

# Team Salina lifts its way to gold at national meet

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By GORDON D. FIEDLER JR.

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Teenagers may sometime imagine the weight of the world on their shoulders. For members of Team Salina, there is no imagining.

For an hour to an hour-and-a half four afternoons a week, the weightlifting group coached by Dennis Espinosa practice getting relatively heavy loads off their shoulders, as well as their chest and the floor.

The team recently returned from the 2009 USA Weightlifting School-Age National Championships June 19-21 in Gainesville, Ga., where the team of McKenzie and Macy Pilgrim out-lifted the competition and are now national champions in their age division and weight class.

McKenzie, 13, also earned gold for her individual performance. Sister Macy, 11, received silver.

Cort Enriquez, 12, earned bronze.

Weightlifting, an Olympic sport, comprises two lifts: the snatch and the clean and jerk. The snatch requires lifters to hoist the weighted barbell from the floor over their heads in one fluid motion.

The clean and jerk is a two-part maneuver.

The bar goes from the floor to the chest, then is pressed overhead.

The effort would appear to be beyond the capabilities of such young bodies, which is just what Ruby Pilgrim, mother of McKenzie and Macy, first fretted over. "We spoke with Dennis and we also spoke to our family physician," Pilgrim said. "We didn't want to do anything to alter or change their rate of growth."

Ruby figured her girls would embrace some activity.



**Macy Pilgrim (from left), McKenzie Pilgrim and Cort Enriquez are nationally ranked weightlifters of Team**



**Macy Pilgrim, a member of Team Salina, works on her weightlifting technique at Reps & Sets. She earned a silver individual medal and a team gold medal at the 2009 USA Weightlifting School-Age Nationals last month in Georgia.**

Photos by JEFF COOPER / Salina Journal

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"I thought they would get involved in gymnastics — girl kinda sports."

They probably would have were it not for older brother, Drew.

He plays football and wrestles for Salina South High School and works out at Reps & Sets, which is owned by Espinosa.

The girls would tag along and soon they got pumped about the sport.

“My brother inspired me to do this,” McKenzie said. “I tried every other sport you can think of.”

She said she likes the challenge.

“When I get challenged, I do the best I can,” she said.

Although she won gold at the recent national meet, she was disappointed she only lifted 88 kilograms.

“I was hoping for more,” she said. “I hoped to get at least 100.”

She said she needed a lift of at least 100 kg to advance to the Junior World championships.

Still, she is pleased with how it’s affected her attitude and her schoolwork.

“It helps me with math,” she said. “And it’s given me more confidence than I had before.”

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Some repetitively lifted the barbells off the floor. Others pressed the bar overhead. Still others were

working their legs by jumping up and off of a series of boxes — all this after first running about a mile in the afternoon heat.

Espinosa’s coaching style is one of quiet instruction, complimenting team members for good form, gently criticizing others for flawed technique.

Each workout begins with a prayer, often offered up by one of the team members.

“I am a man of faith,” Espinosa said. “I believe I was called to do this.”

He hopes he will encourage his team members to someday carry on his teachings.

“My reward for this is knowing I have a legacy,” he said.

Before any athlete can pass on anything, they have to know what they are doing, and Espinosa is a stickler for instilling discipline in his troops.

“It takes a unique individual and dedication to do this sport,” he said.

Espinosa will get no argument from McKenzie Pilgrim, who said she wants to be the first 16-year-old female weightlifter to win a gold medal in the Olympics.

“You have to have discipline,” she said. “If you don’t have discipline, you can’t do this sport. And you have to be coachable.”

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