

# THE MED CITY BEAT™



## Rochester teens using their swords to shatter stereotypes

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When fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad stepped onto the strip at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, she did so under unique circumstances. [Never before](#) had an American athlete competed in the Olympics while wearing a hijab. Merely her presence on the world stage represented a milestone.

But Muhammad did not let the hype distract her from why she was there. She went on to win her first match of the games and helped contribute to Team USA's bronze medal finish. In doing so, she became the first Muslim-American woman to take home an Olympic medal.

"A lot of people don't believe that Muslim women have voices or that we participate in sport," Muhammad [said at the time](#). "And it's not just to challenge misconceptions outside the Muslim community but within the Muslim community. I want to break cultural norms."



Abdullahi said she frequently gets questions about her fencing bruises. "They ask, 'are you sure this is fun?' But we don't even feel them. That's how much we love it."

For students like Saara Abdullahi, Muhammad is an inspiration.

Abdullahi, a college-bound senior, is one of about a dozen young women who participate on the fencing squad at [Rochester STEM Academy](#).

STEM Academy is a charter school serving populations greatly underrepresented in science, technology and related fields. The school started the fencing team a couple years back so female students — nearly all of whom are Somali — could have the opportunity to participate in sports.

(When it comes to athletics, young Somali women often stay on the sidelines because of cultural limitations regarding what they wear in public. But with fencing, players can put their helmet on right over their hijab.)

Though they knew little about fencing, Abdullahi and some of her classmates decided to give the sport a try. The team soon began practicing out of the school's auditorium, a former church sanctuary that doubles as a gym.

"I've always liked to do things outside my comfort zone," Abdullahi told us when asked about why she joined the team.



STEM Academy's Faisa Mohammed, left, prepares for a bout during the state championships this past February in St. Paul.

In just a couple years, the STEM Academy fencing team has emerged as a serious competitor on the state level. Earlier this year, they had their most impressive finish yet — taking fourth in the women's team foil event at the Minnesota High School Championships in St. Paul.

But for Corlis Hicks, the team's coach, the most important results didn't show up on the scorecard. She said fencing — which encourages finesse, sportsmanship and respect — has empowered the young women and improved their confidence in other aspects of life.

"It's made a huge difference for them," said Hicks, who fenced in college. "When they go out, they take their graciousness with them."

*Cover photo: This year's state fencing team, standing left to right, Ekhlash Abdullahi, Salma Abdullahi, Nasro Araye, Ishwaq Abu, Faisa Mohamed, Amina Ahmed, Kowsar Safi, Sagal Yusuf, and on the floor, Saara.*