The Power
A place of cinder block and metal, this isn’t a fancy health club. The air is cold. Stacks of dumbbells line the floor, and weight belts and jump ropes hang from the wall. Those coming here don’t expect to hang out. They expect to sweat.

“How you feeling?” calls out Jon Feinman, MBA ’10 (left), to the teens and young men filing through the doors. “You all right?” After exchanging hellos, the visitors go to work, pushing barbells above their heads before dropping the weight to earth. They then bang out pushups on mats that cover the cement floor.

USING SPORTS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE.

By JOHN CRAWFORD
Photography by TOM KATES
Feinman is the founder and executive director of InnerCity Weightlifting, and the young people training at this Boston gym come from the city’s roughest neighborhoods. Some have been stabbed or shot. Not that they’re saints themselves. Many are caught up in the court system and have a history of violence and gang involvement. But here, among the kettlebells and medicine balls, Feinman uses the sport of weightlifting to empower them to leave their violent ways behind and seek out careers. “These kids deserve any chance they can get,” he says.

Feinman is one of several alumni employing sports to make a difference in the lives of youth. To these alumni, including Richard Spurling, MBA ’08, who uses tennis to help children with autism, and David Cohen ’95, who brings equipment to disadvantaged children around the world, sports isn’t just about games. It’s about teamwork and friendship. It’s about discipline and exercise. It’s about self-esteem and hope.

TEACHING TENNIS
Richard Spurling knows about the benefits and joys that sports can bring. He grew up in Belgium playing tennis and eventually competed at the Division I level at Florida Atlantic University. While he tried a career in finance for a few years after college, he realized it wasn’t for him and returned to the sport he loves, becoming an instructor.

Three years ago, he took his love of tennis one step further and co-founded ACE-ing Autism, an organization that provides tennis clinics to children with autism. On a Sunday afternoon, Spurling holds one of these clinics at a Wayland, Mass., fitness facility called The Longfellow Club, which, with its smaller-sized courts, is a place for the young to learn the game. He watches as children and volunteer instructors interact, the familiar pop from rackets smacking tennis balls filling the facility.

Running the clinics requires patience and flexibility. Holding a racquet, looking at the ball, and even standing in one spot takes a lot of concentration for children with autism. “It doesn’t come naturally for kids on the autism spectrum,” Spurling says. “Their brains are wired differently.” Focus is a challenge, especially among the 4- to 6-year-olds. “Some just want to run around the room,” he says. “Some kids lie on the floor. They don’t want to get up.” Noise also can be an issue. “Their senses get overloaded.” One boy wears earplugs.

The clinics may be unpredictable, but they can help these young tennis players in multiple ways, boosting hand-eye coordination, motor development, social skills, attention spans, and self-esteem. At The Longfellow Club, the parents watching their children attest to the growth that’s possible. Jill Stubbs’ son, 7-year-old Will, tried all kinds of different sports, but he was always a step behind the other players. “There was too much competition,” she says. “Bringing him here, he feels good about himself.”

During one of his first clinics, Spurling met 5-year-old Zoe Spiegel. The class was on a clay court, and Zoe grabbed the clay and put it in her mouth. “She’s very impulsive,” says her mother, Mira. “Zoe was his biggest challenge that first summer.” Now 7, Zoe can hit forehands, backhands, and volleys. “She has come a long way,” Spurling says. “It’s amazing to see.”

Spurling began ACE-ing Autism with his wife, Shafali Spurling Jeste, a pediatric neurologist whose research is focused on autism. Wanting to start a nonprofit together, they decided to combine their interests, tennis and autism, after discovering a lack of recreational services
available for children with autism. “We found out that parents are driving all over to find programs,” he says. “This is a big population of kids who are underserved.”

Attending Babson for his MBA, Spurling pitched the idea of ACEing Autism in Elizabeth Thornton’s entrepreneurship class. He still recalls the chief diversity officer’s encouragement. “It gave me this initial push,” he says. He also remembers how entrepreneurship lecturer Bob Caspe challenged him and his classmates. “Look at you guys,” Caspe told them. “You’re sitting in here because you haven’t made it yet. Come up with an idea and run with it.”

That’s exactly what Spurling did. He and his wife began ACEing Autism in the Boston area, and after moving to Los Angeles, they started the program there as well. In the future, Spurling hopes to increase fundraising, expand the program to more cities, and make the organization his full-time job. “We believe in the program so much,” he says. “It has been so rewarding.”

**EQUIPMENT NEEDED**

Go down into the basement of David Cohen’s Framingham, Mass., house, and you’ll feel as if you walked into the inventory room of a sporting goods store. Boxes, bags, and bins of all kinds of equipment, from softballs and soccer balls, to lacrosse sticks and baseball bats, to racquets and wrestling uniforms, fill the space.

Cohen amassed this “buffet of equipment,” as he calls it, for Playing It Forward, which he started in 2008. The nonprofit collects new and used sports equipment and distributes it to disadvantaged children around the U.S. and the globe. “It won’t solve the problems of the world,” says Cohen of his organization. “I’m not trying to cure cancer. I’m not trying to cure diabetes. It’s basic and simple.”

But in its simplicity, Playing It Forward can make a big impact. Some 20,000 children have received equipment from the group so far.

Cohen was between jobs when he started Playing It Forward. Looking for the “next great thing” to do with his life, he found it while watching TV. A documentary showed children in an African shantytown. On a dirty street, they played soccer with a ball made of tape, string, and crumpled bags, and Cohen thought about his own sports-filled childhood, of how he always had access to that most fundamental piece of equipment: a ball. “A ball for these kids would be like winning the lottery,” Cohen thought, looking at the screen. “I should do something about that.”

And so he did. With Playing It Forward, he basically acts as a sports paraphernalia broker, connecting those with equipment to spare to those who need it. He first started soliciting equipment by targeting schools, which often throw out old gear because they don’t have the room for it. He also collects from sports clubs, community organizations, corporations, manufacturers, and individuals, including boys who help Playing It Forward as part of their mitzvah projects.

Once collected, equipment travels across the U.S. and to countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Mexico, and Israel. Cohen often personally delivers equipment locally, visiting New England towns shaken by the recession. Once a year he visits a modest orphanage in Aruba where the basketball hoops have no nets and the fields have no grass. He doesn’t speak the children’s language, but that doesn’t matter. He pulls out a soccer ball, and the children start running and don’t stop. “We all speak the language of sport,” Cohen says.
BACK AT THE GYM

Another day at InnerCity Weightlifting, and the teens and young adults are at it again, working out as pictures of weightlifters look on. More than 160 lifters are involved with InnerCity programs, and in total, they represent some 40 different gangs. Outside the gym, those gangs have carved out large swaths of Boston into their territories, but inside, this is neutral turf. All are welcome. “Everyone is cool,” says Luis Tello, 18, one of the lifters. “You don’t feel threatened. It’s perfect.”

Unfortunately, today brings a sobering reminder of the world waiting outside. “One of our guys got shot last night,” Jon Feinman announces. “We’re trying to figure out what hospital he’s in.” Feinman is saddened by the news but not surprised. “It’s just another day,” he says. Thankfully, the shooting turns out to be only a rumor.

Reducing violence is InnerCity’s mission. About 1 percent of Boston’s youth commits more than 70 percent of the city’s gun violence, Feinman says, so the nonprofit targets the most violent of that 1 percent. It has had success. Since its January 2010 founding with only four lifters, it has grown exponentially, and only 2 percent of participants charged with violent crimes in the past commit such offenses again. Feinman tells of lifters stopping one gang from jumping another because they recognized someone from InnerCity, and of enemy gangs connected through InnerCity arranging a “sit-down” to work out a truce.

Success also can be seen in the lifters’ personal stories. One young man, in and out of jail since his early teens, was shot five times in the torso and left paralyzed. Since coming to InnerCity for upper body workouts, however, he has made progress toward standing again and is considering furthering his education. “His confidence shot through the roof,” Feinman says.

Violence always seemed to hover around another lifter. Through the years, he has been hit with a hammer and baseball bat, shot, and stabbed seven times. Now engaged with InnerCity, he’s no longer involved in gangs or the courts. “He’s found a support system,” Feinman says. The lifter also is studying for his GED and working toward his certification in personal training, which InnerCity pays for to encourage young people to think about careers. The organization provides paid internships as well. “Our students are good people, but as you can tell from their stories, they are going through incredibly difficult situations,” Feinman says.

Feinman got the idea for InnerCity Weightlifting while serving in AmeriCorps at a Boston elementary school. He dealt with gang members, saw the tough circumstances in which they grew up and the violent things they did, and realized that many had a common interest in weightlifting. Later, Feinman made a good living as a personal trainer, but he didn’t forget about the gang members he knew. He earned his Babson MBA to better understand how to run a nonprofit, and he recruited in gang areas, giving his new organization’s “elevator pitch” while playing basketball with gang members. “To reach young people deep in the streets, you need to meet them where they are,” he says.

Despite its successes, challenges remain for InnerCity. A big one is space. InnerCity offers programs in various locations, including a YMCA, a community center, and a lock-up facility, but its central location, a gym called CrossFit Boston, is only temporary. Finding new space isn’t easy. Many gyms are afraid to host InnerCity because of its lifters’ histories. Some 40 locations have turned down Feinman for leases.

Still, he fights on. Like Spurling and Cohen, Feinman believes in the power of sports to make a difference, and with InnerCity, lives are on the line. “There is a lack of resources and opportunity for the young people we work with,” he says. “If we don’t work with them, someone in the street will pull them down.”