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Let's get ready to rumble, Aurora

Give Paul Oddi credit for mixing it up and rolling with the punches. The owner of Point Blank Martial Arts and Fitness could easily overlook boxing in favour of the thriving mixed martial arts disciplines that have enjoyed much-heralded success in recent times. Many others have dismissed the sweet science in favour of the action-packed MMAs.

But, no, boxing very much has a place on the card at the Aurora club. And with that spot comes a renaissance of sorts as the sport shows signs of a comeback.

Point Blank presents an amateur boxing card June 7, featuring some of its own fighters mixing it up with athletes from across the province.

At least 11 youth and adult bouts have been pencilled in for the 'Brawl Behind The Hall', although final numbers are subject to fight-day variables.

It is the first Boxing Ontario-sanctioned event in York Region in more than 20 years, said Oddi, a number Boxing Ontario is not able to dispute.

One thing is certain — it has been a long time.

The bigger story, perhaps, is the fact boxing is fighting itself out of a tight spot after years spent on the ropes as an accepted activity.

At Oddi's club, which joined the provincial governing body Boxing Ontario two years ago, more than two dozen adult members are enrolled in boxing classes.

Another dozen or so youths are active, too.

He is encouraged the numbers are on the rise, crediting a one-two combination of a desire for fitness and competition for the turnaround.

"When we started our youth boxing program, a lot want to take the next step and spar and compete, so this is a chance to highlight our athletes," said Oddi, 35, whose club covers a variety of fight-related arts, but boxing is growing into one of the best workouts around. You can see the back and forth of it and the fighters analyzing each other."

The numbers may not be staggering, but Boxing Ontario executive director Doug Hannum checks in with some figures that are impressive.

He points out the number of recreational boxers in Ontario mushroomed from 472 in 2007 to 830 this year.

On the competitive side, more than 200 more boxers have stepped between the ropes this year compared to last year.

"I think what is happened is more and more people are coming back from a fitness or health perspective," Hannum said. "For conditioning it is one of the best sports there is. The spinoff from boxercise classes is competitive boxing and those people are introducing their kids to boxing. In general, the sport is back on the way up."

"Amateur boxing is completely different than professional boxing. It's very safe and regulated."

Boxing cards are booked every weekend somewhere in the province, with some clubs staging two events per weekend, Hannum says. It is a far cry from a year ago when only one event was booked in May.

Hannum also pointed out Boxing Ontario is eyeing a new crowd by developing an introductory program that sees instructors go into elementary and secondary schools.

At the very least, the Box On program helps dispel fears the sport is for thugs.

"Boxing has a long-standing tradition of helping kids and that is one of the reasons we got the kids program going," said Oddi, who boxed as a kid growing up in Hamilton and later when he lived in Boston. "We have a strict code for our boxers to sign and parents know their kids are doing something constructive. There is a dark side to any sport, but I think we are seeing more appreciation for the sport of boxing."

Point Blank is at 240 Industrial Pkwy. S. and holds about 300 spectators.

Advance tickets are \$25 and \$35 at the door. Discounts are available for seniors and children.

Ringside seats are \$50.

Further ticket information is available by logging on to www.pointblank.ca or by calling at 905-727-7300.

Doors open at 6 p.m. with the first card scheduled for 7 p.m.