

## CROWN HILLS - A SUCCESS STORY

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Sporting and academic excellence is at the heart of Leicester's Crown Hills Community College. They're proud to be a specialist sports college and are committed to giving their 1,200 pupils the best possible start in life. That means constantly exploring new opportunities to offer unique experiences to the school community. In 2019, they embarked in an exciting 5-years partnership with British Fencing, a new experience for both organisations and an opportunity to create a lasting legacy for a broad community of young people. This is the story of their remarkable journey from absolute beginners to national competitors.

When Crown Hills Sports Academy Manager, James Giling, was presented with the opportunity to partner with British Fencing, he knew that it was a perfect fit: "Offering fencing within the curriculum allows everyone to have the same opportunity and a fair chance of trying a new sport."

The college became an Official Training Partner under British Fencing's License Partner Programme (LPP). The LPP was developed in 2016 to give organisations the opportunity to deliver a range of fencing activities, coaching delivery and courses. James and his fellow staff members received full training and support to deliver a whole school approach to fencing and give everyone in the school the opportunity to experience the sport.

Fencing is in the PE curriculum for junior students, there's plastic fencing swordplay at lunchtime and afternoon clubs, and there are dedicated sessions for their gifted and talented students. At all times there's a real determination to create fun, accessible experiences for pupils, staff and the broader school community. James Giling and his team work closely with their Sports Academy pupils to build their fencing skills and confidence. This is only possible thanks to the Core Coach training they received from British Fencing.

Engaging younger members of their community is achieved through British Fencing's Primary School Resource Pack (PSRP). It's a complete personal development programme that is Ofsted aligned and goes beyond the PE syllabus to offer pupils of all ages and abilities a fun new experience. The resource pack includes 36 lesson plans aimed at pupils through Years 1 to 6. Top tips, fun facts, videos and the Explore Fencing App combine to give teachers a flexible way to introduce their pupils to learn core fencing and life skills in a fun way.

As well as using their coaching skills to deliver training to their own pupils, Crown Hills is accredited to deliver the PSRP and the Core Coach course to other schools in Leicestershire, offering the wider community a broad range of fencing experiences, and making the college a key player in the development of school fencing. James said about the work with local schools: "We're fortunate to have a

fantastic network of primary schools which have come up for sports festivals at the school where they've been able to experience fencing, which they've loved. The resource packs themes of pirates and sword fighting is fantastic. It really encapsulates the fun element of fencing and is quite easy to take part in. It's a really good resource."

Until fencing was first introduced into Crown Hills, for the vast majority of students fencing was completely uncharted territory. There was a new language to learn. New unfamiliar equipment to get used to. And, of course, there was an unavoidable preconception: "The initial reaction from my family when I told them I was going to be fencing was how posh it is, said Crown Hills student Hamza. This is partly because it's more commonly associated with independent schools but also because of the high cost of the equipment needed to participate competitively. "Normally fencing is something that you do at a private school rather than a public school like ours. So you wouldn't expect it. It's different", said another student, Khadija.

But those perceptions were largely forgotten when Hamza, Khadija and other Crown Hills Sports Academy students were introduced to the sport during a taster session. During the session, the pupils had their first opportunity to see a demonstration from experienced fencers. Seeing the cut and thrust of fencing at such close quarters grabbed their attention and created a new level of interest in this 'new' sport. "We got kitted up then we saw this guy do a demonstration and he did this really huge lunge. I'd never seen anyone do that before, I was so shocked, it was breath-taking and I was just like, 'whoa, that was just so cool.'", said Natalie.

From the very earliest stages of the programme the ambition was clear - Crown Hills wanted to give their students the best possible experience. And, for James and his colleagues, that meant competing at a national level. They knew that someday, taking a team to the British Schools Teams Championships would represent an important milestone in their fencing journey. To help make that happen and accelerate the fencing education of their Sports Academy Students, Crown Hills invested in a professional coach. With British Fencing's help, Chris Buxton from the Shakespeare Swords Fencing Club was brought into the school for a few hours every Monday morning. With Chris's support the opportunity to compete would come sooner than they'd think.

Up until this point, the Crown Hills fencers' experience was limited to what happened within the confines of the school. There was already a mix of excitement and nervousness about the prospect of competing at the British Schools Teams Championships in London. There was also an appreciation that it would be a big culture shock for the pupils. James wanted to create an opportunity to bridge the gap by arranging a visit to an established fencing club.

That club was Shakespeare Swords based out of King Edwards Grammar School in Stratford-Upon-Avon, Warwickshire. The club has an enviable reputation for supporting everyone from absolute beginners, right through to experienced competitive fencers. This was the first opportunity that the pupils had to see experienced fencers using a competitive level fencing setup. Hamza's thoughts were: "I was pretty nervous when I went there because all these people that were in Stratford had already been doing fencing for a lot longer than we have, but I decided to take it as a learning experience and not be too stressed about it."

And it was also a first for James: “It was a great experience because it was the first time that I used proper electronic fencing equipment. It was a completely new experience for the pupils and was very different to the school environment. All of a sudden having a cable attached to you, and that feeling was very different for students. And, the experience of fencing against someone other than their peers was taken back into training at Crown Hills. The bar was raised and the performances started to increase because there was a lot of mimicking what they saw at the Stratford fencing club.”

The leap to their first competitive accomplishment came only 6 months after first picking up a sabre, when in March 2020 two teams representing Crown Hills nervously made their way to London to compete in the British School Teams Championship. An Under-13s boys team and an Under-13s girls team would put their rapidly growing skills to the test against much more experienced competitors from across the country.

In order to compete, Crown Hills needed to secure competitive level equipment. Buying second hand equipment or borrowing it from a club were considered before help came in from British Fencing’s Official Equipment Supplier Leon Paul. When they heard of everything Crown Hills had accomplished so far, Leon Paul provided significantly discounted equipment, with the school providing a small financial gesture, making it affordable to get new equipment for the students.

Doug Keast, Crown Hills Assistant Principal, sums up the expectations around the school’s first national competition: “Today is just an amazing experience for us, because we never envisaged we’d be competing at this level six months ago. We thought the long term plan would be quite ambitious to compete in a decent way and in 18 months time. So here we are, one year ahead of schedule. It’s a big experience for our students, getting them to look above the parapet type of thinking and really express themselves in this arena against schools from across the whole of the country. We’ve had massive backup from British Fencing. It’s been great having a British Fencing coach helping us kit the children out because there’s quite a lot of kit to put on.”

The eight sabreurs were noticeably quieter as they got suited up and prepared for their first competitive bouts. Hamza recalls how much more nervous he was in London compared with the visit to Stratford: “this time I’d actually be competing against people, some of them with much more experience. But I could see a lot of them were nervous as well so that helped settle my nerves a bit because if they can do it, then so can I”.

They encouraged each other and the moment the first of their peers scored a point there was a sense of collective relief and joy. The nervousness was replaced by excitement. Remarkably, at their very first competitive outing the girls team returned to Leicester proudly clutching their bronze medal. In just 6 months they’d gone from absolute beginners to fierce and successful fencing competitors. Natalie expresses the team’s general feeling: “Everything has been leading up to that and when you finally realised that, wow, you just won a bronze medal, it’s really nice, because all of that work, it paid off. I think that if we were a little bit more confident, we could have done even better, but I’m happy with what we got”. Khadija even had the chance to share that unforgettable moment with her mother, who went to London for the championship. “She was proud of me. She was cheering

everybody on. She was amazed that the school is doing something like this because it's expensive and very different because you don't see people fencing every day, especially at a public school".

Crown Hills are still at the early stages of their fencing journey, but already the impact has been felt throughout the school and the broader community. The young people that have engaged in the programme have new fencing skills and, without knowing it, new life skills as well.

"The biggest difference that springs to mind is confidence", said James. "The Sports Academy pupils are more confident communicating with their peers and adults. They're able to articulate their feelings and what they're thinking. They've also had leadership experience by taking what they've learned and coaching younger children in the school. Seeing the confidence grow in the students has been really good. And, personally, it's given me the kind of freedom and the ability to provide new opportunities for our students. It's allowed time to create new experiences by bringing in the coaches and creating events like Stratford."

Not to mention some incredible life experiences the Sports Academy pupils have had and that will stay with them forever. "Fencing is a great way to spend my time", said Natalie, "because I'm making memories with my friends as well, which is really an important thing for me. Looking back as well, I realise I didn't just waste my time at home, I actually did something with my time and enjoyed myself throughout the last couple of years". Khadija added that "The whole fencing experience has been amazing and just a bit crazy. Because you're holding a sabre, wearing the kit and you're fighting people. It's a combat kind of sport, and you wouldn't expect to play these kinds of games and it's just very different."

Despite the unavoidable disruption caused by the pandemic, everyone involved in the British Fencing and Crown Hills partnership is proud of what they've achieved. Working together, often in very difficult circumstances, plans have been adjusted and the programmes have continued to be delivered. That ability to adapt quickly is essential, because no two schools or partnership will ever be the same. The experience with Crown Hills proves that if there's a common goal and a shared vision, together you can accomplish great things. British Fencing share this story in the hope that Crown Hills success will inspire others to follow in their footsteps and start their own fencing journey.