

## Rising stars

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AT FIRST glance, Fitzroy Stars in Gertrude Street seems no different to any other boxing gym; the same configuration of ring, punching bags and barbells coated in residue from years of hard grind. On the walls, layers of ageing posters, photos and newspaper clippings hide tales of past glories. But in this case, the stories are a little more interesting than most.

Stars is the state's only Aboriginal-run boxing gym, with a reputation built on blood, sweat and urban myth in equal measure. It's a place where champions have trained and revolutions have been plotted.

Once, high-profile rabble-rousers such as Gary Foley and the late Bruce McGuinness were among the ideological drivers of the gym and its twin, the health service, which has since moved to Nicholson Street. Both were born out of a drive for Aboriginal self-determination in the early 1980s.

A few years ago, it looked like Stars was in its death throes. Boxing gyms tend to flourish where people have limited choices, and Fitzroy is no longer such a place. Many believed it was time to move on, for the community to sell the historic building and regroup in the outer north where most Kooris now live. But others felt it was the last link in an important chain. A comeback is now under way.

The final piece of the resurrection puzzle fell into place about 12 months ago when the most successful Aboriginal boxer since the late Lionel Rose dropped by to see what was going on. Soon, Robbie "Bomber" Peden was head trainer - reviving Fitzroy Stars to not just its former glory but shaping a new future as well.

The groundwork had been laid for his arrival by a child of the original black rights revolution, Glenda Thorpe. She had returned a few years earlier to the city after a decade living in Lake Tyers. She asked her brother, political activist and radio broadcaster Robbie Thorpe, what was going on at "the gym" - as it's always been known, although its official name is Melbourne Aboriginal Youth Sport and Recreation. When the answer was "nothing", she decided to pick up the job that her mother, Alma Thorpe, had begun in the late 1970s.

Back then, the strip from Nicholson to Smith streets was called "The Dirty Mile". It was a time when Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter found not just each other but also the strength to recover from alcoholism and the inspiration for their iconic songs. The Roach classic Charcoal Lane is now also the moniker of an up-market restaurant where the original health service was. It is easy to forget that Fitzroy, now such a hipster hot-spot, was once described as a ghetto, as violent as the streets of Chicago. You could get hit by a flying bottle passing the Champion Hotel, known locally as "the Slaughterhouse", or the notorious Rob Roy and the now benign Builders Arms, where murders were committed.

Stars was a melting pot of those elements and a response to that harsh world, welcoming anyone, black or white, young or old, giving them shelter and structure, which makes it considerably more than just another boxing gym. "We were the gutter blacks here in Fitzroy and there were plenty of poor whites and criminals as well," says Thorpe, now CEO of the centre. She remembers as a young girl listening to the passionate voices of her older black brothers describing a brighter, more empowered future for Aboriginal people.

"I couldn't wait for it all to happen," she says. "I just couldn't wait." Three decades later, with very few tangible improvements for her people, she got a little weary of waiting. She was determined not to let her mother's dream atrophy.

"I walked in here and said, 'I want a job and I promise I won't let you down'. And now we're in the process of reclaiming it as something it was historically always meant to be, as something relevant to the Aboriginal community, as a place to connect with your mob," she says. So she set up exercise programs for elders and schoolchildren and free breakfast for the much-maligned Smith Street "Parkies". The top floor was used for talks, films, concerts and performances. Plans were drawn up for a bush tucker cafe at the entrance. Gradually the empty building began to buzz with life again.

But there was still something crucial missing. Back when it all began, "Uncle" Jock Austin had been the charismatic core of the place, the boxing trainer who was a tough but adored father figure. He believed that physical fitness and good health were as crucial to his people as a roof over their heads.

Current board president Mick Edwards, now in his 50s, remembers Austin as an impressive figure: "He was a pretty heavy dude. He had a reputation that made you shudder. He was a massive man physically and he had a massive reputation.

"He was a living legend, he was a god, he was a master of protection here. When you mention him to people of my age their hair stands on end and their backs straighten."

When Austin died in the early 1990s, Stars went on a rocky journey that seemed to reflect the fortunes of the state's Koori population.

For a time it was inhabited mainly by Greek and Turkish kickboxers from Brunswick and Coburg who trained under the charismatic African American Dana Goodson, who had been Austin's natural successor. At that time, only a few Aborigines came to box as they started to get priced out of the neighbourhood.

The gym certainly maintained a reputation, but more as a hard-core kickboxing gym with little focus on Aboriginal community development. When Goodson died in December 2000, Stars' lights almost went out. The community had dispersed and services closed. Dreams of self-determination became bogged down by bureaucracy. The gym was hanging on by a thread. Boxing trainers sniffed around, sensing an opening. Some stayed for a while but moved on in frustration.

Thorpe said this time she didn't want another standard boxing coach who would see the gym as his own little fiefdom, although she agreed that Goodson had been well-liked. Instead, she wanted someone with a sense of what the Koori community needed, the bigger vision she

had to make Stars shine again. She knocked back a lot of top-line trainers who approached her.

Meanwhile, the basement gym remained pretty lifeless, just a few diehards hitting the bags and a sad smell in the air that something with so much promise was essentially going to waste. The round bell echoed in a near-empty bunker much of the time.

Then, with an uncanny symmetry, along came Peden, ready to pick up the job started by the legendary Uncle Jock nearly 30 years earlier. Edwards is convinced that Bomber is the best man for the job, big enough to fill a legend's "massive" shoes since he is already something of a legend himself.

Peden is quite used to attempting the impossible. He's done it countless times in the ring and has faced great challenges in his private life, including a home invasion and beating which left him with broken bones and facial lacerations, as well as the death of a daughter, Jirra Lou, in 2009.

When he was bedridden with a virus in 2002 he dragged himself into the ring in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to face one of the great warriors of modern boxing, Juan Manuel Marquez. He was vomiting between rounds in his corner, rather than back out or reschedule. "It's not in my nature to back down," he says.

According to his friend and partner in a mobile gym business Julian Holland, a former commonwealth boxing champion, he had a reputation for being both stubborn and audacious and always punched above his weight. Holland saw him deck a few heavyweight nightclub bouncers during their wild younger days on the Gold Coast as well as routinely rocking and dropping sparring partners in heavier weight classes in the gym.

"They call him 'Bomber' for good reason," Holland says.

But his reputation runs much deeper. As an athlete he surpasses Austin. Peden is a former Olympian, a commonwealth gold medallist and an International Boxing Federation junior lightweight world champion. His amateur and professional credentials combined put him in a league of his own. He was rated in the top 10 for six years as an amateur in six weight classes.

By rights he should be a household name, as venerated as his late predecessor and world champion Lionel Rose. His gold medal in 1994 ensured federal funding for the amateur boxing program for the first time ever.

But he decided to avoid the easy path as a professional on home ground and hand-pick opponents for dubious vacant titles, instead fighting only the best in his division overseas until he was ready to contest a genuine world title. He fulfilled his promise in 2005 when he beat American Nate Campbell, securing the IBF super featherweight championship in Melbourne and etching himself into boxing history.

But he's not one to live on past glories. He also couldn't care less about fame. He's tasted the high life, partying at Hugh Hefner's Playboy Mansion and being courted by eccentric boxing promoter Don King.

But his work at Stars gym means more to him than those trappings. "Whatever I do, it's for pride. I don't care about money. It's difficult for me to do what Uncle Jock did because Fitzroy is a rich suburb now. But I want to be the best at educating adults and children to be successful. It makes me feel worthy," he says.

The kids include not just Kooris but African refugees from the nearby commission flats. He also trains aspiring Aboriginal amateurs. His most promising protege is the female IBF bantamweight champion Susie Q Ramadan, undefeated in 21 fights, who he sparred with on the gym's open day for NAIDOC week in front of a big crowd.

Ramadan, a Muslim, has been welcomed with open arms by the Koori community. Another tradition being kept alive is that all are welcome, which is also the ethos of most boxing gyms. All over the world they are miniature United Nations, where racism is rare.

The founders put the gym in the basement because they wanted the centre, which also has two above-ground floors, to be about broader community activities. But ironically it is boxing that has kept the centre's heart beating, even if it has been dangerously weak at times. Some nights now it pumps with up to 50 people and there is an energy and optimism in the air that signals the fight has not finished yet, not by a long shot. Susie Q inspires the fans - even when she's taking a shot at her coach

LAST month down in the basement, the boxing room was buzzing. Families gathered around the small training ring edgy with anticipation. Two of Australia's world champion boxers were about to spar each other.

While crowds of Kooris have come to the gym when champions train - Anthony Mundine, Lionel Rose and Muhammad Ali have all visited - most in the crowd, even the die-hard boxing lovers, had never seen anything like what was about to take place.

In one corner, a compact 53-kilogram woman in black, her ponytail swinging from the back of her headguard. Susie Q Ramadan, 32, a few months earlier had won the IBF world bantamweight title (the IBF has only just begun making titles available to women boxers and Susie Q is first to win the vacant title). But then she dramatically split with her long-time trainers, Preston's Brizzi brothers, Ben and Coz. She had been with the Melbourne boxing stalwarts for her entire career, from her beginnings as an amateur to her four-year professional journey.

She came to Stars because she had heard that Robbie "Bomber" Peden knew more about boxing than anyone in Australia.

Now she was shaping up in the ring to her new trainer, also an IBF champion. And Peden looked close to 20 kilos heavier than his opponent so there was a little tension in the room before the opening bell sounded. When the action got under way, there was a minute or so of respectful silence before Ramadan landed a crisp right hand on her mentor, who moved skilfully, keeping his punches clean and controlled but his left hand audaciously low. "That's it, Susie," someone yelled from the crowd, which seemed to break the ice.

Then followed shouts of "Go Susie" and "Knock him out", and gasps at the near misses as both of them bobbed, weaved and jabbed their way through the entertaining three rounds.

Afterwards, groups of women and girls flocked to Ramadan for pictures, while men told her how much they admired her skills. It seems Ramadan, a Muslim of Turkish and Albanian descent, has become an honorary Koori.

"They're all great people here," she said. "They've welcomed me with open arms. And they're all right into boxing as well, so they all spur me on, give me motivation. It's very supportive."

Of Peden, she says his knowledge is invaluable, as are his connections in boxing. "I'm amazed at some of the experiences he's had. And he's so modest, he doesn't sit around and brag about it. He fought some great fighters and he doesn't get enough recognition for that."

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