

# FATHER'S DAY

## Reclaiming Fatherhood

By Jay Heater

Contributing Writer from The Times

Father and son, Thad and Todd Spencer, stand now on the edge of anonymity despite their former careers as sports stars. The athletic talent long ago was drained from their bodies, dripping into a stream of confusion and ending in an ocean of indifference.

At 35, Todd still has the muscular build (6 foot, 220 pounds) and the emotional fire of his days as a USC and Pittsburgh Steeler running back. However, his reflexes aren't those of a young man.

A youth counselor in an El Sobrante group home, he no longer looks into the eyes of a linebacker, trying to zig away from the linebacker's zag. He instead studies the eyes of teenaged boys, trying to figure out whether or not they've done their homework.

Thad, although he professes to feel "way too good for a man with no money," no longer carries the profile of a heavyweight contender. He has added some extra pounds from his days in the 1960s as a top five contender when he was a threat to Muhammad Ali. His movements now are somewhat restricted by half a lifetime's worth of drug abuse and street violence.

Never much of a team - Thad abandoned Todd and his younger brother, Lance, when they were toddlers - they want to combine their interest in helping develop young men while steering them away from drugs and violence on the streets.

### Thad's Fall

By the age of 22, Thad had gone through a divorce, a boat load of bennies (speed) and some of the world's top heavyweights. "The whole world looked real good," he said.

Thad, a 6-foot, 200-pounder, managed to climb in the rankings because he would always stay clean while training for a fight. He reached the peak of his career in 1967 when he beat contender Ernie Terrell. Thad was featured on the cover of *The Ring* magazine.

However, when Ali's problems with the draft escalated, a proposed bout in San Francisco fell apart and Spencer had to face an up-and-coming fighter, Jerry Quarry, instead. It came at a time when Spencer felt he was unbeatable.

"The Quarry fight was next and



**Thad Spencer of Northeast Portland is a devoted father and championship boxer who has been nominated to the Oregon Sports Hall of Fame by local football great, Mel Renfrow.**

I knew he couldn't beat me."

No one was able to slow Thad down and his party habits became national news prior to the Quarry fight. "I was arrested 10 days before the fight for drunk driving. I was gone. After (a knockout loss to Quarry in the 12<sup>th</sup> round) came two years of faking."

Spencer never won in the ring again. It looked like he wouldn't win at life, either.

### El Cerrito Phenom

By the late 1970's, Todd was making lots of friends as one of the top prep football players in the Bay Area at El Cerrito High School. He was stronger than his classmates and could simply run over most of them, or use his speed to cut away from them. Although he lived in Berkeley, he enrolled at El Cerrito because it had the better football program. Nobody seemed to mind. "used to have dinner with the principal," Todd noted.

USC, along with a slew of other universities, noticed his abilities.

However, it wasn't until Todd's junior year (1982) at USC when Thad decided to change his lifestyle. It was then, during USC's game at Notre Dame, that Thad sat in Fred's Place drinking while the game

played on television. The bartender asked Thad if he was related to the Todd Spencer who was having the big game against the Irish. Thad said no.

Then O.J. Simpson, who was the commentator, announced Todd's father Thad was a former heavyweight contender. Thad walked out of the bar. "That was my last day of cocaine," he said.

Breaking the drug addiction was much harder than preparing for a heavyweight fight. Thad had to swallow his pride and call Lance because he needed help.

Once off drugs, Thad went to Los Angeles in an attempt to reconcile with Todd, who through his first two years at USC drew headlines as the fullback who cleared the way for Marcus Allen, then took over as the tailback his junior season.

It seemed Todd would have the last laugh, especially when he was one of the NFL's top return men his rookie season in 1984. However, like his father, he began to have drug problems. Marijuana turned up in his blood tests and the Steelers quietly told Spencer he had better clean up his act. "Here I was, a guy sitting on all this talent, and I had weed problems," said Todd, who vowed to Pittsburgh coach Chuck Noll he would change.

In his second season, Spencer was clean. But with one game left before the season's end, he gave in to pressure from a couple of his teammates and took a line of cocaine. The next day, after not being drug tested all season, he was asked to give a urine sample. Todd is convinced he was set up, but also admits it was his own fault. He was cut by Pittsburgh, latched on at San Diego for one season, then disappeared from the league.

He took various jobs in Los Angeles on the strengths of the contacts he made through his USC

contacts, but eventually he wanted something more. His marriage fell apart once his celebrity lifestyle dissolved, and he decided to return to the Bay Area. Besides everything else, he was broke.

Both Thad, 55 and Todd had golden opportunities to make positive changes in their own lives, but got caught up in the distractions. They never sensed the fleeting nature of fame. Together they are in the midst of making a comeback, not so much in athletic terms, but in trying to become a family.

Lack of guidance from a male role model was a big problem for both and

they thought they could overcome it by slugging it out in the ring or on the football field. They would like youngsters with similar athletic ambitions to know their story.

Thad Spencer is the founder of "Last Chance to Get a Life" Youth Boxing Program in Portland. The foundation is aimed at helping troubled, disadvantaged youth who have fallen to crime and corruption, landing them in the juvenile detention system. For more information, contact Thad at 503/284-0675 or Derek Gonzalez at 503/936-1460.

## KENNEDY SCHOOL McMenamins EVENTS

### Hudis James Trio

Thursday, June 10 at 7pm in the Gymnasium

### John Bunzow and Steve Bradley

Thursday, June 17 at 7pm in the Gymnasium

### Good In The Hood

Thursday, June 24 in the Gymnasium

Doors Open at 6:30pm

### Mary Kadderly Jazz Band

7:30 to 10pm

### Shoehorn

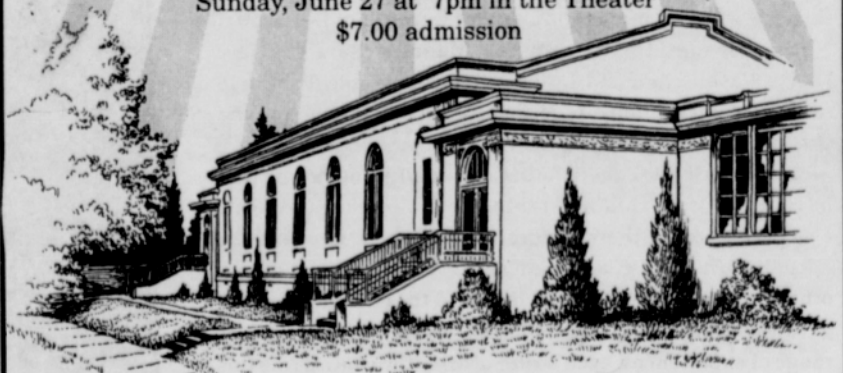
Tap Dancer & Saxophone at 7 to 7:30pm

### Ms. Petal the Clown

### Jon Koonce & The Gas Hog Reunion

Sunday, June 27 at 7pm in the Theater

\$7.00 admission



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