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TAEKWONDO CHAMPION CHANNAH ZEITUNG PROVES SIZE AND AGE DON'T HAVE TO DETERMINE SUCCESS

The guitar riffs of Motley Crue's rock number "Kick Start My Heart" blast through the speakers around the taekwondo ring. Channah Zeitung marches up to the judges and shouts her name and permission to perform. Depending on the skill she's about to demonstrate, she spins and stomps around the mat, high-kicking and throwing all her might into punches and knifehand strikes. "Ki-ai!" she shouts, timing the exhalation with her strike or kick. Or she spins and twirls her weapon, a bo staff, slicing it through the air at a dizzying speed that would put any high school baton twirler to shame. Channah is a force to be reckoned with. Oh, and one more thing: Channah is 4 years old (she'll be 5 in April).

She's currently leading in points in the American Taekwondo Association's 8 and under division nationally in traditional weapons and statewide in traditional forms, traditional weapons, creative weapons, creative forms and XMA weapons. She's second statewide in combat sparring. That means she's currently first in the race for the state championship in several

categories, which will be announced in June. (It's determined by the number of points earned cumulatively at tournaments over the course of the year.) She's a green belt who will test for purple this month (after that, she just needs to advance through blue, brown and red before she demonstrates the skill to wear her own black belt). Her friends, coaches and mentors are all varying degrees of black belts and champions themselves.

"She's a typical 4-year-old," says Trish Church, one of Channah's two coaches and co-owner of Church's Martial Arts in Carmel Valley and Encinitas, the number one taekwondo school in the U.S. for 10 consecutive years. "After she did her form routine [at the ATA Songahm Fall Nationals in Orlando in October] she was off to the side of the ring sucking her thumb."

Take Channah out of the ring and the fact that she's just 4 years old becomes clear (though her mom, Gloria Zeitung, says they're working on the thumb-sucking). Ask her a question, and her little girl shyness comes out before she grows comfortable with you. She's into princesses,

dressing up and other little girl things. But when she steps into the ring, uniform on, hair tied back into two buns atop her head, judges at attention, the little girl in Channah runs and hides, and "Mini Beast," as her coach and fellow students affectionately call her, boldly emerges. She's suddenly not so typical.

"Channah was an experiment," says her sparring and conditioning coach, Senior Master Kenneth Church, who is a seventh degree black belt, the lowest-ranking, youngest taekwondo master ever inducted into the hall of fame, Trish Church's husband and co-owner of their Carmel Valley and Encinitas studios with her. "We took a little girl whose body type wasn't like everyone else's. She's still got baby fat and stuff, but you develop flexibility, develop a work ethic, and what can you accomplish?"

Says Trish Church, who herself is a fifth-degree black belt and current reigning world champion in traditional forms and traditional weapons, they don't normally train 4-year-olds for competition, but Channah is different. Channah now competes in eight events: traditional forms,



Zeitung goes through a traditional form routine at Church's Martial Arts.

traditional weapons, sparring, combat sparring, creative forms, creative weapons, extreme forms and extreme weapons, and she blows away her competition, which is often a child twice as tall and twice her age. When she started taekwondo a little more than a year ago at age 3 (she received private lessons with Trish Church and her first bo staff as a Chanukah gift from her parents last year), she improved so quickly that she was kicked out of the "baby division," Tiny Tigers, in June, because she was just too good for her competition. She advanced to the junior division, for children up to age 8. And she's continued to pummel her competition, figuratively speaking, winning gold medals and trophies left and right.

At fall nationals in Orlando in late October, she placed first in traditional forms, traditional weapons, creative forms, creative weapons and extreme weapons, and second in extreme forms. It was there that she also won her first national sparring match — against an 8-year-old girl twice her size.

Though Channah has found her niche in taekwondo, and a place where she's discovered she has prodigious gifts, she's still just a normal little girl with a very normal life outside of the ring. In fact, mom Gloria Zeitung says, signing up Channah and her younger sister, Naomi, for taekwondo lessons started as a simple alternative to the summertime dance lessons across the parking lot that Channah dreaded like "a cat in a bath," as her mom describes it.

"When I brought her initially it was just for a summer program," says Gloria, whose younger daughter started simultaneously, at 21 months old. "Channah just sucked her thumb, watched, and my 21-month-old went right out there. [One of the instructors] was working with Channah, and next thing I know, I get a call from Trish saying, 'Wow, your daughter can do a lot more.' I was amazed. That was last Chanukah."

Channah has come a long way from her first few classes, where she was hesitant to participate, and her first few attempts at competition, where she refused to enter the ring. Now, her mom says, she can't get enough.

"She always says taekwondo is her favorite," Gloria says. "Her goal in life is to be a taekwondo instructor like Mrs. Church and to be a mommy. Our goal now is to get Channah into the Olympics. It's her goal now and the Churches'."

When asked, Channah says she likes "the form" best of all her events, and that she wants to compete in the Olympics "cause I like the Olympics."

But hard work won't be enough to get her there. First, the Olympics will need to change its rules for taekwondo, which became a full medal Olympic sport at the 2000 Summer Games in Sydney; only sparring is judged in taekwondo at the Olympic level. Additionally, it's a much more dangerous form done without the protective headgear that's worn in ATA competition. Channah, a forms and weapons girl, will

"Channah was an experiment.

We took a little girl whose body type wasn't like everyone else's. She's still got baby fat and stuff, but you develop flexibility, develop a work ethic, and what can you accomplish?"

need the help of ATA in convincing the Olympic committee to recognize all of the many aspects of taekwondo.

Gloria says she'd also like to see her daughter be eligible to compete in the AAU Junior Olympic Games. Although she qualifies now based on skill alone, she won't be eligible until she's 6.

Until then, all parties, including Channah (her mom says she'll keep up her daughter's lessons only as long as Channah wants to), are eager to continue learning, practicing and competing.

At least for now, Channah shows no signs of being unhappy. Her coaches, trainers and fellow students at Church's Martial Arts have become like family, both Trish Church and Gloria say, since they all spend so much time together at the school and on the road at tournaments nationwide. Channah has become close to two other little girls at Church's — Kathryn Baron (aka "Beast," and the inspiration for Channah's nickname), 12, and Rayna Vallandingham, 9, both of whom are champion black belts and act as mentors to Channah, encouraging her, serving as role models and helping her practice her form repetitions. Get the three in a room together, and it's as if they're sisters. Their moms even team up on tournament days, one filling out forms, another doing hair and a third ironing the uniforms. This year alone, they've traveled to Texas, Arizona, Florida, Arkansas and Kansas City, among other places. Competing in taekwondo is a serious commitment, and it

