

USA TODAY

August 16, 2004, Monday, FINAL EDITION

BONUS; Pg. 4D

Fencing siblings started with a solid foundation

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ATHENS -- In early 1991, Tom Smart happened to read a story about the creation of the Peter Westbrook Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to enriching the lives of New York City's youth through the sport of fencing.

The foundation was the brainchild of the legendary Peter Westbrook, a six-time Olympian and bronze medalist in men's saber in the 1984 Los Angeles Games who had used fencing to escape his desperate childhood in the projects of Newark, N.J.

At the time, Smart's friends pointed out that fencing might be the ticket to college scholarships at top schools for his two children.

So in February 1991, Tom and his daughter Erinn, then 11, took an hour subway ride from the family's home in Brooklyn to The Fencers Club on Manhattan's Upper West Side. She was the first child to step foot in the foundation, which was based at the club. Four months later, son Keeth, 12, signed up for lessons, too.

Little did the Smarts know then the impact fencing would have on them -- and they on it

-- as veritable pioneers in a historically white, aristocratic sport.

Keeth, 26, grew up to become a two-time Olympian in saber and the first U.S. fencer to be ranked No. 1 in the world. Saturday in the Athens Games, in his first competition, Keeth was eliminated in the round of 16 in individual saber. But he has a better chance to medal in the four-man team saber competition Thursday.

Erinn, 24, 11th in last year's World Championships, is the lone U.S. competitor in women's foil in the Athens Games. She competes Wednesday.

"Erinn has a tremendous sense of timing, is an extraordinary athlete and has a solid overall game," says Jeff Bukantz, the U.S. Olympic fencing team captain.

Although the Smart siblings traveled a similar path to Athens, they came out of the gates quite differently.

"Erinn was very athletic, very coordinated, so fast, so unbelievable," recalls Westbrook of teaching the Smarts. "Keeth was totally the opposite: tall, gangly and uncoordinated. He was like a

new puppy -- he walked sideways."

Naturally, Keeth was not at all enamored with fencing. He preferred to play baseball, basketball and football -- sports his neighborhood buddies understood.

"It took a lot of explaining," he says. "All they could relate to was the light saber scenes in *Star Wars*."

And he certainly preferred not to be beaten by Erinn. "She was a die-hard," Westbrook says. "He didn't know he'd be great. Imagine how difficult it is for a boy to have your little sister beat you."

Growing pains

Keeth vented his frustration by throwing temper tantrums on the fencing strip. He pitched his weapon. He slung his mask. He snapped his weapon over his knee. Finally, a change from foil to saber got his emotions better in check.

"Fencing is a very technical sport, and I was very awkward when I was young, so it was difficult for me," he says. "The toughest thing is patience. You aren't going to be successful overnight. Peter told me it would take six or

seven years, which is a long time to wait for a kid."

It also took patience to be pioneers. Westbrook became the Smarts' mentor, surrogate father, best friend, coach and confidant. He still fences against the Smarts three or four times a week.

More than a decade after its inauguration, the Westbrook Foundation trains more than 130 inner-city children in 40 weekly sessions throughout the school year. Two other Westbrook proteges are in Athens: Kamara James, who was eliminated Sunday in the second round of epee, and Ivan Lee in saber. The foundation's three-hour Saturday classes are taught by the four Olympians.

"Inner-city kids make the best fencers," Westbrook says. "Inner-city kids have . . . a greater fighting spirit. We believe in the kids that come through our doors. We spend time with the person, healing their idiosyncrasies and scars. That is why our kids bring so much to the table. If you heal them, now you've got a great fencer."

Says Tom Smart: "I grew up in an Irish neighborhood in Brooklyn in the '50s, so I have always been associated with white people. All stereotypes go out the window once you get to know people.

"They've always been involved in an integrated atmosphere. I've always told the kids not to stereotype people or feel people are stereotyping them."

The Smarts are a close family. Tom is an economic assistant for the Bureau of Statistics. Liz, who was born in Jamaica, is an elementary school teacher. Although they are separated and she lives in Orlando, Tom says they are great friends. Erinn lives with her father, and Keeth lives in the same building in a condo upstairs.

Keeth and Erinn are especially tight. They train at The Fencing Club at the same time. They do footwork drills together, and they compare tactics and strategy. They travel the world side-by-side. They have a lot of the same friends -- other fencers.

Success in real world

Even their impressive resumes are in sync.

Keeth has a degree in finance from St. John's, has won two NCAA titles and was a four-time All-American. He is a financial specialist at Verizon and is considering graduate school in business or law.

Erinn has a degree in economic history from **Barnard College** (N.Y.), where she was an NCAA runner-up. She left her job at Celine, the French fashion house, to train for the Olympics and will enter investment banking after the Games.

"We have No. 1 fans in each other," Erinn says. "I'm glad we can't compete against each other because I can't imagine competing that hard against somebody you love."

Says Keeth: "Fencing is roller coaster. It's great to have Erinn there to share the ups and downs."

Despite their success, there is a hint of sibling rivalry. They live across the hall from each other in the Olympic Village. "I harass him," she says, laughing.

In the last few years, their father has been gently nudging them to get on with their lives. "I didn't expect them to go this far, to get this out of control," says Tom, who will watch from Brooklyn because he gets too emotional at their competitions. Liz and a few other relatives are in Athens.

Says Westbrook: "When I told Tom they were good enough for a college scholarship, he said, 'Are you sure?' When I told him they were good enough for the Olympics, he said, 'Really?' When he got them into the sport, he never in a million years thought, 'What can they get out of it?'

"Sometimes, we only see monetary gains in life. But if you took this at its rudimentary level, Keeth and Erinn have gotten so much more out of fencing than anybody could have ever given them."

GRAPHIC: PHOTO, B/W, Robert Deutsch, USA TODAY; PHOTO, B/W, Michael Chow, USA TODAY; Making a point: Keeth Smart, left, celebrates an individual saber victory Saturday against Gael Touya of France. Smart was eliminated in the next round but has

another chance to medal
Thursday in the team

competition. No. 1 fans in

each other": Erinn and Keeth
Smart often train together.