



Hartford showcasing region's top talent

By: Sherman Cain, Journal Inquirer

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HARTFORD - The lights were bright. The carpeting was plush. The ceiling was high. The décor was sparkling.

This would not normally be an environment where you would expect to find some of the toughest guys in Connecticut. Boxers aren't often involved in intimate, upscale gatherings, which you can typically find at the Connecticut Convention Center.

Hartford's crown jewel, however, will play host to several young men in search of crowns and championship belts. Boxing is going upscale on Sept. 23, when the Connecticut Convention Center stages its first fight card. Classic Entertainment & Sports promoter Jimmy Burchfield is billing the night as "Rising Stars over Hartford," a sort of a spin-off on the "New England's Rising Star" theme adopted by Connecticut's capital city.

Manchester featherweight Matt Remillard (10-0) will be on the show. He couldn't help but stare in awe at the facility with floor-to-ceiling glass and breathtaking views.

"It's gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous," Remillard said. "It's almost overwhelming. "Ever since I turned pro I've wanted to fight in Hartford. I was born in Hartford and it will be great to fight here. Hopefully, we can pack the house and get more fights here."

To make a fight work at the Convention Center, where there will be no live television and no major title bout, you need local talent to sell tickets. There is plenty of local talent, and other factors that will contribute to making this fight card one where fans in the greater Hartford area are likely to know someone connected to the event.

You have John Scully of Windsor, the former world light heavyweight contender who trains super bantamweight Mike Oliver and welterweight Israel "Pito" Cardona, and assists in the training of Remillard. Hartford natives Oliver (15-0) and Cardona (35-6) are both on the show. You also have Tony Grano of Hebron, a RHAM High product who is unbeaten as a heavyweight (4-0-1).

You have Bret Hallenbeck, who lives in Tolland and owns Connecticut Restoration Specialists in East Hartford. Hallenbeck manages Cardona and Providence cruiserweight Matt Godfrey, who will fight in the main event on Sept. 23. You have Dave Shapleigh, a strength trainer added to the Remillard team. Shapleigh is a Manchester native and 1990 graduate of East Catholic High. You also have Paul Cichon, the director of the Manchester Police Athletic League and Remillard's trainer.

If they don't sell out the joint on Sept. 23 - the Convention Center will try to squeeze in 4,500 in the ballroom where the card will take place - it won't be because they don't have enough people pushing tickets.

"Most of these guys weren't just good amateurs, they were spectacular amateurs," Scully said. "Now they are having a reunion here as pros. This should be a big party for Hartford."

The show will be dedicated to the late Johnny Duke, the Connecticut Boxing Hall of Fame trainer. Two of Duke's daughters attended a press conference Tuesday to promote the show. The last fighter Duke trained was Oliver, who owns the United States Boxing Organization super bantamweight title.

There was a host of dignitaries on hand Tuesday. Hartford police chief Daryl K. Roberts and fire chief Charles Teale, along with former mayor Mike Peters, were on hand for what turned out to be a festive occasion. Former world welterweight contender Troy Wortham, a Hartford native who now lives in Windsor Locks, was in the building to show his support for the return of boxing to Hartford. Wortham, a University of Hartford graduate, recently obtained his master's degree in holistic thinking.

Windsor's John Burns, former chief boxing inspector and part of the second induction class for the Connecticut Boxing Hall of Fame, was also in attendance.

Connecticut Convention Center general manager Mike Costelli couldn't help but be pleased by the support the show is already receiving.

"We're excited to bring boxing back to Hartford," Costelli said. "We've had a great year and this is like icing on the cake." Grano was thrilled to participate in the card, though he is not affiliated with CES. He has been sparring with Oleg Maskaev and Monte Barrett. Maskaev just won the World Boxing Council heavyweight title.

"It's a great honor to be fighting in Hartford," Grano said. "So many great fighters have come out of Hartford like Marlon Starling and Willie Pep."

Cardona, 29, is on the comeback trail. In August 1999, he lost to Paul Spadafora in a fight for the International Boxing Federation lightweight title. He retired in 2002, but began a comeback with a victory earlier this year.

"Every fighter in the world wants to fight in his hometown," Cardona said. "I'm hoping Hartford really gets behind this show." Cardona praised Scully for helping him get into shape. Heavyweight contender Shannon Briggs recently asked Scully to help him train for a potential fight with IBF heavyweight champion Wladimir Klitschko. But it appears Klitschko may first try to unify two titles by taking on Maskaev.

Remillard, 20, will be fighting in his first 10-rounder. He will be in the co-feature against an opponent that will likely be known by the end of the week. Remillard will fight for the World Boxing Council Youth super featherweight title. That's a 130-pound title, four pounds heavier than Remillard's normal weight. If he feels comfortable at 130, Remillard may stay there.

Grano, Oliver and Cardona do not yet have opponents. Godfrey (12-0) will take on Danny Batchelder (24-2-1) of Greenwich, N.Y., for the USNBC and WBC Continental Americas cruiserweight crowns. Batchelder and Godfrey are rated 13th and 14th, respectively, in the latest WBC rankings.

The undercard will feature former U.S. Olympian Jason Estrada, a 6-0 heavyweight from Providence. Junior middleweight Enrique Palau (4-0) will also be on the show. He has knocked out all four of his opponents.

Tickets, expected to go on sale Aug. 29, will be priced at \$35, \$50, \$75 and \$100. Tickets can be purchased weekdays from 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m. at the Convention Center box office. Tickets will also be available downtown at the Hilton and the Marriott Residence Inn.

