

Learning Life Skills on the Track

An Interview with Dr. Norbert Sander,
Executive Director and Founder, Armory Foundation



Dr. Norbert Sander at the Armory track

EDITORS' NOTE Dr. Norbert Sander is an internist in Bronx, New York and is affiliated with Montefiore New Rochelle. He received his medical degree from Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University and has been in practice for 43 years.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The Armory Foundation (armoryfoundation.org) oversees the premier indoor track and field center in America. It is committed to serving youth by promoting fitness, a love of sport, and the pursuit of individual excellence by hosting over 100 track meets each year, maintaining the U.S. National Track and Field Hall of Fame, operating the largest after-school activities center in New York, providing college prep and academic counseling services to hundreds of underserved New York City public high school students, and offering a variety of community support programs, all in its world-class facility.

What is the history of the Armory Foundation?

The Armory held its first track meet in 1914 but in those days, they did other things, such as using it as a city-side facility for accounting exams and other sports.

I came here in the 1950s when I was on the Fordham Prep track team. I spent a lot of time here. We had 150 boys on the team and we spent several hours at events. The conditions were primitive, but it was a stepping stone for many of us to attend college.

The people who were running it were focused just on running and they didn't have a broader view of their vulnerability. When we ran into the housing shortage with the homeless in the 1980s, the solution by the mayor at that time was to find places to house the homeless. They didn't consider that this program for running was that important so they plunked 2,000 homeless men here.

The track people, not knowing what to do, ran around them – around the beds where the homeless slept. This lasted for five years until it became impossible, so they had to leave. It was just a homeless shelter until we took it over in 1993.

I had been practicing medicine for years and someone came to my office and asked for help in getting back to the Armory. I was a writer at Sarah Lawrence, and I started writing articles and sent in letters to the editor of *The New York Times*, so we got some attention. Many people thought it would never come back.

But I kept it up, and we soon started to get some traction. There was a court order that said you can't put more than 200 men in an individual shelter, so that downsized it, and then I suggested to the city to build a center for the 200 men where the parking lot used to be.

They put a couple million into building that center, which now has a cafeteria and mental health clinics, and there are bays where the men sleep.

It wasn't long before Mayor Dinkins handed me the key to the Amory. We were here with a huge empty building in terrible shape. But every year, we built it up.

What we started to realize was that kids who went to public schools in New York ended up on the streets, and the ones who ran came from more structured environments and went on to college. So I wanted to learn how to help those kids who didn't have the support.

It's a home-away-from-home. It's safe and orderly.

We started the Armory College Prep program, and the idea was to give the kids advice and prop them up to do better with the SATs and in their schoolwork. We also ran some courses in public speaking, acting, and other areas to bring them around. We have about 200 kids in this program and we graduate 60 or 70 seniors each year. We get every one of them into college. The key here is track. They have to make a commitment to the track team. We try to take that discipline and tell them that after they're here to practice, they stay to do SAT prep, writing, and the financial planning that we offer.

This track experience means something. Ninety-five percent of the kids here will not run in college. The experience of being on the track

team, however, is a great one that the Armory provides, and we try to make it important.

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The other side of it is fitness.

Is this about track or life skills, or are both equally important?

It's about both. What you learn from being on the track team is showing up and giving it your best. The beauty about track is that it's a team sport. The kids love being on a team. When you're on the track, you're alone. But you run around that track full throttle and you know that you gave it your best, and they cheer for you even if you come in dead last. It's a good feeling for anyone to complete their race.

It's also safe. We're getting worried about concussions in other sports. Running is safe because you're not using your head.

The kids in track also seem to be better students.

Also, when the kids come, it's social – they meet kids from all over, and they all get along.

Is there adequate support and awareness for this effort?

I run a tight ship in terms of the finances. However, the answer is no – I don't think society understands the value of this. We can raise money when we talk about college prep. When I say, the kids come after school, they are on a track team, and they learn, since a track coach is such an important educator. But even when trying to raise money for that, it's difficult to.

We have a good financial plan because we have a cash-flow from the people who come here. You have to pay a bit at the door for track meets, and people rent the place and have to pay for it. We do whatever we can to raise money. We have private donations, and sponsorship from New Balance and New York Road Runners. We need it because the cost of running here is not covered by what the schools pay – everybody is subsidized.

Do you ever take some time to look back and appreciate what this organization has achieved?

It's the people who keep supporting us that make us feel good. We can't go wrong. We get pleasure out of that. It doesn't mean we can sleep easy – there is still a lot to do and the political climate is always changing. It's a credit to the city of New York that this works. We're entrusted with this building so we're responsible to make this all work out well. ●