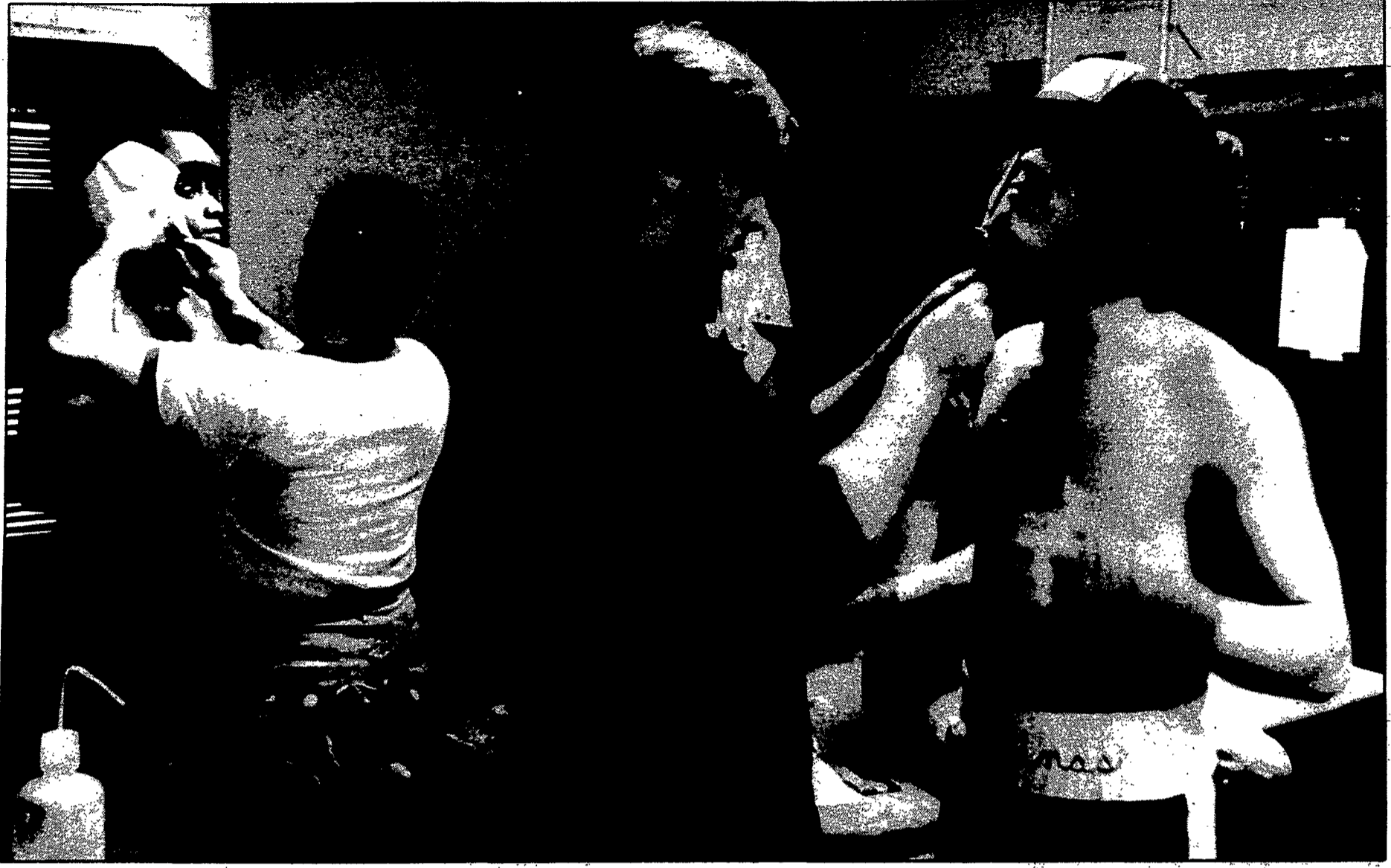


# AQ boxing program gives missions a fighting chance



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Kevin Oliver adjusts Don Schwab's headgear while director Dom Arioli attends to James Galloway before the Aquinas students' middleweight bout.

## Benefit bouts emphasize sportsmanship, excellence

By Richard A. Kiley

One night a year for the past 55 years, Aquinas Institute has given new meaning to the sport of boxing, which, quite frankly, takes more punches from adversaries than it gives.

Through its annual spectacle, the Mission Bouts, the Catholic high school on Dewey Avenue has shown another side to the much-maligned sport.

This year's exhibition on Friday, March 6, brought out more than 650 spectators, among them Carmen Basilio, former welterweight and middleweight champion of the world. Past boxing notables such as Sonny Liston and Rocky Marciano have also attended the fight night, which is believed to be the only such spectacle sponsored by any high school in the country, and second only to the University of Notre Dame in years of existence.

For the past six years, the program has been under the direction of Dom Arioli, a former boxer at Aquinas. The 31-year-old Arioli is quick to come to the defense of the sport, which he believes can prove a positive influence on a boy's life.

"We really keep the kids involved more with the idea that boxing is a sport, and try to keep the fighting end of it out of it," said Arioli, who is assisted in his duties by Kevin Farrell. Farrell, who is head trainer of the program, was a runner-up in the Light Heavyweight division of the New York State Golden Gloves competition back in 1984. "I don't like to equate boxing with fighting," Arioli continued. "It's similar to playing basketball all one on one."

Arioli's words are illustrated by a tremendous degree of camaraderie and mutual respect on the part of those who have gone through his program, and have fought in front of the standing-room-only crowds at the Aquinas gym.

"My opponent was good, very good," said first-year fighter Tim Tarentello, who won his bout against Jason Centrone. "Coach (Arioli) told us that even if the guy you're boxing is your friend, you try to make believe he's not. It's hard because you know he's your friend; but win or lose, it doesn't matter."

"I like (the way) Phil Damiano (fights)," said Vinny Guarino, who earlier in the night had lost a close decision to B.J. Zapf. "There's something about him. He may not be one of the best fighters, but... there's just something about him. And Tim Schwab too."

For Tim Schwab, whose brother, Don, was also on the fight card Friday night, it's been a family tradition to fight in the Mission Bouts. He is third in line among brothers who have gone through the program.

And he wasn't at all disappointed when Arioli scheduled a good friend of his, Zane Carpenter, to be his opponent.

"We've been good friends for years," said Schwab before the fight. "We sparred together in training. And Coach tells us it's a sport just like anything else; you're not out there to hurt anybody."

"Whatever comes out of it comes out," said Schwab, when asked if it mattered who won the match. "I'm just going to try and fight my fight."

Schwab said he came to know Arioli through his brothers, and that they all admired Arioli for his dedication to the school and the program.

"He teaches respect, and he teaches us how to go for goals later in life."

Although the annual night of boxing has enjoyed critical acclaim in recent years, directing the program has not always been easy for Arioli. He's had to deal with those who believe boxing has no place in high school or anywhere else, for that matter.

"I might get that from people who don't know much about the program," said Arioli, when asked about skeptics. "This year, after seeing the program and how much was gained from it, the mother of one of the (first-year) fighters told me that she was going to spread the word around about how wonderful she thought it was. And she told me she had a younger son in the seventh grade, and that if he went to Aquinas, he'll be in the program."

Arioli said opponents of the program began to emerge in the early '70s, when there was talk of grudge matches between some of the boxers.

"There was an incident years ago; the kids involved were from rival cliques in the school, but I think it was the kids around the two boxers that made it that way. They (the boxers) weren't really boxing for themselves."

"That will never happen in my program," Arioli said emphatically. "If I ever see an inkling of something like that, I'll stop it right away."

In the eight weeks of training prior to the bouts — during which boxers wear mouthpieces and headgear — Arioli tries to break traditional stereotypes that develop among students who participate in the program.

"It's hard to devote time to each kid," Arioli explained. "So we try and get the senior on the football team to work with the kid who may not be as involved (in school) and see how they progress. This way, they're not only developing as boxers, but they're developing themselves (as people)."

One of the other targets of criticism was the fact that, for several years, the school strayed from the original purpose of the Mission Bouts, which was to donate all profits made to support missionary activity by the Basilian fathers working in Mexico and Columbia. Arioli credits Aquinas's current principal, Father Stephen R. Martin, with the re-emphasis on the program's original goal.

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Pat Lancer, left, and Misha Lapina, right, stand in the stairwell leading from the locker room to the Aquinas gymnasium, before the first bout of the night.