



A TOUCH OF VEGAS IN MARIN: As a corner crew works furiously to restore their fighter, one of the 'ring girls,' Daniela Lazar, carries the card telling fight fans the number of the upcoming round. The 'ring girls,' boxing experts admit, are unlikely to be found in any other sport besides boxing and are more than a little bit politically incorrect in Marin. It was all part of the action Friday night at the Marin Veterans Audition during the Nave-Haugen boxing match.

IJ photos/Jeff Vendsel

Ringside in Marin

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MARIN fight crowd. Sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it?

Unlikely as it may seem, though, we all know by now that affluent, enlightened, peace-loving Marin County has hosted two world championship boxing matches in the past eight months.

Both involved a local product, Paul Nave, aka "the Marin County Assassin," who won and lost the World Boxing Federation welterweight championship in the county where he was

born and raised.

For Nave, scion of an old-time Marin family, boxing became a form of redemption after he served a prison term, giving his story a pathos that seems endemic to the fight game.

Bloody, brutal, some say barbaric, boxing is a colorful throwback to another era, an anachronism in a sports world dominated by antiseptic NBAs and NFLs.

From the nearly nude "ring girls" to the drunken brawls that break out in the cheap seats, it's a last bastion of political incorrectness. That may be what makes it such a guilty

pleasure.

"It's fascinating," said romance novelist Danielle Steel, adding some ringside glamour to Friday night's title bout between Nave and Greg Haugen. "I've never been to a fight before. I'll have to use it in a book."

She won't be the first. Hemingway, Mailer, Stallone, Runyon have all beat her to the punch. The fight game has been a recurring metaphor in books and movies, but it's also a real-life drama that remains a popular attraction in tacky meccas

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CELEBRITIES AT THE MATCH: Novelist Danielle Steel (left), Peter and Kaylea Bakker and Kimberly Quinlan Bakker talk about an injured fighter between rounds of an undercard fight, prior to the Nave-Haugen bout Friday night.

Boxing

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like Las Vegas and Atlantic City. But in Marin?

Both Nave-Haugen fights have drawn big crowds of Bay Area fight fans to the Marin Veterans Memorial Auditorium. Still, even with a world champion in our midst, this county, more into mountain biking than boxing, has been slow to appreciate the romance of the ring.

"It's a unique sport for Marin," Nave said in his dressing room before the fight, which he would lose a few hours later, relinquishing his welterweight belt to Haugen. "Some people don't know a lot about it. I've done a lot of public speaking at clubs and schools. I tell kids that you don't have to be the very best, but you have to try your very best."

Nave's message was not lost on 10-year-old Ross Guttenberg of

Marinwood, who met the fighter when he visited his school. "I got his autograph," Ross beamed.

The fifth grader attended the first Nave-Haugen bout with his father, attorney Alan Guttenberg. They also took in Friday's rematch. "For his birthday, he got to do what he wanted to do with his dad and he chose the fight," Guttenberg explained. "This year, he wanted to see the rematch."

But isn't boxing awfully violent for a 10-year-old?

"I think it's no more violent than football or hockey or wrestling," Guttenberg answered without a hint of defensiveness.

While other sports have their cheerleaders, boxing has its "ring girls." A bevy of pneumatic young women, popping out of bikinis and thongs that could fit in a shot glass, pranced around the ring Friday night, holding up cards announcing the number of the round.

If boxing seems frozen in the past, it exists in a time long before

the women's movement.

"Nowhere else in any sport are you going to see card girls dressed like that," said ring announcer Joe Hallisiy, conservatively attired in a traditional tuxedo. "People would be picketing the stadium if they tried that at an NBA game or in the NFL."

Boxing matches, especially title fights, are like conventions for former fighters, a chance for ex-pugs to see old cronies and relive past glories, perhaps even be introduced to the crowd from the ring.

Asked about this as he sat in his dressing room before the fight listening to a Metallica album, Haugen, a four-time world champion at the end of his 18-year career, smiled wistfully, knowing that he is about to join their ranks.

"This is definitely a colorful business," he said. "There's characters."

Characters were not in short supply Friday night. There was former Army boxer Al Frosini, a remarkably fit 81-year-old who

runs a gym in Point Richmond. "I had 12 fights in my career and they all ended in knockouts," he said. "I was the one who got knocked out."

Andy Nance, a retired Marin super lightweight once ranked sixth in the world by Ring magazine, worked as a cornerman for Nave, his friend and former San Rafael High schoolmate.

"It's hard to be around boxing," confessed Nance, wearing a garish animal-print shirt that matched Nave's trunks. "It makes you want to get in the ring. You always think, 'I could beat that guy.'"

Haugen, who still lives in the town where he grew up, near Seattle, had a handful of handlers and supporters with him, among them Mitch Libonati, a feisty little cornerman who holds a singular distinction in the annals of boxing.

"I'm the guy who found Evander Holyfield's ear when Mike Tyson bit it off," he proclaimed. "I did 185 talk shows, even Letterman. I did every talk show there is. That was my 15 minutes of fame."

Irish Pat Lawlor, "the Pride of the Sunset," a retired San Francisco middleweight who once beat Roberto Duran and fought seven world champions, held court in the lobby before the first of Friday's three preliminary bouts.

With his battered face peering from under a gray Irish cap, Lawlor looked as if he could have stepped out of one of the "Rocky" movies.

He knew how rare it was for a professional fight of any kind, let alone a title bout, to be held in the Bay Area. That it happened to be in Marin made it even more incongruous.

"The Bay Area leans more toward aerobics and yoga and underwater basket weaving," Lawlor cracked. "Fights don't happen very often here. When they do, if you're a fight fan and don't go, you're an idiot."