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[Introduction]

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Hello and welcome to the weekly addition of the Huffines Institute for Sports Medicine and Human Performance weekly podcast. I'm your host, Tim Lightfoot, and every week we strive to bring you interesting individuals in the world of sports medicine and human performance. And this week is no exception. We have Mr. Jon Feinman on with us from InnerCity Weightlifting in Boston. So welcome to the podcast, Jon.

Jon Feinman. Thank you for having me here.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. You're more than welcome. I'm going to take a minute and tell the audience a little bit about why we've got you here with us and a little bit of an introduction and then we'll jump right into it. Mr. Feinman is the executive director and founder of the Boston-based non-profit organization, InnerCity Weightlifting. He has a Masters of Business Administration from Babson College in Massachusetts. He has a bachelor's degree in marketing. He is a certified strength and conditioning specialist from the National Strength and Conditioning Association. And he's a certified USA Weightlifting coach. He's been recently featured on ESPN and a variety of other places about his work in Boston with the InnerCity Weightlifting. So let's just start there, Jon. Tell us what InnerCity Weightlifting is and what you're trying to do with it.

Jon Feinman. Sure. InnerCity Weightlifting is a 501c3 non-profit organization. And in short, what we do is we work with young people at the highest risk for violence in order to reduce the use of violence. We're getting people off the streets and into the gym where we empower them with the confidence and positive support and positive community needed to say no to violence and yes to opportunity.

So once we have them sitting in the gym, basically what we do is we try to go through what we determine are the three stages of development – the various signs of success. The first being building a relationship and it's measured with outcomes as simple as if we text or call someone, do they text or call us back? From there, can we start to build a new positive network around each student? And the part of that stage of development that we really own is what we call our student apprenticeship program.

So in that, we get some of our most committed students certified as personal trainers through the National Academy of Sports Medicine. And while they're studying, they start training clients at \$20.00 per session. Each session is co-written and supervised by a coach. And something incredible happens in that when our students are getting paid by people coming from six and seven figure backgrounds who are now paying some of the most high impact young people – some who have been involved in the streets, some who are searching for a way out of the streets.

Increases not just a job opportunity for the student but this bond between the student and client that completely outweighs what any job by itself could do.

As the student begins to get more help and support and all of a sudden, people who have never experienced –fortunate enough to have never experienced violence, their eyes become open to this very complex social issue. And also has a real chance for a solution.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Let's give the audience, I guess, a little context. You're located – your facility is located in Dorchester?

Jon Feinman. Yup. The Dorchester section of Boston.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. And it's one of the most violent sections of Boston, right?

Jon Feinman. Yup. So the stats in Boston are that 1% of the city's youth is responsible for more than 70% of gun violence and more than 50% of homicides. And that's based on stats that were taken through 2010. And it's a very small subset of the population that's really driving the violence. From what we've seen is that the same subset also tends to be the most isolated and the most segregated young people who don't have any other way out. Whether it's because they don't feel there's another way or in some cases, there's no one else willing to work with them.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. So Jon, I guess the question – and one of the things we talk to people about when we interview them is how you got into this. I mean, how did you develop this passion? Because obviously, you have a passion for this. And I'll just say up front that we'll put links to the ESPN segment about your efforts there up on our show notes so people can see that. And it's obvious that the passion comes out. So where did this come from?

[05:02]

You weren't an exercise science guy. I mean, you played soccer in college but this wasn't something that it appears, at least from an educational standpoint, that you kind of developed your life to do. Where did this come about and how'd you get into this?

Jon Feinman. My first year out of undergrad, in 2005-2006, I did a year of AmeriCorps. That brought me out to Boston, from Providence, Rhode Island to Boston. I was working at a K-8 school. And my role was just to get young people involved in afterschool sport-based activities. And to the credit of all the great organizations out there, it was just too easy. A lot of young people who are going to go to these programs regardless of whether or not I was there.

So I gravitated towards one young person in particular. A guy named [Alexin]. He was 12 at the time, being initiated into a gang called MS13. I got to know him, some of his friends. And these are the guys with machetes and guns and driving the violence in this area of Boston.

And the more I got to know him, the more I realized two things. One was that there's this huge gap in services for this most extreme end of the spectrum of at risk youth. And most important, I

also learned that although they're making at times really bad decisions, the decisions they were making were based on the logic of the circumstances they were in. And even more so than that, based on this love for each other that they couldn't find anywhere other than the streets. So at the time, really just build a [inaudible 06:33]. I was also a part-time personal trainer. I got certified through the National Academy of Sports Medicine. And really started to fall in love with personal training and the science of weight training, especially the biomechanics of the Olympic lifts. And it just so happened, by talk to Alexin and his friends, weight training was if nothing else, a common interest that could at least could get them off the streets and into the gym.

But then it quickly became apparent that this could be something that would be much more powerful than weight training in that community building space. And that weight training was just really a hook but that relationship and that community that was forming in the gym was really making the program work.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. And so you went back and got an MBA at that point. And then came back to Boston. I think you set that up in what? 2010?

Jon Feinman. Yup. So the end of the year of AmeriCorps, I lost the logistical support. Everything kind of crumbled to pieces. Lost touch with Alexin. Became a full-time personal trainer and actually started doing really well. I went from an AmeriCorps stipend to making just over 100,000 a year just doing personal training. So that was a nice little change of pace for me. But never really forgot about Alexin and this idea that weight training could be used for something much more powerful in terms of that social impact.

In 2008, applied to Babson to the one year MBA program and leveraged my last semester there in 2010 to start a completely bootstrapped pilot model. We set six hours of gym space. Going in two hours a day on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday. Some volunteer coaches and decide to see what we could do. By the end of the first three months, we'd grown from four to over 50 students. Which allows us to start talking to some of the foundations and not just telling them what we want to do, but what we were doing. So we were able to get some seed money that way.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. And you now have your own facility in Dorchester there as we had talked about earlier. How many folks do you have involved? How many students do you have now involved in the program?

Jon Feinman. We've got 119 enrolled students. But that doesn't include – so for instance, one of our students, Dennis, he brings in his one year old son, his three year old son, his two sisters. So we actually work with a lot more than the 119 that we have enrolled.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. All the other folks that come along, right?

Jon Feinman. Exactly.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Yeah. So how do people find out about your program? I mean, how do you recruit these students? Do you advertise? Do you have signs on the building? What do you do?

Jon Feinman. So we actually purposely don't have any signs on the building. We don't disclose any location publically because we do work with rival gangs. And the last thing we want is for someone to know where someone else is that we don't want to have that information. So in terms of the student focus, we do get referrals from probation. A lot at this point is word of mouth. There aren't a whole lot of programs out there that work with this population. Once that initial group of students saw that not only were we going to work with them but we weren't going to kick them out, they started telling their friends. And their friends started telling their friends. So it's largely based on word of mouth.

[10:01]

But again, we do get referrals from probation, from lawyers. In terms of personal training client sides, one thing we do is set up these breakfast events where corporation will host a breakfast in one of their conference rooms. Usually it's 10 to 30 people. We'll bring several of our students. I'll talk from three to five minutes and the students share their stories. And it's just Q&A with the audience. And oftentimes, we start getting personal training clients through that. So they'll come to the gym. They'll train with a student. And people end up leaving that with just a great workout. All of a sudden, this story and this very direct positive impact on a young person's life. And they tell their friends and then their friends come in. And very similar to the students, it ends up becoming this huge word of mouth campaign.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. You said, I think, in one of your interviews that the toughest part of the day for you is when you turn off the lights and close the gym at night. Why is that?

Jon Feinman. So we also completely understand that as great as the gym might be and as much direct work as we can do, end of the day our students still have to go back to that same street where everything is going wrong for them. And now it's where it's out of our control, whether the student does it right or what the student does it wrong. It's something that at that point, we don't have much control over. And it's just kind of fingers crossed.

And one of the things that makes the personal training so impactful is all of a sudden, the young people in our program are talking to people that they'd never otherwise talk to. And those people get to know them on this very personal level. And it starts to extend that same positive community building inside the gym beyond the gym. But it's not until that shifting community and community perception takes place that our students go home to that same hope and opportunity. That's where it truly becomes sustainable. So again, it's the scariest part of the day but also comes with the – the greatest chance for a wide-scale systemic change to occur as well.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Would you like to tell the audience a little bit about your first client? The student that you first got involved with and how that story really reflects and illustrates the things that you were just talking about. That at the end of the day, these folks all go back to where they were at.

Jon Feinman. Sure. So Alexin, who I mentioned earlier, is that young person who I kind of gravitated towards during that year of AmeriCorps. Even though I lost touch with him, I never forgot about him. And at the end of my fall semester Babson getting my MBA, I went back to that same area of Boston and just tried to pitch my idea and see if I could grab a couple of students to get involved. As I'm walking back, I hear this voice behind me go, "Yo Jon. What's up?" I turn around – Alexin. And we talked. He'd just gotten out of jail. He was coming back from another open court case that he had. He became my first enrolled student. Two weeks later, he was stabbed seven times but survived. We set up a barbell in his basement and just started doing some real light work as he was able to. Showed up to court with him in January of 2010 to have his curfew pushed back to he could come to the other gym while we were borrowing space from.

Started getting involved in and fell in love not just with weight training and the Olympic lifts but with the community. He started bringing his friends into the gym. That summer of 2010, he was shot – survived. Had a child on the way; had to drop out of school. All these things were kind of stacked up against him. And really to the credit of Alexin and many of our students and our coaching staff, he didn't slip back into the streets. Despite all that, in the fall of 2010, he was out of court and off probation for the first time in five years. In 2012, he held a full-time job for the first time in his life. He was starting to get re-engaged in a [DV 14:19] program.

And then sadly, June 22nd, I'm in a meeting. I see a couple of missed calls from his girlfriend. I didn't too much of it just because I was supposed to meet up with him the next day to watch one of the Euro Cup soccer games. And then I see a text message from our program director saying to call him ASAP. Call him. Call his girlfriend and Alexin had been coming back from work the night before. Went out to get food for his daughter and girlfriend and walked by a group of young people that he had some past encounters with and he was stabbed to death. And as sad as it was, and still is, his story is what makes us so proud.

[15:07]

Not just of Alexin and the change that he made, but the change that all of our students are trying to make, regardless of how far along they are in that stage of development and where they're at in life, Because for them to change their lives around, because of the past decisions that they've unfortunately made and most if not all regret, that risk is always out there. And the courage it takes to do right, knowing that every time you step outside that door, your life is at risk is something that is fortunately I don't have to experience but I have the utmost respect for. And it's something that keeps us all going through the good times and bad times.

That gym becomes that centerpiece where people can go laugh, smile, have fun and if nothing else even for a couple of hours a day or for eight hours, ten hours a day it's a place where you don't have to think about the reality that exists beyond those walls.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Have you ever been personally fearful for your own safety as you develop these programs?

Jon Feinman. No. That being said, we aren't naïve to the risk that's associated. But understanding the risks and doing what you can to mitigate it ends up becoming not just part of what you do day in and day out, it's what keeps everything safe. Because if you either choose to ignore the risk or if the risk becomes overwhelming, then you end up making decisions that end up putting everyone at risk. Rather than accepting that's what goes into working with the population, but there's a lot that can be done to mitigate. Like for instance, not putting up any signs and not disclosing locations publically. So we're very careful to make sure we do whatever we can do to mitigate that risk. And whenever it can't, you kind of accept that you've done everything you can and learn from any mistakes that might be made along the way. And to date, we haven't had a single incident at any of our gyms.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Fabulous. You say, "Any of our gyms." Do you have more than one location or is it just one location?

Jon Feinman. We have one location that's ours. So we're there Monday through Saturday. And then we've got two locations where we collaborate with. So we're there for a few hours a day where we're able to work with young people who are from rival streets from the young people in our main location. And although those places are great for building that relationship, unfortunately the impact there isn't quite as high without that personal training component and that extended service component where we can have guys in there 40, 50, 60 hours a week. But it's a good starting point while we continue to grow to scale.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. This is a great program. It sounds like you made huge progress over the first few years of the existence. So what's your plans for the future? If you had to dream five years out, what would you like to see the ultimate thing happening?

Jon Feinman. So we'd like to have a strong presence in every major city that's affected by gang violence. We are in the process of trying to figure out – codified what can be codified. Understand what aspects might be more relationship driven and therefore would be more difficult to codify. And then have that going into an identification process for staff and an onboarding process that can help set up our staff to have as much success as we can with each student as an individual.

So our goal is to be able to replicate. There's still some work we need to do to be able to do that both funding-wise and in terms of the infrastructure. That certainly is our major goal. And our vision is to end widespread coordinated youth violence. So we might never stop the one off

fights that happen in high school and college nor is it our intention to stop that. But gang violence often has a much more systemic cause. And it's kind of highlighted in how isolated and segregated our students tend to be.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. It's been an honor talking to you today, Jon, and really, congratulations on your efforts. And I am really pleased to talk to people that have the passion and the drive that you have out there. That's just a great testament. What you're doing is a great testament to your passion and we wish you the best of luck. And as we come to the close here of our podcast, we always give our guest an opportunity to give our listeners a take home message. What do you want them to remember from this podcast?

[20:00]

Jon Feinman. I think the biggest message is we see day in and day out with our students is simply not to write anyone off. No matter how severe or tragic the circumstance might be, to keep giving those young people an opportunity. They might not be ready to take it just now but if we take away that opportunity for good, then they're never going to change. And eventually, when they are ready to take that opportunity we just have to be patient and be there for them when they are. And again, it's going to come down to there's no work we can do by ourselves that's gonna take of that systemic change. That has to be on us as a society to not give up on these young people. To make sure that the opportunities do stay available, regardless of whether or not they're ready for them. And to be by their side, not just in the good times but in the bad times as well.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Great take home message. And I think it'll resonate with our audience very well. Again, thank you for being with us today, Jon.

Jon Feinman. Thank you so much for the opportunity. Again, nothing we do works without people like yourselves getting involved in spreading the message. So thank you.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. And before we sign off, we are going to make a little more time here. How do people get involved? If they want to get involved and help out.

Jon Feinman. One of the best ways to get involved and help out is for anyone who lives in Boston is to come in and get a personal training session. It's \$20.00. Goes right to the student and goes a long way in not just giving them a job but impacting their life. The other way is just simply to send us an email online at innercityweightlifting.org and our staff will forward that onto whoever the correct person. So whether it's someone looking to get more involved with the program, financing/accounting, funding – we would forward that on to the appropriate person at the organization.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. And we'll make sure that website is in our show notes for people to find as well.

Jon Feinman. Thank you so much.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Your welcome. So thank you all for being with us today and listening to this podcast. Regular listeners of our podcast know that at this point we have our podcast question of the week. And here with our podcast question is one of our producers, Cheryl.

Sheril. What are the three stages of development for students at InnerCity Weightlifting?

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Super question. And be the first one to send us the correct answer via email at huffinespodcast@hlkn.tamu.edu and you'll win one of our nifty podcast t-shirts. Those are going fast so make sure you send us your email response as soon as you can. And once again, Jon – thank you for being with us today. And I want to thank all of you for taking the time to download us and listen. And I hope that you join us next week for another interesting person in the world of sports medicine and human performance. And until then, we hope that you stay active and healthy.

[Conclusion]

[24:03]

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