level of apprenticeship, Dan demonstrated enough skill to stand out as a potential competitor. Dan placed sixth in the Skills Ontario provincial competition, the first time he competed. When he won gold at the Skills Canada competition in 2008, Dan called Jeff "when I was at the dealership to tell me he'd just received the information that he needed a trainer for the WorldSkills competition. Basically he asked me and then we sat down and looked at what was involved and decided that this would be a good joint effort for both of us".

They based Dan's initial training plan on the requirements for the last WorldSkills competitions in November 2007 in Japan. At Conestoga, Jeff had Dan focus on increasing his diagnostic skills, speed and efficiency. Dan would compete against

himself, taking part in the same skills tests as the competitors at the last national Skills Canada competitions held in PEI in May. It was an eye opener for Dan to realize, based on his scores, that he was now well positioned to compete at a higher level.

Olympian training without the brawn

The intensity of training required for an event like WorldSkills is comparable to what's required for the Olympics, without the fear of 'peaking too soon' and burning out. It's not about training the body, but about the competitor's speed and accuracy in collecting and retrieving of knowledge. Jeff and Dan have been focusing on Dan's "need to go faster while maintaining his professionalism, and not slowing down too much, to think things through when the pressure is on".

What the general public may not realize is that "going from winning the nationals at the Skills Canada national competition to competing for Canada at WorldSkills requires a lot of personal time for training," says Jeff. Many times Jeff and Dan squeezed in training after regular work hours, training until 11 o'clock at night and having to get up early for their regular jobs. "And if you want to commit some of your work time, it means lost wages and it affects your employer. It takes the support and commitment of the employer, particularly in a situation like Dan's where there are only two people in the shop, Dan and his father."



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Funded by the Government of Canada's
Sector Council Program

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