

Fighting back

Lincoln fighter hopes gym helps urban youth

BY ERIC RINEER
Staff writer

As Mike Tyson chewed on Evander Holyfield's ears during their heavyweight title fight two years ago, a local Lincoln boxer realized his beloved sport was in dire trouble.

If the Tyson incident was not enough to dampen the image of the sport, another match, two weeks after Tyson and Holyfield, certainly was.

The match featured Heavyweight Champion Lennox Lewis of Britain and heavyweight contender Henry Akinwande of Nigeria.

Akinwande repeatedly held onto Lewis during their fight in fear of waking up flat on his back, via a Lewis uppercut.

Akinwande was disqualified for his hugging tactics, which was another major blow to boxing.

As Tyson now sits inside a Maryland jail cell, serving a one-year sentence for assaulting two motorists, Lincoln prizefighter Tony Menefee is doing his part to clean up the image that both Tyson and Akinwande have helped leave behind.

Menefee, who boxes at the Royal Grove Nite Club and Guitars and Cadillacs, is now doing his part to clean up the sport's image.

"Boxing has developed this brutal instinct lately because of boxers like Mike Tyson," said Menefee, who recently opened a gym downtown with an urban-renewal-type mentality in mind.

Menefee's Boxing Club, at 1120 P Street, is located inside what used to be the Nebraska Spirit Store.

The middleweight boxer, who has fought former champions Roberto Duran and Hector "Macho" Camacho during his brief but action-packed career, said the goal of his gym was to take young people off street corners and give them something positive to do.

Menefee said he and his staff take pride in teaching youngsters the discipline, hard work and valuable relationships that come with the sport.

Menefee's Boxing Club begins shaping children into boxers as early as 8 years old. The gym includes 6,000 square feet of space for Menefee and his staff to work with their fighters.

Menefee, who co-owns the gym with his father, Ray, said another goal of his was to preach to fighters some values and morals necessary for living

a healthy and spiritual lifestyle.

"I want to give the kids a sense of direction," said Menefee, who boasts a professional record of 63 wins versus just five defeats.

"I want them to have a sense of respect for the sport so they don't have to fight on the streets."

Street fights, Menefee said, run in vicious circles.

"It never ends," he said. "I don't want to get stuck or shot in a street fight."

Menefee said boxing is positive for youth because of the rules it instills in fighters.

Amateur boxers, for example, fight just three two-minute rounds. Amateur rules also require fighters to wear protective headgear.

Besides the precautions that amateur organizations take to protect their fighters, professionals are also trained



before stepping into a gym and tapping away at a speed bag for the first time.

"I, myself, had problems growing up," he said. "I hung around a lot of people that partied and skipped classes. I didn't do as well (in school) as I could have, if I wouldn't have hung out with that crowd."

Just as boxing has helped Menefee turn his life around, the local favorite wants to help other young fighters do the same.

That can only be done, he said, if his fighters come to the gym with their heads on straight.

"We won't let people in who are involved in drugs or who want to use these skills on the street," he said.

Building relationships, Menefee said, was one of the most positive aspects about participating in the sport.

"Typically speaking, most fighters are the nicest people you meet," he said. "A few are egotistical maniacs, but most are really friendly."

The friendships that come along with the sport are often overlooked by those who are skeptical about boxing, he said.

Mike Wiggins, a boxing trainer at the Kronk gym in Detroit, agreed with Menefee's assessment.

Often, Wiggins said, it's common to see his boxers giving each other advice after they are done sparring against each other in the ring.

"These guys come in every day and fight like mad in the ring," Wiggins said. "As soon as the fight is over, they can sit on the side and tell each other about their mistakes."

Wiggins described a typical post-fight conversation between two boxers after their sparring match.

"Hey man, I kept hitting you with that left hand because you kept missing with that right when you came at me inside."

"They give each other pointers," Wiggins said. "Now, if you're fighting on the street, you know that's not going to happen."

Wiggins' gym, like Menefee's,

"We discipline their lives around working out and doing something good for their body."

TONY MENEFEE
Lincoln prizefighter

to protect themselves at all times, Menefee said.

"The trick is not to get hit," he said. "You hit the other opponent and don't let him hit you."

Acquiring skills like this, Menefee said, takes hard work and, most of all, dedication — things the Menefee gym preaches to its boxers.

"We discipline their lives around working out and doing something good for their body," he said.

"We want to teach people this is a sport — not a gladiator sport. There's two men involved and there's rules."

Many people not familiar with boxing often stereotype the brutality of the sport, Menefee said.

It's more important, he said, for people to understand there's so much more to boxers than just fighting.

"It's always our goal to become (the fighters') friend first," Menefee said.

"It's more than just working with fighters from a coaching standpoint. If they feel they have problems, they know they can come talk to us."

Menefee said he was all too familiar with the problems many youth face



SANDY SUMMERS/DN

ABOVE: A LONE SPEED BAG graces Menefee's gym as a boxer jumps rope. Menefee, who recently opened his gym at 1120 P St., plans to hold children's and women's boxing classes along with the rest of the lessons he teaches.

TOP: JEREMY FERGUSON, a senior in Delta Tau Delta Fraternity, practices his punches Thursday night in Menefee's gym. Ferguson is getting ready for Sigma Chi's Fight Night at the end of April.

starts training children at the age of 8.

The Kronk gym has trained a number of famous professional fighters, who all came from poverty-stricken areas or neighborhoods in Detroit.

Michael Moorer, for example, who is a member of the Kronk gym, was a two-time heavyweight champion.

Thomas Hearns, who won six different titles in six different weight classes, is another prime example of a fighter who started out in the streets, Wiggins said.

"Tommy (Hearns) grew up on the East side (of Detroit). We got him into the gym. After that, it's history."

Every kid who enters the ring has the chance of making a dream come true, Wiggins said.

"If you can last long enough in the gym and stay and be hungry enough, you can make it."

And the Kronk gym makes sure of that.

Not only does it teach youngsters the dangers of running around with street gangs, the trainers also make sure their fighters perform to their highest abilities in the classroom, Wiggins said.

None of the youth who fight in the Kronk gym, he said, are able to slip by without showing their trainers their report cards.

"We don't want just fighters," Wiggins said. "We want to help teach them discipline, and we want to be involved with the kids."

"It's not about boxing," he said. "They want to be a part of something."

"They're all like one big, happy family here. Everybody here wants to

be a champion. Everybody here respects each other."

Wiggins said respect was also a big part of training fighters and gave an example of how he goes about disciplining his young fighters.

"You might talk to your parents like that, but you won't talk to us like that," Wiggins said he will tell kids who come off the streets with the wrong attitude.

"You got to make them respect you," he said. "And you got to respect them, too."

Menefee agreed, saying showing respect toward kids was vital for shaping them into well-rounded people and fighters.

His fighters will be taught to uphold the values regularly practiced by a majority of citizens who reside in Lincoln, he said.

Menefee said his gym will eventually include a set of bleachers for anyone to come and observe what he teaches to his young fighters.

This way, he said, parents can be sure of what exactly goes on when their kids walk through his doors.

Though he mainly trains professional fighters at his gym, Menefee said, he looks to bring amateur boxing back to Lincoln as well.

But for now, he said, he will continue winning, and continue his efforts in urban renewal.

"There's always a problem with kids getting involved in gangs and thieving and vandalism," he said.

"With the gym, we can take those kids off the street and give them something to do, and teach them a sense of respect for people."

Daily Nebraskan

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The Daily Nebraskan (USPS 144-080) is published by the UNL Publications Board, Nebraska Union 34, 1400 R St., Lincoln, NE 68588-0448, Monday through Friday during the academic year; weekly during the summer sessions. The public has access to the Publications Board.

Readers are encouraged to submit story ideas and comments to the Daily Nebraskan by calling (402) 472-2588.

Subscriptions are \$55 for one year.

Postmaster: Send address changes to the Daily Nebraskan, Nebraska Union 34, 1400 R St., Lincoln NE 68588-0448. Periodical postage paid at Lincoln, NE.

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