Sports — Blacks Stick It To 'Em!

Nikki Tomlinson-Franke

At ease is fencing champion Ruth White at home.

By American standards, they are world class. But that doesn't mean much because American standards are not very high when compared to many other parts of the world.

For that reason, fencers in the United States receive little or no media attention; black fencers, none whatsoever.

That is why names like Nikki Tomlinson Franke, Ruth White, Bert Freeman and Peter Westbrook are no more than that: names.

In American fencing circles, however, each of these athletes has won considerable respect.

This is especially true of the two women, Franke and White. Both have scored numerous victories in international competition. Both have represented the United States in Olympic Games. Yet, both have gone virtually unnoticed in media coverage.

A native of New York City, Franke scored a silver medal in the Pan Am Games of 1975, and led the U.S. women's team to a bronze in the same competitions.

Despite her work as physical education instructor at her alma mater, Temple University, Nikki found time to earn a place on the American team for the aborted 1980 Olympics.

Nikki was on the unplaced U.S. team in Montreal in 1976, and would have gone to the Moscow Games in 1980, if the White House had not ordered a boycott. Ruth competed at Munich in 1972, which was the high point of an outstanding career — one which has won her nomination to the Maryland State Athletic Hall of Fame.

The following year Nikki was a member of the U.S. women's team at both the World University Games and at the Montreal Olympics. In 1979, her efforts gave Uncle Sam the bronzes in both individual and team foils.

Freeman and Westbrook also have Olympic Games competition in their stats, Bert in foils in 1972-76, and Peter in sabre in 1976 and 1980.

Freeman, now a U.S. Marine Corps captain fenced foils for Uncle Sam in Munich in 1972, and in Montreal in 1976.

He was a four-time member of the American team in the world championships between 1968 and 1978.

Westbrook is sort of "odd-man-out" in that the 31-year-old St. Louis native competes with sabre, a heavier curved weapon as opposed to the lighter lance-like instrument known as the foil.

However, Peter is no less talented than his associates in this piece. In fact, the IBM specialist may be regarded as the most impressive achiever.

By Sam Lacy

In addition to winning Olympic berths in 1976 and 1980, Westbrook captured national sabre titles in 1974 and 1975; the bronze in the Pan Am Games of 1975, and the silver in the 1979 Pan Am.

While there may be a number of others who have escaped AFRO attention, at least one black is among an array of promising youngsters eyeing top-class recognition in women's foils.

She is Baltimorean Judy Gilbert, a 20-year-old junior member of the William and Mary College foils team, which won the state title last year.

Whether Judy will become more serious about the sport and seek individual honors leading to next year's Olympics depends on her progress in the final term of her W and M career. Otherwise, she intends to pursue a masters degree in marine science.

Aside from Olympian's status, Ruth White boasts a long list of accomplishments.

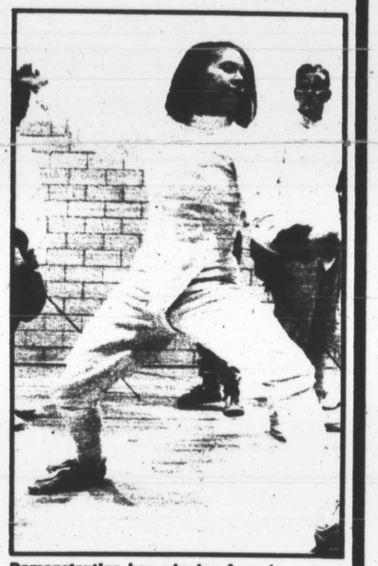
Beginning fencing at age 15, she had won four major championships before her 19th birthday. At age 17, she became the youngest person (and the first black) to win the U.S. national women's title in 1969.

In 1972, after capturing the women's national collegiate title, Ruth was installed as the No. 1 fencer on the U.S. women's foils team for Munich.

Before and since (until her retirement in 1973), White won five Maryland state titles, North Atlantic under-19 sectional crowns, and placed in six assorted international tournaments.

It is likely that many newcomers to the sport have been overlooked in this piece, and that others will crop between this writing and next August when the Olympics will offer a stage.

If not, perhaps here is an incentive.



Demonstrating her winning form is Ruth White.

Judy Gilbert with William & Mary College fencing team.

Peter Westbrook (sabre)