

Hickok Belt reborn at SJFC

Dan Glickman | Posted: Friday, December 2, 2011 2:47 pm

Time and his years in the ring have taken their toll on Carmen Basilio, but the former middleweight and welterweight champion could still remember when he won the 1957 edition of the Hickok Belt - which was awarded from 1950 to 1976 to the best professional athlete of the year and was until 1970 always given out in Rochester.

"It was great," the 84-year-old Basilio said, "it was great and fine."

Rochester Boxing Hall of Fame president Tony Liccione hopes that long-lasting memories like that will return, as he spearheads a revival of the award, which he referred to as the "crown jewel of all sports awards."

This revival was launched with a "Comeback Dinner" on Oct. 16 in St. John Fisher's Cleary Auditorium. The selection of Fisher as the location for the revival was no coincidence, according to Liccione.

"My daughter went to school here, I've got a lot of ties with St. John Fisher, I know a lot of great alumni," Liccione said, "and when I first saw St. John Fisher College- I thought, 'wow, this is a miniature Notre Dame, this is where it should begin.'"

The "beginning", was attended by several notable sports figures of the Hickok Belt era, including two winners of the Hickok Belt: Basilio, and the 1958 winner, "Bullet" Bob Turley, who won the 1958 Cy Young with the New York Yankees. In addition, Harlem Globetrotters legend Meadowlark Lemon, fifties-era pitching ace Johnny Antonelli (who was born in Rochester) and Canadian heavyweight boxer George Chuvalo also attended.

Fergie Jenkins, the baseball hall-of-famer who's charitable foundation is one of the major sponsors of the new Hickok Belt, was unable to attend due to an injury his wife sustained in a recent bicycle accident, much to the disappointment of two Cubs fans who had been waiting outside of Kearney Hall in hopes of getting his autograph.

Before the event, Liccione had expressed his wish that he had been able to do the event sooner, perhaps ten or twenty years ago, when more winners would have been able to attend. It had been tough, he said "because they are aging, or sick."

Despite that, Liccione has high hopes for the Hickok Belt, especially because, he says, it already has a built-in pedigree.

A man named Ray Hickok, owner of the Hickok Manufacturing Company, founded the Belt in 1950 to honor his late father. Voted on back then by about 300 sportswriters and announcers, it was awarded in Rochester every year until 1970, at which point it moved to larger cities such as Chicago and New York before it ceased to be in 1976.

"The history is there, it's all there. Let's begin it again, and get it going from there," Liccione said, "This is going to blossom, this is going to take off."

The first Hickok Belt Award will be given out some time in 2013, after nearly 1000 members of the National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Association (NSSA) vote amongst 12 monthly winners to decide on the winner of the 2012 Hickok Belt.

And if or when the belt, as Liccione predicts, "takes off," perhaps history will record that it all started in Cleary Auditorium, at St. John Fisher College.

Or, as Liccione referred to it, "A miniature Notre Dame."