CHICAGO – Even after 14 years in the NBA, Kendall Gill didn't have the legs to keep up with his training partner.

"We'd go run out on the lakefront and he'd be behind," training partner and middleweight Freddie Cuevas said. "He couldn't keep up with me."

Gill, despite experience in other martial arts sparring, didn't fair well in the gym either.

"It seemed like he was too clumsy in the beginning," Cuevas said.

No lungs and a klutz. Somehow that passed in the NBA, but would hardly help a professional in the boxing ring.

Then again, Chicago native Gill has trained 18 months to change that. But at 37 yearsold, he doesn't have much excess time to mold himself into a contender and he knows it.

"I'm in a special position," said Gill, who will make his debut June 25 at the Aragon Ballroom in his hometown. "I haven't paid my dues as an amateur, but I don't have time."

Gill, who came off the bench in fourteen games for the Milwaukee Bucks at the start of the 2004-2005 season, soon had plenty of time after the Bucks cut him loose. He drove from Milwaukee through a blizzard back to Chicago with a new resolve to become a professional fighter.

Athletes have wrapped themselves in the gimmick of professional boxing for years. Former NBA center Manute Bul, who also dressed for the International Hockey League's Indiana Ice, was pitted against former NFL lineman William Perry. Figure skater Tonya Harding also laced up gloves for a few prizefights.

Freak shows.

It's easy to group Gill into that fraudulent fraternity, given the previous crossover debacles. I – fairly or not – needed something more out of Gill to avoid binding him back-to-back with Harding in cellophane.

To quell naysayers, Gill held an abbreviated public workout at 8 a.m. Friday at Jabb Boxing.

As usual, early morning didn't agree with me. But I was sharp enough to realize the gym was mere blocks away from the United Center, the 10-year-old venue Gill called home as a Chicago Bull two seasons ago.

The gym, located in one of the industrial districts off Western Avenue, actually opened with Gill

was one of its first clients.

Gym co-owner and 8 Count Productions promoter Domenic Pesoli was approached by Gill after a show. Pesoli admitted his concern in taking on the 6-foot-5 guard.

"I told him, 'I don't want this to be a freak show. I don't want this to be an embarrassment for you.'"

He admitted Gill's work ethic settled his apprehension within the first few months.

The coffee generously provided for the occasion hadn't kicked in for me when Gill walked in, swarmed by a film crew. He nodded almost instinctively, as years of high-level basketball conditioned him with the knowledge he was under the microscope.

The television camera's laid siege to the ring for footage of his warm-ups, but I was drawn to his size 14 shoes: Michael Jordan boxing shoes. Jordan's signature silhouette on the side of boxing shoes is only slightly less awkward than putting pink bows on combat boots. But Gill may be the only professional who appears completely natural in them – the Jordans, not the pink bows and combat boots.

I realized after a few moments of shadowboxing, hitting mitts and slipping a towel Cuevas whipped at him that Gill seemed quite natural in the ring as well. His hand speed wasn't going to frighten anyway, but his power was evident. He even displayed impeccable footwork; years of NBA play must have paid off somewhere.

He was slowly chipping away at my internal criticism, which was nearly decimated when we spoke face-to-face.

"When I was a little boy watching Sugar Ray Leonard and Muhammad Ali, I just wanted to be a boxer," Gill said. "Boxing is my passion."

Incidentally, Cuevas' passion is basketball.

Perhaps Gill's greatest decision was choosing to fight as cruiserweight, with a twofold benefit of using his height against possibly shorter opponents. The other perk is his return to the same weight and shape he had when he was drafted in 1990 out of Illinois.

He decided his weight class through more perilous means: sparring against heavyweight ultimate fighting champion and boxer Andrei Arlovski.

"Dom asked me where I wanted to fight," Gill said. "I went in there and after the round ended (with Arlovski), I said cruiser."

That may be his ticket out of the crossover misfits club and into the true boxing fraternity. Then again, it just may be his way back to the NBA with brawling teams like the Indiana Pacers and Detroit Pistons.

"Someone needs to show those guys how to fight," Gill joked.