

Change Agent:

Peter Westbrook is teaching New York City's youth about a lot more than fencing

By Katti Gray

On the first of nine months worth of Saturdays, before the physically or temperamentally unfit have dropped out or been weeded out of the Peter Westbrook Foundation's fencing program, its founder and namesake is moving non-stop. He referees sparring matches between school-aged competitors and rolls off dollar bills to hand to the best kid in this or that aspect of the morning's practice session. He jokes, cajoles, cheers and, every so often, embraces a young charge. He also doles out advice.

"My man, next time get a bigger mask out of the bag; you got a big head," says Peter Westbrook, 54, his no nonsense side on display.

"Okay, come on, sister. Let's go. You talk too much anyway," he says, waiting for her to show him what she can do with a saber. All the while he is riffing on the twin themes of self-discipline and orderliness. His time - like theirs - is not to be wasted.

Don't wear those too tight, painted-on, peel-off denims to class again, he says, to another teen-age girl.

"You can't lunge in tight jeans," Westbrook explains in an interview several days later. "If my male warriors are looking at her butt, it hinders our objective."

The girl in question was a newcomer to that weekend's crowd of 170 or so young athletes. Numbered among them were those returning for another season of being coached by Westbrook, an Olympic bronze medalist, and other Olympians whose careers he helped launch. Also in that assembly were kids angling to prove they were ready to enroll in a program that has reconfigured the face of a sport long preserved by and for elites who could afford such a pastime.

Through the single-minded resolve and charisma of its founder, the Peter Westbrook Foundation has been producing more than its share of Olympic contenders since it was established in 1991. Four of 13 members of the last U.S. Olympic fencing team were products of the foundation; four years earlier, three of that team's nine members were.

Westbrook himself was a national fencing champion 13 times and a member of every U.S. Olympic fencing team from 1976 through 1996.

"Peter has - by himself - tipped the traditional population of fencers. He's completely changed the landscape, just as one guy. And the New York Fencers Club is proud of that," says James Papp, a former manager of the vaunted club, established in 1883, where Westbrook's foundation is currently headquartered.

"What Peter is doing," Papp adds, "has made our club one of the most diverse places in New York apart from the subway."

Though foundation enrollees certainly reflect a racial rainbow also comprised of a few Latinos, Asians and Whites, Westbrook's charges overwhelmingly are Black. Many of the kids are familiar with their leader's difficult beginnings in the housing projects of Newark, NJ., his upward trajectory and his strong belief that fencing should not be pursued for fencing's sake alone but for its capacity to enlarge the human being.

Westbrook was born to a Black father and a Japanese mother. When he was 4, his mother kicked his father out of the house, and as a single parent raised him and his only sibling, a sister.

She loved them but refused to let them become laggards. "My mom was no joke: 'Take off your shoes! Wash your hands!'" says Westbrook, recalling the daily routine. "Wasn't no such thing as a snooze button in our house. When the clock rang, it was 'Get up like a soldier, boy.' And, stepping out of the house, I had to put my gloves on. I had to fight or get busted in the head. That was just how it was."

His mother was killed in Newark in 1994. She was shoved off a city bus onto the concrete by a passenger who inexplicably went into a violent rage. A brain injury from the fall killed her. Her son mourned, of course, but also was motivated by the tragedy and kept building on his personal and professional dreams.

As a boy who got his first glimpse of fencing by watching Zorro on television, as a boy whose mother stuffed his worn-out shoes with cardboard to keep the flesh of his feet off the pavement, fencing became a way to channel his hurts and his productive energy. It is a practice he has passed onto his charges.

For a modest annual registration fee of \$25, Westbrook enrollees get the weekly fencing instruction and use of the fencing gear. They also get sweat suits and book bags emblazoned with the Westbrook logo and a copy of his book, *Harnessing Anger: The Inner Discipline of Athletic Excellence*.

In addition to the 9 a.m.-to-noon hands-on fencing instruction on Saturdays, the foundation also runs an after-school program. It pays tutors to help kids who are struggling academically. It grants college scholarships. Its life development arm, among other undertakings, exposes the youth to high-profile people who've made it. Toward this end, Westbrook enrollees hear from speakers ranging from investment bankers to media moguls to members of a Brazilian dance troupe, there to impart their how-I-made-it formulas for success.

Westbrook's own path fits the bill. Because his mother held certain expectations, Westbrook absolutely could not let the chaos of the world outside his boyhood home keep him off the path to college. Academia was his segue into the buttoned-down halls of corporate America. Westbrook, a New York University graduate, was on sales teams for IBM, Pitney-Bowes and The New York Times advertising staff before leaping full-time into the fencing academy.

"To this day, Peter's not had it easy, but he keeps at it," says Robert Cottingham, 40, a vice president for a New Jersey technology firm who serves as chairman of the Peter Westbrook Foundation's board. Cottingham credits Westbrook with helping him win a spot on the 1988 and 1992 Olympic fencing teams and being an exemplary sportsman.

"Way back when he told me, 'If you don't make the team, you're no worse a person. If you make it, you're no better a person.' That has stayed with me. He respects the kids. He loves them. He wants the kids to have what he has. Education. Discipline. Integrity."

Those themes endure. "Other than doing the sport, we write essays about stuff like Hurricane Katrina," says Oman Saxby, 14, a returning Westbrook trainee.

"It's not like we're just fencing all the time," says Kevin Goodwine, 14. "This gives you lots of other stuff."

"It lets you come here to make friends," says Adam Griffith, 14.

Akhnaten Spencer-El did more than just make friends there. Before he became a Westbrook-trained, globetrotting Olympian, he was well on his way to being a thug. At 10, "I was already hanging out on the streets later than I was supposed to, lying about being in one place when I was really someplace else. I could have easily gone bad," says Spencer-El, now 27.

Seeing his early attraction to the streets, Spencer-El's mother enrolled him in Westbrook's program. For the first six months, he refused to follow the directions, heckled instructors and his fellow students, tried his best to get kicked out. "Stupid stuff," he says. But Westbrook never gave up on him. "When he found me I was at a crossroads. Peter's a father figure to me, part of my extended family, even outside of fencing," says Spencer-El, who plans to return to college next semester. "And this sport is perfect for me. The grace of it, the problem-solving, the one-on-one competition, the focus."

Olympian Erinn Smart, who began studying with Westbrook when she was 11 and went on to the 2004 Olympics, is another Westbrook beneficiary. Like her mentor, she loves the sport and believes it is set apart by what it demands of both body and brain.

"It's not just running around. It's hand-eye coordination. It's thinking ahead toward your next move. It takes a lot to excel at this," says Smart, 26, who works for a New Jersey-based mutual fund. Along with other Westbrook alumni, including her Olympian brother, Keeth Smart, she is a volunteer trainer.

Fencing instruction takes place every Saturday, except major holidays, on the fifth floor of the Fencers Club's quarters in a downtown Manhattan mid-rise. Hardly anyone in the crowd would be considered wealthy. Mainly they hail from households with modest to minimal budgets. Kids arrive there from throughout the tri-state region of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Some have been known to journey from destinations much more far-flung. There was the grandmother who drove up one weekend from the Carolinas with her granddaughter.

"They just wanted to see what was going on up here," says Marika Moses, a fencer while at Baruch College in Manhattan and mother to Khristin, 12, who is beginning a fourth year at Westbrook.

"This is an eye-opener and very uplifting," says Moses, who manages a doctor's office.

Westbrook intends to continue to uplift New York's youth. He is the only paid full-time staffer for the foundation, which also has one part-time worker on the payroll. The foundation's last annual report shows \$402,373 in revenue generated from grants and other sources and \$349,000 in expenditures. When you consider that a fencing gear for a single student runs about \$1,200, and less than 15 percent of the 170 boys and girls who showed up that first Saturday are likely to drop out in the early weeks of the program's new season, those grants and other revenues are miniscule, Westbrook says.

Still Westbrook has dreams for the foundation. He and the board have launched a campaign to raise \$5 million by 2012, hoping to buy its own training and administrative headquarters, build a computer lab, offer SAT prep courses, create a more formal mentoring program and put more coaches on the payroll.

That would be a far cry from the day Westbrook and a much smaller crew of kids walked into the New York Fencers Club. Some existing club members were skeptical of what he might achieve with a bunch of inner-city kids, Westbrook recalls.

"Now they look at us as valued and esteemed," he says. "But in the beginning it was, 'There goes the neighborhood.' I told them this is not just a culture shock for you guys, but it's a culture shock for us. And I told them it was okay to say that because we were both saying the same things about each other. It was simply my job to sell them on how they benefit."

On some level, Westbrook says, he and his kids won them over.