

Glasgow set to deal a blow to boxing



A training session at Glasgow's Kinning Park Boxing Club. The city's rich boxing heritage is under threat COLIN McPHERSON

HARD-DRINKING, hard-fighting Glasgow is about to tear up its long and legendary association with boxing.

Labour councillors meet tomorrow to decide whether or not to move a vote at a full council meeting next month to ban the use of council premises for the sport. If the anti-boxing fraternity win, it will be, if not a knock-out, a damaging blow to the "noble art".

The only places left that could stage fights or train youngsters would be private clubs and hotels. Even private gyms would be hit because many receive some subsidy from the council.

Not surprisingly, the boxing lobby is outraged, bitterly accusing the Labour council of abandoning traditional working-class, pro-boxing attitudes, in favour of middle-class namby-pambyism.

BY JANE HUGHES

"Some gyms let their boys knock each other about a lot, but we make sure we keep things to a sensible level," says Al Hutcheon, a 53-year-old former professional fighter who runs the Bad Apple gym in a garage in south Glasgow.

Rave music is playing at full volume as two boys in red helmets spar, but this is one of the few places in the city that is totally drugs-free.

"I'd rather see boys training in here than shooting themselves up or drinking on the street," says Mr Hutcheon, whose trim physique is testament to his own fitness and abstinence from alcohol.

"We are giving these kids an interest and a discipline. If anyone here took drugs or drank, I

would show them the door straight away because you have to be totally fit when you get in that ring and fight."

Conditions at the Bad Apple are basic, but there is fierce concentration etched on to the faces of the boys who dance and jump around the uneven concrete floor, their red-gloved fists lashing out at punchballs suspended from the ceiling.

Others sweat profusely as, lying on grubby mats, they launch themselves into sit-ups at a furious rate.

Mr Hutcheon, alert eyes taking in every move in the room from behind his spectacles, shouts directions - "Head up, John! Nice and light, Phil" - at the boys circling each other in the ring.

Boxing posters are plastered over one wall, gloves and skipping ropes hang from the others and the ring is lit by a small spotlight.

Mr Hutcheon, who like many of the city's best-known boxing names grew up in the now demolished tenements of the Gorbals, reckons that the Bad Apple is one of the best gyms in Glasgow.

"All we need now is some showers," he says, nodding at the rumpled clothing that is spilling out of the sports bags in a corner.

So keen are his boys, who begin to train at the age of 10, that Mr Hutcheon has kept the gym open for three nights a week through the summer, although the season doesn't start for another month.

John Walsh, 12, has wanted to be a professional boxer since his grandfather took him to his first fight. His huge blue eyes take on a determined expression as he insists that he is not worried about getting hurt.

His grandfather has schooled him in the art of answering difficult questions. Asked what the difference is between a brawler and a boxer, he has the answer off pat. "A boxer has got more skill and he knows how to move about the ring and to hit without getting hit."

Jimmy Murray runs the Gorbals United Boxing Club, in a green prefab among the dis-

trict's pebbledash council houses, disused factories and tower blocks.

In the past, he says, boxing was a night off for the labourers in the city's factories and shipyards, a way to get rid of tension and temper.

In the halcyon days of the Thirties and Forties there was a gym on every street corner. Even the priests trained the young boys in their flocks to keep them out of trouble.

So it is curious that the city that spawned big names such as Benny Lynch - the Thirties world flyweight champion who died a penniless alcoholic at 33 - should be one of the few local authorities to take action after a British Medical Association circular calling for an end to council support for the sport.

Paradoxically, boxing is now attracting a middle-class

I'd rather see boys training in here than shooting drugs or drinking on the street'

element because it is seen as an excellent way of keeping fit.

Even at the Bad Apple, changes are afoot. Denise, one of the few female members, and Neil, a businessman, are evidence of boxing's broadening appeal.

Mr Hutcheon says that even the Gorbals is going up-market. Currently under construction is a new indoor sports centre. "But it's for the yuppies. None of the kids round here will be able to afford to go - the council should be providing new facilities for them and the kids in the estates."

He believes that if the council goes ahead with the ban, a new generation of couch potatoes will be created.

"All these kids spending their time playing computer games and watching telly - in a few years there are going to be a lot of vegetative people around because they don't know how to move their bodies properly," he says.