



Judo helps an Eastern Cape girl to reach heights she never imagined

A special moment at the University of Pretoria's graduation ceremony was when Michaela Whitebooi stepped on to the stage.

She was there to receive a BCom financial science degree.

Students are often told that getting a degree is a life changer. Whitebooi's can attest to this.

If somebody said to her ten years ago that she would become a university graduate one day, she possibly would not have believed it.

Growing up in Port Elizabeth, she did not have it easy. Her father died when she was still young and her mom, Minnie, worked as a domestic worker.

"When my dad passed away, my mom had to take over the roles of both parents. It was a challenge to her then, and it still is," said Whitebooi.

"She always does her best to provide for us. In spite of not having a proper job, she finds a way to put food on the table and manages to push through even when times are tough."

The one thing Whitebooi always had going for her was being a talented judoka. That changed her life. When

she steps onto the judo mat, she does not fool around.

There's a job to be done, and she wants it done as quickly as possible. Her feats did not go unnoticed.

She got offered a bursary to complete her schooling at the TuksSport High School.

After finishing matric, she got a scholarship to study at Tuks.

"If it were not for judo, I would probably have dropped out of school as a lot of my friends did. Where I grew up, gangsterism and drugs are a reality. So who knows how my life would have played out?"

"I love judo, but with this love come to a great responsibility to work hard. For me, judo has always been a means to make something of my life, through it I got the opportunity to study and get a degree. From the start it was non-negotiable. I had to pass my studies.

"I am now in the position where in a year or two from now that I will be able to provide for my family.

Although I might not be able to give them the world, I will certainly make sure that their standard of living

improves," said the Tuks judoka, who is currently busy doing an honours degree.

Whitebooi has not given up on her dream to represent South Africa at the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo. She indeed is talented enough to do so.

She medalled in all three of the last international tournaments in which she competed. Her most prominent frustration, however, is finding money to be able to compete internationally regularly.

To qualify for the Olympics, she needs to improve her international ranking drastically. The only way to do so is through international competition.

Unelle Snyman is the other Tuks judoka to have graduated.



Unelle Snyman and Michaela Whitebooi. Photo: Zander Erasmus.

