

## Local boxers set for fight night at 115

by Patrick Thomas

The softness of a Willie Nelson ballad can be heard in the cramped Celtic Boxing Club, while large punching bags shake furiously at the hands of some 20 boxers jabbing to their own grooves.

Many of the young fighters, ranging from 6 to 26 years old, are preparing for their debut matches at 115 Bourbon Street, 3359 W. 115th St., in Merrionette Park, on March 21.

"These kids here have nothing but energy, and they come here to channel it," said Rich Casillas, head trainer at the Celtic Boxing Club, 3020 W. 111th St.

Casillas has been involved in the sport for 25 years, now incorporating many of the coaching techniques he and the gym's owner, Mike Joyce, learned (See Boxing page 22)



Sean Carberry, 7, spars with Celtic Boxing Club trainer Rich Casillas. The club trains boxers from 6 to 26 years old. Many fighters will be on display March 21 and every third Wednesday of the month at 115 Bourbon Street in Merrionette Park. (Review photo)

## Boxing

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from their trainer, Martin McGarry. Casillas said the kids he trains are incredible athletes who find a constructive outlet in life through boxing.

"When you're on a team sport, you have to adjust for the team. If the team loses, you lose, but in this sport if you lose, the only person you can blame is yourself because you're the one who prepared yourself," Casillas said.

The crowd that packs 115 Bourbon Street each third Wednesday of the month may be there to see 10 exciting bouts, but for the boxing community and its young athletes, the fans' support makes a positive impact in many other ways.

Most of the boxers scheduled to compete hail from McGarry's Boxing Club in McGarry's Beverly garage or from Joyce's gym on 111th Street.

The boxing event is sponsored

by the Police Athletic League of the Illinois State Crime Commission, a not-for-profit organization founded in 1994 to offer legislative solutions and assistance to law enforcement agencies to prevent crime in communities through awareness and activities.

The night of the fight, Jerry Elsner, executive director of the commission, will present McGarry with a \$4,000 check. It may sound like small change with the growing cost of equipment and resources, but the money will go a long way toward the future of many young fighters' lives.

Elsner is currently lobbying the city and state for funding to build boxing facilities in Chicago, namely in places like Beverly, Morgan Park and the Mt. Greenwood communities, he said.

Standing outside the busy Celtic Boxing Club, Elsner said he sees a demand for such facilities.

"We're hoping to get a facility out here. ... You take a look at Mike Joyce's Celtic Boxing

Club here, and you take a trip down to the park," Elsner said. "More kids are here."

Although it might appear like a lucrative business, McGarry and Joyce said their fighters are not expected to pay dues. They are coming in off the street for free, taking advantage of a unique opportunity, Elsner said.

"This is what the South Side is known for, that the neighborhoods stuck together. It's not a matter of how much money you have. If you can't afford it, no kid is ever going to be kicked out of this program because they don't have any money, and that's not real common today," Elsner said. "The beautiful thing you have out here in Beverly and Mt. Greenwood is that you have these facilities set up and the volunteer network in place, and you can see hundreds of these kids have gone through this already."

Many products of the local boxing program have gone on to serve in the military.

Others like Michael Walk-

er and Malachy Farrell, who were trained by McGarry, are now undefeated professionals.

But for the majority, the dream is not about professional stardom, Elsner said.

"We're growing. The proof is here; you can see all of the kids here. These kids are doing good things for their self-esteem. They are working out. They are being productive men and women in the community," Elsner said. "The reality is we are turning out good citizens. It's not a thing that we hope to turn out good citizens or if we work hard we can; we are. We are turning out good members of the community."

In combating crime and educating young athletes, McGarry said he is using creative measures.

"I have police come in once in a while and meet with the kids and have them look at the officer as a friend, not as the bad guy," McGarry said.

McGarry is organizing a boxing program at St. Margaret of Scotland Elementary School and Leo High School. Many of the fighters at Wednesday's event will be from Leo, Marist, Br. Rice and Mt. Carmel high schools.

All proceeds from the March 21 event will benefit Operation First Chance, a program the Police Athletic League started with the Cook County state's attorney's office, for which Joyce works. Operation First Chance helps reshape the lives of young minor offenders. After the participants complete an intense six-week training in the classroom and in the gym, the state's attorney's office decides whether to drop the offenses from the youth's records.

Many of the lessons learned in and around the ring go well beyond boxing, Elsner said. Before they are finished in the program, athletes are required to pay their training forward by volunteering to help younger fighters.

"We want them to believe in God, family and country. We want them to be good parents, good citizens and good Americans. We drum that into them," Elsner said.

The boxing event every third Wednesday begins at 6 p.m., and tickets are \$10. Tickets are available to the schools and parishes at discount prices, and all ages are welcome.