



Ibtihaj Muhammad: A New Frontier for Fencing

Ibtihaj Muhammad competes in fencing. Fencing is a sport where people compete with swords. Muhammad sends a strong message to minorities everywhere.

“I want them to know that nothing should hinder them from reaching their goals - not race, not religion, not gender,” she said.

Muhammad is a practicing Muslim of African-American descent. It has not been easy for her to practice her sport. She is now one of the world's top-ranked athletes in women's saber. Saber is a type of fencing.

Muhammad's religion teaches her to be modest. She dresses in a special way. This makes it difficult to combine religion with sports.

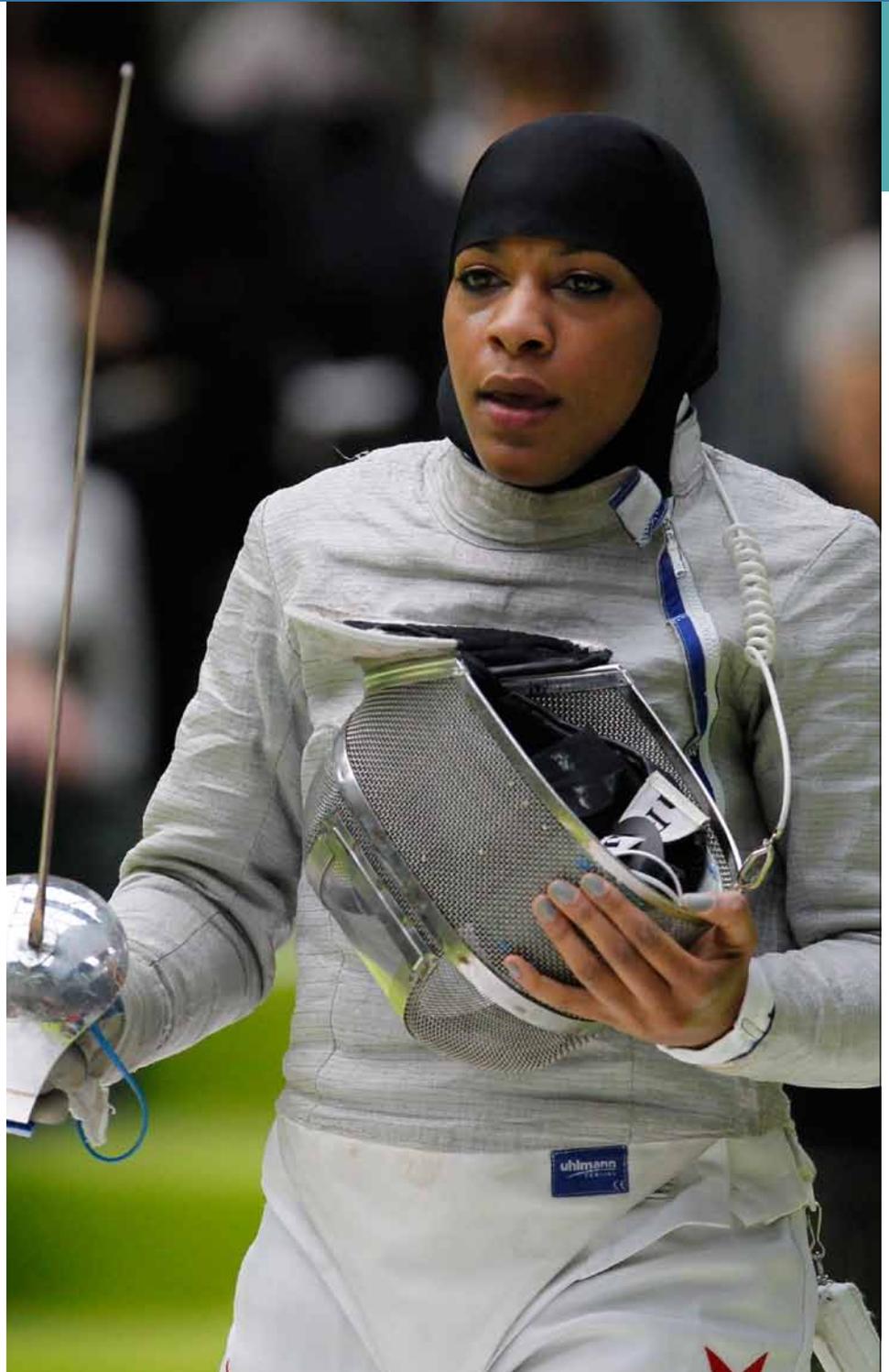
UNIQUELY ACCOMMODATING

Muhammad's parents always wanted their children to play sports. They thought sports were good. Sports keep people physically and socially active.

By middle school, Muhammad did many sports. She swam and ran track. She also played volleyball. But her mom had to make her a new uniform for each sport.

“I remember the feeling of being different from my friends because of my modest dress,” Muhammad said.

One day Muhammad and her mother saw young girls fencing at



Take a deep breath: Ibtihaj Muhammad holds her helmet moments after defeating opponent Ekateri Diatchenko of Russia. They are at the 2010 World Fencing Championships. AP Images/Francois Mori

the local high school. They knew immediately it was a good sport for Muhammad. She would not need a special uniform.

Fencing is a combat sport. It has one-on-one sword contests. Competitors wear head-to-toe protective clothing. For Muhammad, the necessary clothing makes the sport “uniquely accommodating.” The fencing uniform lets Muhammad stick to Islam. In fencing, she is not different from the other athletes.

“What is so cool about my involvement in fencing is I was able to find a sport that embraced my religious beliefs and my desire to wear a hijab,” she explained. “My desire to wear hijab brought me to a sport that I love, but probably would have never discovered otherwise.”

Muhammad is the first Muslim athlete to wear a head scarf and compete for the United States. And she might be the first Muslim to



U.S. teammates, from left: Mariel Zagunis, Ibtihaj Muhammad, Dagmara Wozniak and Daria Schneider. They pose on the podium at the 2011 World Fencing Championship. AP Images/Antonio Calanni

represent the United States in an international competition.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Muhammad said her successful fencing career shows that “the hijab is not an obstacle.”

She works at the Peter Westbrook Foundation in New York. This foundation is a not-for-profit organization. It uses fencing to help inner-city youth develop life skills.

Muhammad went to the foundation when she was a young fencer. She went for conditioning and footwork classes. She now mentors other young fencers - mostly minorities and young women.

“I want to be their example that anything is possible with perseverance,” Muhammad said

TRAINING FOR SUCCESS

Muhammad volunteers at the foundation. She also trains 30 hours

per week at the Fencers Club in New York. She spends another four hours conditioning in New Jersey.

Muhammad wrote about herself for USA Fencing. She said that fencing has taught her “how to aspire higher, sacrifice, work hard and overcome defeat.”

Fencing has taught her the rewards of hard work. Fencing has also given Muhammad opportunities she would not have had without it.

In 2007, Muhammad graduated from Duke University. She has a bachelor’s degree in international relations and African-American studies. She also has a minor in Arabic. She is a three-time NCAA All-American fencer. This award is given to the best college athletes in each sport.

Muhammad has earned many honors in her fencing career. But there is one honor she still hopes to achieve. She wants to represent the United States in the Olympics.

All-American: Ibtihaj Muhammad smiles after winning a bronze medal. This is the 2011 World Fencing Championship in Italy. AP Images/Antonio Calanni

