

Breaking down barriers

ROC E6 program teaches lacrosse to youth of all races

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STAFF WRITER

London Booker doesn't understand why his middle school friends haven't been open to playing lacrosse. Sure, the sport has traditionally been played by white children in the suburbs.

London, a 12-year-old who lives with his family on the city's northeast side near the Rochester Public Market, will listen when his peers rattle off reasons for not playing the sport. He wishes they would get over their stereotypes and get with the program.

"A lot of my friends think it's a white-boy sport. But that's not true. Anybody of any race can play," said London, who first was exposed to the sport through his father before attending last year's ROC E6, a day camp aimed at exposing student-athletes in the city to experiences they might not normally have.

"I try to tell (them) it's a fun sport and it's cool to play. All of them (my friends) should be getting interested in the sport," he said.

There was a time London, like his sixth-grade friends at the Northwest College Preparatory School, had no clue what lacrosse was.

That was until Arkee Allen and Art Alvut became involved with ROC E6. Alvut was Allen's big brother in the Big Brothers program when Allen was 13, and the two have remained close friends the past 18 years.

Allen, an African American and now an eighth-grade math teacher at East High School, remembers feeling the same way as some black people that lacrosse was only "for white people."

Allen, who went to Irondequoit High School through the Urban-Suburban program, felt that his labeling of the sport made him miss out on numerous life experiences.

That's the lesson Allen and Alvut try to teach at the ROC E6 camp, which in addition to getting children into sports like lacrosse and wrestling aims to help them focus on academics.

"Art had always tried to get me interested in lacrosse at Irondequoit. ... But I didn't know what the sport was and my first reaction was, it's a white-boy sport," said Allen, who lists not learning lacrosse as one of his biggest regrets.



CARLOS ORTIZ staff photographer

London Booker, 12, Rochester races between Tristan Lomb, 12, of Irondequoit, left, and Ben Redlinski, 11, of Webster. "A lot of my friends think it's a white-boy sport," said London. "But that's not true."

The program

ROC E6 is a six-week camp for second- through seventh-grade boys and girls. It runs from July 9-Aug. 17.

Cost: \$30 for the entire program, which goes from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Scholarships are available based on financial need.)

Includes: Math and English language arts courses in the morning and lacrosse and wrestling practices in the afternoon.

Location: Seneca Park's John F. Wegman Building.

For more information: E-mail Arkee Allen (roce6camps@gmail.com) or go to the Rochester Area Lacrosse League's Web site, www.rall.org/ROCE6.htm.

Online Extra

DEMOCRATANDCHRONICLE.COM

Click on this story to hear Eddie Tavers and London Booker talk about why they love lacrosse.



London



Alvut



Allen



Eddie

"I always tell the kids that you limit yourself so much and miss out on so much fun in life when you label things as black or white."

Allen and Alvut know they face a daunting challenge trying to introduce lacrosse to kids in poor areas of the city. The sport is more expensive than basketball or soccer, with the average girl needing more than \$100 worth of equipment, and boys requiring \$200 worth of gear. This year, the camp has received equipment and financial help from Fairport, Victor, Pittsford, Penfield, Hilton and East-ridge, to name a few.

Allen and Alvut refuse to believe that what many say is America's fastest-growing sport can't catch on with black youths.

"It's a matter of getting them exposed to the sport," said Alvut, 46, who along with Allen helped to get London

and fellow camper Eddie Tavers enrolled on the East Irondequoit Eastridge fifth- and sixth-grade boys youth lacrosse team.

"Both of the kids were so happy, they were thinking 'I'm going to get a second chance to play lacrosse outside of the camp.' These kids have to play a lot to get better, but you're going to find many kids out there who want to play. It's just a matter of getting them into the sport."

So far the evidence from that first summer camp shows progress is being made. One of Allen's favorite stories involves the journals kept by each of the 76 campers, ages 8 through 12. Each child wrote a daily entry, including their goals and ambitions for the future.

Allen said most of the children were quick to mention

playing professional basketball as their dream job when camp began. But by the end of the third week, most had changed their minds.

"At that point, the first journal I opened up said, 'I want to meet (lacrosse star and Irondequoit graduate) Joe Walters.' The next one, the boy wrote in detail about how he wanted to play in the National Lacrosse League," said Allen of the camp that also offers classes like math and ethics.

"At that point I realized we are making changes in how these kids think about the sport," he said.

Eddie, a sixth-grader at School 33, has changed his mind. The one-time football and baseball player who knew nothing of lacrosse before attending last year's camp plans on playing as long as he can.

"I definitely want to play lacrosse if the high school I go to has the sport," said Eddie, who prefers the attack position.

"A lot of people in the city don't have this opportunity to play these sports. I've been telling all my friends they should give it a try. One day, I'd like to earn a scholarship to play."

All of last year's campers were given the chance to show off their new sport at halftime of a Rochester Rattlers game at PAETEC Park. London enjoyed seeing up-close some of the best players in the sport.

"As we were watching the game I kept thinking 'I can do what the Rattlers guys are doing out there, they're just a little bit faster than me,'" said London, who also plays football.

"I'm good at the sport and it can definitely take me somewhere. I'd love one day to make it to the National Lacrosse League (NLL)."

Alvut and Allen remain hopeful that through their innovative and affordable camp, more youths like London and Eddie will pick up the sport. □

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