

2022 National USATF Junior Olympic
Track & Field Championships

USATF Pacific Youth Features



Ava Padilla

San Ramon, CA

Girls 11-12 Division, Gold Triple: 800
Meters, 1,500 Meters and 3,000 Meters

Charlene Evangelista

Cupertino, CA

Girls 11-12 Division, Silver and an 80-
second PR in the 3,000 Meters

By Bob Burns



Cal Grizzlies teammates, Ava Padilla (L) and Charlene Evangelista

Many of the athletes competing in the USATF Junior Olympic Championships came to track and field from other sports. Soccer identifies which kids have speed or endurance, as does basketball with jumping ability, and gymnastics with the pole vault.

Karate? Maybe not so much. (No disrespect to karate, a great activity for all ages.)

Yet it was while taking the running portion of a test for her black belt that Ava Padilla decided to give running in circles a more serious look, and the results have been fantastic.

Four months after whizzing through a five-mile run during her karate examination, Padilla won three races in two days at the Junior Olympics. Competing in the girls 11-12 age group, the San Ramon resident claimed national titles in the 800, 1,500 and 3,000-meter events.

“It’s been a wild ride,” Padilla said of her initial track season. “It’s overwhelming. I didn’t start running until four months ago and was just hoping to qualify for nationals. To win is a big deal.”

The Junior Olympics were held July 25-31 at Hornet Stadium on the Sacramento State campus. Padilla’s venture into the unknown began on the third day with a qualifying heat in the 800, which she won in 2:19.61.

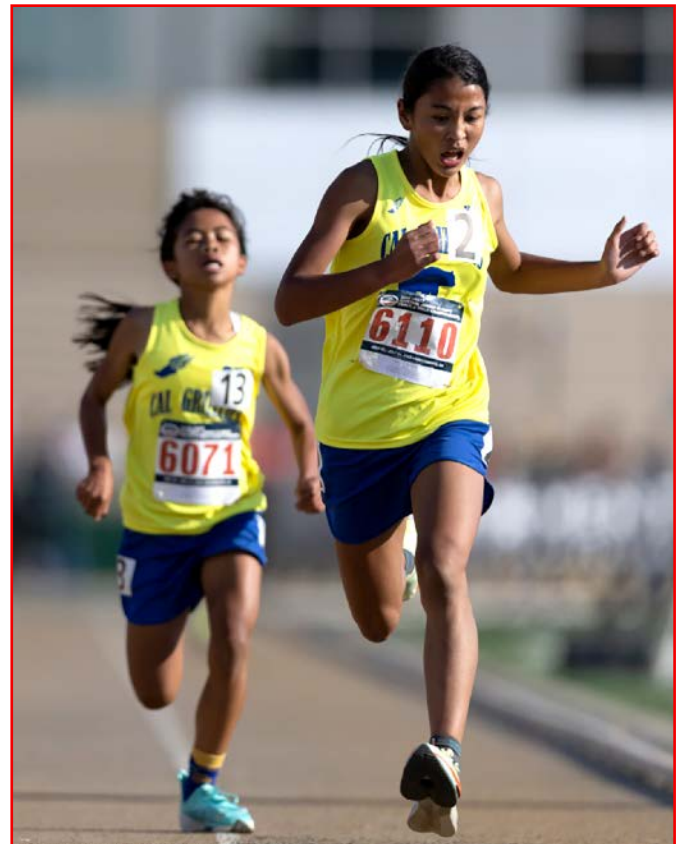
Saturday was Padilla’s toughest day – the 3,000 final in the morning and the 800 about four and a half hours later. She won the 3,000 (more on this in a moment) and followed suit in the 800, crossing the line first in 2:16.39. Padilla won her third gold medal in Sunday’s 1,500 final, clocking 4:48.52.

The 3000 final featured a stirring head-to-head battle with Charlene Evangelista, her teammate on the California Grizzlies Running Club. It didn’t figure to be a particularly close race since Padilla beat Evangelista by more than 40 seconds at the Pacific Association Region 16 qualifying meet earlier this summer.

But Exton knew Evangelista was capable of narrowing the gap.

“We talked before the race,” Exton said, “and I told Charlene, ‘If you go out quick and try to stay near Ava, you’re going to surprise yourself.’”

Standing a head taller than her diminutive teammate, the 5-foot-4 Padilla set her typically fast pace, only to see Evangelista pull nearly even on the final homestretch. Padilla prevailed in 10:25.28, just a stride or two in front of Evangelista’s 10:25.79. Evangelista bettered her regional time by 80 seconds.



Ava (L) prevails over teammate Charlene in the 3000 Meters - by 0.51 second!

“My goal was just to stick with Ava,” Evangelista said, who trains with Padilla in Pleasanton two or three times a week and considers her a friend. “I didn’t think I’d run that fast.”

“Charlene really pushed me, but I knew I could outkick her,” Padilla said.

A rematch in the 1,500 was not to be: Evangelista and her mother left immediately following the 3000 to fly to a soccer tournament in Southern California.

“Both girls are naturals, for sure,” said Exton, a longtime youth and high school coach in the Bay Area. “The one word I can think of for both of them is toughness.

“Ava’s full of energy, always smiling. She has an electrifying personality. Charlene is much quieter, but both are wonderful, wonderful girls.”

Exton said that while Padilla and Evangelista will continue to pursue other interests – soccer for Charlene; karate, basketball and hula dancing for Ava – he believes they’ve been bitten by the track bug.

“I still think soccer’s my sport, but I’ll continue to do both through junior school,” Evangelista said, reminding us of how much road they both have ahead of them.



Charlene (L), Coach Exton, Ava