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Page 9



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Going the distance

Ken Bigham was once sparring partner to George Foreman | page 3

Photo for The Union by John Hart

From sparring to teaching

Storied boxing career brings Bigham to Nevada County

BY TOM KELLAR

Special to The Union

Ken Bigham has experienced much success in the ring, both as a boxer and a coach, but ironically, it took a savage beating at the hands of a California State champion to bring him to Nevada County, where he has been an integral part of the local boxing scene for several decades.

Bigham, who leads a weekly noncontact boxing class at the South Yuba Club in Nevada City, has boxed professionally, coached the men's boxing team at UC Berkeley, the Ecuadorian Olympic team and Venezuelan Military team.

He also is both a poet and college English instructor — and if that wasn't enough, he plays electric guitar in a classic rock outfit called Runnin' for Cover.

Bigham says that his interest in boxing started when he was a small child, living with his family in Seattle.

"It goes back to when I was 5 years old. At 5, there are pictures of me boxing with anyone who wanted to put on the gloves," Bigham said.

"I started because I was kind of shy, quiet and passive as a kid and just wanted to be left alone. Bullies would pick on me and I finally got tired of that, so my dad got me some boxing gloves and got me into boxing.

"One thing I realized was that not only was I better able to defend myself, but people would stop picking on me if they knew I was boxing."

By middle school, Bigham was competing in amateur boxing competitions and soon after completing high school, began a professional career in the ring.

Eventually he moved to California, deciding to attend classes at Chabot Junior College in Hayward while



Photo for The Union by John Hart

Boxing instructor Ken Bigham holds the bag as student Cory Pilind works out at South Yuba Club in Nevada City.

continuing to train as a boxer at the New Oakland Boxing Club, where he would become a sparring partner and friend to future Olympic Gold medalist and World Heavyweight boxing champion George Foreman.

"We became buddies," Bigham said. "I was a light heavyweight and they put me in the ring with him because I was fast on my feet and could move around and make him have to move. He was nothing like the guy you see on TV now. He was really quiet and sullen."

At the time, Bigham also got a job working at the Hayward Theater as an assistant manager and soon was comping Foreman a night at the cinema.

"I found out that George also lived in Hayward and he would come in about 10 o'clock and I would let him up into the lodges and he would sit there and watch movies,"

Bigham said. "We didn't do a whole lot of indepth talking because he wasn't that way at that time, but we gained a lot of respect for each other from being in the boxing gym."

Following Chabot, Bigham transferred to UC Berkeley, where at first his plan was to join the boxing team, but his experience as a professional made that impossible. However, the coach there asked him to be an assistant.

In his senior year, he discovered Nevada County and bought property here. He moved here following college, but returned to Berkeley in 1996 to head the boxing program.

Boxing would be the vehicle that helped Bigham establish his home here, but in a very unexpected way.

"I got a call one morning to be a fill in for that night in Modesto, to fight an exhibition against Stan Ward, who was the California heavyweight

champ at the time," Bigham said. "I weighed in at 178 pounds and he was 232."

"When I saw him, I thought his legs were as big around as my whole body. I was glad it was going to be only an exhibition with shorter rounds, but unfortunately they didn't tell him (Ward) anything."

Ward didn't pull his punches and though Bigham was overmatched against the much larger world-class heavyweight, he finished the fight on his feet.

"I took a lot of blows and went down three times," Bigham said. "They stopped it in the third round and I got brain concussions and basically had to give up boxing for several years. It really hurt my career as a boxer."

Bigham had shown up for the event by himself, so a member of Ward's entourage was asked to be his second.

"Every time I came back to

the corner after taking shots he would say, 'stay down, you've got to stay down,'" Bigham said. "It just wasn't in my nature to stay down."

Apparently the promoter of the event, a local used car dealer, had not followed California laws governing events like the one Bigham participated in and a lawsuit followed.

A part of the resulting settlement helped Bigham to buy property and establish a home in Nevada County.

These days, when he's not teaching at Sierra College, writing, or playing music, he's busy leading TKO Boxing and self-defense classes at South Yuba Club, located at 555 Searls Ave.

Bigham says it's not only a great workout, but a great way for participants to gain confidence in their ability to defend themselves, should the need ever arise.

"I've developed a program which uses boxing in conjunction with other skills," Bigham said. "I've gotten a lot of cross training in things like kick boxing and wrestling and I'm incorporating these things, using boxing as the base. I teach people how to use all their body parts as a weapon."

The class is for both men and women of all ages and Bigham says it's gratifying to see those who participate become comfortable with the idea of defending themselves.

"It's great to see people develop patterns of confidence, but at the same time, I'm always reinforcing that we only use these skills in self-defense," Bigham said.

Anyone interested in attending TKO Boxing should show up at the clubhouse on Friday. The class runs from 4-6 p.m., has a \$10 fee and is limited to 12 participants.

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