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Boxing has twins on track

BY MIKE BRUDENELL
FREE PRESS SPORTS WRITER

Hard time in a maximum-security facility -- not boxing trophies -- was what twins Jacob and Joseph Bonas were on the way to earning on the streets of Detroit when Kronk fight icon Emanuel Steward met the young hotheads.

It was late 2005 when the Bonas brothers, 11 at the time, showed up at the old Kronk Gym on McGraw and shocked the legendary manager/trainer with their ferocity and brawling skills.

"They were the meanest, toughest kids who'd ever walked into the gym," said Steward, who has seen it all. "They were a couple of white boys beating up on our fighters. I couldn't believe it."

They also were in hot water at school, running with gangs and becoming well-known to cops.

"They grew up about a mile from the Kronk, in a very rough neighborhood," said Sugar Hill, who trains Jacob and Joseph, now 15, and is a former Detroit police officer and Steward's nephew. "They could have been lost -- not only to boxing but to themselves and family."

In February 2007, they nearly were when they were arrested in connection with a robbery in Detroit. Both ended up at the Wolverine Secure Treatment Center in Buena Vista Township, near Saginaw -- Jacob sentenced to 16 months and Joseph to 14 months at the facility.

What could have been a case of two more young punks headed down the road to prison has developed into a success story -- at least for now. The Bonas brothers, with the support of their mother, have turned their focus to boxing and winning amateur titles under the mentorship of Hill and Steward.

Back where they belong

Jacob Bonas is helping Marcus Lee, a frisky 8-year-old, skip rope at the Kronk's newest location on Warren Avenue, a few blocks west of the Southfield Freeway in Detroit. He shows the baby boxer some ring moves, too.

Sitting in the corner of the gym is Ileana Bonas, who drives Jacob and Joseph to training every afternoon. Ileana, who works midnights cleaning for a contractor at Metro Airport, has two other sons, including Robert, who boxed at the Kronk until a knee injury forced him to quit.

Ileana and her husband, Costica, escaped the oppressive communist regime in Romania in 1987, two years before Nicolae Ceausescu's government was overthrown. Costica now is serving an 8-year term in a federal prison in West Virginia for conspiracy with intent to distribute and deliver marijuana.

Ileana moved her boys to Sumpter Township this year, away from their posse in Detroit. She appears tired, but her eyes have a look of strength and hope.

"I'm not much for boxing," Ileana said, "but I support my sons, and I come to watch them. They're good boys, but they got into trouble fighting at school and in the neighborhood.

"We moved from Detroit in February -- I did not like the trouble on the streets. Now they want to be professional fighters. I just want them to become good guys, good men."

Down for the count?

After Kronk closed its doors on McGraw in November 2006, the Bonas brothers returned to their old habits, which ultimately led to their incarceration. That's when Hill stepped in, visiting the twins in Saginaw and encouraging them to steer clear of trouble as they served their penance.

Upon their release, they returned to the new Kronk and occasionally stayed with Steward at his home in Rosedale Park when their mother could not bring them to training at the gym or when she was working weekends.

"We were with the boys more than the parents," said Hill, 37, a former amateur champion. "I'd help them with their homework -- make it fun and challenging."

Had he and Steward not stepped in -- to encourage the brothers to stay at the Kronk, it's easy to imagine what might have happened.

"They'd probably have gone back to the neighborhood," Hill said. "They'd be in the streets again with nothing to do. When they closed the Kronk down and other recreation centers across of the city, crime erupted."

Power combination

Former middleweight contender Caveman Lee is in the house, and the intensity turns up a notch in the Kronk ring. Jacob and Joseph spar three rounds against each other, and there's no brotherly love lost.

Joseph lands a heavy right to Jacob's head. Jacobs throws uppercuts. The two trade punches -- quality shots.

"That's the first time since they've been at the gym I've seen them spar together," Steward said. "It's better than watching boxing on TV. They're rough kids, but they're on the right track."

The Bonas brothers were born 14 minutes apart -- Jacob first. They've stuck together through thick and thin, good times and bad, watching each other's back in the streets and each other's future in the ring.

"We box and bang," Joseph said. "We go to the gym, stay out of trouble now."

The pair resumed school at Belleville High this week. Jacob knows the drill.

"Kids can talk about us all they want," he said. "There are more important things for us to do now than fight at school. We don't look for trouble."

'We have to stay strong'

Joseph Bonas (27-1) is built like a big welterweight at 148 pounds and growing. Jacob (16-5) weighs about 149, and they stand about 5-foot-7. Though teens, they fight like men, but their hearts break like any young boy's. Their father's imprisonment hurts deeply.

"Dad's doing the time, and we have to stay strong," said Jacob of his father, a former amateur boxer

in Romania and once a regular at Kronk. "We want to see my dad, want to visit him. We miss him."

Joseph feels the same way.

"He spent a lot of time with us at the gym," he said. "I miss going shopping with him. I pray for him."

Scott Muska, 37, is stepping in to help the brothers. The former Lake Orion High track and field and basketball star works for Quicken Loans in Livonia. He and his company, in conjunction with the Kronk Gym Foundation, keep an eye on Jacob and Joseph, helping them with school books and bags.

"I want to see Jacob and Joseph applying sound principles in the gym, execute good decision-making and learn from their mistakes," Muska said. "Momentum is the key."

In August, Joseph won the 152-pound class at the prestigious Ringside Championships in Kansas City, Mo. Jacob made the quarterfinals before losing a contentious decision at 141.

Momentum in the ring is not a problem.

"We've just got to stay away from trouble," Jacob said. "Emanuel and Sugar have given us a family here. Our old friends -- they're really worth nothing."

Contact MIKE BRUDENELL: 313-222-2115 or mbrudenell@freepress.com.
