

MEET YOUR NEIGHBOR: *Melissa Gil, 26*

Jupiter woman won two speed sailing competitions overseas

By JODIE WAGNER
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Melissa Gil is happiest with the wind at her back.

The Jupiter resident travels around the world to compete in kitesurfing and speed sailing tournaments. During the past eight months, she has competed — and won — in Namibia and France.

"I've always liked water sports, and I love riding waves," said Gil, 26, who works as an environmental specialist with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. "It's just the freedom of being able to do whatever you want. Once you're in a kite, you can sail wherever you want, do tricks, ride waves. It kind of takes your mind off of everything."

Gil began kitesurfing seven years ago, shortly after moving to Miami from Costa Rica, where she was raised. Her aunt and uncle introduced her to the sport, which uses wind to pull a rider through the water on a small surf board, and she developed a passion for it and began competing five years ago.

Last year, she also began participating in speed sailing events. Using a surfboard and sail, participants race as fast as possible over a predetermined route.

In April, Gil competed in the Kite Speed World Championships at Port St. Louis du Rhone, France, and overcame a talented field to win the world title in the women's speed sailing event. In November, she took part in the Lud-



RICHARD GRAULICH/Staff Photographer

Melissa Gil, an environmental specialist with the state of Florida, stands near the Juno Beach pier. Melissa is a world champion kitesurfer, and recently broke the American record in Women's Speed Sailing competition.

eritz Speed Challenge in Namibia and broke the American record in women's speed sailing, reaching 38 knots (43.73 mph).

"I've done pretty well," said Gil, who often trains with her boyfriend, professional kitesurfer Damien Leroy. "I've always been in the top three in the Florida events."

Gil looks forward to a long career in kitesurfing, speed sailing and other surfing disciplines. She's already accomplished a handful of her goals, but she still has many others.

"If I keep training, hopefully I'll go to the world championships again," she said. "The next step would be to break the world record."

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Q&A

What are your hobbies?

Kitesurfing, surfing, mountain biking, painting

Who would you like to have dinner with?

Jacques Cousteau. He could tell me all about his diving adventures.

What has been your biggest challenge?

Trying to balance working and training. Sometimes I feel like I don't have enough time.

Who is your hero, or someone who has inspired you?

Her boyfriend, professional kitesurfer Damien Leroy. "He's used to training really hard to accomplish all these things."

What is your favorite childhood memory?

Growing up in Costa Rica, she often played in the ocean. One time, she looked-around and said to her dad, "This world is so beautiful."

What do you do to get away from it all?

Yoga