

Organizations and People

Toronto teenagers capture gold medals in judo

By PAUL LUNGEN

TORONTO — Inspiration and perspiration go hand in hand when it comes to excelling in sports, and so it should come as no surprise that two recent judo gold medalists had a healthy serving of both.

Joel Gerson and Masha Kazakevich grappled their way to gold medals at the recently concluded Ontario Open Judo Championship.

Both put in hours of hard training and both, to varying degrees, were inspired by Israel's Yael Arad, a judo champion who to Jewish judo-ists represents the epitome of athletic accomplishment.

Arad, *CJN* readers will recall, was the first Israeli athlete to capture a medal at the Olympic Games, winning a silver at last summer's games in Barcelona. She followed that with a second place finish at the recent world championships in Hamilton.

"Yael Arad is a serious inspiration," said Gerson, 19, of Toronto, a gold medal winner in the 65 kilogram class. Kazakevich, who hails from Richmond Hill, captured the gold in the 56 kg seniors category.

In addition to sharing a deep admiration for Arad, Gerson and Kazakevich have another thing in common. Both are coached by Moni Aizik of the Samurai Club Martial Arts & Fitness Centre.

Rounding out the series of coincidences is the fact that Aizik was Arad's coach in Israel for 10 years at the Maccabi Tel Aviv club — a connection that Gerson says inspires him.

Fellow Samurai students Coby Segal and Eddy Dobrovsky captured medals

at the Ontario Open as well; Segal a silver in the juvenile 56 kg class, Dobrovsky a bronze in the seniors 95 kg category.

Gerson, who met Arad when she was here for the world championships, is setting his goals high. Although he professes to "take it one major tournament at a time," he's already talking about making this year's provincial team and following that up next year with a shot at the national squad.

Gerson, a green belt, traces his interest in judo back about six years when Aizik was teaching it as part of a course he was offering in Israeli combat/survival training at the north branch of the Jewish Community Centre.

Aizik, a former Israeli commando instructor, later opened his own martial arts club. For several years, Gerson competed only inside the club, moving up the ranks and increasing his skill level. About two years ago, he began entering other competitions, quickly winning a gold medal at the Brantford Judo Championships.

Gerson says he loves the competitiveness of the sport and the "adrenalin rush" of throwing your opponent and getting an ippon — the judo equivalent of a knockout in boxing.

For her part, Kazakevich says she doesn't have the burning desire to get to the top of the sport. "I want to continue it," she said. "I love it and want to get better."

Kazakevich, a native of Grodno, now part of Belarus, moved to Canada with her family eight years ago. About two years ago, she joined the Samurai Club to learn self defence, starting with Aizik's survival training



Joel Gerson (right) got a chance to meet Israeli judo master Yael Arad during the recent world judo championships in Hamilton.

course. At his suggestion, she began judo lessons and took to it because "it suits my personality."

Judo "is more than physical training and technique. It's a mental challenge," she says.

Kazakevich, an orange belt, says she

enjoys judo's one-on-one competition and is able to defeat brown belts, a higher category.

Her specialty is a juji gatame move, an arm lock that puts pressure on an opponent's elbow to force them to give up.

Aizik believes both athletes have bright futures in the sport with the potential of advancing to the national level. If he wants it badly enough and works hard enough, Gerson has the ability to one day represent Canada at the Olympic Games, he predicts.