

★★ THEIR LIFE COACH

Aljamain Sterling teaches kids the ways to wrestle with reality

BY JIMIN KIM

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In the basement of Uniondale High School, Aljamain Sterling, 26, pins Najee Hall's head down on a tattered black wrestling mat. Hall, 16, grunts and tells Sterling he's weak. Sterling smiles.

Sterling, an undefeated professional fighter in the world's largest mixed martial arts organization — the Ultimate Fighting Championship — for the past two years has juggled fighting in a cage with coaching the wrestling team of Uniondale High School.

Sterling says he sees it as a higher calling: mentoring students in the Uniondale Knights wrestling room and helping to shape boys at risk of falling through society's cracks into young men with promising futures.

"The joking keeps the atmosphere light," said Sterling, who grew up in the community and graduated in 2007 from Uniondale High School. "It keeps everyone happy even if it's a grueling workout."

While the Uniondale wrestlers value having a professional athlete coaching them, they also see Sterling, who has an 11-0 fighting record, as one of their own.

"He's weird, he's not like a normal coach," Hall said. "He's more like somebody we know because he's close to our age."

Sterling, known as "Aljo" by his nearly 35 high school wrestlers, lives about a three-minute drive from the school. To his students, and their parents, his coaching role is vital.

Hall's father, Richard Hall, said the discipline of wrestling has kept his son on the high school honor roll and in pursuit of a college wrestling scholarship. "He has taken school more seriously," Hall, 42, said about his son. Najee Hall is entering his junior year and has goals to study education and to participate in the wrestling program at SUNY Cortland where Sterling graduated as a two-time Division III All-American wrestler.

"He realized that if he puts



Professional fighter Aljamain Sterling coaches Uniondale High School's Alex Kemp, 16, center, as he wrestles Damion Nelson, 22, Friday in Garden City. ■ Video: newsday.com/mma

hard work into anything, the better results he'll get," Richard Hall said.

With the right coaches, other sports such as basketball and football also help develop young players. Jonathan Jefferson, the Uniondale school district's athletic director, said wrestling truly tests a person's resolve.

"There is a separation [from other sports] in the fact that it's so extraordinarily grueling," said Jefferson, 46. "You're out there one on one and you might get pinned in front of a crowd. It's a grueling sport and it takes a certain personality to handle that kind of rigor."

Sterling said he discovered wrestling in the 10th grade and the sport became his obsession, helping him avoid joining a gang like one of his older brothers.

"I just want to pay it forward," Sterling said, wearing a blue shirt with his fighting nickname, "Funk Master," brandished in

white on the front. Under it are logos of five sponsors supporting his fighting career.

"I wouldn't feel right unless I was working with the kids and giving back to those guys to let them know what it feels like to have someone by your side, behind you, backing you and pushing you the entire time," he said.

Carlos Hernandez, 14, said Sterling motivates him to excel both in and outside the gym. Hernandez has improved his grades since joining Sterling's team last year when he started high school. He said he barely passed eighth grade.

"I was always getting into trouble in class and wrestling changed me," Hernandez said. "Before, I thought I really didn't need to go to college. But now I think college can get me far in life."

Sterling also has someone who pushes him: Ray Longo, 57, his mixed martial arts train-

er. Longo, a Syosset resident, said Sterling relieves stress after enduring brutal training sessions by coaching the Uniondale wrestlers. "There is life after mixed martial arts as much as we don't want to think about it and you better be prepared for it," he said.

Sterling takes his wrestlers to train at Longo's mixed martial arts gym in Garden City on Fridays.

As the high school wrestlers prepare for the coming season, which starts in November, Sterling has goals of his own. He hopes to win the UFC championship next year and not let it affect his time guiding his students to titles of their own.

"At the end of the day, I know I'm not Superman," Sterling said. "I try to at least allow myself to get pulled in different directions, to lend an ear to some of my kids and do the best I can to help those guys out."

Police: Suspect detained in killing

BY NICOLE FULLER AND ELLEN YAN

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A woman was in Nassau police custody late last night in connection with the stabbing death of an Oceanside woman earlier in the day, police said.

Neither the victim nor the suspect was identified by police.

Det. Capt. John Azzata, commanding officer of the Nassau Homicide Squad, said police were working with the district attorney's office on filing charges.

The Nassau district attorney's office declined to comment late last night.

Azzata would not reveal the relationship between the victim and the suspect. But "it's not a random act," Azzata said. "The community has nothing to be afraid of."

Azzata said Fourth Precinct officers responded at about 12:48 p.m. yesterday to Terrell Avenue in Oceanside after a report of an assault. Officers found a woman bleeding "profusely" from the neck, he said.

She was pronounced dead at a hospital at about 2:55 p.m., Azzata said.

Azzata declined to detail her injuries and said more information would be released this morning.

Neighbor Kerriann Prisco, 24, said she heard a commotion yesterday afternoon while she was hanging out in her backyard pool on nearby Charles Street.

"I was in my pool and I heard a scream," she said. "It was just a yell."

A few minutes later, she said, she heard sirens and helicopters overhead.

She said detectives interviewed her about what she heard.

"They didn't tell me anything," said Prisco, a student. "They just told me someone got stabbed."

Neighbors said the victim was an older woman who lived by herself.