

Trainer Gonzalez is a little more earnest in his assessment. "I'd like to see Paul putting in way more gym time. He don't get as much as I'd like. You can't miss three days and go to someone's home town and expect to win unless you really have that killer instinct, all the way to the last round. He needs to have that killer instinct," says Gonzalez. Gonzalez and Mpendo have been working on boxing as opposed to slugging, where Mpendo makes more use of various techniques (footwork, defensive maneuvers, counter attacks) rather than just punching. "He can slug, no doubt about it. But with more boxing and upping the training to four or five days, man oh man," says Gonzalez, shaking his head at the potential.

Nearing the milestone of his 30-something years, the big questions hang out there, both for Mpendo and for those who know and work with him: Can he maintain his prime long enough to pursue those regional and world titles? Ryan thinks, with steady matches and wins, it's fair to estimate that Mpendo could be looking at a title in as short a time as two years. But with a wife and family and a day job in Eugene, can a commuter training program really give him the edge he needs to reach his goals? Ryan jokes that Paul has "gotten too comfortable and pampered in this American life" that the hunger for a title isn't as sharp. Mpendo insists, "Even though my life is much better, I will always have that drive inside."

Here in Eugene, Mpendo supplements his Portland workouts at the West Eugene Boxing Club, even more inconspicuous a

Corbin Page, 15, at West Eugene Boxing Club.



facility than Grand Avenue. The 50-year-old club is less than half the size of Grand, but as full of aspiring, young boxers with heart — again, mostly young men, but with a distinct and growing contingent of young female boxers. James Irish, Myron Johnson and Steve Wiltfong are the locals who train and coach the kids at West Eugene. Irish says, "Boxing helps kids learn new respect for people. It teaches discipline, confidence. It's even a little humbling. It teaches a kid that getting somewhere requires training, everyday training. And it gets kids in shape. That exercise really vents and relieves stress."

In this club, Mpendo has a chance to be a little more of a mentor to the younger boxers coming up. One evening, he spars with 21-year-old Colby Matti, who is a relative newcomer to the sport. Between rounds, the two talk about technique and movement, doing super slow-mo reenactments of throwing and dodging punches. "I would definitely love to get into coaching and working with kids some day," says Mpendo.

For as passionate as he is about boxing, Mpendo is not blinded by it. In his day job, Mpendo works as a certified nursing assistant for McKenzie-Willamette Hospital. He laughs, agreeing that there is a certain irony in a boxer taking care of the ill and infirm. "But I enjoy it. I like the aspect of taking care of people." He looks forward to pursuing a college education after his boxing days are over. "I love boxing. But I know I'm not going to it forever. I have a lot of other things I need to do." **EW**



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