

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



Mark Patton

Boxing documentary packs a punch

There is a grainy, vintage scene at the start of director Ryan Pettey's movie "After The Last Round" that struck me like a right cross: Two young boys, laughing and punching each other with big, puffy boxing gloves.

It jogged a memory as clear as if it had happened yesterday: A boxing match with my brother Greg, held in the backyard ring of a childhood chum. The cushiony gloves and headgear made our bout as harmless and fun as a pillow fight.

Two other brothers then appeared onscreen: Brothers Phil and Denny Moyer, both former professional boxers. Neither one can even recall what they had for breakfast this morning, let alone a childhood memory.

They are among the stories depicted in the feature documentary on boxing that will make its premiere during the Santa Barbara International Film Festival on Thursday at 5 p.m. at the Lobero Theatre. A second showing is set for Sunday at 10:45 a.m. at the Metro 4.



Denny Moyer was winning the junior middleweight championship about the time Greg and I were lacing up the gloves. Brother Phil was a middleweight contender during the same time period, from 1957 to 1969.

"I met Tom Moyer, my executive producer, and he wanted to do this project based on his own family's history," said Pettey, a UCSB graduate in film studies. "Phil and Denny are his first cousins.

"The genesis of the documentary was about how these two brothers got long-term brain damage from boxing. It started with them. But in the course of making the film, we met other fighters and wove in their stories."

They include a modern-day "Million Dollar Baby" — current IFBA women's champion Kelsey Jeffries — and heavyweight contender DaVarryl Williamson, a devoted husband and father who is still pursuing his dangerous dream at age 39.

"We wanted to see why they would step into the ring with such a threat of personal injury," Pettey said.

In one of the film's more poignant moments, Williamson's wife, Shalifa, breaks down and says, "My biggest fear is taking that plane ride home by myself."

Although the movie does mention the boxing deaths of such fighters as Benny "Kid" Paret in 1962 and Becky Zerlente in 2005, it focuses more on the survivors and the effects of dementia pugilistica: Brain damage caused by cumulative and repetitive head trauma.

It includes some old footage that is almost gracefully brutal.

"We found a very, very rare interview with Muhammad Ali right before his last fight in 1981 against Trevor Berbick," Pettey said. "It was a very telling interview because he was already showing signs of Parkinson's Syndrome."

Pettey finds it fitting that Mickey Rourke, a former boxer who stars in the widely acclaimed movie "The Wrestler," would be honored on Saturday with the Film Festival's "American Riviera Award."

"I was a big fan of wrestling, and I know the sacrifices that those people make with their bodies and their relationships for the love of the sport," he said. "I

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hear there's about an 80 percent chance that Mickey Rourke will attend our premiere."

One of the film's segments shows a man, Tony Bruno, struggling to perform the rudimentary job of packaging dog toys. He suffered a brain injury when he was 18, sparring with his friend, Jeff Rehman.

"I was a 19-year-old, pride-filled man, and I had a visceral need to show him who was boss," Rehman tells Pettey with a tone of shameful regret.

The movie ends with an emotional reunion of the old friends.

Pettey, however, said the film doesn't intend to be a crusade against boxing.

"We attempt to show every side of the story," he said. "We do explain that there are boxers who come out of the sport OK, and we also show how boxing does make a positive impact on getting kids off the streets and out of gangs.

"I never wanted to make this a hit piece about boxing."



PHOTO COURTESY OF RYAN PETTEY

Former Jr. middleweight champion Denny Moyer walks down the hall of his convalescent home.

But it does present a jarring picture about what might await a boxer after his last round.

Mark Patton's column appears on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. E-mail: mpatton@newspress.com