



# Champions Outside the Ring Vol 1 Ed 1

US Virgin Islands Boxing Federation

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### Tariq Abdul-Akbar

Our featured Champion  
Outside the Ring

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Former USVI Boxing Federation boxer Tariq Abdul-Akbar, in all black, looks on and encourages his stablemate's weight training session.

## A Virgin Islands Boxer's Unlikely Path to Biotech

- By Amara Stokes Gilbert (Introduction by Ihsan M. Sewer)

Before the roar of the crowd, before the bell rings, and long after the lights in the gym are turned off, a boxer's true work is done in silence. It is done in the early mornings and late nights, in bruised knuckles and aching legs, in endless rounds of repetition that test not only the body, but the spirit. Boxing demands discipline, sacrifice, and an unrelenting commitment to self-mastery. It is a sport that strips an athlete down to their core, forging character through hardship and shaping resilience through adversity.

Merriam-Webster defines a champion as "a winner of first prize or first place in competition; one who shows marked superiority." But those words fall short of capturing the full weight of what it truly means to be a champion. The belts, medals, and raised hands tell only part of the story. What most people never see are the sacrifices—the blood, sweat, and tears; the pain and disappointment; the emotional highs and crushing lows; the moments of self-doubt followed by breakthroughs of

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belief. Not everyone who steps into the ring will walk out victorious. Not every competitor will earn a title or hear their name announced as the winner. And yet, winning a belt alone does not make someone a champion.

True champions are defined not only by what they achieve, but by who they become in the process.

*Champions Outside the Ring* is a series that shines a light on former amateur boxers of the **U.S. Virgin Islands Boxing Federation** who embody this deeper meaning of championship. As student-athletes growing up in the Virgin Islands, these men and women committed themselves to the grind—embracing the discipline, accountability, and mental toughness required to excel in one of the most demanding sports in the world. But what makes their stories extraordinary is not just what they accomplished inside the ring—it is what they carried with them beyond it.

The same grit that pushed them through grueling training sessions, the same focus that carried them through tough fights, and the same refusal to quit now fuels their success in life and in their professions. Today, these former fighters excel as scientists, agricultural leaders, welders, entrepreneurs, and professionals across a wide range of fields. Boxing gave them more than athletic skill - it gave them tools for life: perseverance, discipline, emotional control, resilience, and an unwavering belief in their ability to rise after being knocked down.

These are the champions whose victories cannot be measured by titles alone. They are champions of purpose, discipline, and perseverance. Champions who learned to fight - and win - long after the final bell. This is what the **U.S. Virgin Islands Boxing Federation** instilled in these athletes; this is who they are - Champions Outside the Ring!

### Partnerships



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## From the Ring to Research

Though born in Baltimore, Abdul-Akbar has always considered the Virgin Islands his home. He spent every summer in St. Thomas and eventually attended Charlotte Amalie High School. His Virgin Island accent earned him the nickname "V.I." among his Baltimore friends.

In 2009, he walked into I Believe I Can Fly Boxing Gym in St. Thomas and found more than a sport. He found family.

"I was just trying to build some muscle for football. I wasn't even focused on boxing," Abdul-Akbar said. But after a few prayer circles and a sparring session that left the whole gym talking, he knew he had found his place. "Everyone in the gym believed in me. It was like a family," he said.

When football season returned, his focus shifted back. He achieved his dream of playing Division I football at the University of Richmond before eventually focusing fully on academics. By 2019, he'd moved to Australia, earned a master's degree, and began charting an ambitious path to wealth.



Tariq Abdul-Akbar in a field in.....

Abdul-Akbar headed to Africa in January 2020 with his sights set on mining in Zimbabwe, but pandemic-related shipping delays left him waiting months for equipment. Eager to get to work, he resolved to go and retrieve the equipment himself.

He was soon stranded as countries shuttered their borders in response to the viral outbreak. With his mining dreams at a standstill, Abdul-Akbar was forced to forge a new path to success. He found his way from Zambia to Tanzania over the next several days, then took a boat to Zanzibar where he settled down and sought divine guidance for navigating his new world.

In 2021, he founded Firdous Biotech.

"Boxing taught me mental toughness and emotional control," Abdul-Akbar explained. "In the ring, you can't react out of emotion, you have to think strategically. That same mindset applies in business."

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## The Champion's Mindset

Looking back, Abdul-Akbar sees the through line clearly: the teenager who learned emotional control in the ring, the young man who found his center in prayer circles, the entrepreneur who stayed composed when borders closed and plans collapsed.

"Back then, being a champion meant being the best in the ring," he said. "Today, it means being the best at my craft—excelling in my field, leading with integrity, and continuing to grow. The stage has changed, but the mindset is the same."

Abdul-Akbar still keeps in touch with his boxing coaches and teammates, and he credits the Virgin Islands with giving him the foundation that carried him from a 32-square-mile island to leading a thriving biotech company halfway across the globe.

For young people in the USVI facing their own challenges, Abdul-Akbar offered this advice: "Always do what's right, both in public and in private. Study the world. Ask questions. And realize that you are the solution to your own problems. Work hard toward your dreams and trust that the Almighty will guide you through challenges."



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## Upcoming Champion Outside the Ring



Cecil Freeman

Be sure to check out our next publication to learn more about Cecil Freeman's journey on the road to becoming a Champion Outside the Ring.