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Storming the male bastion

For 11-year-old Usha Kannaiha, taekwondo is not merely a sport, it is a means of survival in her surroundings and a step towards realising her dream of becoming an IPS officer.

Though she is the only girl amongst a group of boisterous boys, Usha is by no means lesser to them. She competes with them on an equal footing and has earned their respect with her ability.

Off the arena, the lovely smile and the innocent looks are deceptive as it camouflages a steely grit and determination in one so young.

Eldest among three daughters of an auto driver, Usha plunged headlong into the sport, with the rest of the boys, seven months ago.

When asked about her interest in the sport, Usha, who won a bronze on her debut in the state championship last year said, "My father was very keen I take up some sport. Earlier I was into karate, but when they started taekwondo in school I decided to take up the sport.

I thought it was very important for me to learn this sport because for a girl self defence is very essential. Now the boys in my area don't tease me. Even if someone does try, they are quickly reminded that I know how to fight."

Starting her day at 4.30 am, Usha heads for kung-fu classes by 5.30 am before heading to school. While her mother gets back home from work in the night, Usha, after returning from school does the household work and then looks after her younger siblings.

"My mother asks me not to do work, but I feel very sad for her as she works very hard," said Usha.

Apart from representing the country in international events Usha also dreams of becoming an IPS officer.

"I feel very bad that other girls in my school haven't taken up the sport. When I grow up I want to do my bit to encourage girls to participate in taekwondo."