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CHRIS MACHIAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Omaha Central High School junior Marika Svolos aims high in everything she does, whether it's teaching herself calculus or getting perfect scores on the ACT and SAT tests. "I just feel like whatever the top thing is, I should be able to get it," says the 16-year-old.

Photo Update

By [Jonathon Braden](#)
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



For Marika Svolos, perfection took just one try.

The junior at Omaha Central High School didn't take test prep classes. She didn't spend months studying.

Yet she aced the ACT and SAT the first time she took each test.

On the SAT, she answered all 159 questions correctly.

Of the millions of students in the 2011 graduating class, only about 1,100 nationally earned a perfect score on either college entrance exam.

Svolos' math teacher, Greg Sand, said the odds of acing both tests are minuscule.

ACT, SAT FACTS

- » **ACT:** For the 2011 graduating class, 704 of the 1,623,112 test takers nationally earned a perfect 36.
- » **SAT:** In the 2011 class, 384 of the 1,647,123 test takers achieved a perfect 2,400.
- » **Eight seniors** from the Class of 2012 in Nebraska earned perfect scores on the ACT.

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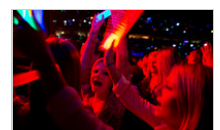
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Given that she's a junior, a female and took the tests only once, he estimates the odds at less than one in 10 million.

To prepare for the exam days, Svolos said she took a couple of practice exams and ate a bowl of Cheerios for breakfast.

"I just feel like whatever the top thing is, I should be able to get it," the 16-year-old said.

Ed Colby, ACT spokesman, called it a very strong performance, although there's no record of how often it happens.

The last time it's known to have happened in Nebraska was in 2009, when Lincoln East junior Nick Ryan achieved double perfection.

"You just accept the fact that she's going to do way better than you at everything," said Ross Harding, Svolos' teammate on the Central math team.

Recently, Svolos sat in the courtyard in the middle of the historic downtown Central High School building.

Black, white, Asian and Hispanic students zipped past her, dressed in all sorts of fashions: skinny jeans, loose sweatpants, long dresses.

Svolos said it's that diversity that drew her to Central.

"It isn't just one kind of person here," she said. "Every day at school I see someone I've never met."

It's at Central where Svolos is achieving academic acclaim, but she got her academic foundation at St. Margaret Mary School.

As a fifth-grader, she earned second place at a MathCounts competition. She hadn't studied math much but began to love the subject. She still helps St. Margaret Mary students prepare for MathCounts contests, said Linda Coates, a math teacher at the school.

Svolos also spends about 10 days a year competing in math competitions, talking about permutations, circumcenters and binomial theorems with her Central teammates.

"There's insight and beauty in a well-written proof," she said.

Having her on the math team is great, said Harding, a junior. "It's much easier to deal with the fact that she beats you at everything," he said.

Svolos, who wants to be a math professor, learns from her teachers and her parents, Carol and Dr. Thomas Svolos, but she's also self-taught.

Svolos said she spent her sophomore year "kind of bored" in pre-calculus. She wanted to skip calculus and move ahead to more advanced math by the fall.

So, over the summer, she taught herself the subject.

She studied for a couple of hours a day and took some practice tests in July.

In August, when she returned to Central, she took an old Advanced Placement test. She scored a perfect 5 out of 5. She's now enrolled in three math classes: Differential Equations, Advanced Topics and Enrichment Math.

"You'd hate to say somebody is bored taking calculus," said Sand, an upper-level math teacher at Central, "but it's obvious she was able to take it on her own."

Harding took calculus at Central. "I took it for an entire year last year and still struggled," he said.

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On his ACT, he got a 34 — two points away from perfect.

In class, Svolos' teachers say she takes time to think before writing an essay in AP English or solving a problem in Differential Equations.

Sometimes, Sand said, Svolos sits and stares at problems on the SmartBoard. Up to 30 minutes later, she will offer an answer that leaves her classmates and him asking: "Could you write that down, please?"

But Svolos is also a teenage girl with glasses who likes to walk around class in her bare feet and who giggles at a classmate's senior photos.

Last October, the Central math team was taking a break from a math competition, walking around Midland University in Fremont, Neb., in chilly weather.

They tossed around a Frisbee, and Svolos wandered off. She waded into a fountain on campus, wearing a hoodie and shorts.

"Basically," Harding said, "she just jumped into a fountain when it was a break from math."

She got out of the water, dried off and went back inside to win the math competition.

She also plays on Central's varsity tennis team. "I like how it has a lot of strategy in the game, like where you're placing your shots," said Svolos, whose favorite player is Serbia's Novak Djokovic, the No. 1-ranked male.

But Svolos prefers solving equations over hitting volleys.

On the fourth floor of Central, she sat at her desk in Advanced Topics, a math course created so super-smart students like her won't run out of math classes to take.

On this day, she was the only girl among the six students. She wore Central sweatpants and a gray math competition T-shirt with a green Tyrannosaurus rex on it.

A classmate plopped down in front of her.

Svolos had spent the morning taking her AP calculus exam. It's the test that would show how well she did teaching herself calculus over the summer.

The classmate asked, "How'd it go?"

Svolos' reply: "Nailed it."

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