

After hooking up with an ex-prize-fighter, Kennett boxer goes on to win the State Championships. Now, he's got his sights set on the professional arena.

By Dan Harvey Staff Writer

A long, gravel drive winds through the trees in Anson Nixon Park in Kennett Square. At the end, past a link fence — “AUTHORIZED VEHICLES ONLY” — sits a building that appears abandoned, lifeless.

But the interior has been transformed into a training room. And everything beyond the doorway evokes flesh and blood.

On a table, immersed in clear liquid, a pile of protective mouthpieces fill a glass vessel. The sight is somewhat disconcerting — surreal in a way; the rubbery crescents are like images from a “splatter” film: disembodied grins floating in a medical jar, fermenting in formaldehyde.

It looks as if some silly grins were slapped off some smirking faces. A sparring glove sits next to the jar, as if confirming the assumption.

Underscoring these anatomical impressions are the signs posted on the interior walls of this austere building. The placards are meant to provoke physical responses, as they offer short and punchy slogans dealing in concepts like intestinal fortitude and stringent suffering.

“No pain, no gain” — and the like.

But the most compelling sign of all is the one that proclaims, “The more you sweat, the less you bleed.”

The message is as pungent as a credo etched onto a deltoid with a tattooist's needle.

It all recalls a line from an old horror movie: “No escape from the house of pain!”

This is home base for Kennett Square boxer Troy Stevenson, who recently scored two knockouts in the span of two weeks — the most recent of which earned him the Pennsylvania State amateur championship (on April 15).

Everything in this building works to remind you that he competes in what has been called “the sweet science” — an ironic sort of phrase for the most intimately violent of athletic endeavors. But it is both

‘...the less you
bleed’



science and sport, requiring disciplined passion and passionate discipline.

“Condition + Concentration + Coachability = Champion.” That’s another sign posted on the wall.

Appropriate. Stevenson’s two recent knockouts earned him, first, the Eastern Regionals championship and, second, the state championship.

Other items on the walls encourage another form of inspiration. They point to the promise of the future. They’re posters of actual boxing cards – professional boxing cards – the kind of posters displayed on gymnasium and arena walls in film noir. Anthony Quinn put a fist through a similar poster in “Requiem for a Heavyweight.” These particular posters go back to the 1960s, with their bold, black lettering that advertise boxing cards promoted by someone named Al Lewis, presented in someplace called The Cambria, located somewhere on Kensington Street, by the Franklin El.

And one of the cards advertises a match featuring someone named Larry Brown fighting someone named Earl Atlee.

Today, Earl Atlee is an Avondale resident, and he has been training area youths since his own prizefighting career came to an end. He’s now Stevenson’s trainer and manager – has been for two nearly two years.

On the eve of his state championship bout, Stevenson arrives bundled in towels and a red sweatsuit. All of the perspiration-provoking fabric makes him look heavier than his 195 pounds, but beneath all of the wrappings, Stevenson is well-defined, fighting-weight trim.

“He looks great,” Atlee enthuses when his six-foot fighter makes his entrance. “He’s in great shape.”

“Just trying to keep my weight down,” Stevenson says, as he adjusts his protective headgear. “I’d rather lose because of my fighting, not because of my weight.”

The session Atlee has planned for Stevenson will contradict the graphic words adorning the walls. Stevenson will only run

through a light workout. The following night, he steps into an Allentown ring to battle for the amateur heavyweight crown.

Even though the routine is somewhat relaxed, Stevenson’s superb conditioning is still quite evident, as he spars six rounds each with three different opponents – no rest in between.

“Troy, you got too much stamina,” marvels one of his panting partners, awe-filled as he prepares to go another round. Stevenson’s plan is to duck and dodge, keep his hands up, and move in on his opponent.

“I just want a lot of movement,” Atlee tells Stevenson from the sidelines. “I don’t want to see too much hitting.”

For this workout at least, most of the palpable intensity seems concentrated in the trainer’s own eyes, which appear to focus on his fighter with the precision of a switchblade. Atlee must have been a formidable foe back in his fighting days. Everything about him appears steel-reinforced, his neck as thick and straight as a ring post, and the crown of his completely hairless head like the tip of a nuclear missile.

“Stay in close,” he instructs, as he watches Stevenson dance. “Now move around some! Move around!”

Atlee has guided the local heavyweight through a successful early career which is now approaching a significant threshold.

“When the going gets tough, the tough turn pro.”

That’s not one of the slogans hanging on the wall of Atlee’s municipal facility-cum-gymnasium. It’s something writer Hunter Thompson once said. But it readily applies to Stevenson. As a competitor, he’s tough and getting tougher – in the past year, he’s collected more titles than a television wrestler. And now he plans to turn pro – by mid-summer, he figures.

Atlee hopes their collaboration will survive the change in status. However, as he is quick to remind, he’s been around the fight game a long time, and he knows how things can sometimes turn out.

"I'm gonna tell you the way boxing is," Atlee says. "For a lot of kids, when they turn pro, the money men come along and grab them up. I've seen it happen too many times. I'm just hoping that Troy's man enough to stay with me. So far, we've had a good relationship. He's a good kid. He's easy to train. And that's a big part of this game."

Atlee's own professional career spanned 36 bouts (23 wins, 13 losses). At one time, he was a sparring partner for Sonny Liston, one of the most brutal heavyweights to ever step into the ring.

At the end of his career, Atlee became involved with the Police Athletic League and created a boxing program to keep youngsters out of trouble. One of the obstacles he always faced was finding a permanent home for the program. But, just this year, the Kennett Square Borough Council offered him the old water works building.

Right now, the furnishings are rather Spartan. Two punching bags hang from the ceiling, and the fighters work out on thick, black carpeting rather than mats. But all of that is going to change soon.

"The West Chester Police Athletic League is supposed to be bringing us a ring," says Atlee. "But that is going to have to wait until after the championship fight."

That's been Atlee's primary concern of late: getting his fighter ready for the most important bout of his career so far.

And, so far, it's been an incredible year for Stevenson. He's on a seven-bout winning streak – a steamroll that started last August with a gold medal in the Keystone Games. The momentum stepped up a notch a month later when he won a trophy in an out-of-state tournament. "That's what really turned it around for him," says Atlee.

Then, on March 26, Stevenson won the Pennsylvania Golden Gloves championship by exacting vengeance on a fighter who beat him last spring.

"After 30 years, this is the first time I ever had a Golden Gloves champion," Atlee proudly reveals.

On April 11, Stevenson won the Eastern Regionals in Scranton with a first-round knockout – a landmark for him.

"That was my first knockout ever," Stevenson reveals, with a disarming smile that's as engaging as his pleasant personality. "I had a couple of technical knockouts before. But that was my first KO. I used a left-right-left hook combination."

Less than a week later, Stevenson recorded his second knockout – also in the first round – this time over Garnett Galmore of Pittsburgh. The win earned him the state championship. "He stretched him right out," says Atlee. "He hit him with a right hand, and as soon as he hit him, I knew he was out."

Once primarily a scientific fighter, Stevenson now demonstrates he can deliver a lethal punch – and with either hand. But, unlike the bullish types he often faces – the ones who like to club away with hammer fists – Stevenson wields his hands with grace and finesse, as if they were twin grim reaper's blades. Quiet, deadly weapons.

"Cold steel, people don't like."

Keith Richards once said that. Atlee should post the quote up on the wall.