

Cuban trio are ready to take on the world from Watergrasshill

EVERY Cuban boxer has one dream. It is to become an Olympic champion and be ringed with greatest heroes from the island. With the likes of Felix Savon, Teófilo Stevenson and Mario Kindelan.

There is another route to glory for talented punchers from the Caribbean. But it is one of exile. The pro game. Where you leave your country and your family and don't go back.

There have been famous Cuban professionals in the past: Kid Gavilán, the delightfully named Kid Chocolate and more recently, Joel Casamayor.

But these men go unheralded on the island, which turned its back on professional sports after its revolution in 1959.

Three years ago three young men arrived in Cork, with glittering amateur records to their name. Alexei Collado Acosta, Mike Perez (once a comprehensive conqueror of our own Ken Egan in the ring) and Luis Garcia were world junior champs with prospects for Olympic success.

However, they were eventually disillusioned with the politics of amateur boxing on the island. None of them won a place on the national team for the Beijing Games.

Garcia had beaten Emilio Correa 13-3 in a contest before that summer, but he was still denied his seat on the plane. Correa would go on to win silver in China, losing out to the now British pro prospect James Degale, who Garcia says he would

love to meet in the ring in the near future.

Corkman Gary Hyde had seen all three box in Cuba and Mike in a contest here and he realised the potential they had to make it in the pro ranks.

So he brought them over to Cork. Although it was a major coup for boxing in this country, more often than not the trio were far superior to the opponents the gloved off against in their first two years of pro boxing.

Although Hyde has now departed (their new manager is Patrick Thomas) they continue to climb the rankings in their divisions.

They also believe they are benefiting from better sparring partners, something essential if you want to progress.

Mike has been sparring Kevin Johnson, an American who was unbeaten in 22 fights until he lost on points to Vitali Klitschko in a heavyweight title fight last December.

Luis has also been mixing in top-class company having Los Angeles-based light heavyweight Enrique Ornelas over for some intensive sparring sessions. Ornelas' last outing came in December when he dropped a 12 round decision to boxing legend Bernard Hopkins. Acosta has been sparring with Canadian Andrew Kooner and unbeaten Irish featherweight and recent Sky *Prizefighter* Willie Casey. All three were delighted with the work but particularly Perez and Garcia who have both been on the sidelines for extended periods due to injury and inactivity.

Thomas has now linked up with Irish promoter Brian Peters in an attempt to reinvigorate their careers and on Saturday night they will all fight at the Neptune Stadium.

"Last year was frustrating for me with fights falling through but that is in the past and now I only want to look to the future. Obviously it is not easy to leave your family and friends behind in Cuba but I am happy here in Ireland. Cork is my home now, I'm very settled here and have good friends here so it's where I want to stay and fulfil my potential," says Luis.

Their coach is Ireland's most famous Cuban, Nicolas Cruz, who trained Michael Carruth to Olympic gold in Barcelona 18 years ago. He drives to Watergrasshill from Portlaoise to train them (they train twice a day and Sunday is their only day of rest).

The daily grind is something they are used to.

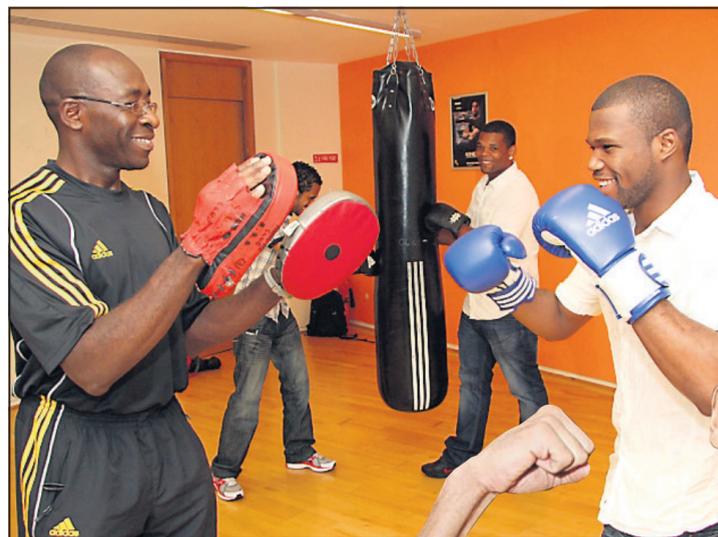
"I started boxing when I was six. I had the talent, the three of us did, but there are thousands of young Cuban boxers with the talent. But

Robert O'Shea meets Cork's Cuban boxing contingent and discusses their hopes for the future and life so far from their homeland in the Caribbean

Alexei Collado

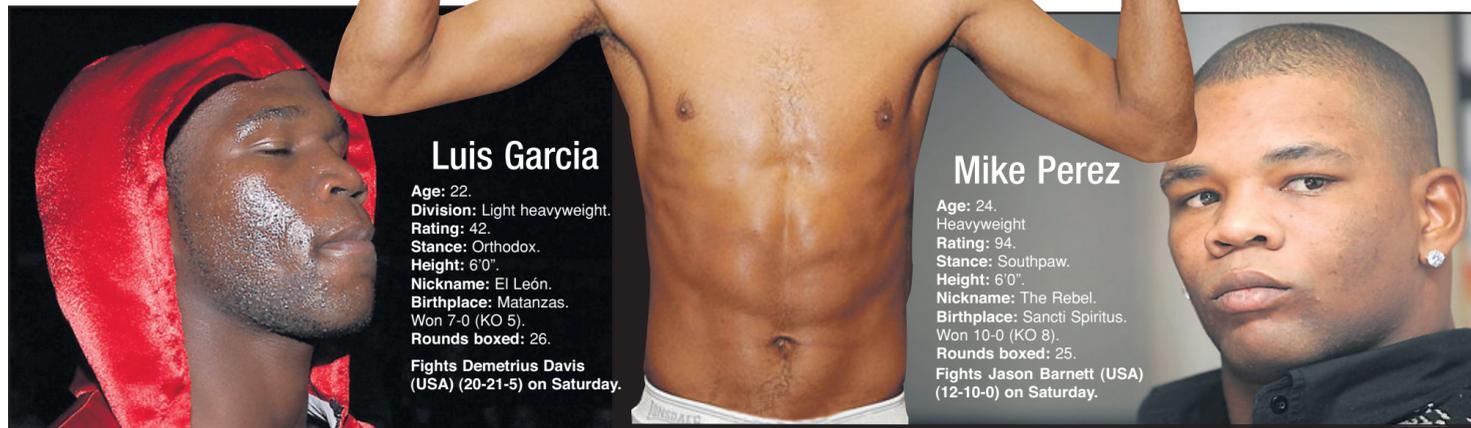
Age: 22.
Super bantamweight.
Rating: 64.
Height: 5'9".
Nickname: Hurricane.
Birthplace: Havana.
Won 10-0 (KO 10).
Rounds boxed: 21.

Fights Jose Saez (Arg) (17 wins-10 losses-4 draws) on Saturday.



Luis Garcia spars with his coach Nicolas Cruz in the company of fellow boxers Alexei Collado and Mike Perez at the Clarion Hotel gym.

Picture: Diane Cusack



Luis Garcia

Age: 22.
Division: Light heavyweight.
Rating: 42.
Stance: Orthodox.
Height: 6'0".
Nickname: El León.
Birthplace: Matanzas.
Won 7-0 (KO 5).
Rounds boxed: 26.
Fights Demetrius Davis (USA) (20-21-5) on Saturday.

Mike Perez

Age: 24.
Heavyweight
Rating: 94.
Stance: Southpaw.
Height: 6'0".
Nickname: The Rebel.
Birthplace: Sancti Spiritus.
Won 10-0 (KO 8).
Rounds boxed: 25.
Fights Jason Barnett (USA) (12-10-0) on Saturday.



CuBAM! sensations: Boxers Mike Perez, Alexei Collado and Luis Garcia will fight on Saturday night in Neptune Stadium.

Picture: Diane Cusack

dedication is more important," says Mike Perez.

Alexei is the only one who had doubts about his career early on. "After one month of boxing I gave up. But the coach would come to my house and tell me I would have to come back. That I was good. He was persuasive, so I gave it another go." Parents often fret about their youngsters getting into the ring, but in Cuba, the three say, pulling on a pair of gloves is always supported by both father and mother.

"There is great honour to boxing in Cuba, as everyone knows. Every parent is proud to see their child putting in a gumshield and climbing between the ropes. There is huge support," says Nicolas.

They had other interests however: Luis was a promising athlete, Alexei practised jujitsu and Mike — unsurprisingly considering his powerful presence — was a freestyle wrestler.

One sport they don't fancy giving a go is hurling.

Mike says he has gone to games and says that it is too fast for even someone with the lightning fists that he has.

Alexei is the only one whose home town is Havana, but eventually all three would end up in the capital, training with the national team. Only recently has Ireland learned from the Cuban model and adopted its high performance team to train potential amateur stars.

highlighted by the recent fantastic performance by our amateur combatants at the European Championship in Moscow. While they would all like to return to Cuba, it would only be as a visitor, later in their life.

Because of the political situation, any visit now would be guaranteed to be permanent.

This is especially difficult for Alexei, who shows a picture on his phone of the son — Michel Ignacio — he left behind in Havana, who he last saw when he was six months of age.

What all three miss most is the food from their home country, with special complaints for the quality of pork we have in this country. Pigs are treated better in Cuba they insist.

Alexei, who has 10 knockouts from 10 pro fights, says he does not step into the ring knowing he will knock someone out, but he can usually tell in the first few rounds if he is going to drop someone to the canvas. They are delighted with the reaction of Cork fans and how they have been adopted by the city of Cork.

However, they are offered a chance to tell what the worst thing is about Cork... excluding the weather. Mike does offer that they found it difficult to get into nightclubs when they first came here, though we're guessing they had no problems with Cubin's or Havana Browns.

Outside of this they have suffered little open racism, but you are less likely to be a victim of the latter when you can send them into next week with one blow.

Although, Nicolas, here now for 22 years, does tell of one incident in the early 90s.

"Some people started shouting at me, saying 'go home to Nigeria'. I told them I was Cuban and they recognised me as the Olympic trainer. After this they wanted to shake my hand and get pictures taken with me."

Another form of prejudice rears its ugly head when Luis inexplicably brings up the fact that all Kerrymen are stupid.

Well, the interviewer, being a native of that dimly looked upon county, took him out with a swiftly delivered uppercut to the chin.

Well he thought of it at least. Apologies accepted, dignity restored and they are asked what part of Cuba are the people the butt of everyone's jokes.

As a man, they point to Nicolas and laugh.

In their spare time, they say they like to play soccer. Enquiries into the potential of the Cuban national team are met with stony stares. They do like to fish also. Mike is a keen angler and he likes nothing better than to get out on the river and catch some trout.

It seems it is not only his opponents who have to be wary of the big man's hooks.

● Saturday night's Yanjing Beer Fight Night takes place at Neptune Stadium at 7pm. Tickets for the Fight Night are €25-€50.



Luis Garcia lands a powerful uppercut on a hapless opponent.