

Teenager Michelle Alfonso is a medal-winning martial arts star in Spring Hill

By Derek J. LaRiviere, Times Correspondent
Friday, May 15, 2009

SPRING HILL

Dragon's Dojo in Spring Hill is one of a handful of venues in the area that has taken to instructing the rapidly growing sport of martial arts.

One of the star pupils for master Carlos Carasquillo is award-winning teenager Michelle Alfonso. Michelle, 16, has excelled at martial arts from the very beginning of her training three years ago.

It all started when she was in eighth grade at Powell Middle School. While most martial arts students at her skill level begin training at an early age, Michelle got a late start in the Micro-society program at Powell. Carasquillo trained novice students there, and by his admission, only one or two out of the 30 he trained would take up the sport.



Alfonso won two golds in April at the National Grappling Association Tournament of Champions in Orlando. She also medaled at the AAU nationals.

"Michelle had a lot of energy that wasn't being channeled anywhere," Carasquillo said. "She had a big family at home, so getting away from home allowed her to channel that energy in the right way."

Michelle, who now calls Carasquillo her hero, was one of the few that showed promise. Her attentive nature made her the perfect student. A difficult home situation with a large family made it economically impossible for her to pay for further lessons at Dragon's Dojo or even pay for a uniform. Carasquillo put her on scholarship, and she has yet to let him down.

Last season, she became a national champion as part of the 11-person team Dragon's Dojo took to the AAU National Championships in Madison, Wis. Michelle was the lone double-champion when she came home, with gold medals in tae kwon do forms and Olympic sparring.

The victories would have qualified her for the Junior Olympics — a major accomplishment at her age — but she didn't meet the basic requirements. All Junior Olympics participants need to have an advanced belt (red or higher). As a green belt, Michelle still has three levels to go.

"I'd definitely say Michelle is on the fast track now," Carasquillo said. "I don't like to rush my students through like some programs, but I figure that she'll be taking her red belt test by January of next year."

It won't be a moment too soon for Michelle, who hurdles nearly every obstacle in front of her. She competes against men in most of her competitions because the female divisions are not competitive enough. She only began training in grappling less than a year ago and already has major titles there.

With a new perspective on life and a motivation to succeed, she passes her passion on to other kids as an instructor in the Little Dragons program on Saturdays at Dragon's Dojo. This also started less than a year ago, and like everything else she's been involved with in the martial arts arena, it's become a big part of her life.

"I love the program so much," Michelle said. "I get to teach these little kids so many things they don't know and then step back in the end and see how happy and thankful they are to have learned."

Michelle has compiled quite a résumé with multiple competitive tournaments under her green belt. Some of the most impressive accomplishments include three gold medals at the 2008 Disney Martial Arts Festival, including one in the adult Gi grappling division. The Junior Olympics and a possible spot on the USA National Team are the next goals on the horizon for Michelle.

As soon as she gets her red belt, next season will be pivotal.

"(Junior Olympics and the National Team) would be the biggest accomplishments I could ever dream for," Michelle said. "I am always at the dojo training, and it's all because I want to get there eventually."