

Karate championships turn into family affair

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Karate training at the North Shore Martial Arts Academy in Northfield has definitely become a family affair.

Now the rest of the nation knows that, too.

Members of the Place and Delneky families combined for four gold medals, two silvers and five bronzes and led North Shore to its biggest medal haul in 25 years July 29-Aug. 2 at the 1998 USA National Karate-Do Federation Championships in New Orleans.

"Those two families brought home more medals than some states did," said North Shore sensei (coach) Jeff Kohn. "This is the end of a very magical summer for us."

The Places and Delnekys, who live next door to each other on Sunset Ridge in Northfield, may have to consider adding trophy rooms onto their dwellings. Fourteen-year-old Annie Place won Intermediate gold medals in both kata and kumite (fighting), and 6-year-old Stefi Delneky claimed top honors in both kata and kumite in her Intermediate division.

Also bringing back medals were Peter Delneky, second in kumite and a third in kata in the 16-year-old Advanced division; Andrew Delneky, third in kata in the 12-year-old Advanced and fourth in kumite; and mom Joy, second in kata in the 45 and over Advanced.

Lisa Place, 12, earned a third in kumite in the Intermediate class and placed fourth in kata. She also teamed with sister Annie and Ashley Linker of Vernon Hills for a third in Advanced team kata.

Other gold medal winners representing North Shore included Linker, first in the 12-year-old Advanced kata and kumite, and 13-year-old Claire Gilbertson of Evanston, who ruled her Intermediate division in kata and kumite.

In the 9-year-old Advanced category, Zach Patzik and Jordan West of Northbrook teamed with Greg Friedman of Lake Forest to bring back the gold.

Although Kohn termed it a "magical" summer, he knew there was more hard work than magic responsible for the team's success that produced 11 national champions, 4 silver medalists, 10 bronze medalists and 11 fourth place finishes.

"I usually only train in the early mornings with the elite seniors before the nationals," he said. "But this year with the younger ones we decided we just didn't want to go to the nationals, that we wanted to all be prepared to succeed there."

"The kids knew they had to train above and beyond the normal schedule and be there three times a day for the couple of months before we went. They skipped Little League practices, gave up camps and family trips. We were just really blessed to have such gifted and hard-working kids. They actually enjoyed those 6:30 a.m. sessions. All 30 of them pushed each

other, and the parents were really great, too."

For the Place sisters, relative newcomers to the sport, the nationals served as a happy ending for a summer that had a grim beginning. Their 3-year-old brother Jimmy, the youngest of five children, drowned in a swimming pool accident at the end of May in the family's back yard.

The fact the nationals were looming in a few weeks helped both Annie, who is entering New Trier High School this fall as a freshman, and Lisa, a seventh grader at Sunset Ridge School, deal with their grief.

"When it happened, I didn't go to karate for about two weeks," Lisa said. "But then I de-

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ecided I'd try to be strong for him. Just thinking about him helped me more."

"I could have said I didn't want to do it any more, but competing helped me feel better," said Annie. "My sister and I just decided we had to take that next step. We took a little break, and then we snapped right back into it."

"To tell you the truth, I wasn't expecting to win two gold medals. I was just going to try my hardest. But I won all four of my matches in kumite. The real surprise was in kata, because I've never done better than second before, and that was at a much smaller tournament."

"What happened to that family was just devastating," Kohn says. "It was hard for us to even know what to say to them. It was a great distraction, but I think karate helped them keep the demons away."

"This was the first national tournament for Annie and she really rose to the occasion. She's only been with me for four years, but she was very prepared going in. I can't say enough about all of them. They all gave 110 percent."

Other medal winners were Brendan Troy of Evanston, third in kumite in Advanced Adult; Melanie Willmann of Wilmette, second in 14 Advanced kata and third in mandatory kata; Ricky Spritz of Northbrook, third in Advanced Adult kumite; Greg Friedman of Lake Forest, third in 9 kumite; and Clay Morton of Northfield, second in Adult mandatory kata.

Fourth place finishers included Troy in open kumite, Seth Reagen of Skokie in 14 Advanced kata, Julia Clark of Northbrook in Adult Advanced kata, Patzik in 9 Intermediate kata, Miles McLeary of Northfield in Adult Intermediate kumite, and Elina Stratigakes of Deerfield in 10 Intermediate kata.

The Place sisters and Delneky brothers were among the 15 competitors from the North Shore who landed berths on the Junior National team. Athletes from the pool are selected for national and international competition.