

THE NICEST, MEANEST MAN: INSIDE JACK LOEW'S SOUTH SIDE SANCTUARY

By Anthony Dominic

“The person who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing which is more important than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself.”

John Stuart Mill

Eight o'clock Saturday morning, and the sun swells over the treetops behind South Market Street. Brilliant blond rays blast through rickety backyard fences and airy brick-walled alleys. Four or five sedans skate north or south, rarely turning, never stopping. Only the sharp October breeze lingers. It smacks of winter.

The strip of South Market running from the Southern Boulevard fork to the Mahoning River is lined with empty lots, hockshops, a porn store, and half a dozen shuttered businesses whose weathered signs have become relics of an era bygone. It's the kind of stuff that keeps most people moving. Residents will tell you as much; the strip sees little activity, especially this early. Except for the lone red-and-black painted building between Willis and Chalmers avenues—the South Side Boxing Club.

Jack Loew is around back, keying the padlocks to the gym entrance. He's a stout man of 54 with hairy arms and a fading mustache. His upper body is as strong as it looks, evident by the way he tosses open the garage door that leads inside.

“You learn to keep your shit locked up around here,” he says, his grin uneasy.

The gym is dusky and cavernous. Its walls are covered in 25 years' worth of fight posters. No matter where you turn, the unwavering eyes

of boxers come and gone are always watching, like deceased amateur Johnny Swanson, imprisoned lightweight “Dangerous” Dannie Williams, and retired middleweight Kelly “The Ghost” Pavlik.

Jack is known for his 20-year relationship with Pavlik, a hot-headed kid from the south side, much like the coach himself. Pavlik worked his way from Jack’s first gym on Southern Boulevard (a closet compared to this one) to Caesars Atlantic City, where, in 2007, he upset Jermain Taylor for the World Boxing Council, World Boxing Organization, and The Ring middleweight titles. After a string of successful defenses, Pavlik lost the straps in 2010 to Sergio Martinez, broke up with Loew in 2011, and retired from the sport in 2013.

While Pavlik remains Jack’s greatest prodigy—the embodiment of the Youngstown revival story, as national sports writers fancied him, for a time—the South Side Boxing Club preceded the former middleweight champion, and it lives on without him. In the next hour, it will fill with mostly young men from the neighborhood. Weights will start clanking. Heavy bags will start swinging.

“I see everything that goes on in this gym,” he says, smiling, surveying the room. “We’re real aggressive-type fighters, aggressive-type trainers. I’m always on their ass, but we have a lot of fun. I had this kid who once told me, ‘You know, coach, you are the nicest, meanest man I ever met.’ I thought, man, do I take that as a compliment, or what?”

Since opening the gym in 1989, Jack estimates hundreds of, if not more than a thousand, kids have passed through his doors. Some want a safe place to hang. Others want to get in shape. Few become amateur boxers, and even fewer become pros. But the doors remain open to all, regardless of age, regardless of skill, regardless of background.

What Jack doesn’t advertise is that the gym, in theory, is a not-for-profit business. There are no steady fees, no filing cabinets packed with names and dues. There never have been. The only charge is \$61 for a USA Boxing Passbook, a requirement for amateurs, which Jack purchases for those who can’t afford them. The gym has lighting, heating, and running water because, from 6:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. five days a week, the married father of three works

construction. After his shifts, he rushes home to let out his dogs before opening the gym from 4:30 to 7 or 8 p.m. On warm Saturdays, he runs an asphaltting business. On cold Saturdays, like today, he’s here, filling water bottles, readying hand tape, waiting for those doors to swing open.

Jack’s first fight was on Glenwood Avenue, not far from his childhood home on the south side. He couldn’t have been more than eight or nine years old at the time. The minutiae—why it started, with whom it started—have faded with the decades. But smart money says Jack won. He usually did. He never had the edge in height or reach, but the sandy-haired boy could move. He had balance and rhythm and a hard right hand from regularly pulverizing a stuffed duffle bag in his basement. After his fourth or fifth fight, word got around: Jack Loew could kick your ass.

This kind of reputation amounted to armor in those days. In the 1960s and ‘70s, the city’s south side was teeming with gutty kids who, when not in school or at the dinner table, were running the streets. In the thick of pickup games, football or baseball, usually, personalities clashed. But none was as oversized as Jack’s. He was as competitive as he was angry and aggressive. The kind of kid who was willing to throw clenched fists when one of his teammates was shoved a little too hard, or when trash talk turned to insults. More often than not, Jack remembers, he was bloodied defending friends, not himself, even when they flat out told him not to.

Jack can’t explain his temperament, not even some 40 years later. His parents were strict but, for the most part, easygoing folks. His father, John, was a professional type, a longtime industrial engineer for the General Fireproofing Company on the north side. Jean was a stay-at-home mom, like most neighborhood moms back then.

Jack’s grandpa ran concessions at the Stambaugh Auditorium, where crowds would flock every weekend to watch closed-circuit boxing from half a world away. Jack and his buddies, like future

International Boxing Federation lightweight champ Harry Arroyo, would bike uptown, and Grandpa would sneak them in through one of the auditorium's back doors. It was the closest a kid from the south side of Youngstown could get to the likes of Muhammad Ali, George Foreman, Oscar Bonavena, and Chuck Wepner.

"Guys my age didn't get to find out who won, who lost, until after the fact when their dads would come home," Jack says. "And even then, they never actually saw the fights. I'd watch them and think, 'I know I could do this.'"

When he was a teenager, Jack started training with local boxing coach Ed Sullivan at the old Naval Reserve Center near Cardinal Mooney High School. He remembers Sullivan as a vocal, "foot-up-your-ass" kind of coach, always honest with you about your strengths and weaknesses, always willing to put in just as hard of a workout as you were. Sullivan's old-school methods proved effective, too, as he produced Arroyo and future World Boxing Association lightweight champ Ray Mancini.

Jack's years as an amateur boxer (his record stands 18-1) were overshadowed by his success on the football field at Cardinal Mooney, where he graduated in 1978 as the school's then-third all-time leading rusher. Despite wanting to turn pro in boxing, Jack's father pushed him toward a football scholarship at the University of Southern Colorado (now Colorado State University-Pueblo).

In his first summer with the ThunderWolves, Jack took an awkward hit in practice. His knee fully hyperextended. After a rough operation and a slow recovery, the same knee was injured again the following spring. In an instant, both his scholarship and football career expired.

Jack moved home, bitter and aimless. One night, he went out to the Sugar Bowl, a bar on Glenwood. After a few beers, things went foggy. He started trading words with a guy he knew from Austintown Fitch High School. Then they were arguing. Then they were wrestling to the ground, yelling, pushing, kicking, punching. Next Jack knew, he was being handcuffed. It was over.

The night before Jack's court hearing, the nephew of the municipi-

pal judge hearing Jack's case was hospitalized after being battered with a baseball bat in a McDonald's parking lot. When Jack arrived at the courtroom, he had no idea what he was walking into.

Jack was calm, thinking the judge was going to dismiss his assault charges.

"But he goes, 'I'm tired of this teenage violence,'" Jack recalls. "Sixty days in jail, probation, and a \$150 fine"—and he got up and walked off the bench.

"It really woke me up, then," he continues. "The days of getting into a brawl and calling mom to get you out of the Boardman jail wasn't happening anymore. I might have been a tough guy on the street, but that was the worst, scariest experience in my life when they slammed those doors."

After 33 days, Jack was released from Mahoning County Jail. He would never start a fight again.

Night after night, Jack would drive home from his job with Tamco Distributors and pass a small building for sale at the corner of Boston Avenue and Southern Boulevard. Night after night, he'd imagine a little gym tucked inside with a small ring and a few bags. By the late 1980s, Youngstown's boxing scene was due for a pick-me-up. City gyms were closing; even Ed Sullivan had been displaced after the Naval Reserve Center shut down. And a decade of Mafia influence on the sport had spoiled many of the city's most-talented boxers, Jack explains. It's what deterred him from turning pro after he returned from Colorado.

"We had so many good fighters in this area that never got a chance because of these so-called wiseguys who ruined their careers, got them to sign into these ridiculous contracts that lined the pockets of these local mobsters," he says.

"There were a lot better fighters here than Ray Mancini, but Ray had the option of scooting out of town," he continues. "These other guys were stuck here. Jeff Lampkin, Greg Richardson, they did it,

but they did it the hard way, and their careers didn't last long, and they didn't make no money."

When Jack finally converted the Southern Boulevard space into a modest boxing gym in October 1989, people thought he was crazy. Many still do. It's a labor of love in the truest sense of the phrase. He has always worked nine-to-fives to support the gym, and his boxers have often come before his wife and kids—a sacrifice his family, who understand his passion better than anyone, has often encouraged him to make. Many of his boxers he's clothed, fed, housed, and found jobs. His aim with South Side Boxing Club—though he never comes out and says so—is to provide everything the city once lacked in a gym. It's more than a gym: it's a sanctuary in one of Youngstown's long-troubled neighborhoods. It offers structure for kids who have none. It's a place where that south side aggression can be harnessed and given direction. Jack knows too well what happens when it's unbridled.

"30, 35 years ago, I could fight with you on a Friday night, and Saturday night we're gonna have a beer together—or we're maybe gonna fight again," he says. "But I never had to worry about you coming back and shooting me. You coming back and stabbing me. You getting 35 of your friends and beating me into a coma."

He hesitates, tugging at his chin.

"The south side didn't used to be like that. Now all these kids are killing each other now because, 'You said something about my mama,' or, 'You smacked me in my lip at school.' Man, well go punch the kid back; don't shoot him and kill him."

Sobering statistics back Jack's assessment. While the Steel City is no longer the murder capital, the south side was the stage for nearly half of the city's homicides in 2013 and 2014, according to Raids Online, the police department's crime-mapping service. Sifting through police reports and *Vindicator* articles, year by year, is dizzying—nearly every south side homicide is a shooting, and nearly every victim is a man under forty. It's a scene that seems to replay over and over and over.

"Our fate is already determined, somehow, somewhere," Jack says. "I could probably say our program saved some kids' lives. Or instead of 11, 12, 13, they didn't end up dead or in prison until 20, 21, 22. At least I got them through those years. But when they leave the doors, there's nothing I can do."

Jack says he returns to the gym day after day because he's chasing the next champion. His son, John, an assistant trainer at the gym, says it's more than that.

"He's bailed fighters out of our jail, given fighters money, 20 dollars here, 20 dollars there. I don't know if I could do it. Some would think he wouldn't—they just see an aggressive guy who swears—but what they don't see is a guy who teaches not just boxing but life lessons. He has the biggest heart in the world."

Jack is the reason welterweight Lavelle Hadley moved to Youngstown from his home in Springfield, IL, in 2011. Hadley had visited South Side Boxing Club years before, and after his longtime trainer passed away, he believed Jack would be the one to advance his career.

"Jack doesn't sugarcoat anything," Hadley says. "When I got here, I wasn't a really big puncher, and he straight-up said I was weak and needed to get stronger. 'These punches aren't going to hurt anybody,' he said, and he helped me with that."

In November 2014, Hadley won his pro debut by first-round knockout.

"There's something about the way he trains fighters," Hadley says of Jack. "He trains them to fight, to fight hard, and I like that. He catches mitts well; he has all the equipment you need. It's the best gym I ever been to." Hadley is in the gym five to six nights a week, every week, for at least three hours. After all that time, you get to know somebody, he says.

"Here and there, through all the aggressiveness, Jack does a lot for people," he says. "He has helped me out in a lot of different ways, kept me out of trouble. He is a very kind man."

John is convinced if his dad were in a sexy gym on the east or west

Coast, he'd be perceived as a Freddie Roach or Robert Garcia. A celebrity coach, always in the news, attracting aspiring boxers in droves.

"He never wanted to leave, and I think that says a lot," John says. "Other guys get handed [money] and will abandon you. Loyalty and commitment is big to him. And he instills that in his fighters. Where else do you see that?"



Jack Loew's South Side Boxing Club on Market Street.
Sean Posey