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St. Lucie teen grapples her way to martial arts success

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At 14 years old, with only 18 months of training, Port St. Lucie resident Stephanie Marconi is already a third-degree brown belt in martial arts. The home-schooled ninth-grader displayed her advanced skills in three events at her last tournament, earning first-place finishes in point sparring, kata and shoot fighting at the Florida Palm Coast Karate Events Kick-Off Tournament in West Palm Beach on Jan. 31.

"Shoot fighting is a form of grappling (a combination of Olympic-style wrestling and martial arts) that allows you to punch and kick, but only if you're on top at the amateur level," said Fred LaSala, proprietor of LaSala's Dojo/Karate for Christ Ministries. Marconi trains six to seven days per week at his multi-discipline facilities in Fort Pierce and Port St. Lucie. "In professional shoot fighting, you can strike when you're on the ground, too. Stephanie had a great three-for-three tournament."



Sarah Grile/The Post

Stephanie Marconi, 14, of Port St. Lucie won first place in point sparring, kata and shoot fighting at the Florida Palm Coast Karate Events Kick-Off Tournament in West Palm Beach on Jan. 31. She trains six to seven days a week at Fred LaSala's dojos in Fort Pierce and Port St. Lucie.

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With the 48-year-old LaSala and his 18-year-old daughter, Stacey, as her primary instructors, Marconi has blueprints for success. LaSala is a four-time world champion (with three titles in breaking, one in grappling) and a member of various martial arts halls of fame; Stacey won an 18-and-under world self-defense championship at 16, and is set to attend the University of Florida on an academic scholarship in a few months.

"I'll be sad when she leaves," Marconi said. "She and Master Fred have had a big influence on me. They've taught me self-discipline, and how to gain control of myself."

Martial arts is also a family affair for the Marconis. Stephanie (who'll turn 15 next month) has a 14-year-old brother, Antonio, who's also excelling under the LaSalas' tutelage. Their father, Frank Marconi, is a student and assistant at the dojo, and even served as a corner man for LaSala when he won his world grappling title in San Antonio this past summer. Only wife and mother Rena Marconi doesn't train, perhaps because she's pulling double-duty as a stay-at-home mother and teacher of both children.

"Stephanie and Antonio started in martial arts when they first came here a year-and-a-half ago," LaSala said. "Frank had already trained a bit. He and Antonio probably come to six or seven classes a week, too, because if one of them is here, they're usually all here. And they're all third-degree brown belts."

Marconi, who moved to Florida with her parents shortly after she was born in Pennsylvania, shows true grit. Asked her favorite discipline, and which was the hardest, she offered the same answer.

"I'd say grappling. It's pretty complicated, but I really like it."

LaSala doesn't teach many of the tactics used in the increasingly popular, and often brutal, mixed martial arts (MMA) craze. But he says the sport is definitely bringing attention to martial arts in general.

"With the economy the way it is, I'd figure my students would be down without the popularity of MMA," he said. "And there haven't been a lot of girls like Stephanie who've traditionally competed in ground fighting events like grappling, but they're starting to get into it. What we're doing is just like the MMA, but we're not beating each other up and getting bloody. I've known for 30 years that we could do that to people, but we don't. It's part of the flow of martial arts. They'll go from kung fu to karate to MMA."

Both the Marconis and the LaSalas are planning their ground attack for the dojos' next event, the North American Grappling Association's Tournament of Champions, coming up April 18 at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando.

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