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Ingle's "Steel City" boxers take on the world

By Gideon Long

SHEFFIELD, England, May 20 (Reuters) - Dwarfed by the nearby steel foundries and the concrete jungle of Britain's main motorway, Brendan Ingle's boxing academy is easy to miss.

A sign next to the front door -- "St. Thomas's Boys and Girls Club" -- gives little away.

But step inside the tiny gymnasium housed in an old church-school hall in the northern English city of Sheffield and you are confronted by the sight of the best fighters in the country at work.

WBO and IBF featherweight champion "Prince" Naseem Hamed is sparring in the ring, British light middleweight champion Ryan Rhodes is working the punchbags and British middleweight champion Neville Brown is skipping to the sound of rock music blaring from the sound system.

Ingle himself is prowling the floor, supervising the boxers whose achievements have made him the most respected trainer in Britain.

"If you get one champion you're doing well, if you get two you're going great," he said in an interview. "If you keep churning them out you must be doing something right. I could have five world champions here in the next 18 months."

Ingle's first success was Herol "Bomber" Graham, who won the British and European light-middleweight and middleweight titles in the 1980s.

"He should have been world champion," Ingle said. "He was very, very elusive, very skilful, very difficult to hit."

Next came Johnny Nelson, whom Ingle transformed from "the most useless fighter I ever had" into European cruiserweight champion.

Then there was Brown and finally the biggest success of all -- the flamboyant "Prince" Naseem, arguably the finest featherweight in the world and undoubtedly the current biggest crowd-puller in British boxing.

"I saw him up in a school yard just by chance," Ingle recalls. "He was only a little kid and he was having a bit of a scramble with some other kids. He was very difficult to hit.

"A week later I saw his father, we got talking, he brought his three sons out and the little fellow was the one I saw in the school yard. Consequently he came down here. That was 16 years ago when he was seven years old."

Naseem has never looked back.

Undefeated in 26 bouts, he has destroyed his British opponents and is now intent on uniting the WBO, WBA, WBC and IBF featherweight belts and bringing them back to Sheffield.

With his leopardskin shorts, somersaults into the ring, laser shows and audacious self-confidence, Naseem has fused boxing and show-business like no previous British fighter, as Ingle points out.

"Just standing up straight and boxing like Henry Cooper -- no disrespect to (former British heavyweight) Henry Cooper or fighters of that period -- isn't enough these days," the 56-year-old Irishman said.

"You've got to have something. You've got to be able to sing and dance and fight and you've got to have charisma and be able to talk."

The latest prodigy to emerge from the Ingle sweatshop is locally-born Ryan Rhodes who, at the age of 20, has become the youngest British champion at any weight for 57 years.

Rhodes is in the same mould as Naseem. The pair share a love of fast cars, designer sportswear and the sound of their own voices as well as a tremendous talent in the ring.

"Ryan's mother brought him down when he was six. He was mad as a hatter," Ingle remembered.

"He was like every kid at that age, he wanted to fight everybody, he'd swing out at the bags, he'd swear, he was disruptive..."

"Ryan Rhodes has beaten good opposition and he's only a baby. He'll go on to be world champion and make a fortune providing he doesn't get fed up with the game, get bored or go mad."

The secret to Ingle's success lies in discipline and defence.

"When you've got a country the first thing you do is get a good army so nobody attacks you. It's like boxing, the first thing I teach is defence.

"If you've got time, distance, balance, co-ordination, mobility, flexibility, agility and you've got rhythm and plenty of patience -- you're in with a chance."

One of 17 children from a boxing family in Dublin, Ingle came to Sheffield in 1958 to work in the steel foundries on which the city built its reputation.

"I wouldn't live anywhere else," he said. "I like it here, the people are smashing and I've fitted in. People are living in paradise here but they don't appreciate it."

That fierce attachment to Sheffield is shared by Naseem and Rhodes who, although they are earning big pay packets, still live in the less-than-glamorous city in which they were born.

"We sweep all the roads around here," Ingle said. "That's part of the training. We live in the community so we help in the community. I do the gardening in the church across the road.

"Going back years ago the (extreme right) National Front were very strong around here and we had plenty of hassle from them. But the National Front are gone and we're still operating."

The rich seam of eager young hopefuls shows no sign of drying up. Ingle has a cluster of 13 and 14-year-olds in his gym who he is already tipping as future champions.

Asked how long he will stay in the fight game, Ingle says with a smile: "Probably I'll finish up at 80 -- please God -- just getting into the ring and collapsing.

"But who can predict the future?" he asks. "If someone had have told me I'd have married an English woman who was a Protestant I wouldn't have believed them -- but God works in mysterious ways."

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