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Fighting for troubled youth

Olympic boxer Chris Johnson gives them a home in the gym

By NICHOLAS DAVIS

Chris Johnson was a baby when his family left Jamaica in the '70s to find a better life in Canada. They left him behind with his grandmother and it wasn't until he was 8 years old that he was reunited with his family in Kitchener.

"It was one of the happiest days of my life when I was able to join my three brothers and two sisters here in Canada," Johnson says. "I was the last one to be brought up here and I missed them, especially my mom and dad."

Adjusting to life in Canada wasn't that difficult for Johnson because his brothers took him under their wing and got him involved in boxing -- something they were doing at the time. The Johnson boys were all good boxers, and one Mother's Day all four brothers were Ontario Champions.

But it was the young Chris Johnson whose talent in the ring was undeniable.

His first coach was Arnie Boehm, who also trained Olympic gold medalist Lennox Lewis. Boehm helped Johnson become a national champion, which led to Johnson being named to Canada's 1992 Olympic team.

"The only sad thing about me making the Olympic team was that my older brother Greg didn't make it," Johnson says.

Johnson went on to win a bronze medal at the Olympics in Barcelona, fighting as a middleweight. He then turned pro and sported a 26-2 record before becoming the No. 3 contender for the heavyweight championship of the world.

All he had to do next was beat American fighter Antonio Tarver and Johnson would have a shot at a world title. The fight was scheduled for Aug. 3, 2001. But Johnson's good fortune in the ring left him that night in Toppenish, Wash.

"I was leading the match on points going into the 10th round," Johnson recalls. "Then Tarver caught me with a punch that knocked me out. I had to go to the hospital that night and I was dropping in and out of consciousness. I didn't think I was going to make it. I prayed to God that if he let me live, I would never box again."

Johnson survived what was diagnosed as internal bleeding in the head. And true to his word he hasn't fought professionally since. But he is now fighting to keep troubled youths on the straight and narrow.

BOXING 'THERAPY'

Chris Johnson's Fighting Alliance is the name of the boxing gym he opened eight months ago in Mississauga. Johnson trains a stable of young fighters, male and female. Some of them use the gym as an escape from the problems in their lives.

"I think the sport of boxing is therapy for the kids on the street," Johnson says. "I see kids who have been hurt, raped ... abused. They come to the gym with a lot of anger and bitterness, then they start hitting the bag and you watch the anger dissipate."

Johnson does whatever he can to help the fighters under his charge not only become good boxers but also become good citizens.

"Coaching is more than teaching people the technical stuff," Johnson says. "It's also about motivating people. I want to motivate these young minds to do beautiful things inside and outside the ring."

Last year, Johnson adopted a troubled 16-year-old boy he met at another gym.

"When I met him he was throwing punches uncontrollably at the bag," Johnson says of his foster son, Carlton Angus. "I find out that his mother died when he was 2, and since he was 7, he was living in and out of foster homes and basically getting into trouble all the time. He's now doing fine."

Johnson credits his wife, Natalie Brown-Johnson, and his 2-year-old son, Omar Jr., for giving him the stability and support to help others.

"The big thing is that they believe in me," Johnson says. "I also believe in myself and I want those who I'm helping understand that I believe in them, too."