

KORA KNÜHMANN 21 YEARS KARATE

National Coach, Thomas Nitschmann, himself a Vice World Karate Champion in 2000.



Looks can be deceiving! Every sportswriter in North Rhine Westphalia seems to have confirmed the axiom by now. A pretty young woman can be competitive in a sport where the risk of getting occasional bruises seems to be a part of it all. She can have the first dan black belt – a high distinction already, but one to set her off on the road to acquire further expertise in an ancient martial art – tied around her waist and be virtually unbeatable in combats.



Meet Kora Knühmann, a Karateka who continually refuses to end up empty-handed in national and international competition! Never mind that the literal meaning of the two Japanese symbols making up Karate-Do is 'ways of the empty hand' – a reference to its purpose as an unarmed method of self-defense!

At age 19, while continuing to rake in the titles at the junior level, Kora was crowned the youngest World Karate Champion of all times. Madrid 2002 was supposed to be her debut in the senior category, a test to see how her skills in kumite, the sparring combat between two athletes, would match up against those older than 21 years. Not many expected Kora to make the semi-final, which she ended up winning

by unanimous decision of the three judges, and hardly anyone gave her a chance in the combat for the gold against Michela Nanni (ITA), a renowned athlete (holder of World and European Championships titles, bronze medallist at The World Games 1997) and more than ten years her senior. Kora won 3:0!

"I was highly concentrated and went into all my combats very aggressively, as I usually do," Kora sums up the Madrid experience. "Only after the semi-final came down to a decision, and the judges had to pronounce whether I would go on to the final, did my heart rate go up."

Is Kora a natural at thwarting off an attack with lightning-fast kicks, at throwing no-contact versions of – if carried through – lethal punches at her opponents, or is she an inspired learner undergoing the rituals of mystical training with her Master: why not break a few bricks with your hand? Bruce Lee, 'Karate Kid' and the likes contributed their share towards making karate popular around the globe, but they equally distorted the realities.



Karate – like other martial arts – upholds the ties to its Buddhist roots and strives to go beyond the merely physical aspects. Besides defeating an opponent, the techniques and the training aim for the karateka to develop human qualities too: self-control is just one of them.

"It's a challenge, mentally as well as physically, and the control over mind and body plays an important role in it," Kora describes the requirements for excelling in karate. To get to the top, much like in any other sport too, one is best advised to get started very early. Kora took up regular training at age four! Her mother would have preferred ballet, but her father, a martial arts enthusiast, prevailed. Mother Rita, however, has since taken up karate herself and won the 2002 German Team Championships – together with her daughter.

To get into regular and competently supervised training would be Kora's next piece of advice to anyone keen to win titles. In order to get her guidance from a true 'Master', she turned to Germany's

Then it is mostly a matter of keeping at it: the more hours, weeks and even years one puts in, working out and polishing the techniques, the better his or her chances of ending up on the podium. After Kora has trained on consistent schedules while still attending school, she has only recently taken it to the next level. After getting her Abitur, the entrance diploma for university studies, she enlisted in the Bundeswehr, the German Army. In the Sportfördergruppe, a special unit allowing top-level athletes in a variety of sports to focus on their training, she has but two major assignments: continuing to excel in karate and winning titles for her country.



Since the Germany Army doesn't have any coaches for karate – they do have specialist staff for nearly every other sport – Kora is assigned to permanent off-base training under Nitschmann. With military discipline – though wearing the Gi, the kimono, rather than the standard-issue uniform – the two of them work towards defending her title later this year in Monterrey, Mexico. And also towards being on top again in 2005! Only thereafter, with everything given to the all-out effort to be at her best, does Kora consider to move on and enroll for studies in "either sports management or journalism".

Kora grew up in Oberhausen, one of Duisburg's partner cities in hosting The World Games 2005. While traveling considerably as an athlete, and despite her recent enlistment, she continues firmly implanted at the junction of Rhine and Ruhr – even at age 21. No need to move; after all, coach Nitschmann's karate school is in ... Duisburg! She is a member of the USC Duisburg, the local karate club. And when it comes to her sport, Kora calls the city about to host The World Games 2005 "home".

FORUM: When and where did you become aware of The World Games?

Knühmann: I have seen the billboards all over Duisburg; the promotional campaign for the event is very prominent in the area. And since I am the reigning World Karate Champion, I had a number of journalists come up and ask me questions concerning the title of World Games Champion. At the recent German Championships we talked about The World Games between athletes and officials, and we discussed them even more in my club, but on the international scene they don't appear to be a much of a topic yet.

FORUM: You have, very appropriately, become an ambassador for The World Games 2005 Duisburg. Their organizers called on you to feature in the promotional clip shown at this year's assembly of the General Association of International Sports Federations.

Knühmann: I was involved in the shoot of a short 2005 Duisburg video. I had to show the camera crew around the venues and the location for the World Games Plaza, transmitting a fairly simple message: hey, that is where the party will happen next year! We also went to the headquarters of the Organizing Committee – 100 people work there already on putting The World Games 2005 together. Finally I donned my *gi* and performed a few *katas*, choreographed sequences of karate techniques, to show the federations in Lausanne: Duisburg is getting ready! Soon I have to go to the sound studio and do the voice-over. I enjoy all of this very much!

FORUM: Karate is not tennis! If you think of other sports where women with the success you are having are getting overwhelmed by the attention of the media, and where they have considerably less difficulty in getting similar quests for excellence funded, are you envious?

Knühmann: No! I am never envious of anyone who has something I don't have. As a matter of principle! That karate does not command high levels of public awareness and does not yet have the prestige it deserves – at least in my personal view – is sad. But I would never envy another athlete for privileges she may have. We all choose our sports because we enjoy them.

FORUM: Karate is getting popular in Germany. 18,000 practice the sport in North Rhine Westphalia, your home state. 60% of them are children. Is this the beginning of a boom?

Knühmann: It certainly looks to be on its way to increased popularity. With every word written about our sport – in articles, interviews, whatever – more and more people find out about karate. But take television: it is not getting much coverage there. Our championships are never televised. That is why I am particularly pleased that West German Broadcasting (WDR – the host broadcaster of The World Games 2005) has only recently approached me: they want to do a feature on me and my sport in the near future.

FORUM: One of the principal reasons for uniting karate and 31 other sports in The World Games is to secure more prominence in the media for all of them. Can this objective be attained in Duisburg?

Knühmann: I expect The World Games 2005 to be very successful in terms of attendance by the public. People in North Rhine Westphalia like sports – taking part in them as well as watching them. With many coming to the karate competitions – or to any other competition for that matter – many will have to acknowledge: "This is interesting and different from what I expected!" That could lead to the next questions: "Where can I see more of it? Where can I get started?" Television and the other media could suddenly discover a genuine demand for sports they don't cover regularly. And karate classes could fill up even more!

FORUM: In 1989 Duisburg was host to the World University Games, another important multi-sport event. Even though you were only six back then, what do you remember from the Universiad? Will Duisburg be able to outdo itself again in organizing the best World Games ever?

Knühmann: Remember that I am from Oberhausen – another city that may be very close to Duisburg, geographically, but at the same time far enough away to have its own sporting history. No, I don't recall anything of the 1989 Universiad. But I have had the opportunity to see the current organizers at work, and I have recently taken part in a function where local Duisburg athletes were honored: the city knows how to throw a party for people whose heart is into sports.

