

Sports

FROM PLAY TO SERIOUS COMPETITION

Never too old to learn

By DINO MACRO
STAFF WRITER

Taking up karate at age 39 is a scary proposition. Especially when the interested individual has endured years of chronic physical problems.

Pamela Lack of Highland Park faced this dilemma last February. A horseback riding accident at age 15 left her with chronic arthritis in her neck.

Years of inactivity followed. "I was almost a semi-invalid," admitted the 5-foot-1, 100-pound Lack.

But the example of Northbrook resident Marilyn Labkon was difficult to ignore. "Marilyn had childhood polio," Lack noted. "Her back was a real mess. But the amount of strengthening she did with karate was amazing."

So Lack overcame her fears and took the plunge. Now, she is a national gold medalist.

Lack earned a gold in kata (forms) at the recent USA Karate Federation meet in New Orleans. She also took home a silver in kumite (sparring).

"I was pretty nervous about fighting there," admitted Lack, a free-lance illustrator. "The woman I met in the finals was 6-feet tall. But I did beat her in one match. I'm more proud of that silver than all of my golds."

But this woman's pride runs much deeper than winning or losing.

"I had constant headaches and neck aches," she said. "But my neck is so improved."

"I was very 'mousey' before I started karate," Lack added. "Now, I'm a much more confident person."

Jeff Kohn, her coach at the North Shore Martial Arts Academy, backs up her claims.

"She was very shy and quiet," said Kohn of her arrival in February.

"She's more confident and focused, and her esteem level is up."

Sometimes these peripheral benefits were difficult for Lack to see. While watching her son Justin compete in karate over the last three years, Pamela became "an armchair spectator."

But it took some prodding before Lack signed up for lessons. Before long, she realized this decision would change her life.

"My teacher (Kohn) instinctively understands how to work around the problems people bring to karate," Lack said. "He taught me in a way that didn't hurt my neck."

Kohn was taken aback by Lack's serious approach. "Usually most of the 'mommys' don't do it for competition," he said. "I give her a lot of credit. She's risen to be a national caliber athlete with a small amount of training."



Linda Levin Ragins/Pioneer Press

Pamela Lack of Highland Park shows her intensity during a karate lesson. Lack has become an accomplished martial artist in just six months of training.

This rise to prominence began with a gold medal in kata at the Chicago Classic earlier this summer. She then claimed a kata gold at the AAU National in early July. Just one week later, Lack captured golds in both kata and kumite in the U.S. Karate Federation Regional.

But all of the hardware pales in comparison to the lessons learned.

"The worst thing you can do (with chronic injuries) is be inactive," she said. "The more you use the joints the better your life will be."

Along those lines, Lack has some advice for those afraid to try. "I really

urge people to step out of their situation," she said. "It's totally changed my life. I've come from doing nothing to having a very exciting life."

This newcomer is currently a green belt, meaning she still has to move through blue, purple and brown before becoming a black belt.

"Next year I hope to compete at a higher level," she said. "They say you just start learning when you get a black belt. I'm just starting to see the complexity of it."

But the value of karate is no longer a mystery to Lack.

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