

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Ripon Boxing Club shaped youth for a decade

Boxing was a popular sport in America from the 1920s to 1950s. Radio broadcasts helped promote the sport by normalizing it and bringing it into the homes of people across the county.

Ripon featured a boxing team in the 1939 Ripon High School Tiger yearbook. A March 17, 1939 issue of the *Ripon Commonwealth* stated that the high school boxing team had 25 members, but "the team is greatly handicapped by lack of a practice facility and ring." Ripon College also had a boxing team.

In the 1940s, there also were adult boxers from Ripon who participated in boxing in nearby Fond du Lac.

The Feb. 28, 1941 *Commonwealth* noted that "Johnny Wepner, Ripon's 112 pounder, who packs a mean wallop" was going to help "pack the house" on March 12, "when six boxing bouts will be staged at the Ripon theater."

Boxing fell out of favor and wasn't really seen again in Ripon until the Ripon Boxing Club was formed in January 1973. The club was co-founded by Tom Sullivan and Ed Turner, both who served as the coaches.

Growing up in Marshfield, Wis., Sullivan boxed in high school and continued to fight, compiling a 27-7 record as a heavyweight boxer in the U.S. Army. He had come to Ripon in 1967 to work for Svend Hollerup (1909-1988) who owned Svend's Barber Shop at 110 Watson St. In 1973, he opened his own barbershop, Dads 'N Lads, 311 Watson St.

Sullivan recently explained that he started talking about boxing with one of his customers, Parkview Nursing Home owner Emil Kesich Sr. (1922-1995).

"He said that he loved boxing, and I said that I was thinking about starting a youth boxing club," Sullivan recalled. "He offered \$500 to \$1,000 to start the club (equivalent to approximately \$3,650 to \$7,300 today)."

With that donation, Sullivan was able to start a youth boxing club in Ripon.

"Our first uniforms were made by my wife Kathy," Sullivan said.

The back of the uniforms had the name of the nursing home, which Sullivan noted that "everyone thought that was pretty good for young boxers."

The club trained at the Wisconsin Army National Guard Armory at 707 E. Fond du Lac St. In the mid-1970s, the club also was called the "Ripon Jaycees Boxing Club" and at other times the "Ripon Optimist Boxing Club" as both organizations helped to sponsor the club. Financial support also came from the Lions Club, along with other organizations and local businesses.

A January 1975 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* article stated that 20 "youths" from the ages 4 to 25 were in the boxing club. An article a few months later stated that 40 young box-



THIS PHOTOGRAPH OF the Ripon Boxing Club ran in the April 17, 1980 *Ripon Commonwealth Press*. Pictured are, from left, Shawn Handel, 8; Terry Cooley, 11; Kevin Neuenfeldt, 10; Fred Neuenfeldt, 13; John Huth, 12; Kip Melerhofer, 10; Brian Cuffs, 12; and Brent Goyette. *RCP file photo*

ers, including one girl, were involved with the club, which had 10 men on its board of directors. The board of directors coordinated fundraising, purchased equipment and located places for the club's practice. By 1977, the club stated that 55 youth were involved in boxing.

Sullivan noted in a 1975 *Commonwealth* article that boxing was "good for the kids. It takes them off the streets and gives them something to do. I've seen a lot of bullies come out and find out they're not so tough. And I've seen shy, quiet kids start boxing and suddenly develop a lot of confidence in themselves. Our main goal is to make the boys become better young men."

When asked how the Ripon boxers compared to fighters from other cities, Sullivan noted that "We have reputation of having tough but inexperienced fighters. If some of these kids keep at it for the next five years, we'll have some of the best fighters in the state."

Rules for the boxing club included that each member must maintain a "C" average in school, and any boy caught fighting in school or on the streets was suspended.

By 1977, the club was practicing in the basement of the Ripon Fraternal Order of Eagles Club, a non-profit organization that had its meetings in an old house located along Eureka and Blackburns streets.

In 1980, a new Eagles Club was built at 404 Eureka St. (the current address of this building is 402-404 Eureka St. and is the location of the Orthopedic & Sports Institute of the Fox Valley-Ripon and Yeomans-Edinger Chiropractic.) That year, Herman Leitz (1920-1986), a local farmer who had boxed in college, started as a coach.

The Eagles Club became Food & Spirits Co. in 1981 and the club continued to utilize the building's basement for practice.

Roger "Buck" Peterson of Ripon was a customer who became a friend of Sullivan's. He started helping with the youth boxing club at about the time it moved to the Eagles location.

He remembered that the boxing ring and workout equipment was built

by Eagles' member William "Butch" Dahlke (1923-2004). Peterson stated that Sullivan was a big man, about 6 feet, 3 inches, and over 200 pounds.

"He was a great guy and really loved working with the young boxers," Peterson said. "He always said, 'I'm not teaching you this for you to go out and start a fight.'"

After being involved in the boxing club for seven years, Sullivan moved to Peoria, Ariz. in November 1980. He became a corrections officer at the Arizona Department of Corrections at Perryville Prison. Bill Hadel then became the manager and coach.

Todd Weir boxed with the club from approximately 1974 to 1980 and noted that "I learned so much from Tom Sullivan, who would spend his free time on the weekends to drive us to Kaukauna, Wisconsin Rapids, Green Bay and all over the Midwest to allow us to box other clubs. ... Looking back, I am blown away with the amount of time that Tom, Herm, Bill and Albert spent with us to teach us not only the art of boxing, but how to respect others, be gracious when it didn't go our way and try to be better the next time. I truly believe they were genuine in caring for each and every one of us."

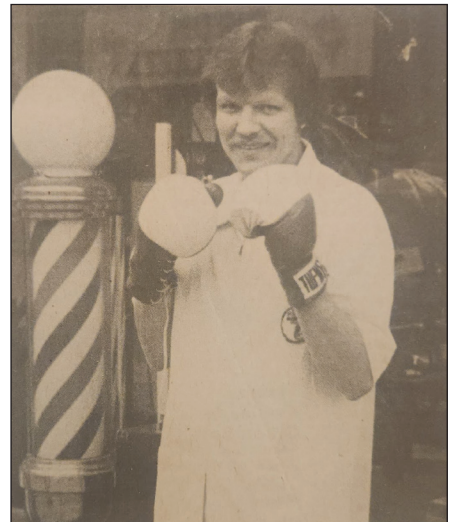
Weir also remembered that one of the assistants was Albert Walls.

"He was an incredible person who was one of the nicest people I have ever met," Weir said of Walls. "He had several disabilities, but that did not stop him from being there for us every Tuesday and Thursday nights for training."

What Sullivan remembers the most over his years with the club is "the kids." However, he related that boxer Joe Keegan stands out above the others.

A 1977 issue of the *Commonwealth Press* stated that Keegan, a Ripon College student from the class of 1978 and native of Lynn, Mass., was ranked "No. 1 in the state" and had boxed with the club during his time in Ripon, obtaining a 33-1 record.

Keegan was thinking that he would just play on the football team when he came to Ripon College as a freshman in 1974. However, someone told him



RIPON BARBER TOM Sullivan won the Jaycees Distinguished Citizen Award and was featured in the Nov. 10, 1977 *Ripon Commonwealth Press*. Sullivan started a youth boxing club in Ripon that ran from 1973 until approximately 1982. *RCP file photo*

that the community had a boxing team.

He already was a champion boxer in Massachusetts and became the most successful boxer in the Ripon club.

Keegan said that his success helped to get more children involved in the club and excited the younger boxers.

The U.S. Olympic Committee contacted the Ripon Boxing Club through the Wisconsin State Boxing Commissioner to see if Keegan could box for the U.S. Olympic team against the Russians in Milwaukee on Feb. 5, 1977. Unfortunately, Keegan ended up being the alternate for his weight class and never fought against the Russians.

John Mazak became the team's trainer after Sullivan left. Mazak, who had started boxing at the age of 9, moved to Ripon in December 1979.

He stated in an April 17, 1980, *Commonwealth* article that "I was at the barber shop getting my hair cut when Tom Sullivan mentioned that he'd been running the boxing club here but that he wasn't doing it anymore. I was interested."

Around the time that Sullivan left the club, it had 12 junior members of boys ages 9 to 16 years old and one senior member in the 16- to 24-year-old category.

Mike Burris and Brent Goyette became 1980 Sliver Gloves Champions in their respective weight classes, while Goyette and Terry Cooley were crowned the 1980 AAU Junior Olympic champions for their weight classes.

The last information on the boxing team was found in the Dec. 9, 1982 *Commonwealth Press*. At that time the coaches were Mark Kranz and Leitz.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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