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^Ethiopia's unlikely boxer fights for gold<

%xhl(Ethiopia's sole Olympic boxer battles mum, poverty to fight for gold%)

%photo(^AP Photos<%)

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¶ ADDIS ABABA, **Ethiopia** (AP) \_ **Ethiopia**'s runners have won at least one gold medal at almost every Olympics since 1960. The country's other athletes have been shut out.

¶ Now a member of the Ethiopian team for the Beijing Games intends to fight his way onto the podium, against overwhelming odds.

¶ Molla Getachew is **Ethiopia**'s only Olympic boxer, an anomaly in a country known for its superstar distance runners. His opponents are the last in a long line of problems standing between him and a gold, including a lack of equipment, no professionals to train against and a disapproving mother.

¶ But when the Beijing Games open in August, he will represent **Ethiopia** in the 112-lb. flyweight division, a weight class dominated by well-equipped fighters from Mexico, Thailand and Japan.

¶ "I feel sad because I'm the only boxer representing my country at the Olympics," said the 22-year-old, who spends four hours a day training at an airless, grimy gym in the Ethiopian capital.

¶ **Boxing** is popular elsewhere in Africa \_ neighboring Kenya is full of **boxing** clubs and boasts several champions \_ but **Ethiopia**'s poverty makes the sport's equipment inaccessible to many.

¶ Professional fights are nonexistent, so boxers have to leave the country to make a living from the sport. In a country of 77 million people, there are only 300 amateur boxers at the country's four **boxing** clubs, yet even that small number strains the available resources.

¶ "The boxers are good," said Fasil Keita, who heads the Ethiopian **Boxing** Federation. "The problem is money. The federation doesn't have money."

¶ Molla's intense morning workout is an exercise in resourcefulness. He bobs and weaves between five lumpy heavy bags that hang from the ceiling, peppering them with punches. His trainer, Salamon Zinna, takes him through speed and footwork exercises, as there are no bags designed for speed or coordination, no medicine ball, and only one jump rope between Molla and his partner.

¶ There is no **boxing** clock to ring the bell between 3-minute rounds, so Salamon keeps time with an old wristwatch. The dilapidated ring, the only regulation ring in the country, is so warped and uneven that fancy footwork would be foolhardy.

Instead, Molla and his partner spar on the hard gym floor.

¶ Molla does not even own a pair of gloves, or ankle-supporting **boxing** shoes. He fights in sneakers and borrows training gloves from the gym's meager supply closet.

¶ Even Molla's track record is modest. With just six fights under his belt he is 4-2, with no knockouts. He's woefully unprepared to meet better-funded, better-trained fighters.

¶ But what he lacks in equipment and experience, he makes up for with sheer determination.

¶ The right-handed fighter throws textbook-perfect punches with lightning speed, never seeming to tire as he jabs at his opponent, ducking before throwing a jaw-crushing uppercut. During breaks, he paces, not stopping to drink water.

¶ "He's good, strong," Fasil said. "But he lacks experience. He went with me to Egypt, to Algeria. He lost in the first round. But he keeps fighting on. He has courage. He has fire."

¶ Molla said he was inspired by his neighbors to pick up **boxing** six years ago. Molla's mother, he said, was always wary of the sport, even after he beat five other boxers to qualify for the Olympic team.

¶ "My mom doesn't know anything about **boxing**," he said. "She thinks it's violent and doesn't want me to continue with this career. She doesn't know anything about the Olympics. She only accepts it because she knows it's a source of income."

¶ He earns about \$70 a month from the **boxing** federation, which he gives to his mother for the care of his four younger siblings. In the unlikely event he wins a gold medal at the Olympics he hopes to pass on any rewards to his mother.

¶ Aside from a medal, the normally quiet fighter has just one other wish.

¶ "My father used to give me a lot of moral support, but he passed away," he said. "I wish he could see the level I am at now."