Paranoia is a healthy reaction if you're parking for free in Chicago.

I made two trips in and out of St. Andrew Gymnasium, wondering why I had so easily found a parking space no more than 10 paces away from the front door of the Chicago Golden Gloves. No matter. Questioning your fortune – good or bad – isn't healthy.

Jason Cook may or may not have questioned his poor fortune in 2001 when the one thing that had endeared him to the boxing world as a heavyweight Golden Gloves champion had damned him from it.

Cook stepped onto a LaPorte, Ind., sidewalk to settle a dispute between a friend and 26-year-old Stephen Lake, who quickly turned his attention to the then 22-year-old Cook. A scuffle ensued, although Cook offered to square off with Lake with a clearer head in the boxing ring.

"The only thing I wanted to do was just get him away or off," Cook said.

One punch allowed Cook the separation he needed as local police closed on the scene. He fled the scene, fearing any more interaction with law enforcement after a recent charge of driving under the influence, but officers caught up to him.

Police interrogated Cook, although the reason wasn't absolutely clear at first.

"I didn't know exactly what was going on," he said. "They asked me if I landed a hard blow, or did I punch him, and I said yeah. They were getting into detail with the punches. I was like, 'Wait a minute, all over a fight?'"

The blow that separated Cook from Lake proved fatal, as Lake died from the resulting severe head trauma. Shock washed over Cook when police told him of Lake's death.

"I was like, 'No more questions,'" he said. "I said, 'That's it, I want to go home now.'"

Cook was found guilty of manslaughter two years later, which came just after he won the heavyweight Golden Gloves title in Chicago and eventually lost at the national tournament in Las Vegas. The court allowed him to serve time on a work release program, requiring that he enroll in Alcoholics Anonymous, abstain from drinking and speak to school and church groups about alcohol and drug use.

He also had to give up boxing – training and fighting.

"I thought about it almost every night," he said. "Boxing was the only thing. I said when I get out of here, boxing is the only thing I want to do. Get in the ring and hit the bag."

His brother, 25-year-old Nick Cook, a professional light heavyweight, always had his older Jason in his corner. The one professional blemish on Nick's record, a 2004, ninth-round technical knockout at the hands of Rocky Smith, occurred when Jason wasn't there.

Coincidentally, the fighters stayed aloof until six months ago. Nick Cook insists the hiatus is more to blame on poor management than any psychological effect of his brother's criminal circumstance.

The court suspended Cook's five-year sentence last fall, and with his probation officer's OK it allowed him to commute an hour to Chicago with his brother to train at Windy City Gym with Sam Colonna.

Colonna entered Cook into a few tournaments. He stepped into the ring a few years older and, somehow, a lot wiser.

"I was really nervous, because I didn't know how thing would fall into place," Cook said. "I thought I would be worse than I was. Actually, now with (Colonna), everyone thinks I'm 10 times the boxer I was at one time."

He decisioned his way through the first round of the gloves at St. Andrew, although needed to drop two pounds for the 178-pound light heavyweight cutoff. He made weight and enjoyed every morsel of the chicken parmesan and sandwich he washed down with water and energy drinks in his car – he always eats in the car.

No sooner had he finished his meal and looked forward to allowing it to digest, then tournament officials said he was to fight much earlier than anticipated.

"After I got done fighting, I did a couple interviews," Cook said. "Then I said, 'Hey, man, I'm not feeling well.' I went to the bathroom and threw up."

He rolled through the rest of the tournament without a hitch until the championship round. Southpaw Cedric Agnew, one of the top amateurs and eight-years Cook's junior, waited for him there.

The matchup also presented an intra-gym quagmire for Colonna, since he trained both fighters at Windy City but insisted on neutrality.

"I'm going to watch like this," Colonna said, peaking through his fingers.

Agnew's hard punches and Cook's steel chin made for an interesting draw for tournament insiders. Of course, Cook's punches weren't noted as creampuffs, either. Style made the fight, with Agnew working the amateur system to his advantage for a unanimous decision.

Cook made a decision of his own afterward in the locker room: There's no place for him in the amateurs anymore.

Colonna said Cook will likely jump to the professional ranks this summer as a super middleweight. He won't look back with disappointment in losing his final amateur bout, or allow the mistakes of the past to haunt him.

He'll just make his own fortune – and with a little luck – make a fortune.