

MEDICAL BREAKTHROUGH

With the game of tennis, a strong-willed mom, and Rutgers as his beacons, Alister Martin, a James Dickson Carr Scholar, overcomes stiff odds and prepares to enter Harvard Medical School.

uring a party in the fall of 2005 in Asbury Park, Alister Martin found himself coming to the defense of a friend who was being attacked by a gang. A third-degree black belt in tae kwon do, Martin held on briefly but was soon overwhelmed. "My face was so swollen that my mother didn't recognize me in the hospital," says Martin, a senior. "If someone's girlfriend hadn't implored the gang to stop, I may not have survived."

At the time, Martin cared little for school, a "directionless punk," he says, who was two months into his senior year at Neptune High School, a tough environment in a tough community by the New Jersey shore. If he had one thing going in his favor, it was his mother, Sandra McKinley, an immigrant from Haiti and a science specialist at New Brunswick High School. She was there during his recovery, as she had been throughout his life. By age 4, she had him taking tae kwon do lessons; by age 12, he was hitting tennis balls at the Atlantic Club in Manasquan, where he spent hours practicing, relying primarily on the ball machine that she bought him for \$400.

Although tennis wasn't popular at his predominantly African-American and Latino high school, Martin played on the team, which was half the size of typical squads. And tennis was there for Martin after the fight at the party as well. Advised by the police to relocate her son lest he come under attack again, McKinley turned to a friend who knew Nick Bollettieri, of the Bollettieri Tennis Academy in Florida, famous for grooming tennis greats such as Andre Agassi. Bollettieri invited Martin to attend the academy that fall, and his mother nailed down a loan of \$15,000 to cover instruction. Martin worked 16 hours a day to improve his game and thrived academically as he earned his GED online. "In high school, I had gotten caught up in bad behavior due to the people I hung out with and low expectations. Now, I was around kids from all over the world who were motivated to succeed," he says. "That made a big impression."

Martin had become good enough to compete in Division I tennis, a caliber of collegiate competition in which only 5 percent of men's players are African American, according to the NCAA. With impressive SAT scores and a James Dickson Carr Scholarship, which recognizes the scholastic achievements of underrepresented students, he arrived at Rutgers in the fall of 2006 ready to play tennis and study. He was voted the team's most improved player and made the Big East Conference Academic All-Star Team, but got bad news when tennis was one of six varsity sports phased out after the 2006–07 season. Hard work had led to an A in first-year biology, but he knew that he faced even tougher courses ahead as a biology major. "Rather than take a woe-is-me approach, I turned losing tennis into a positive, because losing tennis meant I now had more time to study," says Martin. He had come to Rutgers wishing to become a doctor, an aspiration stemming from his mother's successful battle with breast cancer when Martin was only 11. "They caught it late, and there was a discussion about what would become of me if she didn't survive," he says. "The oncologists who saved my mother became my heroes. What career could be more worthy than one that gives a kid back his mother?"

His dream to become a doctor was encouraged by Kamal Khan LC'79, associate director of Rutgers' Office for Diversity and Academic Success in the Sciences (ODASIS), whose Access-Med program invites undergraduate students from underrepresented groups to pursue careers in medicine and medical research. "Although I didn't have tennis anymore, Dr. Khan and ODASIS made me feel like I was part of a team again," he says. "Rutgers is the most important thing that ever happened to me." This spring, Martin is graduating from Rutgers with a 3.85 grade-point average. Next stop? Harvard Medical School in the fall. •

— Bill Glavin

