



U.S. ARMY WORLD CLASS ATHLETE PROGRAM

# ON THE ROAD TO OLYMPIC GOLD

## WCAP Athletes Get A Handle on Success Through Unique Leadership

By PABLO VILLA

At first glance, Sgt. Spenser Mango may not fit the mold of an Olympian. Standing at 5-foot-2, Mango lacks the Herculean frame associated with wrestling at the highest level. But Mango has come up big for the U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program, which trains and promotes nationally and internationally ranked Soldiers vying for a spot on the U.S. Olympic team. With the 2016 Summer Olympics less than a year away, Mango and the athletes of the program's 10 sports teams are preparing to be a part of the traveling party to Rio de Janeiro.

"I just have to keep working," Mango said about a potential trip to Brazil for his third Olympics. "To get there would be just as great as the last two times. It's an amazing experience; to be with the best athletes in the world, to have your USA section cheering. It's special to me."

Two of the sports in the national spotlight — and under some scrutiny — heading into 2016 are wrestling and boxing.

Wrestling, a sport with roots in the ancient Olympics, was temporarily ousted from the list of core Games beginning in 2020 before being reinstated in 2013. In the 2012 Olympics, Team USA boxing suffered through its worst outing, claiming no medals for the first time in the modern Games' 104-year history. WCAP Soldier-athletes are hoping to help the U.S. bounce back. Mango says the Army — and exposure to good leaders — will be a large part of that effort.

### Building the great team

Army Soldiers have engaged in athletic competitions in various sports since before World War I. In 1973, the All-Army Trial Camp Support Activity, or AATCSA, was established to help form standardized regulations of play, apparel and facilities. The agency also was charged with 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 program of the service's athletics. Boxing teams at installations such as Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and Fort Polk, Louisiana, would compete for the right to earn spots at the All-Army competition, which was the first step along the way to Olympic qualification. Throughout the years, fighters have risen 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, Colorado. Since its inception, the Army program has produced numerous Olympic athletes and coaches in multiple sports. It has even provided coaches for Team USA. One of those is Staff Sgt. Charles Leverette. Leverette is the current WCAP head boxing coach and was an assistant coach for the boxing team that went to the 2012 Summer Olympics in London.

"The preparation is going well," Leverette said. "Thank God we're recovered from all the injuries and rehabs from the previous competitions. We're right on schedule. It's time. I spoke with these Soldiers, three years ago in October. I told them that it would be in our lap before we know it."



Sgt. Spenser Mango works out during a practice at the U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program wrestling facility in Fort Carson, Colorado. (Photo by Pablo Villa)

## I have to be that leader

In 2012, while an Army wrestler, Mango earned a spot on the U.S. Olympic team. It was the second time he participated in the Olympic Games. His third attempt at reaching the pinnacle of sports is in high gear. Mango is the lynchpin among the 18 NCOs on the wrestling team. While reaching the Olympics is their goal, they all still serve one primary mission as Soldiers, and Mango says the program's noncommissioned officers help facilitate that mission.

"I think the biggest thing we can teach others about what we do here is hard work," Mango said during a recent workout at the WCAP wrestling facility in Fort Carson, Colorado. "Nothing in life comes easy. Everything you want, you have to work for it. You need to have a great team to help you. Here at WCAP, that's what we have — a great team. We work hard."

The team's most recent high-profile outing came in September at the 2015 World Wrestling Championships in Las Vegas. Mango, who competes in the 59-kilogram weight class (130 pounds) of the Greco-Roman division, fell short of the tournament's championship rounds, losing in the repechage rounds to Soslan Daurov of Belarus. While the loss denied Mango a world title, the path to Rio for the two-time Olympian is still open. With his weight class qualified, Mango can still make the team with a good showing at the 2016 U.S. Olympic Trials.

To that end, Mango toils diligently at the WCAP facilities and says a factor in improving his skills is the leadership he exemplifies and the direction he takes from the leaders around him.

"In this program we learn a lot of self-discipline, leadership and teamwork," Mango said. "Wrestling is an individual sport, yes. But for me to get better, I need my training partners to work hard. For them to get better, I have to push them. I have to be that leader. So we have to work together as a team. Leadership, you know, is when we see somebody slacking, you tell them, 'Hey, pick it up.' It's a lot of discipline, too. We have to make weight. Everybody outside of here is going to a party, and I can't. I've got to lose 10 pounds. It's a hard place to be. But it's also a great place to be."

Mango held a high reverence for WCAP long before he arrived. His fondness for wrestling was instilled even earlier. Mango started his grappling career at Christian Brothers High School in his native St. Louis when he realized his physical liabilities weren't going to serve him well on the gridiron.

“I had always played football,” Mango said. “But being 4-foot-something and 80 pounds wasn’t cutting it.”

So when a wrestling coach at the school offered him a chance to join the team, Mango obliged. He quickly took to his newfound sport. Mango won two Missouri state championships. His prowess on the mat earned him a bid to the high school national tournament in Fargo, North Dakota, where he met Ivan Ivanoff, then the head wrestling coach at the United States Olympic Education Center. Ivanoff recruited Mango to wrestle at Northern Michigan University in Marquette, Michigan. The program there is not NCAA affiliated and the university itself is home to a U.S. Olympic training site. There, Mango began laying the foundation of his decorated mat resume, which today entails several individual accolades, including five U.S. Open championships and three Dave Schultz Memorial International championships.

His college career culminated with qualification in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, where Mango reached the quarterfinal round. The experience was a rewarding one, Mango said, but it also made him yearn for more success. With his time in college nearing its end, he needed a new avenue to continue his wrestling career.

“I graduated, so I had a choice to make,” Mango said. “While I was at Northern Michigan, we used to have dual meets with the Army program. That’s kind of how I met (WCAP wrestling head) coach Shon Lewis. He would say, ‘Hey, you know, the Army would be a great fit for you.’ The more I thought about the World Class Athlete Program and the more I learned about it, I started thinking, ‘You know, this might be a great opportunity for me.’ I could either come out to the Olympic Training Center, or I could join the Army World Class Athlete Program. So I decided to come into the Army in 2010, and I’ve been here ever since.”

## **We’re all teammates**

Mango came into the Army as a specialist. He was promoted to the rank of sergeant after completing his advanced individual training and joining WCAP. He immediately reaped the benefits of being a Soldier.

“The Army has the best [training] room in the nation,” Mango said. “In order to be the best, we have to train with the best. This is the place to do it. We have everything we need — treadmills, sauna, weight rooms — it’s just a great facility.”

Mango used the tools within that facility to great effect and earned a berth on his second Olympic team, though he fell short of the quarterfinal round. He remains undaunted and he approaches what could be his third Olympics with a stoic resolve.

In the meantime, Mango tries to improve himself and those around him as they engage in the type of cooperative leadership that he says you won’t find other places in the Army.

“Something kind of special happens here,” Mango said. “We’re all teammates. When we’re in uniform, yes, we salute and address each other the way we’re supposed to. When we’re in the wrestling room, we’re just working trying to get better. We leave the ranks in the locker room. We actually leave our uniforms hanging up to show that ranks stay in there. When you come out and put your singlet on, we’re all equals. Anybody can tell anybody anything to get better. You can have a private tell a captain, ‘Hey, I think you should work on this,’ and that captain won’t take offense, he’ll listen.”

That unique approach is one of several characteristics of WCAP that spurs confusion amongst Soldiers who aren’t a part of it.

“People think, ‘Oh, you guys just work out? That’s easy,’” Mango said. “But it’s not all fun here. You don’t get a second chance here. You mess up one time and you’re done, you’re gone from the program. You have the same benchmarks of success as any Soldier, but if you want to stay, you need to be top five in the country in your sport. It’s definitely not easy. It seems like it’s easy to be a part of this program. But it’s not easy being one of the top athletes in the nation.”

That notion is known well by Sgt. Whitney Conder. Conder is a fellow WCAP member. In fact, she is the nation’s No. 1-ranked female wrestler in the 53-kilogram (116.5 pounds) weight class. Like Mango, Conder wrestled at Northern Michigan University after graduating high school in Puyallup, Washington. While she is younger than Mango, she is enjoying the same meteoric rise he did through the wrestling ranks. She just missed qualifying for the 2012 Olympic team, finishing fourth at the Olympic Trials. Now, as a seasoned veteran, she is in the running to achieve a dream she has had since she began wrestling at age 8 — to win an Olympic gold medal. She said being a part of WCAP pushes her toward that goal.

“For me, I’m not allowed to go at my own pace,” Conder said. “It’s not just that the guys are good leaders. It’s that I have to work as fast as the guys. We have guys in here who run a 4-minute mile. So I have to keep up with some of our fastest guys. So I work at a top level every day. Because of that I get to get better.”

## **Ready to take on the challenge**

Leverette knows something about the work the program entails.

For the last 13 years, Leverette has been a part of the boxing team in Fort Carson. He is now in the midst of terminal leave as he prepares to embark on the next phase of his life. While the Army won’t be part of his daily regimen, there is no doubt that boxing will be.

As a fighter, Leverette was a more-than-capable heavyweight, winning two consecutive gold medals at

the All-Army competition in 2003 and 2004. He won the bronze medal at the 2004 U.S. Olympic Trials to cap his amateur boxing career, just missing a trip to the Olympics in Athens, Greece. Leverette joined the coaching ranks after his fighting days ended, becoming an assistant under then-WCAP head boxing coach Basheer Abdullah. He said working under the four-time Team USA boxing head coach was an enriching experience and a blessing.

“You can’t work under one of the best there is and not take something away,” Leverette said.

The stint at the London Olympics as an assistant coach would have been a fine end for Leverette’s days at WCAP, and he was preparing to resume work as a combat engineer. But at the end of that year’s summer, he received a surprise announcement — he was named the program’s next head boxing coach.



Staff Sgt. Charles Leverette, right, works the mitts with Spc. Alex Love in Fort Carson, Colorado. Leverette is the outgoing head boxing coach of the U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program. (Photo by Pablo Villa)

“Every three years, this unit releases [Soldiers] back to other units, then the selection process starts all over again. So in the back of my mind, I’m thinking, ‘OK, I’m going to 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.”

That challenge began in September 2012. The man referred to as “Coach Lev” has done little to disappoint, employing a calm, personable demeanor that his fighters feed off of. As he guides the Army’s boxers closer to a run in Rio, he has also taken on training professional fighters. His best prospect is Sammy Vasquez Jr., a current welterweight champion as well as a former Soldier and WCAP member.

Clearly, Leverette’s post-Army life will continue to revolve around the world of boxing. But before that, he remains committed to preparing his fighters for a chance to bring a gold medal back to America. Leverette says that goal can be accomplished through hard work and living the Army Values.

“There are definitely challenges,” Leverette said. “The only thing that’s difficult is the stuff you don’t work at. We live and breathe by our company motto, which is ‘Soldiers First.’ Me being an NCO myself, I don’t want any of these Soldiers to fall short, because my mentors and my leaders never let me fall short. They never left me behind. I’ll be honest with you, anybody can come in here ... and they’ll see what the sacrifice is. Besides coming in here and training, they also have to be MOS qualified, keep all their certifications up to do their job. And the NCOs are competing with their peers on the same level. So it’s a challenge. Almost all the guys on the team have deployed, some of them multiple times. They’re just as much a Soldier as anyone else. We’re Soldiers first; we’re definitely Soldiers first.”

### Finish the mission together

Conder echoes the sentiment that while WCAP is a specialized company open to a small percentage of Soldiers, it is still one that keeps the Army’s mission at heart. It just goes about it a different way.

“Out there, being a Soldier, you have to learn how to work as part of a team,” Conder said. “If you don’t do that, things aren’t going to go the way they should go. As Soldiers, we work together and we all finish the mission together. It’s the same thing here. We all work together to finish a mission together. Our mission is a different mission, yes, but we work together and we grow together.”

Whether that work culminates in a trip to Rio, Conder intends to give back to the Army by continuing to serve and apply the leadership skills she has developed as a member of WCAP.

“I want to be able to represent my country,” Conder said. “But I want to be able to represent the Army in the best way possible. It’s very important to me. I want to be a leader. I want to continue my career as a Soldier after I’m done wrestling.”

Leverette says Conder is on the right track with regard to leading.

“It’s about discipline,” he said. “Every great leader had to be a great follower at one time, too. As NCOs,



Sgt. Whitney Conder is preparing for the 2015 Senior Nationals and Trials Qualifiers tournament in December in Las Vegas. A good showing there keeps her on track to make the 2016 Olympic team. (Photo by Pablo Villa)

we're the backbone of the Army. Discipline is one of the biggest things that make an NCO what he or she is. With (WCAP athletes) coming in here with that understanding, it's a lot easier when we're planning training camps or when we're leaving. If we're going to be gone for two or three weeks, somebody's back here. I've got an NCO who I know is going to take care of everything. Not everyone goes on every trip. So having those NCOs in strategic places at certain times is a great benefit."

combatives. The fact that we use wrestling is great in that it's the original self-defense. When you have nothing to use but your body, you need to know how to use it."

For now, though, the nearest goal on the horizon for Mango, Conder — as well as the rest of the WCAP hopefuls — is the Olympics.

"That's the goal," Conder said. "It's almost here. It definitely makes you want to get better every day." ■

Mango is one of those NCOs. He, too, hopes the Army remains a part of his life even after his athletic days are done.

"After this Olympics, I'm getting old, getting a little banged up," Mango said. "But I'll continue to wrestle. I don't know if I'll make it to another Olympics, but I want to continue to help a lot of the younger guys.

"Yes, I will remain in the Army. So far it's been a great fit for me. Right now, I couldn't imagine anything else outside the Army. The Army has been great to me. It has given me all the tools I have needed as a wrestler and also as a Soldier. Wrestling is such a valuable tool. It's an excellent base for Army

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