

Siblings duel among nation's elite

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

ROCHESTER — Three evenings per week, a basement room in the former Corpus Christi School becomes a training ground for nationally-ranked athletes — and, possibly, for at least one future Olympian.

That's where Liz Van Son and her brother, Ben, don protective clothing and masks for their beloved sport of fencing. The Van Sons, along with a handful of peers, spend the next two hours working up a sweat by dancing, thrusting and jabbing their blades.

As Liz was toiling on a recent Friday her coach, Mio David, frequently implored her to correct some movements. Later, Liz said she welcomes the pressurized directives.

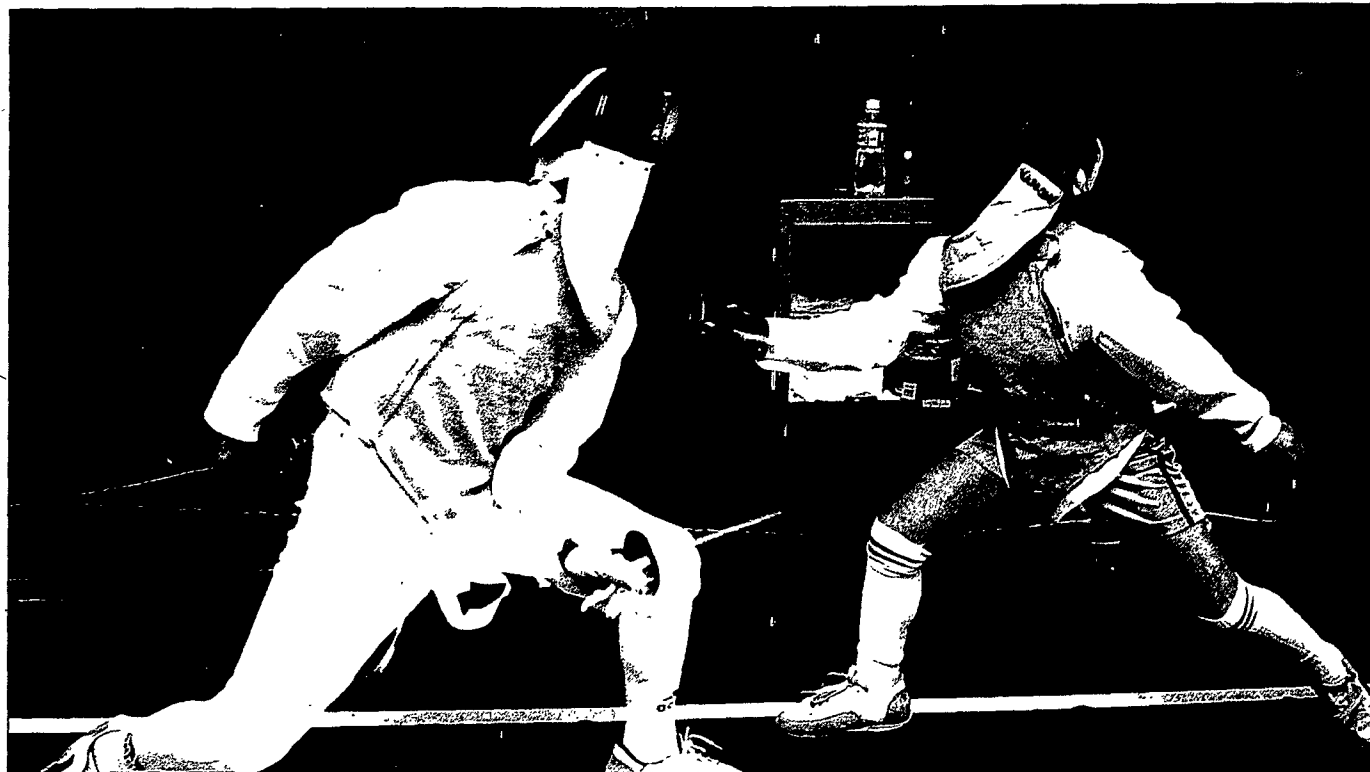
"I don't really mind. I like being pushed," Liz said.

Pushing from her coach has helped the 10-year-old push up through the national rankings; she recently took over the No. 1 spot in the nation for girls age 10 and under by the United States Fencing Association. Ben is in the national top 10 as well, ranking eighth for boys 12 and under. Liz and Ben have achieved these lofty positions by scoring well in numerous competitions nationwide.

The Van Sons' successes and intense travel schedule are an outgrowth of a fencing competition their family attended four years ago at the Rochester Armory. Liz and Ben were quickly hooked.

"It helps me stay in shape a lot more than soccer or baseball; those are team sports so you're not always active," Ben explained.

Fencing owes its origins to actual sword-fighting duels. However, rather than leap from chandeliers as in the movies, competitors square off on a 6-by-40-foot strip and accumulate points based on touches that



Leila Navid/Catholic Courier

Eleven-year-old Ben Van Son (left) fences Sept. 5 with his 10-year-old sister, Liz, during practice in the basement of Rochester's Corpus Christi School.

are scored electronically — "more like Star Wars than Errol Flynn," according to the USFA Web site.

Three kinds of swords — foil, epee and saber — are used in fencing. All are point-thrusting weapons, and the saber is a cutting weapon as well. Both Liz and Ben have achieved their national rankings in the foil division.

Points are scored when a weapon touches an opponent's body. The points are registered through a system of wires connecting the sword tips, the fencers' bodies and a scoring machine. Action can move at lightning speed during a match as opponents alternate rapidly between offense and defense.

Fencing requires stamina, good



Liz prepares her equipment before practice starts.

leg and arm movement, and — according to Liz — perhaps the most important asset of all: "your mind." Liz said her mental toughness is at its best when she's fencing.

"I'm not good with tests, I get all

nervous with exams," she said. But with fencing, "You have to be confident to achieve the goals you set. If I lost confidence, I would definitely lose (the matches)."

However, her brother said, overconfidence may result in letting one's guard down just long enough to make the difference in a match. "You need to focus — always focus," said Ben, who will turn 12 on Sept. 25.

Liz is a sixth-grader at Seton Catholic School in Brighton, and Ben is in eighth grade at Brighton's Siena Catholic Academy. Both were born in Korea and adopted separately as infants by Gary and Annmarie Van Son. The family belongs to Corpus Christi Parish.

In regard to future fencing goals, Ben said he hopes to someday become a member of the U.S. World Cup team. Liz, meanwhile, aims to follow in the footsteps of her idol, Iris Zimmerman, a Rochester native who competed in the 2000 Summer Olympics. In fact, when her father raised the possibility of qualifying for the 2012 Olympic fencing team, Liz quickly said she'd rather aim for the preceding Summer Games — in 2008, when she'll be a mere 15 years old.

"Hey Liz, if you're ahead of schedule it's OK by me," her father said with a laugh.



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