



NCOs Teach World Class Athlete Program Athletes to Be Soldiers First, Olympic Hopefuls Second

By PABLO VILLA

NCO Journal

It's a crisp, 12-degree November morning in Fort Carson, Colo. But within the confines of the U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program's boxing gym, a fine sheen of sweat covers the brow of Staff Sgt. Charles Leverette.

Leverette is the head boxing coach for WCAP, the Army's program that trains and promotes nationally and internationally ranked Soldiers who are vying to be a part of the U.S. Olympic team. Though the 2016 Summer Olympics are more than two years away, the preparation to be a part of the traveling party to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, has been ongoing. Meanwhile, members of the program's winter sports team are currently gearing up to participate in the Winter Olympics, which begin Thursday in Sochi, Russia.

During a recent boxing training session, Leverette, the former heavyweight and self-proclaimed hands-on coach, dons a pair of mitts to conduct glove work with his stable of seven boxers. As he glides from station to station amid the violent snaps of leather hitting leather, the perspiration trickles forth. So do the exclamatory

phrases that serve as motivation and also as succinct reminders of what the day's mission is.

"C'mon now," Leverette booms in his baritone of a voice. "Let's work."

Leverette makes it clear to his fighters that the work they partake in isn't solely relegated to honing their pugilistic skills. The Soldiers of WCAP's boxing team — and the program's nine other sports teams — are part of an elite group of athletes who are offered the privilege of attempting to reach the pinnacle of sports. But they all still serve one primary mission as Soldiers, and Leverette says the program leans on its noncommissioned officers to help carry out that mission.

"We're gonna teach them how to Soldier," Leverette said. "That's what we do here — we teach them how to Soldier. We never get away from our Soldier skills and our leadership skills as NCOs. We're gonna teach them about life.

"And we're gonna teach them how to box. I think we have one of the greatest coaching staffs and the greatest facility in the United States."



Staff Sgt. Charles Leverette, left, head boxing coach of the U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program, works with Pfc. Alexandra Love at the program's boxing gym in Fort Carson, Colo. (Photo by Pablo Villa)

Paving the way

The Army's boxing team is widely viewed as the fore-runner for the entire World Class Athlete Program.

Though Soldiers have engaged in athletic competitions in various sports since before World War I, the All-Army Trial Camp Support Activity, or AATCSA, wasn't established until 1973. This agency helped establish standards of play, apparel and facilities, as well as identifying and developing coaching staffs and governing bodies for recreational and competitive sports throughout the Army.

The early 1970s were ripe for Army athletics with troop strength at an all-time high because of the Vietnam War. The Army sent 31 athletes to the 1976 Summer Olympics in Montreal, Canada, winning five gold medals and four silver medals.

The success spurred discussion in 1978 about developing what would eventually become WCAP. Though questions about funding and implementation mired the process for almost two decades, the Army's boxers

became the showcase pieces of the military branch's athletics. Teams at installations such as Fort Bragg, N.C., Fort Polk, La., and Fort Hood, Texas, would compete for the right to earn spots at the All-Army competition, which was the first stop along the way to Olympic qualification. Throughout the years, fighters have risen nicely to the challenge, most notably the trio of Ray Mercer, Kennedy McKinney and Andrew Maynard, who all claimed gold medals at the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, South Korea.

By 1997, WCAP was established at Fort Carson near the U.S. Olympic Team's headquarters and training center in Colorado Springs. Since its inception, the Army program has produced numerous Olympic athletes in multiple sports. It has even provided coaches for Team USA; Leverette was an assistant coach for the boxing team that went to the 2012 Summer Olympics in London. Leverette joined a staff led by Basheer Abdullah, a retired staff sergeant and former WCAP head boxing coach whom Leverette lauds and regards as a mentor. In addition to the pair, one of Leverette's current WCAP assistant coaches, Staff Sgt. Joe Guzman, also joined the Olympic coaching staff as a trainer.

"I remember the day [Abdullah] sat us out on the ring apron, and he let us know he's still evaluating us," Leverette said about the days before he learned he'd be the next leader of WCAP's boxers. "Every three years, this unit releases back to another unit, then the selection process starts all over again. So in the back of my mind, I'm thinking, 'OK, I'm gonna try to stay out here or PCS back to Fort Hood where I came from.' But the chips fell where they did, and I wound up being the guy they selected. I was shocked, but I was ready to take on the challenge."

'You can't take anything for granted'

That challenge began in September 2012. And the man referred to as "Coach Lev" has done little to disappoint, employing a calm, personable demeanor that his fighters feed off of. His assistant coaches, Guzman and Staff Sgt. Alexis Ramos, follow suit. Leverette himself was an accomplished boxer, boasting three All-Army championships and a third-place finish at the 2004 U.S. Olympic Trials. But he's quick to deflect praise. He says the job of WCAP's NCOs is to exemplify what a Soldier is, despite perceptions that may be held outside of the program.

"We know we're under the microscope," Leverette said. "So we have to perform, because there's a lot of other things the military could be doing with its money. A lot of people don't understand what we do here. It's hard work. We task these Soldiers out. Then we're juggling two hats because we're that Soldier and we're that athlete. But I want everybody to know that everything we do, we dedicate it to the Soldiers — our brothers and sisters

in arms. Being able to bring that morale to your friends who are downrange or just returning from downrange is a great accomplishment."

One of those returning from downrange is Staff Sgt. Reyes Manuel Marquez.

Marquez joined the WCAP boxing team in 2009, but his time was interrupted by a deployment to Afghanistan with the 4th Infantry Division from 2011 to 2012. He returned to WCAP in October 2013 to resume training for a run at the 2016 Olympic team. But he says his time overseas was far more vital for building his leadership skills as an NCO.

"Being in that environment, trying to take care of Soldiers there and getting leadership from my platoon sergeant, that's what helped me with my leadership," Marquez said. "Coming here, it's easier to put that leadership out there, because Soldiers here understand better. They know that, at a moment's notice, if they do something they're not supposed to, they can be out of here."

The 5-foot-11, 152-pound Marquez won the All-Army competition in 2009. He has a much loftier goal now that he has returned. But he is aware of the fortunate position he is in.

"The thing about WCAP is you can't take anything for granted," Marquez said. "It's one of the few specialty platoons in the Army. I know it's a privilege to be here and you've got to be dedicated 100 percent. The goal for WCAP, and for me, is to go to the Olympics."

But Marquez is also quick to say that he and all the other fighters he works with every day are Soldiers first, then athletes. And while the values he embodies as an NCO go hand-in-hand with the dedication required to reach the pinnacle of sports, he is also aware of what his knowledge can do for younger Soldiers on the team.

"As NCOs, we can show the new privates and specialists how to become better Soldiers," Marquez said. "We have one of the Soldiers about to go before the board. So my experience as an NCO helps him become an NCO so he can grow and progress his military career. Even though he's here, he might not be here forever. So showing him what a proper NCO is supposed to look like will help him and whatever unit he goes off to in the future."

Getting a hold on success

As it does with Marquez, the notion of learning and relaying the lessons of leadership sits well with Sgt. Justin Lester.

Lester joined the WCAP wrestling team in December 2011, a little more than a year after enlisting. As a Team USA competitor in the 2012 Olympics, he stands as a testament to WCAP's goal.

"It was a great experience," Lester said about his time in London. "It's obviously what you train for in any sport. I fell short of a medal, but at the same time, I got to experience the whole Olympic tradition and the movement. It was awesome, especially to have two other sergeants make the team with me. To have the Army represented well just made it an even better experience."

As he prepares for another attempt to make the Olympic team, Lester says he enjoys the camaraderie between WCAP's wrestlers and coaches and the team's ability to dissolve its rank structure while on the mat in order to prepare properly. But Soldiers are always aware of their military structure.

Lester says that ability to switch between the two worlds isn't a natural thing for the group. He calls it a byproduct of the excellent leaders the team is exposed to as well as the innate desire of each person on the team to be the best Soldier he or she can possibly be.

"You can be as great as you want as an athlete," Lester said. "But if you're not squared away as a Soldier, then it's not gonna work. People say they're born leaders, and I don't believe that. I think the Army has definitely shown me that being around good leaders, good NCOs — which we have here because they've gone through the



Staff Sgt. Alexis Ramos, left, an assistant boxing coach for WCAP, spars with Staff Sgt. Reyes Manuel Marquez at the WCAP boxing gym in Fort Carson. Marquez rejoined WCAP in October 2013 after returning from a deployment to Afghanistan. (Photo by Pablo Villa)



Sgt. Justin Lester wrestles for the Army's World Class Athlete Program. He competed in the Greco-Roman 145.5-pound class at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London. Lester is hoping to return to the Olympics in 2016. (Photo by Pablo Villa)

NCO schools — you learn good leadership. It transfers over to athletics as well. A lot of people think that we don't have that because all we're doing is sports. And it's so wrong. We have great NCOs. Their leadership trickles down on us."

Eyes on Brazil

Though the Olympics seem a distant two years away, the Soldiers of WCAP are already toiling for a chance to make the U.S. team.

All Soldiers in the program have benchmarks they must reach in order to remain at Fort Carson. For the boxing team, a regional Golden Gloves tournament looms in the spring. Other sports will have various competitions around the country throughout the year where athletes will have to rack up points in varying systems to maintain their standing.

Lester, who has had the privilege of pulling a jacket emblazoned with "Team USA" over his head, says the significance of the Olympics reaches further than knowing the hopes of the nation are on your shoulders.

"There's nothing greater than knowing you represent the Army," Lester said. "Of course you put Team USA stuff on. But you represent guys with boots on the ground overseas and all these other places. So you're not just competing for yourself or for your country. Ultimately, you're competing for those guys who are providing the opportunity for me to do this."

Leverette agrees.

"It definitely was a great honor to represent the United States Army, as well as the United States as a whole, in London," Leverette said. "The patriotism runs deep. What has meaning for me is being able to go over there and hear the national anthem and understand the true meaning of what this is all about from the aspect of being a Soldier. It's one of the most prestigious things I think I could ever do for the Army.

"I hope we can give some of these young Soldiers that opportunity." ■

NCO JOURNAL

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

