



Carli felt a little shiver of excitement when she saw the sign on the door of the sports centre. Her dad looked even more excited as he pointed to it.

“Children’s Judo lessons. Enroll today.” the sign said.

Carli shook her head to one side, sloshing out the water that had gotten in during her swim class.

“But dad,” she said, “It’s my swimming lesson day, how can I fit both?”

“Well,” said Carli’s dad, “If you really like the sound of judo, you can try it instead. And if you don’t enjoy it, you can always go back to swimming.”

Carli nodded eagerly, feeling a little butterfly fluttering around her stomach at the thought of trying something totally new. She knew her dad was grinning, because it was a sport that he had done as a boy, and he loved it.

“But what exactly is judo?” she asked, frowning at this very important question.

The very next week, she found out.

Carli looked around the big, airy room, noticing lots of squishy blue mats on the floor. There were groups of kids chatting excitedly, stretching their arms and legs. Some of them were wearing white robes, which she learned were called 'Judogi'.

"Judo is a Japanese sport," her dad explained "there are lots of words that we use which come from Japan."

Carli found that very first class was unlike anything she had ever done before. She got to practice trying to flip her opponents off balance, making them fall onto the mats, while they tried to do the same to her. It was a new challenge, and she quickly learned that you had to be strong, and you had to be quick.

There were also lots of rules to follow, so that you didn't do anything unfair to throw someone over. Luckily, Carli was only seven, and her small body was like elastic. If she fell down, she would bounce right back up.

Carli began to look forward to going to judo class every week, and each time she did she learned more and more about her head and her heart.

"I didn't know that I could be small, but also strong," Carli told her dad one day.

Her father smiled, and then looked thoughtful—"You've discovered a well-kept secret, my girl," he said.

"You don't have to be the tallest. You don't have to be the heaviest. Judo teaches you how to use what you have in clever ways. It's about your brain helping your body figure out what to do."

Carli kept learning about judo as the years went by, and soon the graceful, powerful martial arts movements felt as natural to her as breathing and walking. She was usually the only girl in her class, but that didn't bother her. She became just as good at toppling over the boys she trained with, and this made her stronger as she worked to match their strength.

One day Carli walked through the school gates, on her way to class, swinging her heavy school bag by her side.

Her arms were strong, and her long legs carried her in graceful steps, but suddenly she felt someone tug on her pony-tail from behind.

She turned around to see a red-faced boy with brown hair squinting up at her. It was William from the year above her. Cali held her pony-tail in surprise.

"You're that girl who fights against boys," he said.

“You must be some kind of boy then.” And with that, William ran past her, sniggering as the morning bell sounded. He was gone in a flash, but the damage was done. Some students nearby had heard his comments and were laughing at her.

“Yeah, who ever heard of a girl fighting anyway?” she heard someone say.

Carli could feel a prickle in her eyes as she tried not to cry, but she couldn’t stop a sad and confused tear from rolling down her cheek.

That evening when the school bus dropped her home, she was very silent as she walked into the house.

Her mum looked over at her dad as their daughter dropped her school bag by the couch and drifted like a puff of smoke into her bedroom.

“Hmmm,” they said together.

Carli still wasn’t talking as she sat down to dinner with mum and dad and her little brother and sister. Her dad cleared his throat.

“Carli, you’re so quiet tonight, is there something wrong—has something made you sad?”

Carli felt another lump in her throat as she looked at her dad’s kind smile, and her mum’s concerned eyes. She let out a little sigh.

“Well, it’s just ...” she trailed off. “...Maybe I should have stuck with swimming lessons.”

“What do you mean?” asked Carli’s little brother. He had started doing judo after his big sister did, and he loved going to class almost as much as she did.

“I mean, maybe I shouldn’t be doing judo anymore. There are no girls in my class and the kids at school are saying it’s just for boys, not girls.”

“Well that’s rubbish!” Carli’s mum said, snorting into her glass of water.

“You’ve got arms and legs and feet just like anyone else, why shouldn’t you play judo, even if there aren’t other girls around.”

Carli nodded, looking into her mum’s face, but her shoulders still sagged.

“Your mum is right,” said Dad. “You love this sport because it’s made you strong, it’s taught you how to work hard, and how to think fast. But they’re not even the most important things.”

“They’re not?” Carli asked, looking slightly confused.

“The most important thing is that you keep doing judo so that other girls will know they can do it too. You’ve competed against girls from different schools before. Imagine if they all stopped competing just because someone told them they weren’t supposed to!”

Carli nodded. It was hard to stop the hurtful words from ringing in her ears, but she was determined. Since she first started judo, she knew she wanted to work hard at it. She loved the feeling of winning competitions, and she also learned from her defeats. Why should she stop doing something she enjoyed?

The next day at school she walked from the bus to her classroom with her head held high, silently daring anyone to tease her. No one said a word.

On the weekend, when she arrived for her judo class she saw a sight that made her stomach drop.

It was William from school, his brown hair flopping as he lunged and twisted, warming his body up to join the class.

What is he doing here?

As the class got started, Carli could see that William wasn’t very experienced. He fell over a lot on the mat and didn’t seem to be able to tip anyone else over, even the younger kids.

When it came her turn to face him it only took Carli about ten seconds to flip him off his feet.

She couldn’t help feeling a little flash of triumph as she looked at the boy lying like a turtle on his back. But as she leaned down to help him up, Carli was surprised to see a tear glistening in his eye.

“What’s the matter?” she exclaimed, unable to stay cross with someone who looked so sad.

“Oh, I thought this would be easy!” he sputtered. “I thought if you could do it then I would try.”

Carli kept her voice soft as she led William to a seat away from the practice mats. She passed him a tissue and they sat down.

“You know it takes a lot of skill to be good at judo, actually,” Carli said. “You shouldn’t feel too disappointed that you didn’t get the hang of it on your first try.”

The boy nodded, but looked about as glum as she had that day he taunted her at school.

“I’m so sorry about what I said to you,” William sniffed, blowing his nose.

“It’s pretty cool that you’re strong enough to flip someone over!”

Carli smiled, as she decided that this boy wasn’t as awful as she’d first thought.

“It is cool, and it is something I’m good at,” she said, feeling proud as she said those words.

“But it’s taken a lot of years of training to become so strong.”

“Which part of you do you think is strongest?” William asked, eyeing her curiously.

**“Definitely the inside,”
Carli said with a laugh.
“That’s the most important part.”**

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Carli Renzi

Carli Renzi is an Australian Judo champion who lives in Hong Kong. She took up Judo aged seven and by the age of 16 she became the youngest black-belt in Australia. Carli won her first Australian Championship in 2000. She won the Australian Championships in 2005, 2006 and 2007 and her first Oceania Championship in 2006. Carli missed out on qualifying for the 2008 Beijing Olympics but qualified for the Australian Commonwealth Games freestyle wrestling team in 2010—the first time the sport had ever been included in the Games.



Carli won the 2012 Oceania Judo Championships, which meant she had qualified to compete at the Olympic Games in London. Since the London Olympics, Carli has welcomed a son and a daughter, and she hopes that they will love judo as much as she does. She will soon begin working her way back to full fitness so that she can teach her signature judo moves and encourage the next generation of girls to try martial arts.

What is the most unusual sport you have tried?

Has anyone said anything you found hard, how did you deal with it?

What adventure would you like to have?
