



Regeneration's karate kid

● **Geoff Thompson**, chairman, the Youth Charter for Sports, Culture and the Arts

A former world champion himself, the founder of a Manchester-based youth charity is convinced of the power of sport and culture to help disadvantaged young people

"I'm probably still the most dangerous man you'll ever meet," Geoff Thompson warns the photographer. He's laughing, but you get the impression he probably believes it. And with five karate world titles behind him, he has good reason to. Thompson may have won those titles in the 1980s, but sport remains central to his life.

It's a new and more challenging fight that drives him now, however. Like many people, Thompson is alarmed by the level of youth violence. "It's a crisis when it is no longer just urban, but becomes suburban and rural," he says. Thompson, who lives in Manchester, says he is haunted by the lives lost on the Moss Side estates in recent years. But these tragedies have also inspired him.

It was the combination of two events in 1993 that led Thompson to use his sporting knowledge and connections to work to tackle youth violence and disaffection. The year that Thompson was asked to be an ambassador for Manchester's bid for the 2000 Olympics, was also the year that 14-year-old Benji Stanley was murdered in Moss Side. "He was shot dead in an area of historical deprivation. I was compelled to go back on the streets and see what role sports could play in regeneration,"

CV HIGHLIGHTS

1986 Becomes world karate champion for the fifth time.

1991 Appointed a member of the GB Sports Council (later Sport England).

1993 Made an ambassador for Manchester's bid for the 2000 Olympics.

1993 Founds the Youth Charter for Sport, Culture and the Arts.

1997 Becomes chairman of the Sport England Racial Equality Advisory Group.

says Thompson. The result of his deliberations was to found the Youth Charter for Sports, Culture and the Arts.

The concept of the charity was simple: to exploit the attraction of sport to young people and Thompson's connections with sporting celebrities (and the corporate sponsors they attract) to create mainly sporting schemes that would pull young people away from drugs, gang culture and violence. Sports stars are one of the few groups that children from disaffected neighbourhoods look up to and, according to Thompson, the ethics of sport provide an effective way of nurturing the values that will help

young people progress in life. "[The charity] is about socially developing young people through sports, culture and arts for life," he says. "All we advocate is that punctuality, hard work and enthusiasm – the prerequisites for winning in sport – can be transferable social skills for winning in life."

Thompson now labels himself a "social broker". And nothing illustrates what he means better than the story of why he is sitting in a rent-free office in the redeveloped Salford Quays area of Greater Manchester. Back in 1996, Amec Developments built a business park in the area, then notoriously deprived. Private healthcare firm Bupa had been secured as an anchor tenant, but youths living nearby were harassing female staff. "We were asked to come in and ensure that Bupa stayed by getting the young people to stop attacking the female workers. If we could assist and reduce the youth nuisance issue we would be given offices and I'm very happy to say we achieved that."

Amec hasn't asked for a penny since. But that doesn't mean the Youth Charter has had it easy: it is always chasing its next cheque. "We operate on a recession-proof model," he says. "When people say it's a credit crunch, a recession,

I do smile, because that's all we've ever had since the beginning." The Youth Charter's funding has largely been from private organisations. "For some reason, we're just not public sector-grant friendly," says Thompson.

This lack of funding has led the Youth Charter to become a think-tank, and is now focusing on producing reports and case studies, establishing academic links and developing a website with tools to help other bodies do youth development work. Thompson partly blames the lack of funding on the North-South divide, claiming that cash from bodies such as good causes distributor the Big Lottery Fund goes disproportionately to London. "I've been working in London for 14 years with the Youth Charter, but we're still seen as a Moss Side project. That's incredibly frustrating," he says.

Thompson is well-placed to judge the reality of the North-South divide: he was born and raised in east London before moving to Manchester in the 1990s. "The East End of London is where I grew up. Where I knocked around – on London Fields and Hackney Marshes – is where the Olympic stadium is now being built and it's incredible to see."

Thompson believes in the power of the Olympic rings to catalyse regeneration. But he fears that opportunities for the cities outside London to benefit from the 2012 Games will be wasted unless the regions seize the initiative. "The regional development agencies have been working on this and we are trying to inform that agenda," he adds.

Despite British success in Beijing, Thompson is pessimistic about the state of sport in this country. Look behind the third place in the medals table, he says, and there is a lack of social and cultural diversity. "For the last three Olympics, the medals table has not reflected the 1984 Games' medals table, which saw the most diverse and multi-disciplined yield [for the GB team]. Most of the [Beijing] medals represent the independent schools and a specific aspect of society. The young people I am working with ... who will they be inspired by from the current medal table? Will they be able to get a yacht? Will they be able to ride a horse?"

Although frustrated by 15 years of fighting his corner in the regeneration arena, Thompson wouldn't turn back the clock. "It is a labour of love. It is a vocation. It can be dispiriting when you see the opportunities that are missed. But I'm more proud of this than my gold medals in sport."

Katie Kilgallen