

'Buddy' McGirt crafted better life via boxing

By Kathi Overstreet
Sentinel-Voice

Two-time welterweight boxing champion James "Buddy" McGirt rose to the top during the 1980s and early 1990s to lose it all, make an incredible comeback and along the journey learn invaluable life lessons.

McGirt's name may not be as common as Mike Tyson, George Foreman or Oscar de la Hoya, all easily recognizable boxing greats among aficionados as well as those who care little about the sport, but his stories are as colorful. McGirt, 39, trains WBC and IBF Light Heavyweight Champion Antonio Tarver and is in Las Vegas for this Saturday night's match between Tarver and WBA Heavyweight Champion of the World, Roy Jones Jr., at Mandalay Bay Events Center. Tickets range from \$50 to \$600.

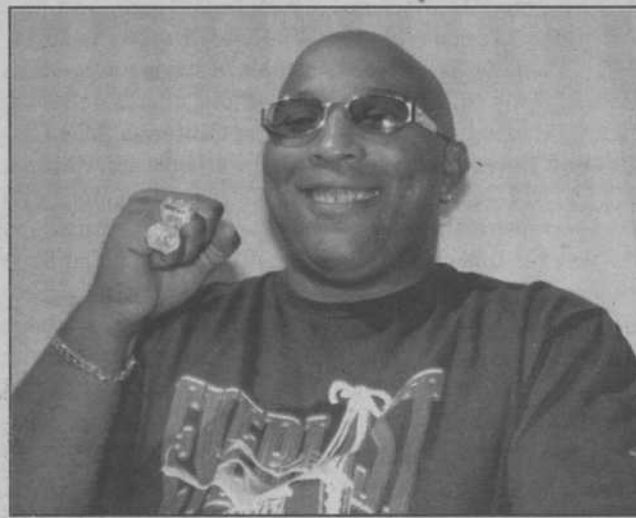
A Brentwood, NY native, McGirt grew up with an abusive alcoholic for a stepfather. He discovered boxing thanks to a cousin and found it the best way to control an-

ger and resentment he harbored due to his troubled home life. This week he talked about how personal experiences have shaped who he is today.

"I remember one time when I was home alone, my stepfather came in drunk and almost beat me to death, if it weren't for my big brother coming home and stopping him I believe he would have killed me."

Boxing channeled his anger and began to pay off early. At age 12 he won his first amateur fight. "Winning felt so good, I remember walking home with some of my neighborhood friends who had come to see me fight and thinking this is it, I remember walking home with my hand wraps still on."

McGirt boxed in the amateur ranks from 1976 to 1982, earning a record of 54-9 before turning to professional league boxing. Just six years in as a professional, McGirt knocked out Frankie Warren in a 12-round bout to win his first Junior Welterweight Champion title. He described



Sentinel-Voice photo by Kathi Overstreet

From boxer to trainer: Former welterweight champ James McGirt trains light heavyweight champion Antonio Tarver. the fight as the toughest of his career.

Tragedy struck McGirt in 1990 while fighting Jose Bermudez in Atlantic City. McGirt said it was an upper cut thrown in the 4th round that caused him to rupture his bicep tendon. "I knew the moment I threw it I had messed something up, but I wasn't about to stop fighting." He won in the 10th round and was immediately rushed to the hospital for surgery.

While healing from surgery and continuing to train under Al Certo, McGirt beat Simon Brown, and in 1991, took his second belt to become the Welterweight Champion of the World. McGirt was living large, traveling with an entourage, and spending money fast as he was making it. However, the show stopped in 1992, when McGirt tore his rotator cup while training in preparation to fight Pernell Whitaker. The ruptured bicep tendon

coupled with the torn rotator cup proved to be the one-two combination that knocked McGirt out of the ring as a boxer.

Shortly into retirement, his entourage and life style was gone. The cars, house and friends were gone as well. "I put food on a lot of tables back then," McGirt said. "The most painful part of losing everything was seeing how fast your so-called friends leave you when you're down. It was a long hard drop, but that experience taught me a lot about managing money, so called friends, family and keeping your priorities straight."

The injuries and harsh realities of life after stardom didn't keep McGirt down. He embarked on a new phase of boxing as a trainer and last year the Boxing Writers Association of America honored him as "Trainer of the Year." And in 2001, McGirt founded the Elite Boxing gym with business partner Cindee Pugliese-Gurny. By day professional athletes train and in the evenings the gym offers

activities that teach youth how to become mentally and physically disciplined through the art of boxing.

"I knew I had to do something. I couldn't just sit around. I wasn't going to start using or sale drugs. I had to take care of my family," McGirt said.

"I remember one time riding my motorcycle (with a bad battery) to New Jersey for a one-day training job that paid \$600. I had some jumper cables with me and every time the battery died I'd have to get a jump."

McGirt said his family has been his biggest blessing. There were times during his climb to the top when he spent more money and less time with his children. A mistake he learned from.

"I may have lost my money, but I gained some valuable time with my children. Instead of going shopping, we would go to the park or for walks, or to watch some of the older ones play sports," McGirt said. "Now, I'm real close to my kids, they call me all the time for advice."

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