



# Local Boys Named International Ninja Champs

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August 14 2023 1:41 PM



DORSEY/COTTAGE HILLS - Three local young men have won international titles in ninja, a sport where athletes test their speed, gymnastics and parkour skills by running through a timed obstacle course.

In the past two months, Phill Folsom, 17, took first place at both the [Ultimate Ninja Athlete Association \(UNAA\)](#) World Finals and the [Federation of International Ninja Athletics \(FINA\)](#) National Finals. Sam Folsom, 19, placed second in the FINA competition alongside his brother. Their friend Tyler Smith, 17, won gold in the Ninja World Cup and the [World Ninja League Championships](#).

“To watch him do good made me feel good,” Tyler said about seeing his friends win. “I started training with Phil and his older brother Sam close to six years ago. So just competing with them and training with them for so long, and then watching them do well — it’s a great bond that you can have, doing a sport with your best friends.”

While the boys enjoy competing, their passion is for the sport itself. Ninja is growing in popularity, largely due to the TV show [“American Ninja Warrior”](#) on NBC. Athletes run through elevated obstacle courses, a high-intensity, full-body workout that lasts a few minutes at a time. Take too long or fall from the course, and you’re disqualified.

The trio was well-prepared when they started training about six years ago. All three participated in sports like hockey, baseball, gymnastics and soccer. Sam became fascinated by videos of parkour, which brought him to [Shinobi Fitness](#), a martial arts and ninja obstacle training facility in Cottage Hills. His little brother soon joined him.

“I just loved it the second I tried it,” Phil said. At first, the brothers ran obstacle courses for fun. But by the third year, they were “getting kind of good,” as Phil puts it. Along with Tyler, they started working out with the intention of improving their ninja skills.

It wasn’t long before they outgrew the obstacles at the gym, leading the Folsom brothers to convert the empty barn in their backyard into a training space complete with homemade obstacles. They built the main “American Ninja Warrior” obstacles first, and have since expanded to other obstacles that are used in major competitions. These days, the three train in the barn for at least four hours a day and are affectionately known around town as The Barn Boys.

“It makes training more fun, and to be able to build whatever you want as an obstacle always makes things more innovative and exciting,” Sam added. “When you see win World Finals, you know that when you’re training with them, you’re training with the best.”

While the boys love training together, competing against each other is “obviously a little bit of rivalry,” Phil confessed with a laugh. They might be competitive, but ultimately, they’re rooting for each other.

“You know how good each other is in training. We’re all very close in training. We train different aspects and then we all are better in our own ways,” Tyler explained. “But competing against each other is definitely one of the hardest parts. It’s definitely very fun whenever they do their best, but then also, whenever they don’t do their best and they fall earlier than expected, it can be very sad for all of us because we all train together. We know we can all do better.”

This mindset is part of their success. Phil told the story of a recent competition that pushed him to the limit. He explained that competitors ran the course twice, once to qualify and once to compete. On the first day, Phil made it in two minutes and 37 seconds; he was feeling confident until he watched Isaiah Thomas, a fellow ninja, beat him by 33 seconds. Though it was a sobering moment, it was also motivating. Phil’s final run timed in at one minute and 49 seconds.

“It’s funny. There’s been a couple of finals that I’ve competed in, and each time, I was not competing to my full potential,” Phil said. “I’ve done that a few times. And then this time, it was like a dream come true, because I finally had a run that I thought lived up to my potential. It was just great.”

With several champion titles under their belts, the trio is looking ahead to more competitions over the next few years. In 2019 at age 12, Tyler competed on “American Ninja Warrior Junior.” There are rumors that all three boys might compete on the main show eventually; fans currently have their eyes on Sam.

“It’s all of my life right now,” Sam said of the sport.

He suggests that anyone who is interested in ninja should start at [Shinobi Fitness](#) in Cottage Hills or [Ultimate Ninjas](#) in St. Louis, or simply search for a ninja gym in their area and go check it out. After all, that’s how he got started.

While none of the boys could have predicted their passion for ninja or their success, they agree that it’s been a great experience. Whether they’re training, competing or just hanging out, they’re happy to do it together, and the Riverbend area is eager to cheer them on.

“I think training and competing against them is only a positive thing all around,” Sam added. “Overall, I think it’s a great and positive influence on my life. And it’s also just amazing, training with my brother and one of my best friends.”

