

Teen judo champ tightens belt

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Spencer La Mott attempting to armbar Alejandro Perez

On March 19, Claremont High School senior Spencer La Mott was promoted to first-degree black belt by his Senseis at [Goltz Judo](#). He has nine more black belts to go, but the teen is well on his way to becoming a judo master.

The belt switch-up, from brown to black, is just one of many achievements Spencer, 18, has garnered in his sport of choice.

He's comported himself well in competition, taking fourth place in his division in the 2015 Summer Nationals in Indiana last July. And earlier this year, he was accepted to San Jose State University.

There he will participate in the college's judo club, which is among the most prestigious in the country. His peers will be the crème de la crème of aspiring judo champions, providing the perfect training ground for a young man with his eyes on Olympic gold.

Spencer is determined to compete with the US team in the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. It's a high aim, but one he's willing to work for.

He wasn't always this driven.

Spencer felt adrift when, at age 14, he moved with his family from Montana to Claremont. His outsider status made him an easy target.

"He was being taunted at school by a couple of bullies," his dad Paul La Mott recalled. "They were relentless, and the school was not mitigating the problem."

The two youngest La Mott kids, now 10 and 11, were taking judo classes at the Alexander Hughes Community Center, which has served as Goltz Judo's dojo for the last 25 years. Mr. La Mott decided it was time for Spencer and his twin sister Mackenzi to give judo a try.

At first Spencer's parents had to force him to go to class, but within three months his attitude changed. "I really picked it up. I wanted to do it for the rest of my life," he said.

The about-face was due to the quick progress Spencer—who had previously excelled at baseball, soccer, basketball and track—made in the discipline.

"He's a natural," Goltz Judo founder Gary Goltz said.

As Spencer gained confidence in his judo skills, the bullies backed off. He didn't have to fight them. "They found out I did judo," he said simply.

The whole La Mott family has benefited from its association with Goltz Judo. Mr. La Mott appreciates the familial atmosphere, as well as the life lessons Senseis like Mr. Goltz and OJ Soler have imparted to his kids.

"Respect for yourself and respect for others—these are things taught through the sport," Mr. La Mott said.

Mackenzi, now a green belt, also came to love judo. While she doesn't plan to pursue the martial art with the same zeal as her twin, she considers it a fun way to stay in shape.

"You get to work out while learning self-defense. Now, when I'm walking down the street, I'm sizing people up. I was on the wrestling team. I'm kind of a big deal," she laughed.

All joking aside, Mackenzi has spent her teen years knee-deep in extracurricular involvements. She hopes to one day pursue a career in law enforcement. So does Spencer—that's one thing the very different siblings have in common.

As preparation, she's served as an Explorer with the Claremont police. She also enjoys singing and is currently on CHS' all-girls choir.

Spencer is a different story. He is smart and did well on his ACT, but isn't a particularly inspired student. For him, life very nearly begins and ends on the judo mat. He will only spend more time there once he's at San Jose State.

Mackenzi will likely be attending college out of state. She's waiting to hear back from her two preferred colleges, University of Hawaii and the University of Arizona. It will, she admits, be strange to live apart from Spencer.

"He's my twin brother. We've been joined at the hip since we were born," she said.

Mackenzi says it's been cool to see Spencer transformed by his passion for judo.

"It's kind of made him more confident and not as lazy. He gets respect—people look up to him as a role model," she said. "I have no doubt I will be traveling to Tokyo in 2020 to see him compete in the Olympics."

Spencer, in turn, has high praise for his sister. "She's always been there for me. She's always helped me and done judo with me," he said.

Mr. La Mott said that though there is some sibling rivalry, the twins are closer than they'd ever admit. Still, he feels they are ready for some experiences of their own. "It's just kind of a trip to watch them grow up and be ready for that next step," he said.

Goltz student Inez Torres, 18, is another of Spencer's partners in crime.

"We're acrobat buddies. We keep each other high," she quipped, referring to the fact that they often throw one another while sparring.

Inez, who also received a first-degree black belt on March 18, got involved in judo when she was 12. She started taking classes at Goltz Judo her sophomore year in high school. Now a business and finance major at Citrus College, she calls the Hughes Center her second home. She's not aiming for the Olympics, but she feels she struck gold when she happened upon judo.

"I love the philosophy. You never want to see someone fall and not get back up," she said. "And for females, judo is really empowering. It shows women can go much further than expected."

Having gone much further than he expected, Spencer has been getting in some extra practice with his judo partner Arthur, a 20-year-old from a nearby dojo who also plans to compete in the Tokyo Olympics.

He has no illusions about the fact that he's on a challenging path. In fact, he had to have surgery on his shoulder in October. "Injuries will happen in judo," he said, matter-of-factly.

Considering the high level of competition that awaits Spencer as he moves onto the next level, he's often asked what he feels he needs to work on most.

Judo, however, is not just a sport, but a way of life. As judo founder Kano Jigoro declared, "It is not important to be better than someone else, but to be better than yesterday."

Accordingly, Spencer's answer is as holistic as the philosophy of judo itself. "I want to improve as a person in general," he said.



New Black Belts - Spencer La Mott, Toshio Takeshita, Inez Torres, with their Senseis; OJ Soler and Gary Goltz

Update – In 2018, Spencer and his family relocated to Australia