

Zuger Zeitung 9 April 2024, English translation:

Stavros Itsanis, 17, from the Zug Fencing Club has won a place at the Junior World Championships in Saudi Arabia.

Felix Ertle

The tips of the swords touch each other. The two fencers put on their masks. And the swords are rushing towards each other at rapid speed. Stavros Itsanis moves explosively and stands out with his creative, almost playful maneuvers. For the student it is normal training in the Zug fencing club. If it weren't for the newspaper to interview him.

Because Stavros Itsanis has qualified for the Junior World Championships in Saudi Arabia. On April 16th, the 17-year-old will compete in Riyadh with the world's best fencers in his age group. An honor that was last bestowed on a member of the Zug Fencing Club six years ago. The native Greek, who has lived in Cham for seven years, is competing for Greece.

He almost missed out on qualifying. With his tournament successes, Stavros is the fourth best Greek junior fencer - and only the top three will be invited to compete with the world elite in Riyadh. It was a big surprise when his mother received a call: one of the fencers had dropped out - and Stavros could take his place.

Help from your own dream

Stavros' success story began with a fencing match that he watched on television. The speed and precision impressed the then five-year-old so much that his mother enrolled him in the fencing club. Since then, he says, the sport has never left him. Despite setbacks. Two years ago he wanted to get serious about the tournaments. However, as ambition grew, so did self-criticism. His athletic performance began to falter. "I lost focus during training and my competitive performance left a lot to be desired," remembers the young talent. The help came unexpectedly from his own subconscious: "I dreamed of winning a competition - and the ones that followed."

The dreams gave him back his self-confidence and the fun of fencing. Thanks to the inner change, he gradually relaxed and celebrated competition successes again.

In fencing, self-confidence is crucial, which needs to be maintained just like technique and fitness. In 2018, the Swiss professional fencer Max Heinzer motivated himself with the mantra: "I'm fast. I'm unpredictable." And became world champion. Stavros' personal ritual - kissing his cross before and after each tournament, as well as his daily prayer - is an important part of his mental preparation.

Difficult double burden

Nevertheless, it is not easy for Stavros to balance sport and school. He trains three times a week at the Zug fencing club and also travels to Biel for training. In addition to tournaments in Switzerland and Greece, he also takes part in international competitions. "I also have important exams in a month," says the eleventh grader, who will graduate from school next year. That's why he takes advantage of every opportunity to learn: in the hotel, on the plane on the way to tournaments. He rarely meets his friends anymore. He used to occasionally play basketball. That doesn't work anymore. "You have to want to fence at this level," said the young talent.

But fencing gives him more than it takes away from him. Stavros says: "When I started at the Zug fencing club seven years ago, I immediately felt at home. Even though I didn't speak any German, people welcomed me warmly." He has many friends in the club with whom he goes to tournaments, stays in the same hotel, eats together and goes out. "I made friends here that will stay with me for a long time. I would like to thank my coach Solange, my coach Tobias and the whole club from the bottom of my heart for this."

Last year he fought against three-time Olympian and world fencing champion Max Heinzer. "I want to go where he is." After graduating from school next year, he would like to study at a university that would enable him to continue fencing at a high level. "Probably in America."

The results of the Junior World Championships are available at www.fencingworldwide.com .