She’s No Lightweight

Meet Anita Sil, M.D./Ph.D., mother of two young children, scientist, and resident of the West Coast’s most relaxed city, San Francisco. She stands just 5’2”, but an immaterial detail until you hear her say: “I remember the first time I kicked a man over six feet tall in the head.”

Meet Anita Sil, black belt.

If it seems surprising for a warm, soft-spoken molecular biologist to take on taekwondo (loosely translated: “the way of the foot and the fist”), Sil doesn’t see it that way. After all, both disciplines require patient dedication; both take unexpected turns; both can reach frustrating plateaus. In the lab and in the ring, she says, “the real goal is to try sincerely with everything you’ve got.”

That she might someday achieve taekwondo’s highest rank was not always obvious to Sil, an HHMI early career scientist at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). “I’m actually pretty uncoordinated,” she laughs, remembering her decision 15 years ago to mix up her exercise routine. Then a student at the UCSF School of Medicine, Sil joined a taekwondo club near the lab where she spent most of her time.

“I still remember walking in that first day, very nervous,” she recalls. “The first thing the instructor said was there would be no girl push-ups. Once you get to know him, he’s a really compassionate and kind person, but he was scary that day.”

After those first-day jitters, Sil quickly took to the sport. She enjoyed the physical and mental challenges and the sense of community with her instructors and sparring partners. A typical class included calisthenics, drills, and sparring—kicks, punches, strikes—with a partner.

Sil excelled in her science, receiving a UCSF fellowship that allowed her to establish a lab and circumvent the traditional postdoc stage. At the same time, she was switching fields to work on the fungal pathogen *Histoplasma*. It was exciting, but Sil says she felt insecure about everything.

Everything but taekwondo, that is. She was preparing to test for the black belt. From October 1998 to June 1999, she trained at least 25 hours a week, spending the rest of her time in the lab. She was lucky to get four or five hours of sleep a night.

The test was a two-day series of challenges that included running, vigorous sessions on a rowing machine, rolling, and sparring. The point, she says, “is to get you physically and mentally exhausted first.” During the test, “you can be asked to do anything, even if you’ve never seen or done it before. It’s generating a mental structure to deal with the unexpected.”

She passed and became an instructor. Sil says she aspires to motivate rather than intimidate her students—in science and taekwondo. “I’m going to ask people to do a lot, but I wouldn’t ask them to do something I wouldn’t do myself.”

Sil continued to teach until 2008, after her second child was born, and she still trains when time permits. In the lab, when they need to focus and get work done, she fights the occasional urge to have her graduate students drop and give her 30. Despite her invitations, none of her lab members has joined her in the taekwondo studio. She laughs: “Maybe that’s a good thing.”

—Sarah Goforth