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Anna Maria Pepa proves her skills in MMA. Although she is very young at the age of 8, she was qualified to participate in the World Classic. She had to fight kids older and heavier than her, but she managed to pull off second place despite challenges thrown her way. L&T photo/

Victoria Calderon

By VICTORIA CALDERON

• Leader & Times

Orlando, Fla., is the home to many famous landmarks and events: Disney World, Universal Studios, SeaWorld, the Wizarding World of Harry Potter. You name it, Orlando probably has it. And this summer, the beautiful city was also the host of the International Kickboxing Federation (IKF) and its World Classic Amateur Kickboxing and Muay Thai Championship.

The competition was conducted July 19-21. In that three-day period, around 500 juniors (ages 8-17) and adults (18 and up) participated in fights for the championship belt. These participants come from all over the world; many countries and 25 states in the U.S. were represented. Because of the variety of people there, competition is considerably tougher than it is in rural Kansas.

Two kids from Liberal, Anna Maria Pepa and Payton Yancey, had the privilege of participating in this prestigious competition. Anna's parents, Donna and Kole Pepa, accompanied them to the competition, and they agree that the fighters there are a cut above the rest.

"It's a whole different level," Donna described. "The best of the best compete there."



Anna is a third grader at MacArthur Elementary School. She has been training in mixed martial arts (MMA) for two years, but has only about nine months of experience in kickboxing and muay thai, specifically. When she arrived at the competition, she expected to fight kids in her age and weight division, which was 8 year olds between 50 and 54 pounds. However, she was told that there was no one in her division to fight her.

Despite this roadblock, her parents knew that her hard work had to result in something, since Anna had already gotten that far. To remedy the problem, the people from IKF allowed Anna to fight kids heavier and older than her. According to Donna, some of the girls were half of Anna's weight heavier – they weighed around 70 pounds. This extra weight makes a big difference in terms of MMA.

Another issue with the competition was in the rules and restrictions for fighting. Training in Liberal, both kids had learned many moves that were considered illegal at this high level, and so the two had to improvise. Anna also wasn't allowed to use certain pads and equipment, which gave her already bigger opponents even more of an advantage over her. That didn't stop her from doing well, though.

"She was really good for her first time at a world championship," Anna's father, Kole, said. Anna managed, despite her disadvantages, to get second place in her division. She had to forfeit the fight for first, however, because of the significant size difference between her and her final opponent.

"I'm sure that if someone was her age and her weight class, she would have had the belt and

first place in anything,” Donna said.

Yancey, although coming back home without a championship belt, also competed very well and gained a lot of valuable experience. He is about to be a freshman at Liberal High School, and he has only about nine months of experience in kickboxing and muay thai.

In his very first match, Yancey just happened to be put up against the four-time (now five-time) world champion for his division. If someone else were in Yancey’s position, they would have most likely been knocked out within the first 17 seconds or so, according to the Pepas. But not Yancey. He stuck it out, and managed to fight all the rounds, eventually losing the fight. But he earned a reputation among the competitors for being so tough.

“He gave a very good fight; people called him Little Muscle,” Donna said.

For being first timers, both Liberal kids fought incredibly well, and everyone is proud of them. Most of the competitors at the world classic are very disciplined and intense about how they train. They also have more years of experience under their belt than Anna and Yancey have combined.

“You can’t compare them with anything you see here,” Donna explained. “No matter how little, they look professional. The way they move, the way they hit is professional.”

Most kids who fight their way to the top at this competition have a good chance of working their way up to UFC. The junior division fights provide them with a head start to that path.

Disciplined is not the only way to describe these kids who grow up training in MMA, though. The Pepas said that most competitors were very polite and respectful. They have also noticed that these kids are also very well off academically. Yancey and Anna are prime example of this; they both receive exemplary grades. Not only do MMA fighters achieve success in the fighting arena, but in the classroom as well.

The Pepas and Yancey could not have made it to the world championship without the help of several people. Many businesses and friends across town helped by donating money, but the main sponsor was Kojo Amaa. They also had help training Anna and Yancey. They would like to show appreciation to the following people who helped them spar to prepare for the competition: Robert Madrid, Jesus Adame, Mario Munoz, Joey Scott, Colton Yancey, Juan Moreno and Clayton Yancey.

They hope to return to the championship next year, with the help and support of the community.

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