

THE OPPONENTS' GYM; WEST ENDERS FIGHT THE STAR ATTRACTIONS WITH LITTLE CHANCE OF WINNING

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Jackie Morrell used to be one of the West End Gym's top prospects. That was before he worried about being as punchy as the old fighter called "Ding Dong." They say Ding Dong took too many punches, and they also say he was shellshocked in the war. Nobody is sure which war.

"You see Ding Dong on the streets," said Morrell. "The bus will be driving by and the kids yell Ding Dong.' He chases the bus and starts hitting it with his fists. His knuckles will be all bloody. Next thing you see the kids are throwin' rocks at him and he'll be chasing them.

"He always has the same suitcoat on," continued Morrell. "It could be 100 degrees outside. Ding Dong wears the same one every day."

Standing outside the West End Gym at 202 Middlesex st., a late afternoon sun casting a long shadow on the sidewalk, Morrell shuddered at such a fate. He fingered his own face, which is round and blond and showing wear.

"If my nose gets much flatter it won't fit through the door," he said. He is 27 and has been knocked out in the past year by Marlon Starling and Kevin Rooney. He was scheduled last night for a fight in Hartford against New England welterweight champion Papo Figuero, but the Connecticut boxingcommission would not sanction the fight.

"If I don't beat Figueroa that might be it," said Morrell. "I seen a few fighters a little punchy."

As usual, it would have been a fight in the home town of Morrell's opponent. But that is standard for the eight pros who fight out of the West End. In the trade the West End is known as an "opponent's gym," an opponent being someone who is matched against the contender or star attraction without being given much chance of winning. Opponents are always club fighters, even though the converse is not always true.

"This is a club," said Morrell. "We got no contenders here. If anyone is thinking he is he goes down to Marvin Hagler's gym in Brockton."

The West End is managed by 46-year-old Art Ramalho, a Charles Durning lookalike who works fulltime as the director of the Lowell Council on Aging. Ramalho is known on the club circuit as the "Lowell Connection" because he delivers the goods. "If he says he's sending three fighters, three fighters show up," said Dan Duva, Totowa, N.J., club promoter. "People will call Art when they're in a fix and he'll come up with something. We use his fighters generally against young, inexperienced kids.

"The good thing about Art's kids is that you know what you're getting. They're not great fighters

but they put up competitive fights."

The West Enders give good value. Ramalho, 46, a hard-nosed fighter who began as a bantamweight and retired a light heavyweight, is proud of his reputation. "I'm 90 percent dependable," he says. "It's a rarity for me to cancel a fight."

Ramalho didn't start the West End with the idea of managing and training opponents. "We all dream," said Ramalho. He has an army of amateurs to pick from and occasionally they have become promising pros - Larry Carney, Beau Jaynes, Morrell, his son Davey and others - but for one reason or another they didn't pan out. Injuries claimed some like the younger Ramalho, hard living claimed others. Lowell's deserted brick factories attest to the struggling milieu.

"That's Tobacco Road up there," said Jim Farrell, a Boston promoter. "Art's had some wild men."

There was a time when 35 pros fought out of the West End. But the decline of local promotions and the preeminence of the Petronelli Gym in Brockton has decimated the West End ranks. Ramalho works with what he's got and takes fights where he can find them - usually in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

"You go down there and you know they aren't bringing you in to beat local kids," said Ramalho. "My fighters all know that. They understand it would be a big win to go into somebody else's town and beat 'em."

The West Enders don't always lose but lately it seems that way. Morrell was KO'd twice, heavyweight Don Halpin was TKO'd by Marty Capasso, welterweight Robotito Colon lost a split decision to Johnny Turner, welterweight Ricky Camaro lost a decision to Figueroa, junior welterweight Manny Madera lost two split decisions to Derek Cuttino. Young welterweight Tom Ignacio, fighting his second pro bout, brought back the only good news, a 6- round decision in Maine.

"It's a little discouraging," said Halpin. "I'm waiting for somebody to come back with a nice win. I went down to Atlantic City last month. I was in tremendous shape and I was beating this guy (Capasso) when I got hit with a couple of good pops under my eye. It opened a nice cut and the doctor stopped it in the fifth round. It was discouraging because the last six or seven times one of our pros fought he's lost.

"We're looking to turn it around, especially for the younger guys (amateurs). They see the pros go off and come back with losses. It must be a downer for them, too."

They all start with the basic equipment - two hands, two feet, a brain, a strong heart. They start as equals but somewhere along the way the subtle differences come into play.

"When I first started I set my goals as high as you could go," said Halpin, 29. "I wanted to be heavyweight champion. Now I see a fine line between the contenders and myself. The real contenders got it on me by three- four inches. They're a little quicker. It's unbelievable how hard some of them hit."

Halpin, at 5-feet-11, 202 pounds, fought Randy Cobb and Tony Tubbs on their way up, Jimmy Young and Dino Dennis on their way down. He lost to them all - Dennis twice.

"I had some first-round knockouts when I started," said Halpin. "Then they moved me into some main events overseas. Then I fought Jimmy Young. He was past his prime but I couldn't believe

his hand speed.

"Then I fought Tex Cobb who could put his fist through a brick wall with his gloves on. I thought I was a world beater but when you run up against a stone wall it's a stone wall. I got a perforated ear drum against Cobb and I was cut under and over my left eye. He busted me up pretty good. It was like fighting a guy with a pair of hammers for hands.

"Last December I lost an eight-round decision to Tubbs. The guy can't crack eggs but he's fast.

"I could fight Dennis once a month for the next two years. With him it was a matter of styles."

A few years ago Gerry Cooney's people called for Halpin. Ramalho tossed the name and a \$1500 figure at him.

"Art threw the name at me like he wasn't sure who it was," said Halpin. "Cooney only had 12 fights at the time, but I had been reading the boxing magazines at the variety store. Everything he did was a knockout in the first or second round. He's 6-6, 220 pounds and he's crackin' guys' skulls.

"I said They got a gorilla there. He's going someplace. I'll fight the guy but we gotta get what it's worth." "

Cooney's people stuck with their figure. Halpin told them to forget it.

Halpin makes his living as a prison guard at Concord Reformatory and helps coach the inmates in boxing. He picks up \$500 to \$1500 for his fights which just about makes up for the three miles of jogging in the morning and 90 minutes of gym work in the evening.

"It's a part-time job to me," said Halpin. "I get a lot of personal satisfaction out of it, I stay in shape and I do some traveling. Mostly, the older I get, it's the extra few bucks I pick up."

Only once did Halpin consider making boxing full time. They told him if he beat Young he would get the winner of Earnie Shavers- Bernardo Mercado for \$50,000. Halpin peeped into the keyhole and saw a blinding light.

"If I ever got a break like that I'd take a leave," said Halpin. "But those dreams of glory have faded a bit. I've got a wife and a little boy and an eight-hour job. My wife wants me to give it (boxing) up. I came back from my last fight and looked like I had a third eye. She was sick."

A call for Halpin came from Cleveland last week. Stan Ward, a former contender who once beat WBA champ Mike Weaver, needed an opponent. Halpin took the ten-rounder for \$1500.

"Ward might be ready to grab a couple paydays and hang it up," said Halpin. "Art said if I beat him I could get Doke or Snipes. Then you're talking 15 grand and it's worth it. You give it hell and if it don't work out you hang up the boots."

Morrell pointed to a sparkling white 1982 Corvette parked outside the West End.

"See that?" he said. "Boxing paid for that."

His \$11-an-hour job laying track for the Boston and Maine Railroad won't buy fancy cars, so Morrell is hoping a new vein will turn up in the ring.

"You never know," he said. "They're always calling for replacements in those title fights. You see

it on TV. I can step in any time. I stay at the gym most of the time in case that happens. I can punch. I got a pretty good punch."

One such opportunity arose last August. Marlon Starling, a rising young welterweight from Hartford, was making his first appearance at Madison Square Garden. Starling's opponent canceled out the day before the fight. The Garden called Ramalho asking about Morrell.

"I was working in New Hampshire that day," said Morrell. "I came home tired and Art called. I said I don't wanna fight.' He said, C'mon, four thousand dollars.' I said, Let's go.' "

Starling stopped Morrell in the second round. A rift developed between Morrell and Ramalho.

"He didn't even go with me," said Morrell. "He sent his son. I got stopped in two 'cause I got hit with a body shot. I wasn't in shape. No sit ups. If I had trained for a month or six weeks I might have beat him. But what does Art care? He'll throw you in with anybody 'cause he gets a third."

Ramalho, who retired Beau Jaynes and Danny Heath when they were punched out, regrets taking the Starling fight on a day's notice. "I should have just said no," said Ramalho.

But there was another consideration.

"Morrell needed the money 'cause his girl just had a baby," said Ramalho.

In 1975 Morrell boxed for the Army team at Fort Bragg, N.C. He met a girl when he was stationed there and married her. They divorced because she didn't want him to box. For Morrell the choice was easy.

"Now I got a girl who likes boxing," he said.

The front door of the West End Gym is propped open by a crumpled garbage can. "A tomato can would be more fitting," said one wise guy.

Inside is trainer Roland Frechette, a boxing ring, five heavy bags, wall mirrors, suspended fluorescent lighting, two pinball machines, a soda machine, a shower head and a toilet. Ramalho pays \$200 a month for the space and when business is good he also uses the adjacent building. He charges \$5 a month for boxers under 16 and \$15 a month for those over 16. His pros don't pay fees.

"I had to give the one side back because I couldn't swing the rent," said Ramalho. "Look at all these kids and you're lucky if four of them pay their dues. A lot of them ain't got it. I got a lot of Spanish kids on welfare and everything else. They don't come up with the money."

Madera, Colon and young 132-pounder Carlos Rodriguez are the West End's Puerto Rican fighters. Ramalho says they came to him with boxing experience.

"Most of the kids from Puerto Rico can fight," he said. "They all bob and weave when they come in here. I don't know if they get that from pickin' in the rice fields or what, but they all seem to have that natural movement."

Ignacio, the 21-year-old welterweight and Lowell native, is Ramalho's brightest prospect - the Jackie Morrell of a few years ago. Ignacio trains fervently, which makes him doubly promising in Ramalho's eyes.

"He's a serious kid," said Ramalho. "He ain't a wise guy. Some of these pros, they train hard and you lock 'em up in a fight and they start backing off in their training. They get to a certain peak and they want to go around shakin' hands. What you gonna do?"

Jose Ortiz, a 27-year-old featherweight from the Bronx, is making a comeback after two years away from the ring. Ortiz, thick through the midsection, is trying to get down to 126 pounds. "I been drinking," said Ortiz. "I got to take off some weight."

Frechette told Ortiz to step onto the scale.

"One forty-one," said Frechette. "That's no good Jose. You were 138 yesterday."

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