

The Revival of KRONK: Detroit's World-Renowned Boxing Gym



The infamous ring at the KRONK

Detroit has always had a rich history of boxing, and nothing embodies the spirit of this sport quite like the [KRONK](#) gym, in Detroit, Michigan. The gym was founded in 1921 and named after John A. Kronk, a former Detroit Councilman. The facility was located in the historic Brewster-Wheeler Center in Brush Park.

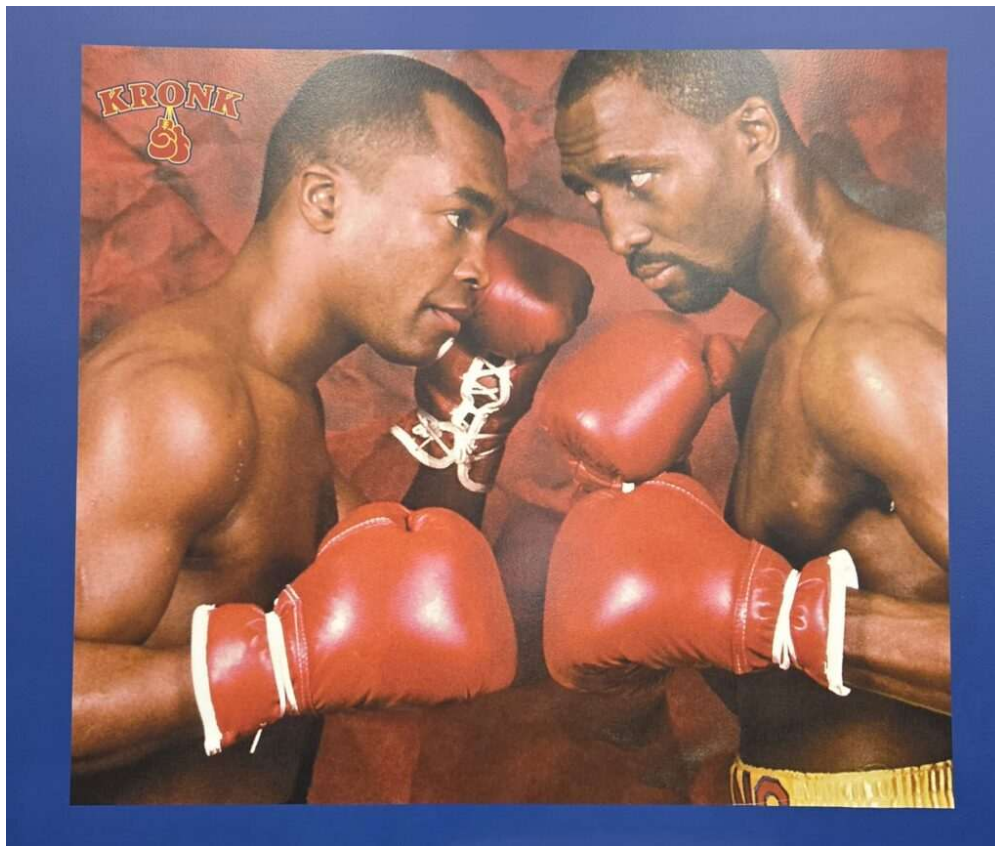


The entrance to KRONK Gym at the Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center

Through the decades, KRONK Gym has become a cornerstone of Detroit's boxing legacy, serving not just as a training ground for aspiring fighters, but as a symbol of the city's resilience, grit, and passion for the sport. The gym's influence extends far beyond its walls, having produced world-class champions and legendary trainers, most notably [Emanuel Steward](#), whose leadership transformed KRONK into an international powerhouse. Boxing legends hail from KRONK, which Emanuel Steward owned and operated since 1971.

Steward's dedication and expertise nurtured historical icons like [Thomas Hearns](#) (61-5-1, 48KO), [Lennox Lewis](#) (41-2-1, 32KO), and [Wladimir Klitschko](#) (64-5, 53 KO), earning KRONK a reputation for excellence and innovation in the boxing world. Emanuel Steward was historically known as “the godfather of Detroit boxing”. From 2001-2012 he was HBO's Sports ringside boxing commentator. Unfortunately, the beloved gym went out of business in 2006, due to severe vandalism, including damage to the infrastructure, which was beyond repair. In October of 2012, Steward passed away and left an incredible legacy behind.

As Detroit faced economic and social challenges, KRONK remained a beacon of hope and opportunity for the community. It offered young athletes a chance to pursue their dreams, and build character through discipline and perseverance. This article will explore the remarkable history of KRONK Gym, its legendary figures, the impact it has had on Detroit, the world of boxing, and the exciting new chapter unfolding in its new facility at the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center. Through the examination of key moments, personal stories, and the long legacy of KRONK, we will gain a deeper understanding of how one gym captured the heart of a city and shaped the course of boxing history.



Leonard vs. Hearns II

Here is a recent quote from Tommy Hearn: "Emanuel Steward turned me pro and he was the best trainer any man ever had, he taught me everything I know about boxing and about life. He was like a father to me. I was always a tall, lanky fighter and he taught me how to keep a man at distance, to use my long reach, so I get the time to do what I wanted to do." (Hearn, Tommy. Interview by BTR Boxing Podcast Network, 15 Oct. 2025.)

The revitalization of the KRONK brand and gym has been remarkable, marking a new era for this legendary institution. In December 2025, the historic [Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center](#) was restored and reopened as the new KRONK Gym, seamlessly blending its storied boxing heritage with modern fitness amenities. Visitors entering the facility are greeted by creatively arranged memorabilia, including vintage photographs, championship belts, and equipment used by famous alumni. This thoughtful display gives the gym a museum-like atmosphere, inviting guests to immerse themselves in Detroit's rich boxing history while actively participating in a vibrant fitness community.

KRONK Gym's enduring legacy, shaped by its reputation for hardcore training and producing iconic champions, continues to motivate and energize emerging boxers. This storied institution stands as a powerful emblem of Detroit's unwavering determination, reflecting the city's historic resilience and commitment to excellence. The influence of KRONK extends beyond the ropes - its impact is felt throughout the Detroit community, inspiring both athletes and locals to persevere and embody the city's characteristic "Detroit grit." As new generations enter the gym, they carry forward the traditions of toughness and loyalty that have defined KRONK's history, ensuring that its backbone remains a source of pride and inspiration for Detroit and the world.

There are some amazing people to thank for opening and operating the KRONK gym again. Among these individuals are [Paul Bhatti](#) (KRONK CEO) and [John Lepak](#) (KRONK COO). Prior to acquiring the KRONK brand, Paul worked in the IT sector. Leading KRONK is more satisfying for him than working in IT. Most important is that with certainty both Paul and John can enjoy their passion for boxing, whilst on the job. Hey, who can beat that?!



Hilmer Kenty, Paul Bhatti, Milton McCrory, John Lepak

The historic Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center is 51,000 sq feet and was initially built in 1929. This is the location where [Joe Louis](#) (66-3, 52KO) once practiced boxing. Currently, the KRONK gym has a five-year lease, occupying 3,500 -square-feet of space on the premises. They opened their doors in the old rehabilitation center in December of 2025. There will be about 200 units of affordable housing right next to the Brewster-Wheeler Center. All occupants will have the ability to join the KRONK fitness center and Boxing gym. KRONK is open in morning and afternoon for fitness classes running from 6am-3pm, and boxing classes run from 4pm-8pm. This takes place Monday through Friday. Boxers from other gyms often visit, to partake in sparring at KRONK.

I viewed some sneak peaks of upcoming features that are currently in development in the historic Brewster-Wheeler Center. It is remarkable what has been done thus far, but there is so much yet to come. I had the pleasure of touring the newly renovated Brewster-Wheeler Center. Paul Bhatti delightfully showed me around the building with all its charm. Of course, the purpose of my visit with Paul was to learn about his vision for KRONK and to view the gym. KRONK is the most fascinating gym I have been to. I was honored to witness a new historical revival and era for Brush Park, KRONK and The Brewster-Wheeler Center. To be honest, anyone who visits the Brewster-Wheeler Center will be flabbergasted.



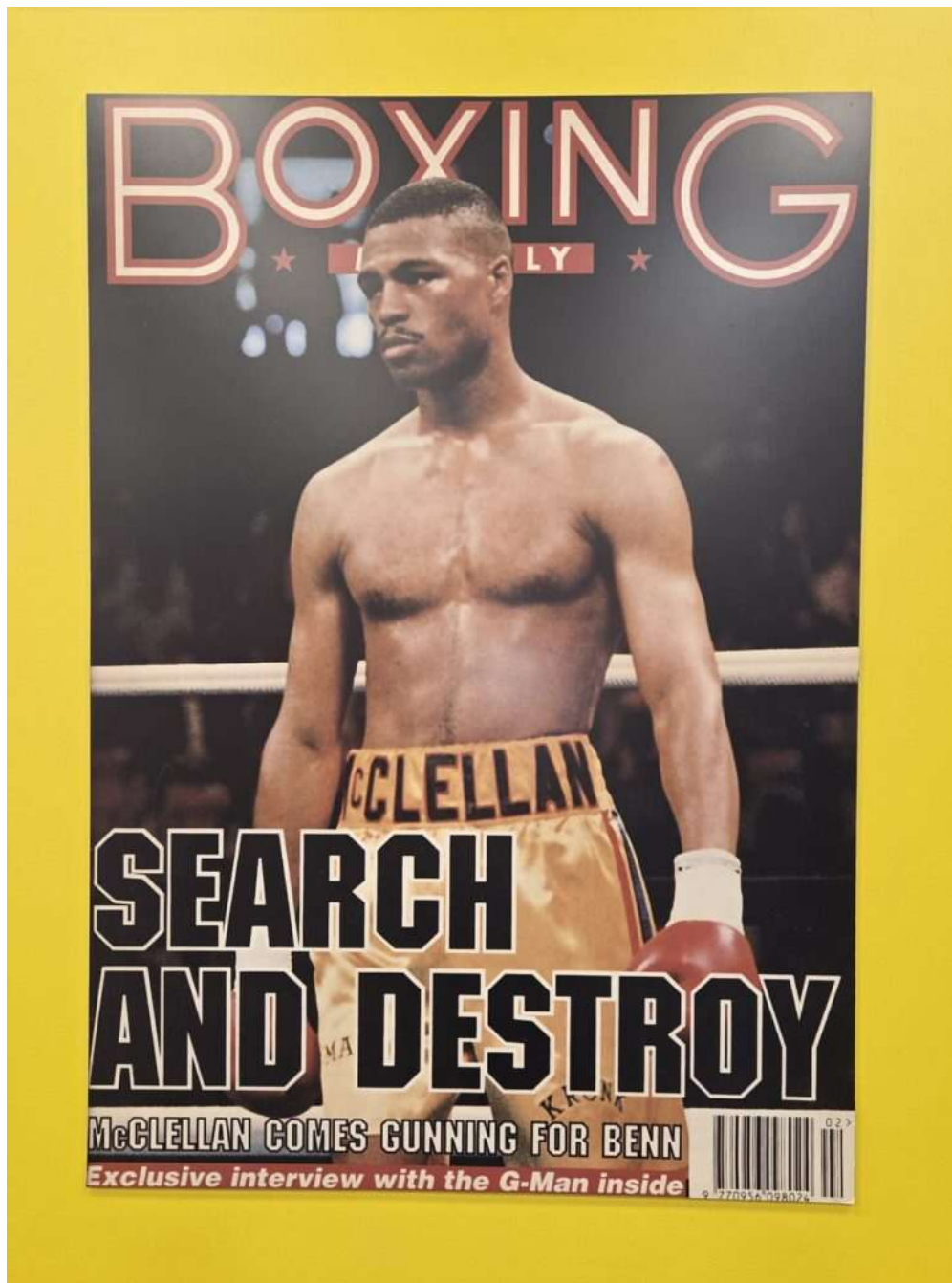
Emanuel Steward watches over his legacy

Immediately when you walk into the gym's entranceway, there is a circular shaped image of Emanuel Steward watching from above you. It was a nice touch to the place that was so meticulously designed and constructed. The walls surrounding the ring are artistically displayed; it is like a collage of Detroit's boxing history. All photos are retouched and modernized from the original images. Emanuel Steward was present throughout the entire gym; one can almost feel his presence throughout the museum-like beauty.



KRONK Professional Super Welterweight boxer, Hunter Lee

Stations to practice boxing were fixed against the walls. They were decorated with pictures of long ago, and some are of newer boxers, such as of [Hunter Lee](#) (4-0, 2KO), who is a professional fighter under contract at KRONK. A poster of the face-off of Leonard vs. Hearns 2 hangs on those walls. Another former boxer that trained under Emanuel was displayed against those red walls - former WBC middleweight champion [Gerald McClellan](#) (31-3, 29KO). He recently made an appearance at KRONK. McClellan retired from boxing due to a brain injury that he sustained from the bout with [Nigel Benn](#)(42-5-1, 4KO).



Professional Light Heavyweight Boxer, Gerald McClellan

There is a dedicated area called "Emanuel's corner." This spot has the old-school hand wrap bench that he utilized years ago, which was constructed out of wood and displayed in the corner of the weight area. There was one photo above the bench that I liked of Steward and [Eminem](#). The spirited people that come out of Detroit are often not a stranger to struggle, perseverance, and the will to succeed.



Dedicated area known as Emanuel's Corner

Besides the gym there is something else spectacular about the building. Paul allowed me to witness that gem prior to the reconstruction. It was like the grand finale and as we walked down the steps to the lower level of the building, Paul turned to me and said something along the lines of "Joe Louis' ring is down here, and it sends shivers down your back". I was feeling that same vibe from the building at this point. To be quite honest, I was stunned by what Paul said was in front of us; very surreal. The KRONK training ring is located directly above what was once Joe Louis' training ring.



Paul Bhatti standing in the center of Joe Louis' training ring prior to reconstruction

On that same tour I learned that a wrestling gym will be accompanying KRONK by leasing out space on the same floor. Detroit legend and former Red Wings player, [Darren McCarty](#) owns and operates [Grind Time Wrestling Academy](#). As of now, this is housed in Centerline, Michigan. I do not know when it will open doors. From what I saw it seems soon. The newly renovated space used to have a pool that vacated the room.



The before and after images of Joe Louis' ring

Let's learn about the people who make KRONK tick and who will shape the future of this legendary brand! Since Paul provided me with information on the gym and took me on a tour, we shall begin discussing a bit about him. Paul Bhatti was born and raised in Manchester, England. At the age of eight years old he began to watch boxing matches with his father. Bhatti feels that [Muhammad Ali](#) (56-5, 37KO) is hands down the greatest boxer of all time. While his current favorite boxer is Tyson Fury (34-2-1, 24KO). Until this day he remains an avid spectator of the sport. Currently, Bhatti resides in Michigan, USA.

I asked Paul if there was any hesitation from him in acquiring the world renowned KRONK brand. He stated that this was a "Once in a lifetime opportunity - from the business end and the fighting side". Bhatti essentially took an oath as he claims any leader is expected to do. He stated that his job is to "provide strength, protection and the vision of the brand, for fighters and employees, representing the brand as it should be!" Together with his partner John Lepak, they began and will continue to revive KRONK. With John's vast expertise and experience in boxing, he heads boxing, amateur and professional development, and talent recruitment.

John was a major part of 16 fights of [Mike Tyson's](#) (50-7, 44KO) career. He organized everything in Tyson's training camps from coordinating the logistics to the promotional aspects. Hence, Lepak brings a wealth of knowledge and acumen to the table. Ironically,

Paul attended two out of the sixteen events that John assisted Mike Tyson with. He attended the bout in Manchester, England and another in Scotland. Paul and John met through the Steward family. It is funny how the stars align and sometimes we meet just as we should.



Jonathon Banks wins the WBO NABO Cruiserweight Title in 2006

When Steward became ill in 2012, during the training of Wladimir Klitschko, he told [Jonathon Banks](#) (JB) (29-3-1, 19KO) to take his place in preparing Wladimir for his upcoming bout. Banks served as the head cornerman and trainer for many of Klitschko's later fights, including the 2015 loss to Tyson Fury and the 2017 battle against [Anthony Joshua](#) (29-4, 26KO). Currently, Jonathon Banks is the head trainer of the new KRONK Gym. He started working at KRONK for Emanuel Steward as a heavyweight boxing contender. He is a local, that recently came back home where he belongs!

https://youtu.be/Pa0pa2Y_WpQ

JB heads the training of KRONK's 13 amateur boxers. From what Paul says there are several prospects that will likely turn pro, in three or four years from now. Provided these gentlemen go pro, they will be managed by their advisors. In addition, there is a boxing class for youth ages 8-18. KRONK takes anyone with any talent level and they train them. For the youth classes, Everlast has donated accessories such as headgear and gloves for youth boxers to utilize when working out in the center. A 3-year promotional contract with

[Bobby Hitz](#) boxing was signed. As Paul explained, “Bobby is a promoter who cares for the fighters” and is someone KRONK “likes doing business with”.

There are approximately 17 sponsors that the gym works with. If anyone reading this article has an interest in sponsoring KRONK and its athletes, you can reach out to [Paul Bhatti via LinkedIn](#). There are various ways to provide sponsorship and at different levels. Paul and John are toying with the idea of having a summer camp in the future or even an MMA gym, but neither are in the works for the short term. They are simply ideas that have been taken note of but could be another revenue avenue later. Paul had made it clear that the most important thing to do was focus on the boxing end first. First came the revival of a world-renowned name in boxing history! Next to come is Paul Bhatti and John Lepak’s new journey that they embark together as part of “team KRONK”.



Sponsors for KRONK gym

There are several revenue streams implemented to drive the business forward. These include merchandising, the gym, licensing, sponsorships, and access to media outlets. Social media visibility is how they have managed their growth. “Scale and longevity are how

this must be built,” says Bhatti. I was told that there was something in the works that will be based on telling the story of KRONK. That is something that I look forward to viewing. Paul explained that the brand's short-term vision is to continue “building the brand towards mainstream”; its long-term outlook is focused on being back on top, in the boxing industry. From what I have seen and heard, this is sustainable and KRONK will rise to where it rightfully belongs! Paul had stated that the partnership between him and John Lepak is perfect.

Boxing has made a powerful comeback in Detroit, thriving as if it never faded from the city's pulse. Detroiters have managed to survive challenging times, from economic recessions to the brutal decline of the auto industry. Despite these hardships, the people of Detroit have developed a reputation for their remarkable resilience and tenacity. This spirit is deeply embedded in the city's culture, driving fierce loyalty and passionate support for their sports teams and athletes. Detroit fans are known for their “tough love,” rallying behind their teams with steadfast passion and constant energy. This same spirit and determination are mirrored in the boxing community, where legends like Joe Louis and Thomas Hearns rose from humble beginnings to achieve global acclaim.

In many ways, that is the real victory KRONK continues to deliver: not simply championships, but a living legacy that ties Detroit's past to its future. From the champions Emanuel Steward molded to the young fighters now learning their first combinations under Jonathon Banks, the KRONK name still represents discipline, opportunity, and pride. KRONK is once again positioned to be more than a gym; it is a proving ground and a cultural landmark. This is thanks to community development and everything that comes along with it. As long as Detroit keeps showing up with the same grit that built KRONK in the first place, the story will keep moving forward—one round, one lesson, and one new generation at a time.

**THIS DOOR HAS
LED MANY TO**

**PAIN
AND
FAME**

www.KRONK.com



Identical saying from the original KRONK