

Toughman contenders slug it out

By CRAIG PIECHURA

In professional boxing circles, the "Toughman Contest" has all the grace and prestige of a demolition derby.

But in this year-old, state-sanctioned event the idea is to smash men's faces, not grills of old Chevy Impalas.

The contests are promoted by Art Dore of Bay City. Dore made most of his money demolishing buildings to make way for new construction.

His "Toughman Contest" is the home of the roundhouse punch, a place where backstreet brawlers test their prowess under professional boxing rules. Style points, however, are unheard of in these fights.

Despite the sport's unprofessional reputation, at ringside Friday night in Southfield's Beech Woods Arena was Ms. Hiawatha Knight, recently appointed boxing commissioner for Michigan. She told a reporter she enjoyed watching the competition. This was the third Toughman Contest she's attended in the past year.

Three state boxing judges and two licensed referees were also on hand for the slightest that pitted contenders — a bath fixture salesman against a laid-off a factory worker and a professional athlete against a student.

Ms. Knight said she had no regrets seeing the state sanctioning such unprofessional boxing.

"I have no opinion about it. People are enjoying it. It's said to be safe for the length of time they participate."

She also discounted speculation in some sports circle that participants could be badly injured.

"They're supposed to have undergone some type of physical training. They're supposed to be engaged in some type of training program and they go through a

physical examination before they fight," she said.

However, more than one of the losing fighters said they'd decided on the spur of the moment to compete in the contest and were physically unprepared for the fight.

IT COST fighters nothing to compete in the contest. But it cost the rooting section \$10 a head. Only 450 people paid to attend the Friday night fights, while about twice that many paid to watch 12 elimination bouts Saturday.

In those bouts, Jairocey Simpson, 18, of Detroit was named the toughest guy on Detroit's west side.

After fighting one bout on Friday night, a knockout, and four Saturday night, two knockouts, Simpson received a check for \$1,000 and a three-foot trophy. A \$500 runner-up purse went to Tyrone Smith, 23, of Detroit, who said he'll try out for a position on the Kansas City Chiefs in training camp this week.

The toughest east sider was found in February, a fighter named Biff Humphrey. As \$1,000 winners of regional "Toughman" contests, both Humphrey and Simpson are scheduled to compete in an "international" Toughman contest sometime in October in either the Pontiac Silverdome or Detroit's Joe Louis Arena. Promoters predict televised coverage of the event on NBC.

Before the championship takes place, between 64 and 80 regional contests will be conducted, said Joe Goldring of West Bloomfield, director of operations for Ardore Ltd. which owns the "intellectual property" of Toughman Promotions.

On May 9-10, Toughman contests are scheduled in Jackson Mich. and Hampton, Va. The following week the con-

tests are being held in Macon, Ga. and Flint. Upper peninsula pugilists will slug it out May 23-24 for a chance at \$1,000 and a trophy.

Goldring says he's also angling for contests in Dublin, Ireland and Anchorage, Alaska in upcoming months, figuring pipeline workers and pub drinkers are naturals for the contest.

WHAT DRIVES these less-than-ammateur boxers to climb into a ring to face people who want to hurt them had enough to win?

For 36-year-old Hosea Johnson of Detroit the motivation was the same thing that drove people to compete in dance marathons during the depression — the chance to win money.

"What do I do for a living?" asked Johnson. "I'm a professional racker for Budd Wheel, but not now though. I'm trying to make a dollar right now. I been out of work about a month and a half. I got about five years seniority in."

Johnson said he had never boxed before that night although he admitted participating in a few street fights "back when I was a teenager." Johnson won his first fight Friday night against A.L. Hayden, who complained that his opponent Johnson butted him with his head. Johnson didn't return to box Saturday night because he suffered a sprained hand in the fight.

"I was in the contest last year and didn't win so I figured I'd come back again and see if I could do it," Johnson said. "It was just an old man out there trying to do it."

An old boxer's pride caused 40-year-old Roberto Crazette to climb back into the ring after a 16-year hiatus to see if he still had any moves left. An old purple robe told Crazette's background:

"Penn. Post-Gazette Golden Gloves—1964.

Crazette came directly from his job as repairman at a Pontiac assembly plant to compete at the event against smiling, gangly Don Wheelright. When three rounds were over a bloody, but smiling Crazette, won the decision in his first fight.

One of the losers said he had wrestled once before and lost.

"I wrestled a bear three years ago at the 'Outdoorma' at the State Fair. I 'know Victor.' I wrestled him. I lost."

THE BIGGEST rooting section Friday night was backing 36-year-old Jim Males of Detroit, sales representative for Village Bath Products, who, it could be said, threw everything but the kitchen sink at his opponent, Robert Solmose.

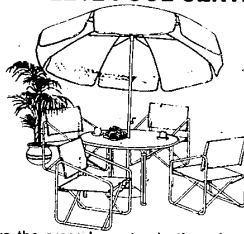
After Males' victory, his co-workers rushed over to pose for pictures with their hero and informed the reporter that as a bath fixture salesman Males is "one of the best."

Like many fights both evenings, the fighters started out in a flurry and ended up so tired that they had trouble lifting their 10 oz. gloves. Referees and judges said the fighters' inexperience and fatigue made the bouts tough to officiate.

"THESE FIGHTS are neither fish nor fowl," said referee Tom Briscoe, 70, of Detroit. "I could stop every bout if I went by what's on the record. What I looked for was whether it was a foul or a harm foul. These kids are amateurs, there's no harm foul."

Briscoe received a lot of criticism, even from the "Toughman" staff, for not stopping a particularly one-sided bout won by Tim Taylor against Geno Donati.

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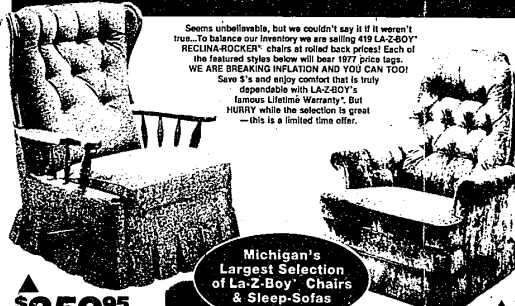


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