

First Person

A boxing trainer talks with Marya Smith

'Boxing . . . can make a gentleman out of a kid'

Name: Gene Kelly

Occupation: Boxing trainer

Background: When he was 15, Kelly started boxing at the Paradise Inn, an old storefront on Roosevelt Road, and later, in CYO (Catholic Youth Organization) programs. As a trainer, he has been in the corner for hundreds of amateur fighters, including dozens of Golden Glove Champions and many who have become professionals. Kelly has been the boxing trainer at the Chicago Park District's Fuller Park facility for 10 years. Before that he worked out of Wentworth Gardens. Kelly and his wife, Louise, live on Chicago's Southwest Side. They have 7 children and 15 grandchildren.

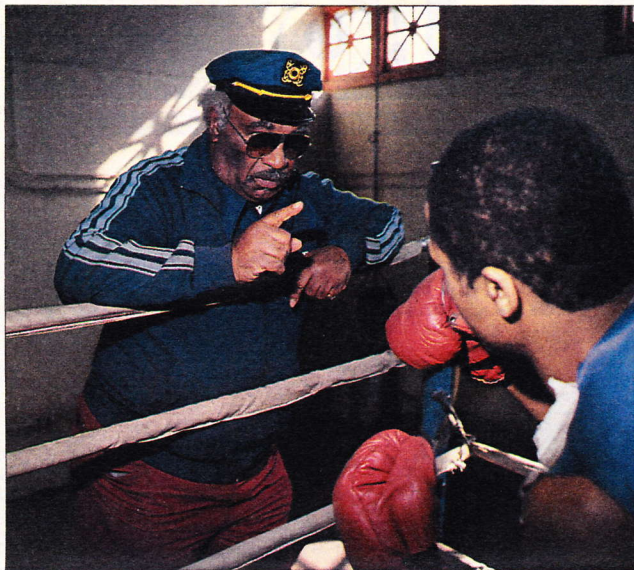
Years in present position: 43

Boxing is a tough sport, but it can make a gentleman out of a kid. You have to live clean to do well in the ring. It shows if you're not training. You can't fool people in boxing. It's not like baseball. You can tell after half a round if you didn't do your road work. It tells on you.

This door opens and swings all the time. I work with 30 to 35 kids a day, from 1 to 10 p.m. Their ages range from 11 to 25 or 26. They are from the neighborhood and other parts of the city. At least one comes all the way from Schaumburg. They sign in and stay two, three, four hours. I have a crowd around 1 until 3:30, and then later in the afternoon until 8:30 or 9. I've got some who come in at 9, and I say, "You've got to be crazy, I've got to get out of here at 10." But they want to stay anyway, even for an hour.

Years ago, kids had nothing to do but boxing. Today kids have a lot more sports programs to choose from. It all depends on what you like. Sometimes a dad or mom brings a kid in. It makes me happy to see a family interest. Some kids come on their own. Maybe they saw the name of the park on TV. A kid came in yesterday and said to me, "Mr. Kelly, I want to be a boxer." He looked like a little pit bull. I told him to get himself some hand wraps, trunks, sweat socks. He'll be back today or tomorrow.

Some kids are what we call a natural. A kid can walk in that door—and I have had kids do this—and they move around, jump rope with a natural rhythm. He's got to be born with it. I say, "What did your old man do? Did he play ball? Or what did Momma do? Did she skate or what? You've got that natural rhythm. It's got to come from somewhere in the genes. Where's it from?" They laugh it off. But you let them know. Then I see what I can do with them.



Gene Kelly works with Nate Rush at the Fuller Park gym: "A boxer has to trust the trainer."

When you've been around boxing all your life, you can tell right away. You watch how a kid walks. He's got that little snappy walk. You think: "I can make something out of that guy. I like what I see." I've had a few surprises, but not too many. A kid has come in and I didn't think he'd make a fighter. Then later he gets in that ring and gives me a little bit of that booming and everything, and I think, "I can mold that guy."

When a kid first comes in, I talk to him, see what he's lacking in equipment. A lot have their own, but we furnish it if they don't. If they go out and buy the basics—bag, gloves and hand wraps—it's under \$30. Some don't know anything about boxing. I start with the fundamentals. I have them shadow-box, in front of the mirrors. I show them how to hold their hands, what the left jab is for, what a right hand is for, how do you catch a punch here to keep from getting hit. Self-defense—so they protect themselves at all times—is the first thing you work on with a fighter. We go through all the basics, like going through the Marines and boot training. I watch about three at a time.

After they shadow-box, I take each fighter to the heavy bag, put him on jump rope, then his exercise on the medicine ball. I watch at least an hour, and I know how he's progressing. I talk the whole time, about how his hands should be, what he should be doing. I tell them road work is the No. 1 most essential thing for a fighter. You have to have legs to carry you. Amateurs need to run at least one or two miles a day; professionals run at least four or five miles a day.

When I know a kid is ready for the ring, I

put him with somebody at his own level. I watch. Then, later, I put him in with a little bit better fighter, but I can't do that until he's ready for that level. As he goes along, if he improves, I put him with a little bit better guy, and a little bit better guy. But I have to watch that nobody gets hurt. I also have to watch to make sure they're in a good frame of mind to box that day. Sometimes they tell me, "I feel okay, I want to box today." But maybe he doesn't feel like boxing that day. You've got to watch that.

A boxer has to trust the trainer. A boxer has to listen and do what he's told. They have to learn strategy. They can always learn something. Even the champions will stop and listen when the trainer talks to them. They've got to put into it to get out of it. I tell them: "You are the only one who can control your success. I can't."

Most of them make pretty steady progress. I can tell when they are ready to go for pro. I know how much time they've been working. It's not one, two or six months. It could be two to three years. I know when they reach their peak. You don't want them to overstay their level. One kid had won several Golden Glove Championships when he turned professional. I tried to get him out before that. Boxers burn themselves out if they stay too long at one level.

It's a melting pot here, all races. A senator's son trains here, and so does an ex-porite captain's son. It's free because it's the Park District. It's all amateur boxing. That's like the minors. In amateur boxing competition, you have your juniors [12- to 15-year-olds], intermediates [16 to 19] and seniors

[20 and up]. Novice means beginners, and open means experienced. All divisions go by weight. I work with all levels. I've had a lot of Golden Glove Champions. Every year I have a lot of winners in different categories in the finals.

I'm right there at the fight with my boxers. That's a must. The trainer's got to be there, or the fighter's going to go nuts. I'm glad when they've made a good showing. For example, recently my fighter lost, but the kid who beat him was older and had more experience. My kid gave him a hell of a fight. He did a good job. He told me the other day he's ready to go again. I told him he's been snake-bitten with boxing.

We take them to the fights by bunches, in cars, to the Amphitheatre, Clarendon Park. Sometimes, like at Black Expo in Indianapolis, I take a team of seven or eight guys. Last time the Army team beat us out. Those guys are in special training. We came in second and brought home trophies.

Boxing is not as dangerous as people think. Any sport is dangerous. This sport teaches kids to be clean and decent. What if a kid didn't take up boxing? He'd be on the street and then writing letters from the penitentiary. When a kid is boxing, he's doing something. He feels wanted. A lot of kids today, a lot of grownup kids, don't think anyone cares for them; they feel they're not wanted. But when they do well as a boxer, people look up to them. They earn respect.

We call this place the home of champions. I worked with Lee Roy Murphy, Wayne Lynum, Bobby Boyd, Randy Smith and Frank Smith and others like that here. This is their home base. They'd come in every day ready for a fight. Some of the professionals still come back to me to work on things. They're comfortable here.

When I get a boxing star to come in and train, you can't get your car in out there. Kids idolize a star. Even little kids

come and watch him. They think, "I want to be like that." It's good if they have an idol, gets them involved in a sport. Idle time and minds cause problems. They can make something of themselves, too, if they make up their minds. All the best fighters are from poor families. They're rough and tough. That's the way they've lived. When the family is rich, they want the kid to get an education, do something better. I thought "Rocky" was a good movie because it motivated kids, shows them kids rise up from lower levels. I loved the way the trainer played that part. He played it the way it's supposed to be played.

I love it, the training. It makes me stay younger, and it keeps my mind pure because it's always revolving. I watch, see the mistakes and tell them what to do. I break the buttons off my shirt, I'm so proud when I mold a kid into a good fighter. That is a thrill, when you know you've taken something from nothing and made it into something.