



## the competitor

➤➤➤ Almost a decade later, she spotted an intriguing ad in the newspaper beckoning those wishing permission to enter the United States to enter an annual international lottery. A precious 2,000 from around the world would be chosen to begin the process of emigration.

"I thought it was funny. What were my chances?" she laughs. But a few months later, she was notified that she had been chosen. "It just happened," she marvels. "I thought, I got the chance. There has to be a reason."

Coincidentally, a young woman from Romania who lived in Walnut Creek happened to be visiting her homeland. The woman recognized Smoljan's name on the list of potential emigrés and needed a roommate. "It was so easy," Smoljan reflects. The fountain at Broadway Plaza was one of the first East Bay landmarks that she visited.

Five days after Smoljan arrived here in 1998, she was coaching gymnastics to young girls. She is thrilled with the opportunity to be a role model in the lives of her student athletes. "Commitment is a virtue I can teach the kids. I explain that not all of them are going to be champions, but they can make and meet their goals. Also, they learn the discipline of being on time and being responsible for themselves."

And Smoljan continues to set goals for herself. Next on her checklist is U.S. citizenship. "I want to stay in Walnut Creek," she enthuses (though she hopes to visit Romania this summer to meet her newborn niece, Elinor). "I love it here."

—Mindy Bachman

# diablo

MARCH 2003

# Speak of the devil

march

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"I SEE YOU wobbling there," announces Ellie Smoljan, a firm tone affixed to her Romanian accent. "Stay straight. Your bottom leg is way too low. Don't give up. Fight for it."

In a large gym at the Concord Youth Center, several dozen young girls leap, spin, and somersault, their ponytails flying. These are some of the 60 students in Coach Ellie's classes. Eighteen of the girls are good enough to compete in national tournaments. Last year, four of her students qualified for the Junior Olympic Competition.

Smoljan, 30, has had competition in her bloodstream since childhood. Growing up in communist Romania, she was selected by coaches as a potential gymnast at age six. After half a decade of intensive training, she made Romania's Olympic team in 1985. On the state-sponsored team, the athletes did more training than studying. Feeling education was more important, her father insisted she drop out of gymnastics.

"He walked in the gym one day and he grabbed my hand and said, 'We are going,'" Smoljan recalls. "He took me home, and that was it. It was difficult, because I was so used to my routine."

Devastated, Smoljan became a closet Comaneci, participating on her high school's team without her family's knowledge. "I hid it from my father, but I still did it," she says. "I just needed to be around the gymnasium."