

Pierson Grads Find Their Niche In World Of Fitness



PHOTO GALLERY

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By Frank S. Costanza

The parallels between Antonio Waldo Jr. and Antoine Waldo only begin with the similarity of their names. Naturally gifted athletes, both brothers spent their early years in Virginia before moving with their mother, Adrienne, and two younger siblings to Sag Harbor as pre-teens following their parents' divorce.

Both Antonio, 32, and Antoine, now 31, found solace as teenagers in the weight room at Pierson High School, from which they graduated in 2005 and 2006, respectively.

Both would go on to have successful careers in the field of physical fitness, though they would follow divergent paths.

For Antonio, a debilitating injury would eventually force him down a familiar road. For Antoine, an early and clear understanding of his limitations—both physically and financially—would offer direction that continues to shift and evolve.

Today, Antonio manages Flywheel Sports East Hampton, a cycling and fitness studio, roughly three years after he convinced management to give him a shot. He found success less than 10 years after hurting his back so badly at another job, in a different field, that he was told he'd have to choose between spinal surgery or relying on a walking cane for the rest of his life.

His brother, Antoine, has spent the past decade building his personal training business, Hampton's Fitness Training LLC, while formulating plans to both earn his bachelor's degree and find a permanent South Fork location to house his company.

In addition to working as a certified personal trainer and functional strength coach—he has clients in both the Hamptons and New York City—Antoine teaches boxing and is himself training with plans of entering the competitive ring before summer's end.

"We're both in the fitness industry, and we both help people through fitness," Antoine said. "The connection is, we're both trying to help people and serve people in the Hamptons."

And each credits the other for his individual success, saying their time spent together in

the Pierson weight room some 15 years ago, and the lessons learned there, drives them in overcoming adversity, and pushes them to constantly challenge themselves.

Still, the paths taken by the siblings could not be more different.

Divergent Paths

Though he acknowledges that Antoine is more athletic, Antonio points out that he was the one who introduced his younger brother to the sport of weightlifting when both roamed the halls at Pierson. He recalls his younger brother, who was 14 or 15 at the time, struggling to find a release after pulling back the reins on his basketball aspirations.

“He always played sports and, in high school, I started lifting with other friends,” recalled Antonio, who’s now 6 feet tall and weighs between 185 and 190 pounds. “Technically, we started lifting for the first time when we were younger, with our father ... back in Virginia.

“I started lifting again in high school. Part of it was because I was short and [Antoine] was taller,” he continued. “Now he’s bigger than me, even though I’m taller.”

Antoine explained that he had been playing organized basketball since the sixth grade and had grown frustrated by the lack of a supporting cast on the hardwood in Sag Harbor, not to mention his slowly fading chances of earning a college scholarship. A lack of financial resources—he notes that money was tight for his family, never allowing him to take private lessons or attend summer camps to hone his skills—also led him to stray from a sport he once loved.

“In seventh grade, I had two guys in my grade who were over 6 feet, and I was still playing center or forward,” said Antoine, who estimated that he was 5 foot 6 at the time and preferred playing either shooting or point guard. “By that point, I realized I wasn’t going to get where I was going to need to be ... so I began prepping for college.”

In addition to making post-high school plans, Antoine began joining his brother in the weight room and quickly became obsessed with his new hobby. He would soon land a part-time job at a private gym in Southampton and, most days, could be found working out when he wasn’t in class.

“I fell in love with working out,” said Antoine, who now stands 5 foot 9 and weighs 188 pounds, though he’s cutting weight for an upcoming boxing match. “The gym was like my second home.”

Still, Antoine says he applied and earned entry into Duke University, which he described as his “dream school,” but realized his slim chances of making the basketball team there, as well as his inability to cover tuition. He ended up enrolling at Morehouse University in Georgia, but withdrew before earning his degree and moved back to the East End. He once again found himself contemplating what to do with his life.

“I was getting older and I was becoming more realistic,” Antoine said. “I knew I wanted to do something in athletics, but I didn’t know how I was going to accomplish that without actually being involved with athletics, like being on a team or doing some sort of sports.”

And then it hit him: He could make a career for himself as a personal trainer.

Antoine has spent the past decade since then building his business, originally called Right Body Fitness, and solidifying his reputation. He creates specific workout regimens for his clients, whom he meets at gyms and fitness centers across the South Fork, as well as in Manhattan. He is close to finalizing the required paperwork to officially rename his firm Hampton’s Fitness Training LLC, and is already tentatively scoping potential locations that could one day permanently house his business.

Antoine credits his older brother, Antonio, for showing him a path that he would pursue later in life—and for wresting back control of his own life when faced with a crippling injury.

Salvation Through Necessity

Similar to Antoine, Antonio tried his hand at college, opting to study business at Stony Brook University. He never finished his degree, explaining that a need to provide for his family—more specifically, his now ex-wife and their two children, 12-year-old Amaya and 9-year-old Antonio—prompted him to trade in his textbooks for a pair of steady paychecks.

He was in his early 20s and working days at a deli, and afternoons and evenings at a nursing home, averaging nearly 90 hours a week between the two. "I went to work at 5 in the morning and left there at 1, and then worked from 3 to 10 p.m. in the nursing home," Antonio recalled.

He kept up that intense schedule for a few years, until severely injuring his back after misjudging the weight of what he wrongly thought was a light load of laundry. "It was poor body mechanics," he said. "I lifted a bag that I thought had dry towels in it—but it was filled with sopping wet towels.

"I wasn't taking care of myself back then," he continued, explaining that his weight had soared to 250 pounds at the time due to his hectic work schedule. "I was told I might not be able to walk again without a cane. Even at 23, you can mess yourself up pretty good."

He opted against surgery, saying doctors would have had to fuse two of his vertebra at the cost of his mobility. Instead, he received a cortisone shot and began physical therapy.

When insurance stopped paying for treatment, Antonio continued working out on his own—with Antoine providing the guidance. "He came every day and pushed me to work, even though I was hurting and didn't want to," Antonio said.

He slowly shed the additional weight, which likely contributed to his injury, and a short time later returned to his demanding work routine. He stopped working out again and almost immediately paid the price, saying his back began hurting all over again.

That's when he realized he had to make a choice: change his career or get accustomed to being in pain all the time.

So, roughly three years ago, he decided to find a job at a local gym, setting his sights on Flywheel Sports East Hampton. After much convincing—Antonio says he essentially had to "harass" management to give him a chance—he began working there as a facilities and technology coordinator, and was promoted to manager about a year ago.

Antonio says he loves his job and its many benefits, including the constant motivation to work out when not on the clock.

"They say fitness isn't a hobby, it's a lifestyle. And it is," he said. "If you want to have a better quality of living, you need to be fit all the time. You cannot really just work out here and there, and not expect to hit problems down the road.

"I went and got a job at a gym," he continued. "I kept thinking, 'If I was working around fitness, I would be more likely to work out.'"

He was correct, though he did not necessarily expect his interest to build so rapidly. Antonio is now a certified personal trainer, just like his younger brother, though he has not yet taken on any clients. Antonio wants to wait until the right moment to do that—namely, when Antoine opens his own training facility in the Hamptons.

"If I'm going to work with anyone, I would want it to be with him," Antonio said. "Part of the reason I'm off the couch right now, and not walking with a cane, is because of him.

"Who knows where I would have ended up [without him]," he added. "I could have been addicted to opioids or other pain medications right now. I wanted to cry most nights ... there was no way I could lie, sit or stand that felt comfortable. It is easy to see how that can happen to people," he added, referring to opioid addiction.

Antonio now applies his knowledge and personal experience to inspire others, those who think they lack the willpower to get in shape. In addition to his studio's normal clients, he provides guidance to teenagers from local schools, including those students who prefer to lift weights or practice yoga instead of competing in organized sports.

"That's why I do this now," he said, "and I enjoy what I'm doing."

Returning Dividends

Though they don't now enjoy the same solid financial footing as some of their clients, Antoine and Antonio have built their respective reputations by giving back to their hometown.

A member of Sag Harbor's Wamponamoc Masonic Lodge 437, a fraternal philanthropic organization, Antoine volunteers his services to worthwhile causes and organizations. For example, he trains at-risk girls enrolled in the i-Tri program, assisting them as they work

to improve their self-esteem and physical fitness, and volunteers as a boxing class instructor for patients suffering from Parkinson's disease as part of program overseen by Stony Brook Southampton Hospital.

"I really believe in giving back," Antoine said. "I want to build the community. If you're not doing something for people, why should people do anything for you?"

Meanwhile, Antonio has been offering instruction for local students, including those taking Amy Barletta's personal wellness classes at East Hampton High School. She recently took students enrolled in her five personal wellness classes on a field trip to Flywheel Sports. She says they had such a great time, especially with the spin classes led by Antonio, that several later secured memberships at discounted rates offered by Antonio.

"They loved his enthusiasm and his energy," Ms. Barletta said of her students. "Many students are intimidated to go into these kinds of places ... and for them to open up their doors to us was an amazing experience."

Ms. Barletta, who takes a boxing class taught by Antoine at Truth Training in East Hampton every week, said she's impressed by the energy of the siblings. "If you take [Antoine's] class, he really kicks your butt," she said. "It's a phenomenal workout. It is not for the faint-hearted."

Like his brother, Antoine thoroughly enjoys working where he lives, which is why he intends to open his own fitness studio on the East End one day, and earn his bachelor's degree in exercise science.

But don't make the mistake of calling his vision a "dream."

"I'm going to accomplish all of those things," Antoine said. "I want to have a gym in the Hamptons—and that's going to happen."

"That gym ... it will represent a young black man doing something positive in the area, for the community," he said. "It's just not about the gym—it's so much more than that for me."



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