



Don't call me champ—yet

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» Saiedah Said, 20, national silat champion



WHEN she was five, Saiedah Said used to sidle up to the silat arena and watch her grandfather Hosni Ahmad coach the national team in the Malay martial art.

"Watching the moves, it looked really exciting. He took me to all his training sessions and taught me the moves at home," says the pint-sized 20-year-old.

Descending from a line of silat champs — her granddad was a renowned instructor, her uncle Hidayat Hosni was the 1994 world champ and 1993 SEA Games winner and her aunt Badariah Hosni was 1992 world champ — Saiedah started rigorous training at 10.

Two years later, she entered her first national level tournament and walked away with a gold medal. But shortly after, her granddad died of a heart attack.

"I was very close to him and felt very lost," she recounts, her voice quaking.

"That was when I decided that I had to go out there and win for him."

By age 14, she had made it to the national silat junior squad.

The next year, she competed in the world junior championships in Vietnam.

She was the only female from Singapore to make it to the finals and emerged runner-up.

This year, she was the first female Singaporean to strike gold in the World Silat competition held here.

She was also named Sportsgirl of the Year at the 2004 Singapore Sports Awards.

Recently, she received the inaugural Goh Chok Tong Youth Promise Award, which honours Malay-Muslim youths who have shown talent beyond academic fields.

Now she's aiming for gold at the Manila SEA Games next month, training at least two hours a day and hitting the gym three times a week.

But her sporting success has come at a price. While she scored five credits for her O levels at Siglap Secondary School, she failed English.

That pushed out of reach of the Nanyang Polytechnic sport and wellness diploma course she had hoped to do.

"I really regret not studying more, but balancing studying and

training can be really hard," she says. Now a part-time coach with the Silat Federation, she is doing a diploma in sports and exercise science with the Singapore Sports Council.

Her father, cargo assistant Said Noor, 44, was retrenched earlier this year. The family of five relies on the pay cheque of her mother, Kamariah Hosni, 44, a clerk.

She has two younger brothers, Mohd Danial, 19, who is doing his national service, and Mohd Elyasak, 13, who is still in school. Both compete in silat on an interclub level.

She knows her chosen sport is a little unusual, especially for a girl.

PHOTO: JOHARI RAHMAT

"I'm not really a girly girl. I don't even know how to use make-up. People have to do it for me when I have an event," says the Liverpool Football Club fan, whose only concession to femininity is long hair.

Even though she has won six gold medals in the last two years, Saiedah squirms at being called a silet champion.

She tells you squarely: "I don't call myself a champion. Yet, I need to train more, get more medals. And not just at the SEA Games.

"I want to earn at least two or three world champion medals. Then you can call me a champion."

ARTI MULCHAND



NOT A GIRLY GIRL: Saiedah practising her tics. She says she wants to earn some world champion medals before she lets anyone call her a champ.