



# Hall Honors A Proud Class

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By TOM PULEO, Courant Staff Writer

MASHANTUCKET — Chico Vejar was a high school dropout getting into fistfights and into trouble with the police when his father steered him into boxing in 1947. "I was in trouble, going no place, downhill," Vejar said Friday in the Grand Pequot Ballroom at Foxwoods Resort Casino. "My father knew I wanted to be a fighter. He encouraged me to train and he encouraged me to go back to school. I did both."

Vejar, 74, who became one of the prominent middleweights of the 1950s, was inducted Friday into the Connecticut Boxing Hall of Fame.

Also inducted into the hall's second class were former state boxing commissioner John Burns; Gaspar Ortega of New Haven, a member of the World Boxing Hall of Fame; Manny Leibert of West Hartford, a manager, promoter, and trainer for more than 50 years; Lou Bogash Sr. of Bridgeport, a former state lightweight and welterweight champion; and Nathan Mann of New Haven, a former heavyweight contender.

Vejar (92-20-4, 43 KOs) was once ranked the No. 7 middleweight in the world. He twice fought former world champion Joey Giardello, losing both times, and also lost decisions to former world champion Gene Fullmer and Kid Gavilan.

The hall also paid tribute to two members of the 2005 class who died in 2006 - Willie Pep and Johnny Duke.

Mann fought Joe Louis for the heavyweight title in 1938 at Madison Square Garden. He won the New England heavyweight title in 1940. Mann (74-11-4, 44 KOs) died in 1999 at age 84.

Referee Johnny Callas, speaking for Burns, told the crowd of 400 that the job of state boxing commissioner is increasingly important in a sport that operates without a federal umbrella.

"The sole responsibility to preserve the integrity of the sport falls upon that individual commissioner," Callas said.

Burns, 70, became a boxing inspector in 1972 and the state director of boxing in 1987, a position he held until 2000.

Ortega (131-39-6, 69 KOs) fought some of the best welterweights and middleweights of his era, including Emile Griffith and Benny "Kid" Paret. Ortega, 70, beat Paret by unanimous decision in 1959 and did it again two years later. Ortega, who was born in Mexico, was inducted after a speech by his son, Michael, one of the state's top referees.

Leibert, 93, was a key player behind boxing's revival in Connecticut in 1973 after the sport had been banned in the state for eight years.

"I am 93 years old and everybody thinks I'm 92," Leibert quipped, breaking up the crowd.

Bogash had a world title shot in 1920, fighting to a draw with Jack Britton. Bogash (100-16-13, 39 KOs) died in 1978 at age 77. His son Lou Bogash Jr., a timekeeper in the state, accepted the award.

Former Courant sports writer George Smith, a professional boxing judge since 1996, won the William Hutt Award for state boxing official of the year.

Chad Dawson (23-0) of New Haven was named state pro boxer of the year. Melissa Roberts, 20, formerly of the Manchester PAL and winner of the 125-pound U.S. title last year, was named state amateur boxer of the year.

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