

24 Hours in Toledo

GLASS CITY BOXING GYM [6 TO 7 P.M.]

Taking the hits

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BY RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

The first thing to hit you when you walk inside Glass City Boxing Gym isn't a strong left jab.

(If you're not careful, though, that could be the second thing.)

It's the smell of sweat. Plenty of which is oozing from the guys jumping rope, punching bags, lifting weights, and sparring against one another.

It's a smell that Ramon Vargas knows well. He started boxing at migrant farms before he turned 10. He remembers that this city was a powerhouse in the sport, back in the '50s and '60s.

"Now," he says as he surveys the busy gym, "we're starting to come back."

Mr. Vargas, 52, is the head coach here. That's his sit-up chair — 25 years old, chewed up by his dog — in the weight room. That's his son over there — Devin, the Olympian — beating the crap out of a heavy bag.

At the moment, though, Mr. Vargas's eyes are drawn to someone else.

"Get outta there, Richiel!" he yells from outside the boxing ring that occupies the center of the room, an old, converted fire station on Suder Avenue. "Spin out! Spin out!"

Richard Caughhorn, 15, the boxer in question, does as he's told, eventually twisting his way out of the path of two gloved fists. The East Sider is young and lanky and, at the moment, looking exhausted. Before long, he's back on the ropes getting hit again.

MULTIMEDIA

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Chris Woods, left, and Calvin Foltz, both 11, spar at the gym. (THE BLADE/LORI KING)

"Get off the ropes!" Mr. Vargas says.

Richard, wearing padded headgear and a mouth guard, summons what's left of his strength and the two boxers wail on each other some more. Each punch lands with a thump and a sharp, loud exhale.

When it's over, the fighters embrace and Richard goes to his corner for a squirt of water.

The sophomore at Waite High School comes here every day for two to three hours. He got his start back in junior high, when Devin Vargas was his football coach.

"It keeps you out of trouble, in shape," Richard says.

And it teaches you what it's like to take a hit. A real hit.

"You just see it like a big flash of white," he says.

It hurts, of course, and sometimes it can leave you dazed. But no time to think about that now.

Next up for him is Ashley Moreland, 16, of Point Place. She's the only girl here tonight, but she doesn't feel out of

place.

"I'm used to sparring boys," she says. "They treat me like a boy."

She's been coming here for about a year and watches boxing all the time.

"I just love the sport," she says. "It teaches you respect. It teaches you to think."

For some of the people here, it's much more than a hobby or a way to stay fit or disciplined. It's a proving ground.

"You've got to have heart to do it," explains Jermain Smith, 23, of South Toledo. "You can't be weak-hearted at all."

He says he feels good right now, despite a particularly tough sparring match. Then again, standards are different here.

"I'm feeling good when I can stand up," he says, ignoring the scratches to his face and arm. (Boxers apply Vaseline to their faces before a match to help, but it can only do so much.)

Around the rest of the small, gritty gym, peppered with some trophies and posters for boxing matches, is a flurry of activity. Some teens are jumping rope, others are working on the basics — how to throw a hook or a jab. Those who are older slam their fists into punching bags, hung like swollen fruit throughout the room.

Above it all is the loud boom of the radio. Directly below that is Devin Vargas.

The 25-year-old who went to the 2004 Olympics as a heavyweight is here training for a pro fight in Las Vegas (from which he'll later have to drop out due to a training injury).

Slowly circling a heavy bag in a winter cap and red shorts, his fists blast into it.

Left! Left! Left! Right!

His hands have been hurting lately and he talks with trainer Tom Urbina about wrapping them more.

"We didn't have wraps back in my day," Mr. Urbina says.

"You didn't hit as hard as I do," Devin shoots back, smiling.

A day of training for him means starting off with some shadowboxing, hitting the bag, jumping rope, knocking off 300 sit-ups, and getting in a couple of rounds on the speed bag.

For his 4-year-old son Bishop, it means a chance to enjoy the nearby drinking fountain and monkey around on some of the equipment in the weight room.

"He already knows a bunch of punches," Devin says of his son. "He's going to be better than me."

That's a bar other boxers here might dream to surpass. But it's a dream for another day. As closing time approaches, a few stragglers remain in the locker room and lines of punching bags still swing back and forth in the emptying room — waiting to take one last hit.

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.



Devin Vargas is watched by his son, Bishop Vargas, 4, at Glass City Boxing Gym. (THE BLADE/LORI KING)

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