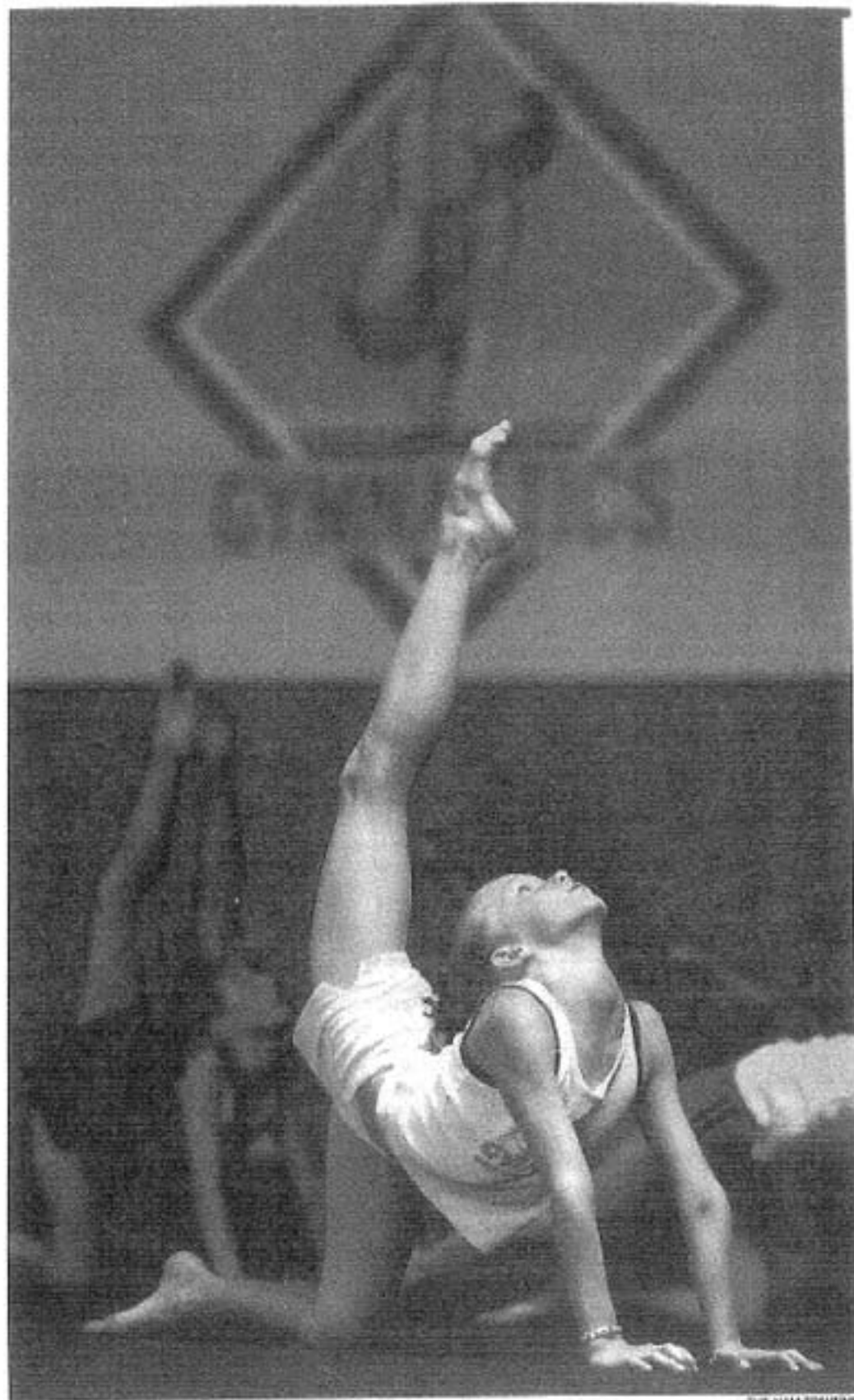


GYM GIVES ALL KIDS  
A CHANCE TO DREAM



CONTRACOSTA

Saturday, August 21, 2004

TIMES

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SOPHIA BOUZOS, 9, of Walnut Creek works on a rhythmic gymnastics exercise at the Community  
Multi-Center in Concord on Wednesday. The facility is open to children ages 4 to 18 for \$20 a month.

# Top coaches, A's angel keep Olympic sports affordable

By Denis Cuff  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

**A** CONCORD S AMERICA cheers its heroes in Athens this month, a little-known sports center offers a golden opportunity to youngsters aspiring to many Olympic sports.

For a \$20 monthly fee, the Community Youth Center gives East Bay youngsters top coaches, spacious gymnasiums and rigorous training in boxing, wrestling, gymnastics, judo, taekwondo, wrestling, plus some non-Olympic activities such as cheerleading and dance.

The coaching staff boasts top amateur performers in boxing, gymnastics and judo.

Some of the center's more than 500 young athletes have finished high in state and national competitions.

No one gets cut here for not being a winner, though. You don't even have to be good at sports to be welcomed at this unusual center, dedicated to offering equal opportunity in sports regardless of a person's income, experience or social background.

"It's a kids' gym. It's very challenging," said Saron Bennett, 7, of Concord, after finishing a vigorous judo sparring session. "I would go to the Olympics some day. For now, it's a lot of fun here."

The nonprofit sports center is largely the product of Ken Hofmann, a Contra Costa developer who is a part-owner of the Oakland A's baseball team.

He provided much of the funding for the center.

Hofmann, a boxer in college, has described the center as an antidote to youth crime, drug use and gang activity.

"I do not know of another youth sports center like this," says Dennis Constanza, executive director of the complex of gymnasiums and sports rooms in two big converted warehouses.

"We give kids quality coaching, first-rate facilities and an opportunity that many of them couldn't otherwise afford."

The center waives the \$20 monthly fee if families cannot pay.

Steep fees for coaching and club membership discourage many American youngsters from entering individual sports, skewing the field of young athletes toward the affluent.

Elinor Smoljan, the rhythmic gymnastic coach, is painfully aware of this.

In a previous job at a club that charged \$400 per month per gymnast, Smoljan lost promising students who dropped out for lack of money.

"It was horribly frustrating," Smoljan said during a practice with 13 girls who leaped, turned, and twirled while swinging ropes, hoops and ribbons.

"This is a demanding sport that can take years of close work together by an athlete and coach," she said.

Ironically, Smoljan started gymnastics in a country where the government sponsored youth sport centers.

A Romanian national champion as a young teen, she trained away from home and aspired to compete in the 1988 Olympics.

Her father ended the dream, ordering her home because he feared her academic education would suffer.

Smoljan regrets the denied opportunity, but now uses the regret to stoke her passion for helping students learn and enjoy gymnastics.

"I could earn more money elsewhere, but I don't know of another place that gives coaches support and facilities like this," she said.

The center, open to youngsters 4 through 18, employs some 30 people, including coaches. It has an annual operating budget of nearly \$1 million.

Operators recently renamed the center the Community Youth Center, removing Concord from the name to reflect the growing number of members from outside the city.

Several athletes regularly travel from other Bay Area counties, one from as far away as Los Altos.

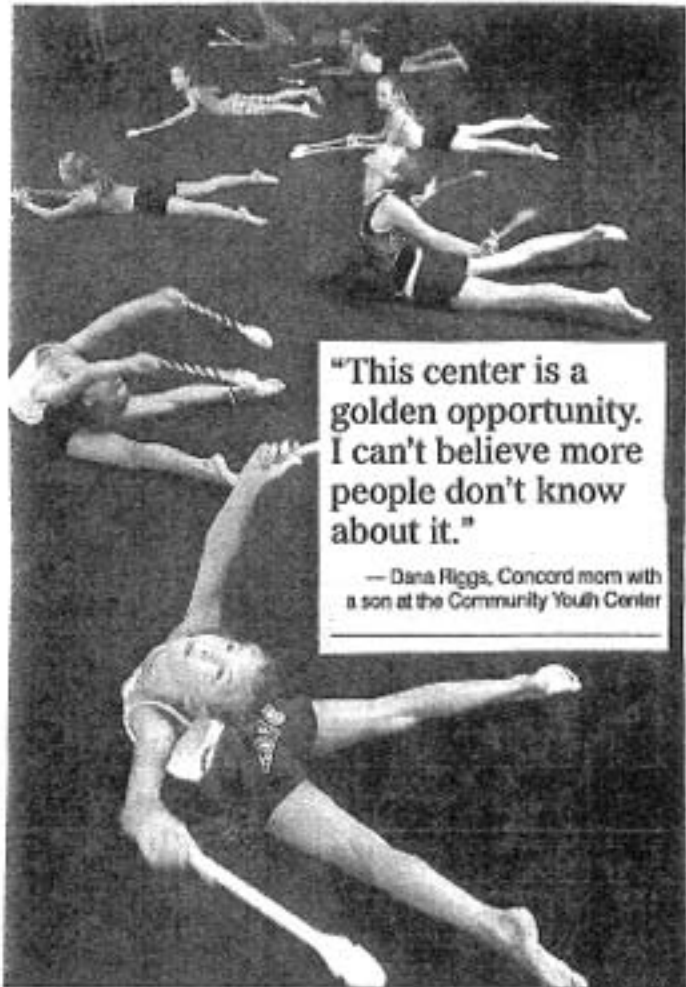
"This center is a golden opportunity. I can't believe more people don't know about it," said Dana Riggs, a Concord mom with a son at the center.

The center opened in 1995 with a \$1 million gift from the Hofmann Foundation.

Center operators say they have kept a low profile as they added more sports, instructors and an academic center open for tutoring five hours a day.

The center has added sport-specific conditioning in soccer, football and other sports.

Sprinter Eddie Hart, an 1972 Olympic champion in the 4 x



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— Dana Riggs, Concord mom with a son at the Community Youth Center

KATYA DEMINA, bottom, 8, of Moraga, and others work with clubs, a rhythmic gymnastics apparatus, at the Community Youth Center. Coach Elinor Smoljan was a Romanian national champion.

100-meter relays, guest-coaches at the center as a speed trainer.

The new judo program, like the center, has grown. Enrollment increased from two to 30 students in two years.

Howard Nam, the instructor, said starting slowly has created a strong program that teaches physical skills as well as a judo philosophy to respect other people.

"Judo takes years of training. It has been slow to catch on in this country," said Nam, whose students have placed in regional, state and national competitions.

He sees individual sports facing stiff competition in America from television, computers and sedentary lifestyles.

"Maybe someone from the center will compete in the Olympics some day, but that's not our goal," Nam said. "We want young people to get in shape, have fun, and learn lessons for life."

"I could earn more money elsewhere, but I don't know of another place that gives coaches support and facilities like this."

— Elinor Smoljan, rhythmic gymnastic coach

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