

Size no barrier for tiny Calicchia

'As long as I'm there learning stuff, if a guy attacks me, I'll know what to do,' karate champ says

ARPON BASU
Special to The Gazette

At first glance, Stephanie Calicchia appears to be Jekyll and Hyde in a ponytail.

One moment she is your typical cute 10-year-old girl, complete with an ear-to-ear smile that lights up any room. But the very next moment, she is a hyper-aggressive, grunting karate champion, cutting the air with vicious punches and kicks that would bore a hole through most stomachs.

Not only is she no longer lighting up the room, she is serving notice to all that she is someone you don't want to mess with.

The precocious Calicchia is one bar away from a black belt in the Japanese martial art of Kyokushin, and last month she won the North American Karate Organization's world karate championships for girls and boys age 11 and younger.

Calicchia didn't go to the championships in New York expecting much, and she was expecting even less when she saw the boy she would fight in the final was at least 40 pounds heavier than her and a full black belt.

"I was nervous at first — I'm competitive, you know?" she said, wearing an infectious smile. "He was pretty tough because he was a little bit taller than me, he knew more. But if you use your brain, it works. You react well to what happens."

What happened was that Calicchia and her American opponent were tied 2-2 in the first two minutes of the match before Calicchia dropped him with a spinning back kick to the stomach with only 40 seconds to go, winning the bout and the title.

"Size doesn't matter, it's what you look at that matters," Calicchia said philosophically.

To make the trip to New York that much sweeter, Calicchia took the forms competition, as well, to earn a

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clean sweep of the tournament.

Her victories were big news at her dojo, the Ohan Brothers International Karate Organization in St. Léonard. A photo of Calicchia posing with her two trophies, both of which are at least three inches taller than her, is displayed proudly in the window.

A peek into one of her training sessions gives an idea why this young girl, also an elite soccer player for St. Léonard's competitive U-10 team and who plays boys hockey in the winter, enjoys so much success.

George Ohan, who co-owns the dojo

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Stephanie Calicchia

with his younger brother, Dominic, is running the advanced karate class, and friendly would be the last word one would use to describe his teaching methods.

Though it is obvious that Ohan is trying to motivate his best students, an outsider watching a grown man of 28 yelling in the ear of a 10-year-old girl might flinch at first.

But Calicchia is not one to cringe.

"Your basic punch has to be A-1, your basic kick has to be A-1, every time," Ohan hollers three inches from Calicchia's face, prompting no reaction from the intensely focused youngster.

"You're never going to be able to take me like that, never ever," Ohan screams in Calicchia's ear as she does situps, prompting not tears, but more situps.

Though most people might look at such treatment as cruel, Calicchia knows it is for her own benefit.

"Every time you get out of that class, you've learned something new," Calicchia said. "You improve every day you go to class. You get out of there and you feel so great about yourself that you went and tried your hardest."

Calicchia has been going to these classes with the Ohan brothers, who are both third-degree black belts, since she was 4. By age 6, she was already a green belt, only two belts away from black. Her parents also practice the martial art, though they must look up to their daughter once they step on a mat.

"My wife is a yellow belt," said Calicchia's father, Dominic. "So when they do a class together, my wife has to bow to my daughter. How great is that?"

But the belt she is wearing has little influence on Calicchia's motivation.

"The belt doesn't matter, it's more experience," she said with a shrug. "As long as I'm there learning stuff, if a guy attacks me, I'll know what to do."

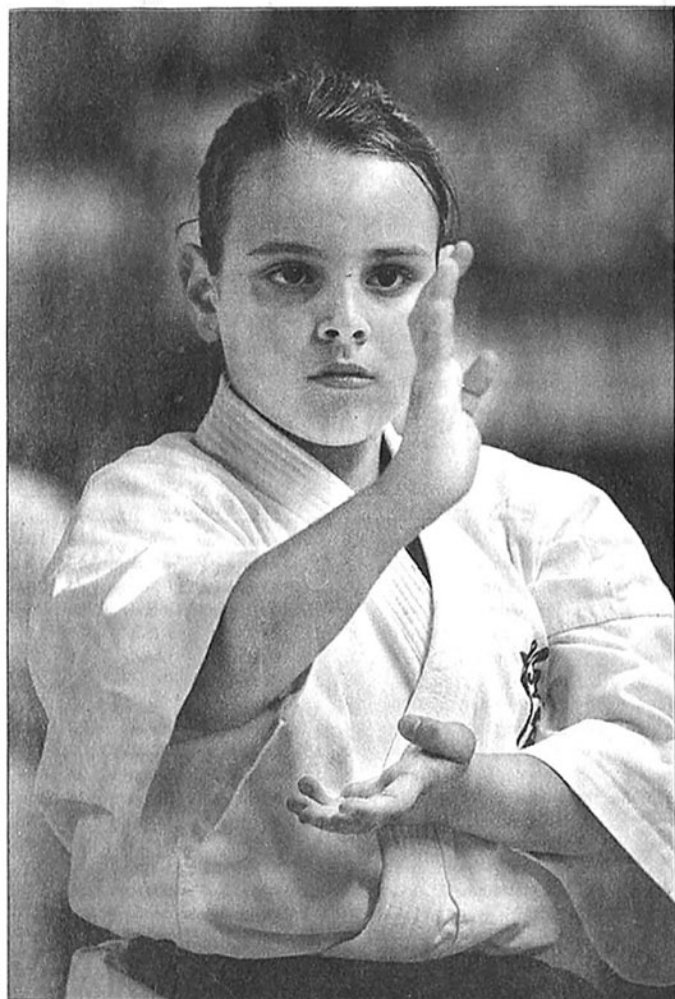
Calicchia admits she's used her expertise in martial arts to pull some weight in school, though she has completely bought into the philosophy of her chosen art and never uses it on unsuspecting fellow students at Rosemount's Nesbitt School.

"When my friends need help, they just say: 'Steph,' and I'm right there. It's kind of cool, actually. You just stand in front of them and go: 'Boo' and they run away," she said, laughing. "But I've never, ever even pointed a fist at someone."

Calicchia said some of the boys tease her about her karate prowess, challenging her to prove her considerable skills in a fight.

But Calicchia's not an easy con.

"A lot of people do that, but it's what's in your heart that matters," she said. "I back off. If you want to fight me, come to my dojo and I'll fight you."



MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, GAZETTE

Stephanie Calicchia is only one bar away from black belt in Kyokushin.