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Pugs become friends in D.C. ring classic

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They're a bunch of tough guys. And friendly guys.

From the wee ones with a smattering of freckles across the nose slashing the air with gauze and tape wrapped fists, to the six footers incessantly jogging and shaking their lanky limbs, all the boys are boxers.

Kids from Belfast and our nation's capital squared off in the ring last weekend in the Belfast-Beltway Boxing Classic at the Westin Hotel in downtown Washington, DC.

With ten bouts on the card, young men from 12 to 21 years old went three rounds with supporters seated ring-

side enjoying dinner and enthusiastically calling for the fighters.

This was the third Belfast-Beltway Boxing Classic. It annually brings together Protestant and Catholic boys from Belfast who might not otherwise have an occasion to hang out.

"They just got on together and it's been great," explained Brendan Lowe, a referee from Andersonstown who came over all three years with the group.

"With boxing competitions at home, normally once they end, they would go their way and we would go our way, but while they're over here we stay together."

In addition to traveling

and training together, the boys toured Capitol Hill and went on the garden tour of the White House.

William Tranghese, one of the chief supporters of the event and a staff member for Congressman Richard Neal (D-MA), said local D.C. kids get something special out of it other than a tough round in the ring. Some of the kids, he said, who live less than five miles away, had never been to the Capitol buildings or the White House.

Emmanuel "Manny" Quinn, one of the founders of the event, is originally from Belfast but lives here now. His father started the Ardoyne Holy Cross Boxing Club in 2003 to help direct youth onto a better path.

"It keeps them fit, it keeps them healthy, it keeps them strong. It keeps them, I say, smart and keeps them out of trouble and they come to events like this and better their lives as is evident when you're talking to them."

"They're excited that someone took a chance on them on a Saturday night, or else where would they be? Sitting on a corner back in Belfast somewhere, or a corner here?"

15-year-old Taequone Nance of Northeast Washington agrees.

"It gives me a lot of opportunities," he said before his bout.

"Once you get it that ring, it don't matter where you from. It's all about where your technique is at."

The universal theme of the night expressed by all the participants was that boxing is bringing discipline to these youths.

Seth Billups, a 19-year-old from suburban Maryland says boxing is a great stress reliever, especially for youth in challenging environments.

"It's an art you know, it's a science. It's more than just fighting. You have to have some strategy to it, and some



PHOTO BY JACK GARRATY
Toe to toe at last weekend's Belfast-Beltway boxing tourney in Washington, D.C.

finesse and all that.

"It's given me a sense of pride, a different way to carry yourself. You want to carry yourself with respect and be really reserved and everything else comes out in the ring."

14-year-old Eamonn McNally, who attends St. Mary's in West Belfast, says boxing has taught him more than just resolving issues with his fists. He's learned to be a better listener.

"I love the sport, you make good friends, keeps you fit and keeps you out of trouble and gets you something to do."

The main trainer for Ardoyne Holy Cross, Eanes Keenan, says the boys have made friends for life through

the project.

"There are kids who have come back this year and the friendship is unbelievable. They're hugging them like long lost friends," says Keenan.

Brendan Lowe says that after refereeing at all of the Belfast Beltway bouts, he's seen it as a completely positive experience.

"For our kids, it's a big experience to box against black kids, and I suppose for black kids it's big to go against Irish kids and again they seem to get on great."

Efforts are underway to fund a reverse trip of D.C.-based boxers to visit Belfast in the next year.

"It makes them gentlemen in the end," says Lowe.