

Daryl Homer Lives by the Sword

March 18, 2020

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For Team Toyota athlete Daryl Homer, fencing is much more than just a sport — mastering fencing is like mastering life.

“Fencing is literally your life put into a 20-second period,” he says. “Twenty seconds of pressure. It takes so much from you. You have to make the right decisions, keep your emotions tight and stay confident.”

Homer believes that teaching kids how to fence is a way to teach them life skills, something the Olympian has learned firsthand.

“I remember being this skinny kid with braces and a lisp who hated losing — I would cry and throw my stuff around,” he says. “I’ve kind of seen how, through fencing, I built confidence and the ability to handle pressure and express myself. It taught me that achievement isn’t linear: You’re going to lose a lot more than you win.”

That’s why Homer, while still training for the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020, is dedicated to helping introduce young athletes like himself to the sport of fencing.

Stepping Onto the Strip

Born in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Homer moved to the Bronx with his mother and younger sister when he was five years old.

Homer first learned about fencing when he stumbled upon the word in the dictionary when he was 10. Suddenly, Homer started seeing the sport everywhere: in movies like “Zorro” and “The Parent Trap,” in comic books about the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and ads on TV.

“I remember seeing this really cool ad where two African American guys were fencing for a cab in the city,” Homer says. “It was like a four-second scene where at the end, they bow and salute each other and the older guy gets the cab.”

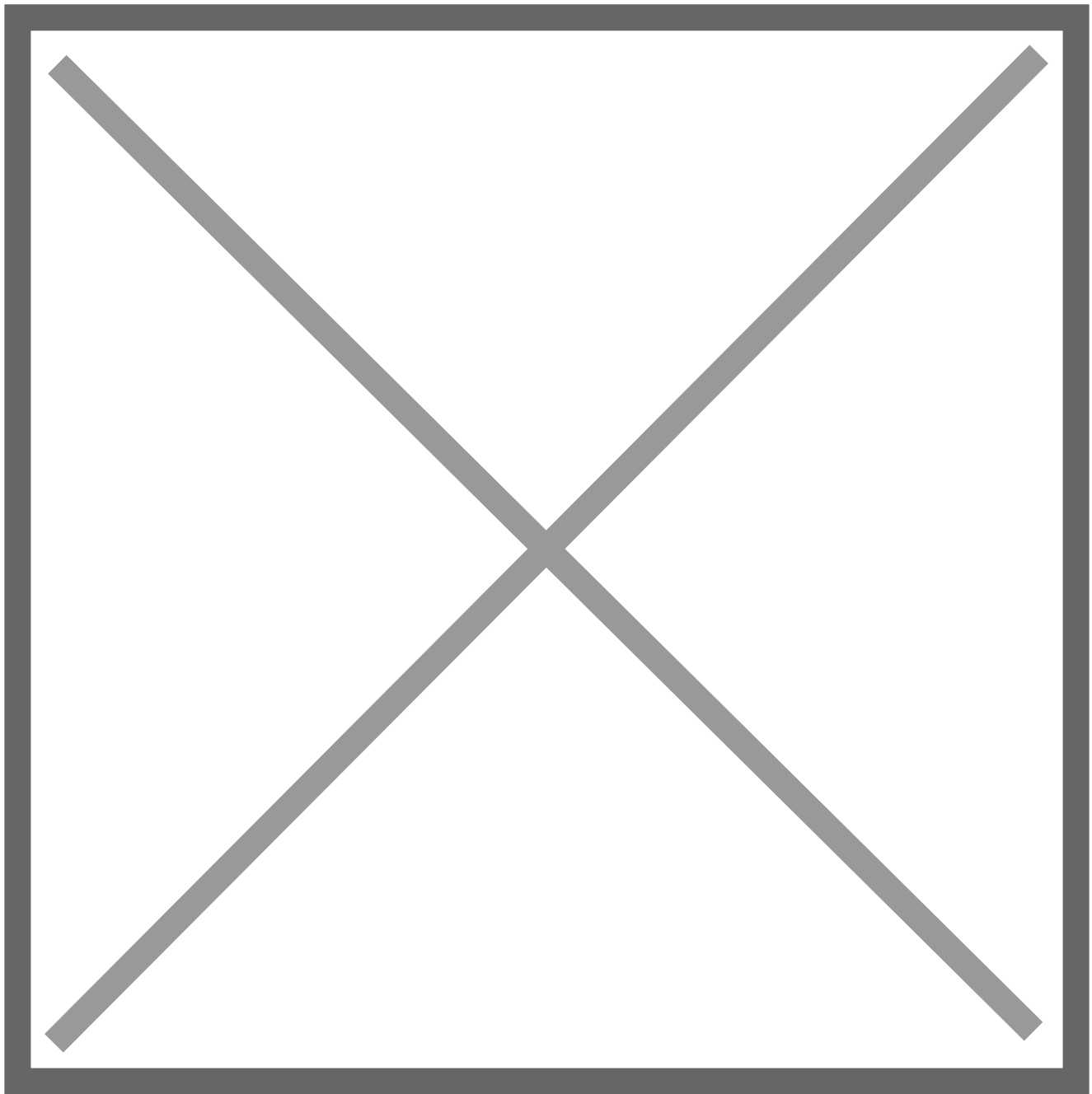
That ad was the final push, convincing 11-year-old Homer he had to try fencing. At his insistence, Homer’s mother signed him up to take lessons at the Peter Westbrook Foundation in Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood.

Westbrook, a saber fencing champion, was the first African American to win an Olympic medal in fencing — and he was the star of that taxi ad. In 1991, he began the nonprofit foundation to bring fencing to young people from the New York City area, like Daryl Homer, who would otherwise not have access to the sport.

“Of those two guys in the New York ad, one of them is my current coach and one of them is Peter,” says Homer, now 29. “It became this full-circle thing. Peter and I are really close — I see him twice a week. He’s been a mentor to me on the strip, but also in life.”

The Peter Westbrook Foundation’s all-volunteer staff are primarily Olympians who serve as both coaches and mentors to the young fencers. Homer participated in the program for only a few months before one of the coaches saw potential in the nascent champion and encouraged him to start training to compete in national contests.

“I started training three times a week,” Homer says. “My ‘fencing for fun’ phase was very short. I started with my first national company probably one full year after I started, when I was 12.”



Joining the Competition

A talented athlete, Homer was soon ready for an increasingly challenging training schedule. He continued to train at the foundation with Westbrook and his coach, Yury Gelman, through high school and into college. At St. John's University in New York City, Homer went on to win the NCAA college championship two years in a row and qualified for the World Championships.

While competing at St. John's, Homer chose to redshirt his senior season to train for his first Olympic Games: London 2012. The move allowed him to pause participating with the college team while still preserving his eligibility to play during his fifth year of school. Ultimately, Homer placed sixth in individual competition at the

Olympic Games London 2012.

Four years later, Homer won silver at the Olympic Games Rio 2016, becoming the first U.S. medalist in men's saber since Westbrook took bronze in 1984. Now, as Tokyo 2020 approaches, Homer is giving back, helping coach young athletes at the foundation, even while he prepares for his next Games.

"It's kind of a cool experience because you go from being the child looking up to the Olympians to becoming the Olympian that a child looks up to," he says.

Building a Community

Homer loves to be able to give other young people the same positive experience that he had in the program. And in many cases, those young people are his neighbors.

"I live in Harlem now, so I run into the kids all over the place," he says. "Fencing creates such a community. It's much less intimidating than people might think. You're surrounded by older kids who want you to get better, because you're their training partners, plus coaches who invest in you not only as an athlete, but as an entire individual."

Homer believes that the foundation's coaching mentality — helping kids reach their athletic, academic and personal potential — is what has made the program so successful.

Homer says his return to the Peter Westbrook Foundation is about more than giving back to his community; it's also a way to recognize everything the foundation has done for the sport of fencing as a whole.

"Fencing should have been completely out of my realm as a kid," he says. "I think that's what makes the foundation so special is that it was full of young kids like me from Harlem, Queens and the Bronx."

"Now that I'm older, I just hope the younger athletes can look at my success and think, 'If I approach the world the way he did and make it work for me, then I can be equally as successful.' Just like, 'If Daryl can do that, then I can do that, too.'"