

Harlem's Lacrosse Rookies Score Scholarships

By JOSH DAWSEY - Wall Street Journal

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Harlem's youth lacrosse scene was virtually nonexistent just a few years ago. Now some local stars are securing scholarships to tony boarding schools, where the sport is a major force.



Coach Jacob Klein of Frederick Douglass Academy, right, watches as Kwanzaa Owens gets set to score (PJ Smith).

Daniel and David Mark had never held lacrosse sticks until two years ago. But the rookies became fixated after they received equipment at Frederick Douglass Academy, a public school near West 148th Street.

The lacrosse stick became "an extension of their arm," their mother, Marcia Mark, said. "They walked down the street with it. They turned the TV off with it."

Devotion to a new sport led to full scholarships at private boarding schools: Daniel, now 14 years old, is at the George School in Pennsylvania, and his 12-year-old brother David is at the Eaglebrook School in Massachusetts.

For Marlik Toure, 17, lacrosse dramatically changed his life. After his mother died seven years ago, he was arrested for stealing a bike and missed enough time at middle school to become ineligible for sports.

"I don't know where I'd be without it," said Mr. Toure, now a scholarship student at New Jersey's Peddie School. "It wouldn't be here."

The three youths are among more than 100 students who have been introduced to the sport over the past five years with the help of Harlem Lacrosse and Leadership. The nonprofit organization created a second boys team at P.S. 149 on West 117th Street last year, and a girls team will be added to the roster at Frederick Douglass.

So far, 11 young lacrosse players trained through the program have received scholarships to boarding schools, according to the group. Other students from Harlem have flourished at a sport that is typically a prep-school province, traveling to and winning at top tournaments.



Peter J. Smith for The Wall Street Journal
Harlem Lacrosse players line up to learn the basics.

Lacrosse had long been associated with well-to-do enclaves until an expansion in recent years brought the game into inner-city schools. Harlem had no organized lacrosse teams until 2006, when CityLax helped A. Philip Randolph High School on West 135th Street start a team, said Mat Levine, director of the nonprofit organization. Frederick Douglass added a high school team with CityLax's help in 2007.

That same year, Simon Cataldo brought the first middle school lacrosse team to the neighborhood and launched what would become Harlem Lacrosse and Leadership. A self-described frustrated teacher and former lacrosse player, Mr. Cataldo pitched the idea to Greg Hodge, then the principal of Frederick Douglass Academy, citing research that sports teams can improve grades.

Mr. Hodge was supportive—and skeptical. "I told him, you're going to have kids with sticks walking around the streets beating the hell out of each other," he recounted with a laugh.

The first year, Mr. Cataldo's middle school team won only one game, and most of the defeats were lopsided thrashings. He had just 11 players in a sport where a side plays with 10 on the field at a time.

But there were signs his losing program was having a positive impact.

Parents were calling the school to complain that their children wouldn't stop fiddling with lacrosse sticks, Mr. Cataldo recalled. Students on the team were also paying more attention and attendance was improving, according to several teachers and administrators. Behavior violations were dropping.

At Frederick Douglass, school officials say every lacrosse player but one has graduated since the program's inception.

Mr. Cataldo's formula was simple: For the kids to play, they must attend daily lunchtime tutoring sessions, which meant missing out on time with their friends. Miss class or get in a fight and you miss games.

Rewards for doing well included equipment upgrades, trips and scholarship opportunities. The Frederick Douglass middle school team rapidly improved, posting winning records over the past three seasons.

For students who rarely got to leave the city, lacrosse trips became a big perk. Harlem players now visit Concord, Mass., near Boston, for a weekend every November to play in a tournament. Several other so-called lacrosse jamborees—including a Thanksgiving weekend event in Briarcliff Manor, N.Y.—host the team each year.

Mr. Cataldo left Frederick Douglass to enroll in law school, turning the middle school team over to a new coach. He remains director of Harlem Lacrosse and Leadership's board, and he says the nonprofit organization has an annual budget of \$140,000 to support teams in the area.

Behind the school one recent afternoon, 25 kids lined up on a small grassy patch with no goals and no lines. Players were learning to scoop the ball and communicate with teammates.

"None of them had touched a stick until a few weeks ago," said Wyatt Melzer, a coach who graduated from the University of Virginia in May after playing on a national championship team.

Mr. Melzer spent several minutes coaching Denzil Saunders. Denzil, one of 12 siblings in his family, shares a bedroom with several brothers. His new sport, he said, could be a ticket into a less-crowded dorm room.

"They've told me if I keep it up," Denzil said, "I can maybe go to boarding school."

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