

## *John Harris*



When **John Harris** decided to move to Norwalk nearly 40 years ago, it turned out to be a blessing in more ways than one for the city in general and the local sports scene in particular.

The 70-year-old Harris has had a tremendous impact on inner city youngsters in Norwalk for the last 17 years through his local boxing program, which he founded and built into one of the most successful in the country.

Born in West Virginia, Harris moved to Cleveland and began boxing himself when he was 19, fighting 57 amateur fights from 1946-'56. He lost his only pro fight as a 126-pound featherweight.

Harris decided to hang up his gloves after that but his days in boxing were far from over. In 1960, he and his wife Pearl moved their family from Detroit to Norwalk, and in 1979 Harris

got back into boxing when he and Ted Lowry, a 1991 Old Timers honoree, were two of the original trainers with the newly formed NEON Boxing Club in town.

While that local gym went on to flourish under Lowry, Harris answered another call. A year later, in 1980, several parents from the Meadow Garden housing project in South Norwalk approached Harris and asked him if he could start a boxing club there for younger kids as a way of keeping them off the street. Harris agreed and the Meadow Garden Boxing Club was born.

The name and location of Harris's local boxing club has changed a few times, moving from the Meadow Garden Community Center to the former Ben Franklin School. In addition, the local Sons of Italy and NEON have served as sponsors in the past, while the club is presently known as the John Harris Boxing Club.

But regardless of the name and place, Harris would be there every day of the week, instilling discipline, values, and a positive attitude into their lives as well as teaching them the fine points of boxing. Over the past 17 years, more than 500 young boxers ranging in age from eight years old to adults in their 20s and 30s, have trained under the watchful eye of Harris.

And under his guidance and leadership, the Norwalk club has attained great heights, producing 40 state champions, over 30 regional Golden Gloves winners, and a pair of national champs. In fact, in 1989 the Meadow Garden Boxing Club received a special team trophy for placing the most boxers in the Western New England Golden Gloves finals with six. Then in 1993, four of Harris's boxers qualified for the National Golden Gloves Tournament in Little Rock, AR, almost unheard of from just one gym.

But Harris has been more than just a trainer to many of the kids who pass through his gym. He's been a father figure, someone to talk to when there's a problem and someone who watches their grades in school. He even makes the kids bring him copies of their report cards to make sure they are doing their schoolwork. With funds tight and sponsors lacking, Harris, a retired machinist, has often dipped into his own pocket to pay expenses, provide transportation to tournaments, and buy equipment to keep the club afloat and kids off the street.

But teaching the sport of boxing is only one way John Harris has helped others in town. For the past 25 years, he's been a deacon at the Grace Baptist Church in South Norwalk, and in 1975 he founded the Norwalk Youth Community Choir, which he ran until 1987 while they gave concerts locally and around the country. His goal again was to give young people something positive to do and keep them off the streets.