Heart of a Warrior

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WHERE TO START WITH MARTIN ROONEY ’93?

He's the author of nine books, the chief operating officer of two companies, and an internationally renowned athletic trainer and motivational speaker. He was a three-time Southern Conference champion in the javelin, a straight-A student at Furman, and an Olympic bobsledder — before becoming a martial arts expert.

All are stories unto themselves, but none can stand alone if you're to understand the man. Because as much as they shaped him, they are merely glowing embers heated by the fire burning inside Rooney, who can’t settle for anything less than the best in himself, or anyone else.

“He’s got a following, and he presents a positive message that I think resonates even if you’re not a National Football League combine guy or a mixed martial arts guy. The average person can buy into it,” says Tony Caterisano, professor of health sciences at Furman and Rooney’s longtime mentor. “His message is there’s a warrior in every one of us, and there’s an athlete in every one of us, and you’ve got to bring it out. You can’t just wanna-be. You’ve got to do what it takes to be. Everything he does he’s excited about, and that becomes a contagious thing.”

Rooney’s enthusiasm about fitness does seem impossible to fake. Type his name into a search engine and multiple videos pop up, any of which will inspire you to push a truck tire down your driveway with a car strapped to your back.

His most recent book (and the third published by Harper Collins), Warrior Cardio, came out last April. It breaks from the tradition of his previous two, Training for Warriors and Ultimate Warrior Workout, in that it reaches out to a broader audience. To that end he enlisted Caterisano as a collaborator.

“The first two [books] are more fighting-centric. The newest one is about fitness. It’s not about fighting at all,” Rooney says. “I needed a science guy to explain the style of training in layman’s terms, and Tony wrote that chapter.”

In fact, as far removed as Rooney’s life now seems from Furman, he credits his time there for everything he has accomplished.

“If I would have had somebody who took an interest in what I could have done, maybe I would have played football or something. But there was a track guy [Bill Scarola, Rooney’s high school coach in New Jersey] who saw what I could do, and that got me a scholarship to Furman,” Rooney says. “That’s why people need coaches. There are so many kids out there who need somebody to see the talent they have and the heart they have.”
Martin Rooney strikes a pose in front of the Vatican in Rome. His businesses take him around the world, and he has spoken about the value of fitness in more than 20 countries.
Caterisano took the baton when Rooney arrived in Greenville, first recognizing the young man's drive in class and then letting himself be talked into becoming Rooney's javelin coach — against his better judgment. "I said, 'I don't even know which end to throw,' and he said, 'I'll teach you how to coach me,'" Caterisano remembers.

"Martin was always an over-achiever. I used to teach exercise physiology, and it was one of the tougher classes that we offered. I used to give quizzes that covered material we hadn't covered in class yet. I told them I would drop the two lowest. Martin got 100s on the first eight, and since there were 10 total I thought surely he was going to coast on the next two. But sure enough, he got 100s on the next two as well. I asked him why, and he said, 'I don't like to get bad grades. I knew it didn't count, but it counted to me.' It was that kind of attitude that made me think this guy is different, this guy is special."

Rooney went on to attend the Medical University of South Carolina with the goal of becoming a physical therapist. Instead, however, he pulled a Henschel Walker and made the United States bobsled team through an open tryout at an amusement park in Seaside Heights, N.J.

Rooney happened to be in town visiting his grandmother, and he impressed the coaches so much with his blazing time pushing a 300-pound sled on wheels that he was sent directly to Lake Placid, N.Y., to begin training. This was 1995, and for the next two years he trained with partner Todd Hays while also earning his degree and working as a physical therapist.

Hays and Rooney, racing the two-person bobsled, competed throughout Europe but fell just short of making the U.S. team for the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano. During their time together, however, Rooney learned that Hays, who would go on to win the silver medal in the bobsled at the 2002 Olympics, had been a professional fighter. That set him on the road to training mixed martial arts competitors.

"I got really interested in it and started training with him," Rooney says.

When he returned home to New Jersey in 1998 he decided to go to mixed martial arts fighter Renzo Gracie's training academy in New York City. Gracie was impressed with Rooney's fitness and dedication, and before long Rooney was training Gracie in exchange for Gracie teaching him to fight.

The Gracie family created the modern form of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu that revolutionized MMA fighting. Working with Gracie gave Rooney the idea and the opportunity to pioneer fitness training for fighters. "I was the first one in," he says. "I carved my niche because no one else was doing it, and I'm regarded as a leader. Some of it was luck, and some of it was hard work."
His success opened doors. He began to work with other elite athletes, such as former first-round NFL draft pick Chris Long, and did strength training for the New York Jets. Along the way Rooney was also building two companies. He was hired in 1998 by Bill Parisi to be the chief operating officer of Parisi Speed School, created to help athletes of all ages. The same year Rooney launched another company, Training for Warriors, which focused on working with fighters.

Both businesses have grown exponentially thanks to the success of the Parisi School’s pupils at the NFL combine and Training for Warriors fighters in the MMA ring. Rooney now has locations all over the country and, in the case of Training for Warriors, in Canada, Mexico and Europe. His reputation grew with them, to the point that he says he now works with nearly every NFL team and has connections in virtually every corner of the sports world.

It seems that nobody can get enough of his fitness message. Rooney has spoken in more than 20 countries, and he’s in such demand that his schedule is booked for months.

“The talks are usually based around coaching, training science and personal development, depending on the audience and what they want. The speeches can be as quick as an hour or up to three days,” he says.

“When I was helping build Parisi School I would speak twice a week, and I cut my teeth on that for a year. It gave me such confidence. I don’t think anybody’s a natural speaker. It’s all about practice. Now I seek out challenges. The last time I went to Germany, I gave the first 10 minutes of the speech in German, and they went insane. They just loved it.”

He talks to Olympians and national teams as well as amateurs and people who aren’t athletes at all. But the message is basically the same, and it’s one Rooney is passionate about.

“If you really had to boil it down, the ultimate goal is to feel better about yourself. Most people unfortunately do the wrong things because that makes you feel better in the short term, but that’s also going to be what makes you feel worse in the long run,” he says. “I’m speaking in front of crowds of 500 and sometimes 1,000 people, and most of those people aren’t fit at all. I’m speaking in kindergarten classes about broccoli and then [discussing] the finer details of biomechanics to a top coach in China.

“I can help people. It doesn’t really matter to me who the audience is so long as they’re open to getting better.”

He is adamant that getting better, and fitter, is possible for anyone who wants to and, given the obesity rates in America, he knows many people should. With that in mind, he says he’s ready to “crack the code” on the obesity epidemic.

“I only train four days a week, but my diet is really clean. You can work out all you want. If your diet is bad, it won’t work,” Rooney says. “The secret is, I never stopped. There haven’t been three days that I haven’t had a workout in 20 years.

“I don’t see that someday I’ll say, ‘I’m done, I’m going to go the next 20 years and not move anymore.’ It doesn’t compute in my brain. But that’s what a lot of this country does, unfortunately. That’s what I’m always trying to teach, to get this to resonate in somebody’s head.”

Rooney, who recently moved from New Jersey to Cornelius, N.C., manages all of this while also being a family man. He is married and recently had his fourth girl, all under the age of 10, which has only increased his determination to think outside himself.

“The old rush used to be getting it and keeping it. Now the rush is giving it away,” he says. “It’s making me even stronger.”

The author, a 1993 graduate, is a freelance writer based in Hendersonville, N.C.