Hamill sees boxing as a brutal sport — a lot like life

Hamill spoke Thursday as part of "Beyond the Ring: The Art and Culture of Boxing," a two-month series of films and talks sponsored by the Rensselaer County Council for the Arts. Besides covering fights for various newspapers, Hamill published a boxing-and-incest potboiler, "Flesh and Blood."

Like a newspaper column, Hamill's unscripted talk mingled autobiography and social comment, cultural history and crackerbarrel philosophy.

Hamill, 57, was born and raised in Brooklyn near Eighth Street and Sixth Avenue, in a mixed neighborhood of mostly Irish and Italians. The Italians ran the pool halls (so Hamill said, he never learned to shoot pool) and the Irish ran the Police Athletic League gym (so he learned to fight).

He started boxing at 12 and kept at it through his two years in the Navy. He reveled in the "imaginary glory" of boxing matches on radio, and used the skills he learned in the ring to survive in the street, "to make me become more human."

Boxing mirrors the bigger culture, Hamill said, citing his own neighborhood where "we had street gangs, but there was no heroin and few guns. It was a much more innocent city than it was to become."

Besides being a rite of passage, a male ritual, boxing is a skill, an art ultimately practiced in solitude, not unlike writing.

"You learn that it's not as easy as it seems. Your instinct is to get hit in the mouth and run. The code of the gym was you couldn't run," Hamill said.

In 1960, not long after he stopped boxing, Hamill got his first reporting job, at the New York Post. He remained there for 14 years and was recognized, with writers like Jimmy Breslin and Tom Wolfe, as one of the "New Journalists" who came to prominence in the 1960s.

Hamill has worked as a columnist for the New York Daily News, published seven novels and has written television and film scripts.

Boxing teaches a moral code, a respect for one's self and others, and Hamill related the fading of boxing to the torment of the cities.

"Boxing gave me a sense of myself on this planet. I was the first son of immigrant parents, and therefore the first American. In boxing, you can find rules to live lives," he said.