

bare-knuckle prizefights in which the contestants fought for money and spectators made wagers on the outcome.

Though the world of modern day professional boxing has ditched the cestus and bare knuckles, though it has developed rules and regulations and governing bodies and safety gear, that hand-to-hand element is still jarring. Even just in practice sparring sessions, even with padded gloves and mouth guards, it is more than a little unsettling to see a punch land squarely on an opponent's chin or face, to hear the "oof" as a jab sneaks past a block into a fighter's gut or sternum. The sport is still one-on-one, using hands and wits to defeat the opponent. Fighters do get hurt; they do sustain serious injuries, just like pro football players and basketball players and hockey players do. But the sport is still essentially something of hand-to-hand combat, and the taboo of that confrontation keeps boxing, to some extent, in the more shadowy regions of the professional sports world; in a realm with a reputation for deep-seated corruption, a realm sensationalized by boxers the likes of Mike Tyson.

It is difficult to reconcile Mpendo as a sportsman with this part of the sport's reputation. Again, it is the quiet refinement you don't expect to find from someone who puts up his dukes and fights for sport. He speaks of boxing in terms of discipline, focus, strength and grace. He speaks of the sport with both passion and reverence. He isn't just hungry for a title; he isn't just in it for the glory. Mpendo *loves* the sport, loves how it works his body, tests his strength, challenges his mental focus, agility and coordination. With a record of six wins (three knockouts), three losses and three draws, Mpendo describes all of his matches, even the losses, by saying, "In my heart, I felt I won."

Mpendo does the bulk of his training at Grand Avenue Gym in Portland (stomping grounds of skater-turned-boxer Tonya Harding). Grand Avenue sits inconspicuously off of SE 82nd, in the bottom floor of a building with just two windows, sharing space with a couple of racquet ball courts. The gym is filled with what at first glance seem to be gritty, urban characters — mostly sweaty, muscled, straight-faced young men, some with tattoos and shaved heads, one with intricate cornrowed hair, a cultural mix of Asians, Latinos, whites, blacks.

A closer look and a little eavesdropping reveals young guys simply joking and ribbing one another, talking about making weight and whether or not to take a competitive match as they sit and wrap their hands with the rolls of elastic webbing they wear inside their boxing gloves. They are surprisingly quiet, the kind of quiet you are in church. They focus intently on jump rope workouts, on punching bag exercises, on sit-ups, on prepping for sparring matches.

There is a giant of a young man — maybe 6 foot, 4 inches, well over 200 pounds — bouncing lightly on his toes, shaking his arms loose at his sides, watching with a cool expression on his face his own movement and form in the full-length mirrors on one wall of the gym space. Maybe 10 feet away from him is a spiky-haired Asian kid, 15 or 16, who looks very self conscious in his baggy denim shorts and Tommy Hilfiger sweatshirt. He looks at himself in the mirror, puts up his fists, glances side to side to see if anyone's watching him, then drops them back to his sides. George Gonzalez, a Grand Avenue trainer who works closely with Mpendo,

walks by and urges, "Get moving! Loosen up and *move*." The kid startles a little at the command, puts his fists back up, shrugs his shoulders and manages to throw a couple of very straight, hard punches in succession at his reflection in the mirror.

Mpendo is also practicing in front of the mirrors, but the difference in form between him and the kid is staggering. Mpendo suffers absolutely no self consciousness, throwing punches not at his reflection, but at an opponent he is visualizing clear as day. He moves quickly, throws punches from his arms kept up close to his face and chin. He squares his shoulders, keeps his knees loose, peeks from behind his fists, keeps his chin tucked down as tight as he can. He is *fighting*. He has that look on his face that chil-

dren get when they are deep in make believe play — in his mind, he isn't practicing; he's boxing, playing out the whole scene as if it were actually happening.

Grand Avenue's Fred Ryan works as Mpendo's manager. His job, he says, is to "minimize the danger and maximize the earnings" in the very tricky science of choosing opponents and arranging matches with which Mpendo can continue to build up his record. Of Mpendo's strengths, Ryan says, "Paul is quick. His speed will overcome just about everything except blind luck. He keeps his weight right where it should be. And he's got an admirable work ethic. When he first started here, he'd come up by bus two or three times a week, making the connection downtown to get here and everything."

Mpendo and Gonzalez at Portland's Grand Avenue Gym.



'You can't . . . expect to win unless you really have that killer instinct, all the way to the last round.'

-GEORGE GONZALEZ, TRAINER

Mpendo and Colby Matti sparring at West Eugene Boxing Club.



SPORTS FATALITY RATES

PER 100,000 PARTICIPANTS

HORSE RACING: 128	MOUNTAINEERING: 51	COLLEGE FOOTBALL: 3
SKY DIVING: 123	SCUBA DIVING: 11	
HANG GLIDING: 55	MOTORCYCLE RACING: 7	BOXING: 1.3

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