

Sports

Black youth aspire to compete in euro-centric sport

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Vanessa Clark began with a "back grab." In this one elegant move her legs went into the air in a perfect vertical with her toes pointing directly to the ceiling. Throwing up two white clubs in musical harmony while going into a ground flip, her entire routine was a combination of breathtaking flexibility and gymnastic style. For 11-year-old Clark this is second nature, but, it isn't for everyone.

Predominantly a European sport, rhythmic gymnastics is a unique mixture of gymnastics, ballet, theatrical dance and manipulation of various apparatuses. While slowly gaining popularity within the United States, the sport is even slower to gain African American participation.

Rhythmflex in Gaithersburg, Va., is the only rhythmic gymnastics team in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. The team has three young African-American girls aspiring to compete within the euro-centric sport: Vanessa Clark (level seven), Selena Wiborski (level nine) and Mackenzie Jean-Philippe (level five.)

Each of the girls is tall, lean and flexible which is the dominant body type amongst girls



Vanessa Clark, 11, a Black member of Rhythmflex, the only rhythmic gymnastics team in the Washington, D.C., area, shows off some moves.

and women in the sport.

"The girls are legs from the neck down and very graceful," said Rhonda Clark, mother of Vanessa Clark. "They prance into a room with their heads held high. When a rhythmic girl walks into a room they have a glow. It's beautiful."

At a young age the girls have learned dedication that carry over from their sport to their school and home lives. Clark is an honor roll student and keeps up her grades in order to stay in the sport.

"It's teaching them how to juggle responsibility. She knows she can't slack in school if she wants to stay into the sport," said Rhonda Clark. "It makes her more comfortable in school

because of the confidence she's gained from being in front of the judges."

Unlike others their age, the girls, through rhythmic gymnastics, develop discipline skills and build positive char-



acteristics. On average, each of the girls practice 20 hours a week, four to five days a week.

"I've learned time management," said Clark who is in the seventh grade. "We go to school, then my mom picks me

up to go to practice"

Wiborski, who will be starting the ninth grade in the fall, said regardless of the physically consuming aspect of the sport, she loves rhythmic gymnastics because of the physical fitness developed through routines and practicing.

"I get to stay healthy," said Wiborski. "I get to travel all over the nation and competitions are satisfying when I feel like I've done well."

"Young girls, especially in rhythmic gymnastics, understand the importance of physical fitness when they are young. When girls participate before 10-12 years old they are more likely to do better in school, not get pregnant, not get involved with drugs, and have better self confidence and body image," said Wendy Hilliard, who became the first Black to earn a spot on the six woman U.S. rhythmic gymnastics international team.

When it comes to the lack of African Americans in the sport of rhythmic gymnastics, Hilliard admits it presents a difficulty for young girls.

"Being in the situation when you're the minority is more challenging," she said. Hilliard recalled her days as a young Black rhythmic gymnast. "In the end it made me much more aware of how the world works and how you have to fight. You

must be 10 times better and it takes 10 times more effort. It's not necessarily a bad thing" added Hilliard. "It just makes you more prepared for the next situation you have to handle."

Rhythmic gymnastics competitions are separated into age groups of juniors and seniors. Juniors are all girls under 16 and seniors are those 16 and over. At the junior championships for rhythmic gymnastics 2006 there was only a total of three African-American participants: Tyler Rosemond, Naomi Moore and Britney Bartley.

One of the reasons the sport has been slow to gain momentum with African Americans, specifically in urban areas, is the high cost entailed in participation. Parents have to pay for practice hours at the gym, shoes, travel expenses, competition leotards and apparatuses used during their routines.

Both Wiborski and Clark's parents have mastered various money saving techniques to keep their daughters in the sport. They recycle leotards and apparatuses selling them to one another as the young girls sprout up and quickly outgrow their sizes.

"It's a financial struggle," said Rhonda Clark. "I love her in the sport and she loves the sport. I do it for her so that she can advance to the next level."