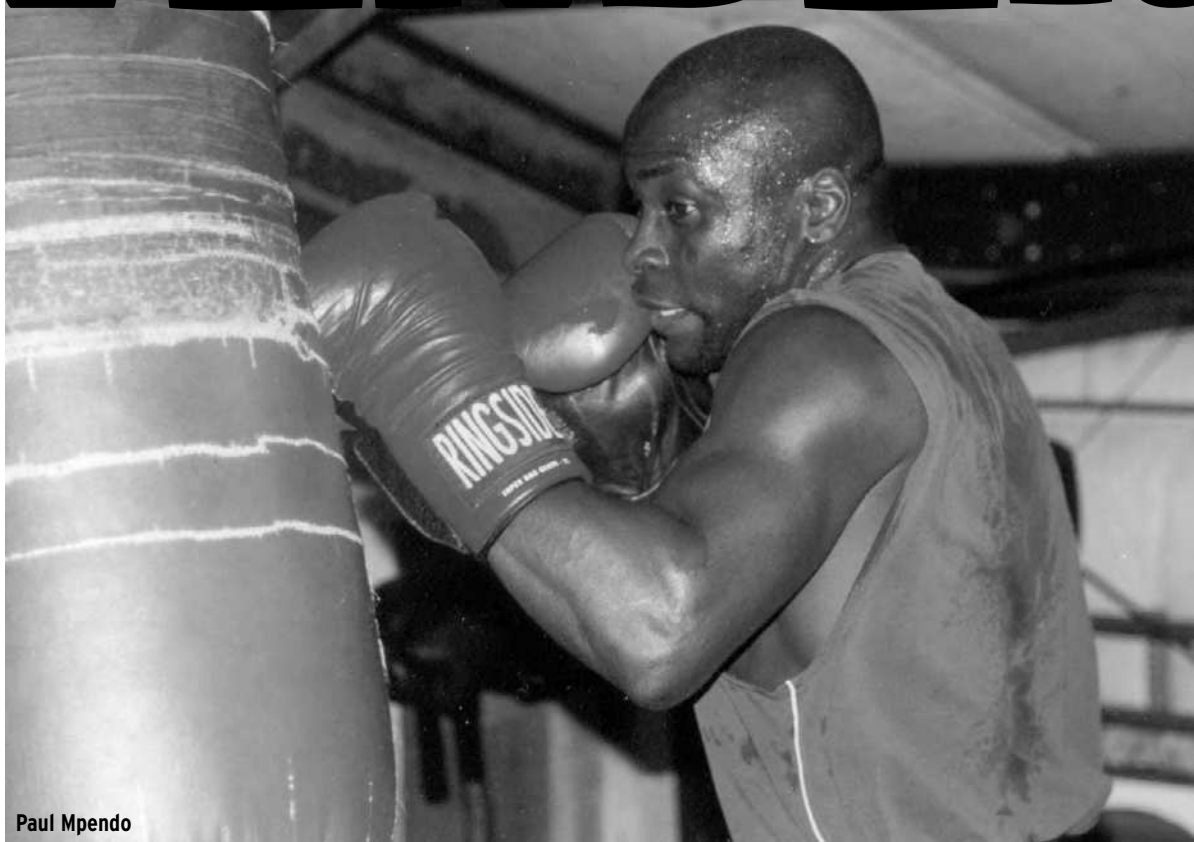


THE CONTENDER

Pro boxer Paul Mpendo has his eye on the prize. STORY & PHOTOS BY BOBBIE WILLIS

The boxing gym vibrates with the rankle of chain-hung punching bags swinging from the ceiling like sides of beef; with the tap and squeak of rubber-soled shoes skidding and skipping in waltz steps and box steps, in the twist and hustle of fighting formation; with the periodic startle of the gym timer buzzing 2.5- and 3-minute intervals; with effortful huffs and snorts and grunts of exertion behind power lefts, right hooks, uppercuts, straight punches and jab after jab after jab; with the thud of padded vinyl --- boxing gloves against punching bags, against trainer's mitts, against the ball-shaped speed bag, whose rhythm under a competent boxer is like the roar of a V-8 engine.



Paul Mpendo

'I look where I am today, and where I came from, and it is amazing. All because of boxing.'

- PAUL MPENDO

Amidst this orchestrated clatter is where native Ugandan and Eugene transplant Paul Mpendo bobs and weaves in the dance of a boxer's training. At present Mpendo is Eugene's only professional boxer, and he has his sights set on the big time: His two-year plan includes the pursuit first of a regional title, hopefully leading to a shot at a world title.

A welterweight at 5 feet, 7 inches, and a lean, muscular 145-ish pounds, 29-year-old Mpendo is built like a sprinter or a tennis player, possessing none of the overwrought muscle binding one might mistakenly associate with boxing. "A boxer has to be loose," Mpendo says. "Big muscles make you tight --- not good for fighting." A ringer for actor Djimon Hounsou, Mpendo's face remains unmarred by the travails of the sport --- no smashed or crooked nose, no cauliflower ears, no black-bruised cheeks or eyelids hatched with the scars of battle. He smiles easily, laughs even easier, and bears a quiet refinement that seems at odds with the blood and sweat imagery --- not to mention the testosterone-fueled machismo --- of the boxing ring. If you saw him walking down the street, you might guess he was a student.

In his lilting English, Mpendo says simply, "Boxing got me out." Out of an improv-

erished urban childhood in Uganda's capital city of Kampala; out of an adolescence surrounded by good friends in rough situations; out of the bleak street world and into school. "I look where I am today, and where I came from, and it is amazing. All because of boxing."

In the '80s and '90s as a kid in Uganda, Mpendo started out playing soccer, but found that the team approach was not his thing. "The problem with team work," he says, "is that it irritates me when I get ordered around. It makes me lose my focus ... With boxing, I like that aspect of two people tussling it out, of going one on one and having it be totally up to you to do good. Everything is up to you." He had enjoyed boxing from the spectator point of view, and as a teenager he discovered he was a naturally capable boxer himself. "I was good from the start," he says matter-of-factly. He won a boxing scholarship and went on to win a national title for his school.

In the middle of Mpendo's academic career, however, the school hired a new administrator who was unimpressed with Mpendo's sport of choice, tagging it as brutal and untoward for a school to be building its reputation on. Mpendo lost his scholarship and found himself back out on his own. He continued fighting at the amateur level, and eventually made the deci-

sion to go pro. As a pro super featherweight, Mpendo climbed to ninth in his class for the African Professional Boxing Confederation.

The world outside the ring is full of assumptions and opinions around what it sees as the sport's main characteristics --- raw violence and sheer brutality. "I hate to hear that," says Mpendo. "People find out that I am a boxer and they say, 'Oh, boxing is so brutal! It's so violent.' But to me, it is a sport, the best sport."

Boxing does, in fact, descend from gladiatorial one-on-one, bare-fisted battles to the death. In ancient Rome, boxers wore the cestus, a metal-studded leather hand covering, with which they maimed and even killed their opponents as part of public spectacles. In ancient Greece, boxing evolved as a popular amateur competitive sport and was included in the first Olympic games.

The sport declined in popularity after the fall of the Roman Empire. It saw a revival in 18th century London in the form of



Portland's Grand Avenue trainer George Gonzalez preps Mpendo for sparring.