

YOUTH BOXING

/Kelly Foreman,
Public Information Officer

With great care and precision, Kyle Ruff meticulously swathed his hands in soft, yellow, Ring-side hand wraps – stretching, rewrapping and tightening the material between his fingers until it enveloped his fists.

Then, with assistance from his coach, Lexington Division of Police Officer Jerry Loughran, Ruff pulled on the tight, leather, sparring gloves in preparation for his fight. Every week Ruff goes through this routine before practice with his Lexington Police Activities/Athletic League teammates.

For Ruff, boxing is more than something to do in his spare time. The opportunity to participate in the PAL sport has opened his eyes to



what he hopes will be a new part of his future.

“I don’t think I’ll ever quit,” said the 16-year-old police officer’s son. “I’m starting to fall in love with boxing, pretty much.”

It took nearly four months of fundraising, planning and recruiting, but in April, Lexington reignited the PAL boxing program that fell by the wayside many decades ago. The boxing league means something different to each of the spearheading officers – Loughran, Jonathan Washington and Connie Rayford.

But, the three agree that the newly created team achieves the same goal – bringing cops together positively with the community’s children. >>

▼ Lexington Police Officers Jerry Loughran, front, Connie Rayford, back left, Michael Smith and Jonathan Washington devote their time to the Lexington Police Athletic League boxing program.



Interested?

Of the state's 411 law enforcement agencies, Kentucky is home to two Police Athletic/Activities Leagues.

Lexington Division of Police Officer Connie Rayford, who heads up the agency's PAL program, said she would like to see that change.

"We have another PAL that is in Louisville, but right now, Louisville police and Lexington are the only two police departments that offer PAL," Rayford said. "I would like to try to find ways to recruit other agencies."

Several agencies have called Rayford to ask questions, she said, and often just need help going in the right direction. Getting started is fairly simple, according to National PAL materials.

By visiting the National Pal Web site at www.nationalpal.org, an application for membership can be completed. Along with it, interested agencies should submit a letter from the police chief or agency head, proof of insurance, articles of incorporation, non-profit status documentation and a check for \$400.

"As a membership organization, National PAL provides chapters with resources and opportunities to grow their own programs and enhance the quality of individual programming," the PAL materials state.

"These resources include funding opportunities through various grants, general liability protection programs, programming opportunities through affiliate organizations, and goods and services provided by corporate partners and supporting organizations," the materials state.

Anyone interested in more information about getting a PAL program started should call Rayford at (859) 258-3636 or contact by e-mail at conniemdavis@excite.com. ■



Giving back

"I am from this neighborhood," Washington said, inside the gymnasium of Lexington's Chestnut Street YWCA. "I always wanted to give something back. When the chance came for me to become a police officer, I said, 'This is my opportunity. This is what the Lord planned for me to do.' This is the perfect chance to give something back in my community."

Giving the community a chance to see police officers work in a different environment also is an important issue for Washington.

"Every time most people see the police, the big thing they always say is, 'Well, somebody's going to jail,'" he said. "Here, this is the police helping kids obtain a goal. We like to mentor them and be friends with them and everything because it is not just about taking people to jail. And that's really big to me."

Four days a week for two hours, local children ranging in age from 8 to 17 years old gather in the repurposed gym to practice their skills, condition and train. About a dozen kids regularly attend the league, with a total of nearly 20 signed up to participate. Of those, three youth recently attended their first USA Boxing competition.

"I was a nervous wreck," Loughran said.

But within four seconds of being in the ring, Loughran said Kyle scored a knock down, ultimately stopping his opponent – a move Loughran said earned the entire league legitimacy in the community.

"Boxing is a close-knit family," he said. "A lot of coaches have been around for years. For me to come around, I'm a young guy, still in my 30s ... a lot of times it is hard to get that respect from some of the other coaches who have been in it so long. To start out like that – the proof is in the pudding"

After 10 years of fighting around Kentucky as an amateur boxer himself, Loughran said the idea to rekindle the boxing program grew from his work with Lexington's Community Law Enforcement Action Response unit.

"I worked in the CLEAR unit where I was assigned to a neighborhood that has had a history of maybe more than its share of crime," Loughran said. "You are encouraged to be innovative and take a holistic approach, not just enforcement, what have you. So, one of the things I started looking at – me and another officer – was the PAL boxing program because I knew nationwide how big it is.

"I knew we had a PAL program here, but the question was, why have we not implemented the boxing?" Loughran said.

Timing was right

During her 15 years working with Lexington's PAL program, Rayford said adding boxing had been discussed several times, but PAL coordinators often ran into road blocks, particularly when it came to funding.

"Some PAL clubs are just strictly boxing programs," Rayford said. "So because of all the good, positive things I have heard from them, that was one of the reasons why I really tried to tap into it and get it started. I have seen some of the great results they were having, especially for kids with discipline. I'm not saying boxing is just for kids that are necessarily in trouble. But it also just teaches self discipline.

"I felt like it would be a good activity to add to what we already have and to just enhance some of the things we are offering," Rayford said.

When Loughran brought it up again last year, things began falling into place.

"I put zero effort into it until they said yes,

because I anticipated a no," Loughran said. "And [police officers] approved it and then we just went from there."

While Lexington's PAL offers more than a dozen sports and activities to local children and seniors, Loughran said boxing is different because it reaches a different group of children.

"I know there are a lot of kids who are not interested in basketball or football that would be interested in boxing," he said. "And maybe they are not gifted for those sports. Maybe they are not 6 feet tall. They may not be able to run a 4.4 (seconds) 40 (meter dash). But they may be able to box."

No restrictions

Being able to offer the program for free also is a major benefit for the program. The only cost the boxers pay is \$35 if they choose to compete.

"A lot of programs will charge as much as or close to \$100 a month," Loughran said. "I had a kid say yesterday, 'I've wanted to box for years and I just didn't want to pay the money.'"

PAL does not have any income-based restrictions for participants, Rayford said. It is not intended solely for troubled kids or clean-cut boxers. Anyone who wants to box is welcome.

"We have kids of all shapes, sizes, backgrounds and ethnicities," Loughran said. "It is definitely about the kids – giving them an opportunity and seeing them blossom. We have been at it two months and we have kids who, when they came in here, had never thrown a punch before, correctly. And in two month's time, it is amazing. Yesterday, we had our first sparring match and it was way above what I expected.

"So that's what it is all about for me," Loughran said. "Just seeing them improve." J

► Javonte Thomas, 12, practices his boxing moves with his coach, Lexington Police Officer Jerry Loughran, during a regular practice of Lexington's Police Athletic League boxing program.

