

The fighter still remains

Ferndale names park for ex-boxer who hopes to knock out cancer

By Michael P. McConnell
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FERNDALE — Robert "Tiger" Natin was well into his 60s a few years ago when a masked mugger jumped out of the darkness and cracked him in the head with a black jack as he walked home from work.

But Natin, a former professional boxer who fought under the name of Tiger Gorman, didn't go down.

"I grabbed him, hit him and knocked him down," Natin recalled. "He was hurt a little bit."

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Newspaper photo was not scanned well....

Daily Tribune staff photo by Dick Hunt

Former professional boxer and longtime Ferndale public works employee Robert Natin stands at the baseball field that was named in his honor this week.

Natin

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The mugger ran off but was later caught and confessed. He turned out to be an alcoholic to whom Natin had once lent money. Natin, in the best sense of the word, is a fighter. A fighter with a soft spot for underdogs.

From his hardscrabble youth in Pennsylvania living in a series of foster homes to his professional career as a heavyweight boxer and almost four decades of work for Ferndale's public works department, Natin has endured with scrappy persistence.

Still, his toughest battle is now before him.

Diagnosed with lung cancer in October, Natin, 66, is undergoing chemotherapy.

He's still on the job, though.

Wednesday, he was dressed in an orange knit cap, dark jacket and work boots. He was getting ready to leave work for another round of chemo at the hospital.

Natin's gray-blue eyes are set in a face creased by time and 34 professional fights. When he talks, he gestures with his large labor-hardened hands for emphasis.

"I just want to work," he said in a gravelly voice. "And I hope and pray I can see my granddaughters graduate from school. I'd like to live another 10 years, but you never know — it could be 10 days — you just never know."

This week, among the stacks of business papers that City Council members shuffled through was a resolution honoring Natin and giving the large, lighted ballfield at Martin Road Park his name. Co-workers and city officials told the 37-year city employee how much they love and admire him.

People around the city know him simply as "Tiger."

Over the years Tiger Natin has trimmed acres of city parks, dumped tons of garbage cans and cleaned city bathrooms with the same discipline and zeal he brought to his boxing career.

Those who know him say Natin

treats work the same way he treats people. There are no unimportant people, just as there is no such thing as an unimportant job.

"He's one of a kind and he has a heart of gold," said Shaun Slocum, Natin's supervisor with the city's park and forestry division of the DPW. "He gives everything 150 percent. It doesn't matter who you are — if he can help you out, he'll be there to help you out when the chips are down."

For more than 30 years, Natin both coached and gave his financial sponsorship to a number of Ferndale's men's and women's softball teams that went on to win district and state recreational titles.

"A lot of people might have walked away from those baseball teams after all that time, but not Tiger," Slocum said.

Natin's early life would have made a great old-time Hollywood movie where a kid overcomes adversity and a hot temper when he puts on a pair of boxing gloves and turns pro.

Born in Pittsburgh, Pa., Natin's family fell apart after his mother died when he was 8 years old. His father drifted away and Natin and a brother went to live at an home for orphaned children, Thornhill, which was in the country and had cottages, cattle and orchards.

Natin was sent to live in foster homes when he was 13, but he never stuck around long.

"I kept running away from the homes," Natin said. "I got into fights all the time."

Five years later, he met a priest who encouraged young Natin to put on some boxing gloves down at the gym.

"The priest told me to take my fight out in the ring or take it out on the (heavy) bag," Natin said. "It kept me out of trouble."

Natin fought amateur bouts to get his moves down and eventually turned professional.

"Being in the ring was like show-and-tell," he said. "You could be somebody. They'd announce your name to everybody. You'd walk into a store or something afterwards and people would know who you were."

He moved to Royal Oak in the early 1960s and stayed at a rooming house. He did his road work running along the railroad tracks and down the stairs at the railroad stop near 11 Mile Road.

In one of his last fights in 1968 he lost to Amos Johnson, who was ranked 13th in the world. Tiger Natin was getting older.

"I stopped fighting," he said. "I thought there must be a better way to get a check every week without killing yourself."

Natin eventually went to work for the Ferndale Department of Public Works. He married and

had two sons, one of whom still lives here. The other son, who was adopted, died.

He earned a reputation as a hard worker and soft touch for a loan.

"Some of the money comes back, some doesn't," Natin said. "I treat everybody the same. Nobody's better than anyone else."

Natin was astonished at the recognition he got when he was in the hospital after he was diagnosed with cancer.

"People called. They sent cards and came to the hospital," he said. "It was unbelievable."

All he wants now is to get better.

He knows the fight is different from facing another man in the ring.

"This is harder to fight because it is more dangerous," he said. "I'm a sissy when it comes to being in the hospital."

Even with the pain in his side from the sickness, Natin said it is better to work than sit home.

Whether trimming grass and trees at the city parks or putting new bags in trash barrels, Natin believes a day's work is its own reward, a victory of sorts.

"You go out to the big park and you just sing along with the work," he said. "The next thing you know, it's time to go home."

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