



From Medals to MBA

Olympic Fencer Keeth Smart

By Maya Payne Smart

On any given day, you can find Keeth Smart in the Thomas J. Watson Library in Columbia University Business School's Uris Hall. It's home to an impressive collection of business and economics texts, but in keeping with the collaborative spirit of MBA programs everywhere, it's also social. A few years ago, students lobbied the dean for more study space and library officials capitulated sending 29,000 volumes off to a New Jersey shelving facility to make room. Now Smart, an MBA student, tackles economics, statistics, accounting and strategy assignments with anyone up to the challenge. "There's no shame in my game," he says. "I study with everybody who hangs out in the library."

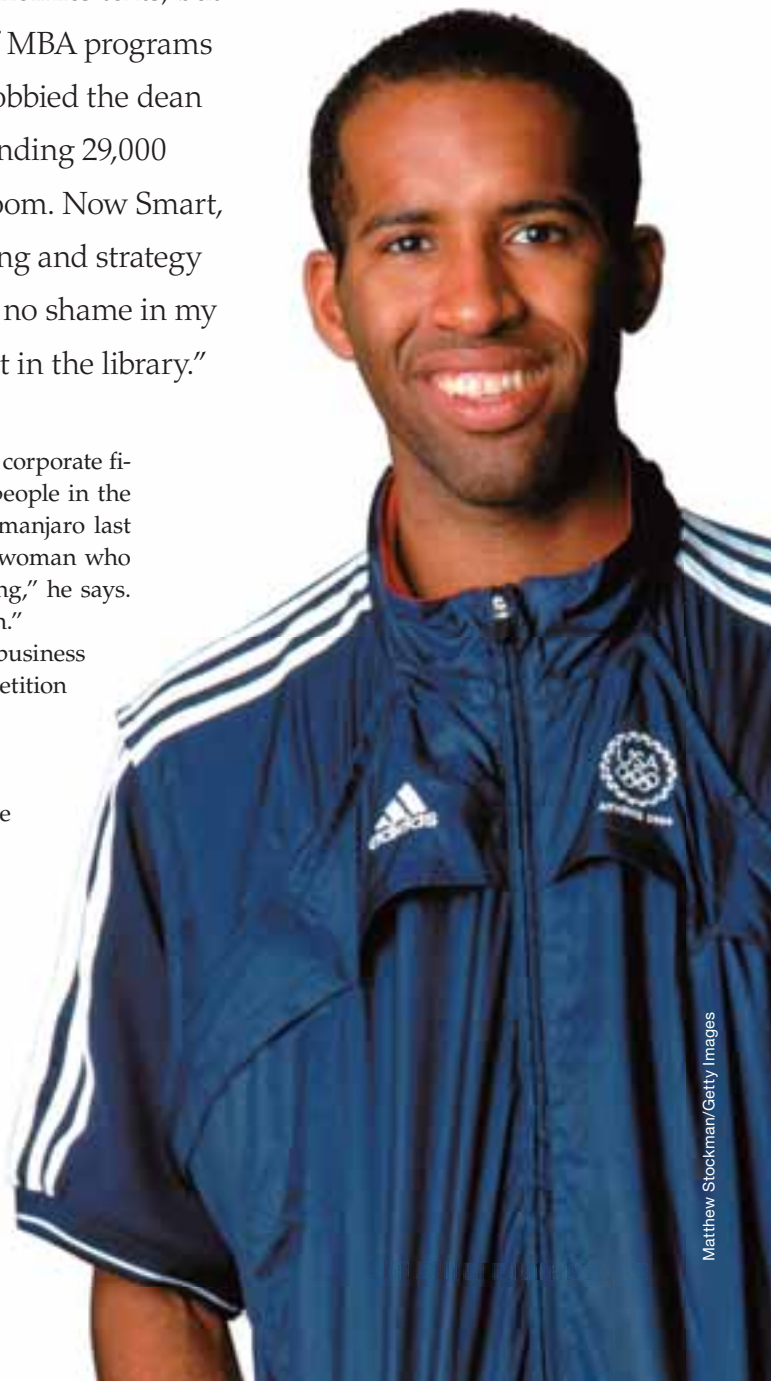
"Hangs out" are the key words. Though serious about school and corporate finance in particular, Smart is most animated when describing the people in the MBA program with him. There's the guy who climbed Mount Kilimanjaro last summer, the physician who is giving business school a go and the woman who just gave birth and is already back in class. "Everybody's so amazing," he says. "Literally, I'm blown away by how many things everyone's involved in."

The same could be said of Smart, who spent the months before business school battling a life-threatening illness, family tragedy and stiff competition on the road to winning a silver medal at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

THE WILL TO WIN

Smart was no one's pick to become an Olympic medalist when he arrived, in 1991, at the Peter Westbrook Foundation, a New York City-based nonprofit fencing program for inner city youth. Westbrook, a legendary fencer, likens the young Smart to a newborn puppy who moved right to left in order to go forward. "He used to walk sideways and fence sideways," Westbrook says while demonstrating Smart's awkward gait. "He was totally uncoordinated."

Even today, Smart doesn't strike observers as particularly Olympian. He's fit, but so lean that clothes fall over his slight frame as if on a hanger. His conservative glasses call to mind an accountant, not a sabre-wielding combatant. And then there's the open smile and ready laughter that belie the intensity he's known for in training and competition. He exudes a genuine



warmth and care that prompts dear friends and casual acquaintances alike to declare him the nicest guy you'll ever meet. "It's not just a pat on the back or handshake with him – he'll send you a thank-you note," says former teammate Herby Raynaud. "Especially in sports, most guys just kind of grunt and say, 'I'll buy you a beer.' He goes the extra step to acknowledge people."

Whatever he lacked in talent, the future three-time Olympian easily made up for in sheer competitiveness and determination, working constantly to improve his footwork and composure. "He didn't hit his stride until he got into college," says his sister Erinn, who also won a medal in Beijing. "So I think not being a really strong fencer at a young age probably taught him a lot of patience... taught him how to adjust his game and helped him develop into the fencer that he is now."

Indeed, as a student at New York's St. John's University, the full extent of his athletic gifts and mental toughness

came to the forefront. He won the NCAA title twice and qualified for the 2000 Sydney Olympics while still a student. In 2003, he became the first American sabre fencer to be ranked No. 1 in the world. The next year, he narrowly missed winning bronze medals in team and individual competitions at the 2004 Athens Olympics.

In 2008, he came back with new determination. He tore a ligament in his left thumb in January, but refused to have the connective tissue repaired with surgery, which would have taken him out of competition. Instead, he fenced with his hand in a cast for the first two months of Olympic qualifications. "If it wasn't meant to be, God would have broken my thumb," Smart reasoned at the time. "Obviously, He wants me to keep going with this."

This is vintage Smart, the never-say-die attitude that is his greatest strength in competition. "No matter how bad you beat him down, he will jump up and try to kill you," Westbrook says, injured or

not. "Having been on teams with him, what he brought to the table more than anything else was his will to win and self-confidence," Raynaud says. "It was off the charts."

Both expect Smart's killer instinct and indefatigable work ethic to serve him well at Columbia and beyond. "I could easily see him as the CEO of a Fortune 500 company," Raynaud says.

Smart qualified for the Olympics April 1, 2008, at a tournament in Algeria. Four days later, elation vanished when he was admitted to a New York hospital. Fatigue that Smart thought was jet lag was the onset of a rare blood disorder, ITP. His platelet count had dropped to 3,000, a fraction of the normal 150,000-300,000 range. Doctors were astounded that he'd been able to walk through the hospital doors. They said he might have just two days to live.

Smart thought otherwise and once again made medical decisions with Beijing in mind. He needed a full blood transfusion to combat the relentless



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internal bleeding, but Olympic rules wouldn't allow it. In its place, he chose a steroid treatment that left him in intensive care for two weeks. He didn't compete for two months while the steroids remained in his system and later passed a series of doping tests to maintain his Olympic eligibility. Once well, he went through the grueling process of retraining every ounce of muscle memory and endurance for competition. Another blow came when his mother, Liz, died of colon cancer a month after he was released from the hospital. His father, Thomas, succumbed to a heart attack in 2005.

The pain and grief that he suffered put Olympic competition in perspective. His parents were gone. His body was battle-worn. Just being on the strip felt like a victory. "I've given it my all," he recalls thinking. "Regardless of what happens, all of my friends and family support me."

What happened was the stuff of legend. Going from aggressive to defensive and back again in short order, he

overcame a nine-touch deficit to give the seventh-seeded U.S. team a 45-44 victory over No. 2-ranked Hungary. Next, he served up another upset in the medal round against Russia. The U.S. sabre team was down 40-35 when Smart faced off against five-time world champion, Stanislav Pozdnyakov. "I really felt like I had nothing to lose," Smart says. "I just had to keep him guessing the entire time so he never could feel comfortable with what I was doing." Smart out-hit him 10-4 and clinched victory with a flying lunge that team captain Jeffrey Bukantz calls "the greatest touch in American fencing history."

Smart and his teammates had won the U.S. men's sabre team's first medal since Westbrook won bronze in individual competition in 1984.

BACK TO SCHOOL

Two days after winning silver in Beijing, Smart was back in New York gearing up for his first year in business school. The transition from spending

100 to 150 days on the road fencing in tournaments in locales as far-flung as Budapest and Las Vegas to logging long hours in Columbia's Watson Library was quick, but Smart was ready. He'd been balancing work and fencing for years. Unlike many of his competitors who fence professionally in Europe, Smart worked as a corporate finance analyst at Verizon Communications by day while training for elite fencing competitions at night. His time management skills and powers of concentration are unparalleled.

Setting aside competitive fencing for graduate study was a logical next step for the son of two strong proponents of education. In one of their last conversations before his death, Thomas Smart encouraged his son to earn a graduate degree. The elder Smart, then an economist for the U.S. Department of Labor, was a lifelong learner who was always enrolled in one college course or another until the day he died. He

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had recently completed an engineering degree and was thinking about applying to business school himself when he died. "For Keeth, being at Columbia now is kind of a continuum of what our parents put into us," Erinn says.

Obtaining an MBA is a family affair in another sense as well. Keeth's wife, Shyra, is a first-year MBA student downtown at New York University's Stern School of Business. She left her job as a production manager at VH1.com to travel the school's media management track. The two were introduced by Westbrook at a Labor Day party in 2003 and married in May 2007. "It's cool that my wife and I are both MBA student first-years," Smart says. "We're learning as we go – going through it together."

GIVING BACK

Now with the Olympics behind him and a business career ahead, Smart's passion for the sport is expressed in his work with the next generation of fencers at the Peter Westbrook Foundation where he got his start. The center has relocated from the cramped West 71st and Broadway space where Smart and pioneering participants in the program began, yet the original spirit of the place persists. There's likely no other fencing club in the world where champions are so committed to being role models that they show up week after week and year after year to fill the talent pipeline behind them.

One Saturday in October, Smart paces up and down a fencing strip dressed in black Chuck Taylors, jeans and a Team USA tee, urging students to slow down and focus on their technique. "The important thing is to do it right," he says over and over again. "We're trying to get you to the next level. It's all about footwork."

The next level is different for each child. Many are weekend warriors. Some will compete nationally, others internationally. All will be pushed to do their personal best and to challenge their peers to improve as well. "If your partner is doing a weak lunge, tell them," Smart says. "Help them get

to the next level." This idea that it's not enough to succeed individually – that each is responsible for the success of all – is a part of the foundation's DNA. Westbrook started the nonprofit at the height of his career to ensure that others had the opportunity to hone their talents, compete and see the world just as he had. Over the years, thousands of students have benefited from the mental, physical and emotional challenges of the program's drills, conditioning and competition.

"It's great that we produce Olympians, but the most important thing is that we produce an amazing amount of well-rounded citizens," Smart says. "Our success rate of kids going to college is close to 100 percent. For the most part, we are taking kids that have no exposure to role models in the city and we're reprogramming them literally with this sense of belief and self-confidence."

At one point, Smart is visibly irked by a talented student's performance in a bout and scolds him for not winning by a wider margin. He tells the young fencer that no one's going to be that nice to him in a tournament and that he was doing his opponent a disservice as well. Smart's not just venting. He's convinced that his every word and interaction with the young fencers matter, and he believes that being there and showing he cares makes a difference.

The foundation works with a lot of at-risk kids who don't have much structure or discipline outside of fencing, and Smart doesn't hesitate to speak up when he sees one headed for trouble. Over the years, many kids and parents have thanked him for intervening. "It feels good to have someone come back and say, 'Remember that time you pulled me aside five years ago? It really meant a lot,'" he says. "That's more important than winning a medal."

For Smart, business school and Saturdays at the foundation strike the perfect balance. They equip him for success in the competitive world of business and remind him of what that achievement is for – to reach back and lend a hand to those who follow. **mba**