On Campus

Kicking It with Karate Champ Miriam Trujillo

In karate competitions around the world, this busy electrical-engineering major is creating sparks.

By
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Trujillo competes at the 2024 World Karate Federation world championships. (Sanan Maharra)

Miriam Trujillo heard shouts in the next room. She was four years old, stuck in an after-school ballet class in Caracas, Venezuela, and she hated it. The teacher made her do splits, which hurt. But the kids on the other side of the wall seemed to be having fun. *Kiai!* they shouted. *Kiai!*

When the teacher wasn't looking, Trujillo sneaked out and peered into the next room. The girls and boys there weren't doing splits. They were kicking and punching. Magnetized, Trujillo joined in. This was her introduction to karate, a martial art that originated in the 1300s in the Okinawa Islands, became popular in Japan in the early twentieth century, and spread around the globe. Karate promotes mind–body harmony, respect, self-control, and nonaggression (the basic principle is never to strike first), and Trujillo was hooked. Today, Trujillo, a Columbia sophomore, is one of the top-ranked practitioners in the world.

"Karate has taught me more than I ever imagined: discipline, how to stay consistent, and how to keep myself in check," she says.

Cheerful, modest, and poised, Trujillo virtually hums with energy and light. She studies electrical engineering at the School of Engineering and Applied Science, is an RA in her dorm, belongs to the Columbia Formula Racing team (she's helping to build an electric car), and is president of the SEAS Class of 2027.

There are two modes of competitive karate, she explains: kata and kumite. Kata is a set of memorized moves and is judged on technique. Kumite is sparring and is point-based: punches to the face or stomach are one point, kicks to the body are two points, kicks to the head are three points. Trujillo does kumite. It's not full-contact — just enough to score — but collisions happen. Trujillo has had her nose broken more than once. "It's part of the sport," she says. "And it's definitely made me stronger."



Amit Aharoni

Last summer, Trujillo fought in the USA Karate-do Federation national championship, held in Lafayette, Louisiana. Competing in the under-twenty-one bracket, Trujillo kicked and punched her way to a gold medal. It was her third gold at the nationals

(she also won in 2022 and 2023). In August she represented the US at the junior Pan-American championship in São Paulo, Brazil. Karate is huge in South America, and it showed: “The competition in the Pan-Americans is next-level,” Trujillo says. In that powerhouse field, Trujillo finished second.

Days later, Trujillo was at Columbia, in her circuit-analysis class, learning about resistors, capacitors, and inductors. That’s when she got a text from a friend: the latest World Karate Federation (WKF) rankings were out, and Trujillo was number nine. She had cracked the top ten! Then she saw all the other messages of congratulations. “I was the last to find out,” she says.

Trujillo is rarely last at anything, but she has certainly had to play catch-up. When she was eight, her family immigrated to the US, to Miami. She had to find a new dojo (place of karate practice) and a new sensei (teacher). She also had to learn a new language. English was hard, but math and science flowed to her. Her drive in the classroom was matched by her dedication after school on the mat. At sixteen, Trujillo became a black belt — what she calls “a super monumental moment.”

Soon she was preparing for college. Her passion was robotics, and she dreamed of building prosthetics. She got in to Columbia, and her parents were able to rest easier knowing that their only child, alone in New York City, possessed a useful skill set. “If there’s a physical altercation, I know I can defend myself,” Trujillo says.

This past October, she traveled to Venice for the WKF world championships. Her first opponent was from France, and Trujillo fought her to a tie. That meant the four judges had to vote on the winner. But their vote was split, which left the decision to the referee — who gave it to Trujillo’s rival. Naturally, Trujillo was disappointed, but karate has also taught her how to get up from the mat. “When you’re a kid, you see every loss as a failure,” she says. “But as you get older, you realize that rather than a setback, a loss is just getting you a step closer to reaching your next goal.”

Trujillo turns twenty-one in June and will try out for the senior US team. She hopes to make the senior Pan-Americans in May, in Mexico. Meanwhile, she’s got a full course load, and she has to build that electric car (she’s working on the wiring). Whether it’s karate kicks or kilowatts, the same current runs through everything that Trujillo does. Call it the spark of life.

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