



# THE TRAINER IS IN

*Punching through life  
at the Cameron Street  
Boxing Club.*

BY MADDIE CONLEY



**R**icky Clark tried to retire once, but that didn't work.

For 12 years he worked overtime practically every day. That's if you can even call it overtime when a 13-hour day is the norm. When he was gone, people would call wondering if he was OK. Although he dreamt about moving down to Florida, he just couldn't leave.

You would think Clark is some sort of doctor, transplanting hearts or probing brain matter. He must be saving lives with those long hours and that high demand.

Well, those who know him may say he's doing just that. Not through transplants or surgeries, but through punching bags and boxing gloves.

"Some would say boxing is their therapy," said Clark, owner of Cameron Street Boxing Club in Harrisburg.

Clark starting boxing when he was 11 years old and a student at Benjamin Franklin School on N. 6th Street.

"This girl kept beatin' me up in school," Clark said. "So, my mom put me in boxing. She didn't know the girl was boxing too."

He fought until he was 50, when he decided to open his own gym and train up-and-coming boxers.

Beginning in an old warehouse and jumping "basically all over the city," Clark explained, the boxing gym moved in May to the skeleton of an old Goodwill store. You can still make out the thrift store's faded blue name on the sign above the two large glass windows. Driving by, you wouldn't even know what was going on inside. But if you happened to walk up, having heard of the gym or thinking you were still going to go get some bargain clothes, you may be met with a surprise.

If not training in the ring, Clark (most likely the one in the bandana) will greet you from his white folding table situated under a framed, black-and-white photo of Muhammad Ali in the ring. You will get a big smile and a "how you doin'," putting your nerves about entering a facility that trains people to beat you up at ease.

Respect, acceptance and camaraderie are the primary values Clark works to instill in fighters. He wants his gym to be unique.

"When you walk into another gym, people barely speak to you. They got this persona, they gotta be tough," Clark said. "But not these guys. These guys will greet you at the door."

Cameron Street Gym is home to boxers from all walks of life, Clark explained. You may find a kid swinging at a bag or senior fighting in the ring. There are 89 members from a range of demographics and even countries. Italy, Jamaica, Morocco and the Dominican Republic are a few of the flags waving from the ceiling around the ring. Boxers at Cameron Street are all at different levels as athletes, some boxing for recreation, others for sport—most boxing to fulfill a passion.

"I would say for about 90 percent of the boxers here, it's a dream," Clark said.

## HARDEST SPORT

Cory Dandy, a 22-year-old from Harrisburg, has been involved in martial arts since he was 12, when he wanted to become some hybrid of a Power Ranger and a Ninja Turtle. It was only 1½ years ago that he made the switch from kung fu to boxing.

"Fighting always intrigued me," Dandy said. "I thought it was cool to be able to use my skills—the skills I learned in kung fu—well. It's the ultimate form of competition."

Just eight months after picking up the gloves at Cameron Street Boxing, Dandy decided he was ready to pursue his dream—winning the PA Golden Gloves.

At his first fight in Scranton in March, Dandy stood in front of a crowd of 250 people, a majority of them wearing shirts with his opponent's name on the front, cheering for the Marine that Dandy was about to face.

"That fight was probably the worst I ever felt fighting," Dandy said. "I think it was just like the nerves of my first amateur boxing bout."

But he won and traveled to Philadelphia's 2300 Arena for the championship fight in April. In a second round TKO, Dandy claimed his shiny gold

trophy and title as 2019 PA Golden Gloves Eastern Region Champ.

Although Dandy may have made his win look easy, the athletes at Cameron Street Gym were quick to explain that boxing is no game.

"My first week in the gym, I walked in like I can fight anyone—boy, was I wrong," said boxer Hanif Johnson. "Three minutes in the ring is a very long time. It's the hardest sport I ever did."

New to the gym, Johnson needed to earn his reputation. He quickly made a name for himself once he started sparring with other boxers.

Johnson remembers one of his first times sparring. Walking up the stairs before ducking under the ropes of the ring, he began yelling 'Hanif Bomaye'—a reference to the chant fans used to hype up boxer Muhammad Ali.

"Since then, everyone calls me Bomaye," Johnson said.

## A RARITY

For others, making a name isn't as easy. You can chant all you want and come up with the cleverest fighting name. But if you're a woman, you're going to be at a disadvantage.

Twenty-five-year-old Da'sha Ragland has been fighting since she was 13.

"It's kind of crazy to say you like a sport you get beat up in, but I don't feel like I get beat up," Ragland said with a smirk.

According to New York Public Radio, female boxers didn't begin to gain recognition until the 1970s. It wasn't until then that women were finally issued boxing licenses, but they were limited in the number of rounds they could fight and even the clothes they could wear while fighting. Women began to fight professionally only in 1996.

Ragland is a rarity at Cameron Street Boxing and in the sport as a whole. She's often stuck sparring with male boxers at the gym because there aren't other women to fight. She gestured to her cheekbone and up to her eye, explaining how she will sometimes



*Dasha Ragland, one of the gym's few female boxers, practices at a bag.*

go home “all busted up” from training with men. “I wish they would remember they’re fighting a female,” she said.

While training with the guys hasn’t always been easy, Ragland admitted it has paid off, helping her win fights and advance.

On June 1, she got her first pro fight. But that was just a few months ago. She’s been at the gym for years.

“She’s one of the best fighters we have in here, but she’s a female so she can’t get fights,” Clark explained.

But Clark doesn’t give up on her—even though there are not always other women for her to fight and she’s pressured to balance her time between her job and boxing.

“He [Clark] will stay here until I get here after work,” Ragland said.

#### RING & BAGS

Coming in usually at 11 a.m., Clark rarely heads home before midnight. Through Harrisburg’s ups and downs, he’s been in that gym training fighters.

He recalled tragedies that the gym has faced over the years. For instance, boxer Johnisha Wright was shot in 2009, leaving her unable to walk to this day.

“Our city has been through a lot, but boxing has remained constant,” Clark said.

Over the years, Cameron Street Club has maintained the feel of a traditional gym. There are five trainers at the gym, but Clark and Felix Pacheco are the main coaches—the ones usually wearing the boxing pads and calling punches in the ring. They are old-school trainers, slightly different from their more modern counterpart,



Capital Punishment Boxing Club down the street. “All you need is a ring and some bags,” Clark explained.

Nonetheless, Clark believes this is the best shape the gym has ever been in. They’ve got the essentials: a new ring to fight in, bags to punch and a fresh coat of paint. Not to mention local, state and national champs in their midst.

But it’s not the trophies or awards keeping Clark around all these years—it’s the people.

“Probably about half of the gym has been here over 10 years,” Clark said. “I’ve pretty much watched them grow up.”

In the ring, Clark, Dandy, Johnson and Ragland all seem the same—tough, aggressive, even violent. They’re fighters, the perfect image of what a boxer is supposed to be. But take off the gloves and you have Clark, the man who fought cancer, Dandy the up-and-coming music artist, Johnson, the youngest elected magisterial district judge in Pennsylvania, and Ragland, the single mom. They’ve all had their uphill fights, ones they couldn’t punch their way through.

“These guys come from all different walks of life, but boxing is their thing,” Clark said.

You never know who you’re going to meet when you step into Cameron Street Boxing Club. It could be a doctor, a judge, a lawyer or a teacher. It may be a group of people who don’t have much in common besides boxing.

But that’s what has kept coaches and boxers around for so long. It’s a community and a family, but also a melting pot—an example of what can happen, if instead of seeing differences, we find one thing in common. Who knew fighting people could unite people? **B**

*Cameron Street Boxing Club is located at 627 N. Cameron St., Harrisburg. For more information, visit their Facebook page.*