Build it and they will come. It wasn’t intended to happen in the hillside boxing gym overlooking the western portion of Riverside County but boxing fans of Chris “The Nightmare” Arreola poured into the “secret camp” on a daily basis.

That’s life for the Riverside, California heavyweight Arreola who faces veteran Jameel “Big Time” McCline (39-9-3, 23 KOs) at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino on Saturday in Las Vegas. Boxing fans are now discovering the first true Mexican-American contender for the heavyweight world title. The fight will be shown on HBO.

Last year corner man Willie “Indian” Schunke built a boxing gym for Arreola in his scenic hillside backyard to give the rising heavyweight an alternative to going to Big Bear Mountain.

“I hate Big Bear,” said Arreola (26-0, 23 KOs), who spent several weeks in the mountain resort area preparing for his previous fight against Travis Walker. He won by knockout but also tasted the canvas for the first time in his pro career. “It’s boring.”

On almost a daily basis young fans from the Inland Empire area filled the boxing gym to get a glimpse of Arreola as he ran through his numerous drills. Their eyes focused intently on the newest hope from their area that comprises both San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

Now, Arreola faces the man-mountain prizefighter McCline who has a history of being able to stay on his feet against the most brutal punchers in the heavyweight landscape.

“He’s a big name,” said Arreola of McCline. “I have to step up.”

In Arreola’s previous 26 professional contests only three have survived to the finish. Usually, the bouts end early with the Riverside heavyweight stopping opponents with a flourish of head-snapping punches.

“Arreola can really be something,” said one observer who specializes in scouting for boxing talent. “Can you imagine if he wins the heavyweight world title?”

Ever since Mike Tyson hit the professional boxing circuit, promoters have been searching for the next killer to emerge. Boxing promoters have scoured the nation for a fighter to fill that vacancy left by Iron Mike.

“People like Chris Arreola’s style because he’s an action fighter,” said Bill O’Neil, a former boxing writer who followed closely the career of Jerry Quarry when he was rising to the top. “Fans love a fighter who is aggressive.”

O’Neil covered the sport during the last heyday for heavyweights when Muhammad Ali, Ken Norton, Joe Frazier, Quarry and many others roamed the landscape like so many dinosaurs. He

says Arreola reminds him of a young Frazier.

“That’s the way Frazier fought,” said O’Neil about Arreola’s aggressiveness and wicked combinations.

Big boys

In the last month Arreola’s sparring consisted of three heavyweights who all had height advantages. Rod Willis and Lance Whitaker had four-inches in height over the Riverside heavyweight while Cisse Salif only had a couple of inches.

“We needed guys with a lot of height for this fight,” said Henry Ramirez, who trains Arreola and also trains lightweight contender Josesito Lopez. “I think we got the perfect guys for Chris.”

Willis, a heavyweight out of Dallas, Texas, was probably the quickest and most fleet-footed of the trio. His long arms and quick punches helped Arreola prepare for closing the distance he’ll encounter against McCline.

The easy-going Texan always arrived early and was prepared for action before Arreola arrived.

Salif is a heavy-handed fighter famous for his sturdy chin. Every time he lands a punch the concussion can be felt throughout the gym. He’s a veteran of Arreola’s training camps. This is his fourth time with the Riverside fighter and he’s also worked with McCline in the past.

“McCline is very durable,” said Salif, who is scheduled to fight for the IBC heavyweight title on April 12 in Laredo, Texas. “He’s a big man with fast hands.”

Whitaker arrived last in the camp and was definitely the biggest of the three heavyweights invited. Though equal to Willis in size, he’s heavier but it’s not fat, it’s all muscle. During sparring he had those moves and tactics that showed he’s been up against elite competition. On several times he used his strength to push off Arreola after missing a combination.

It was Arreola’s best camp since fighting dangerous Damian “Bolo” Wills, who was undefeated at the time they collided in November 2006. The Riverside heavyweight admits that motivation was lacking in the past year.

About two weeks ago, Arreola fell ill and missed almost seven days of training. But when he returned his conditioning allowed him to pick up with little struggle as he traded big blows with his sparring partners.

“The last time we worked together he was only 20 percent of what he is now,” said Salif, who worked with Arreola in Big Bear before the Walker fight in November. “In the last camp I was hitting him and hitting him and he wouldn’t do nothing in return. Not this time.”

Arreola is ready to test the deep waters of the heavyweight elite where height seems to be a requirement. Most of the top 10 resemble a NBA basketball squad as titleholders like Vitali

Klitschko, Wladimir Klitschko, Nicolai Valuev and others tower over the competition.

“This guy (McCline) has a big name. People know who he is,” said Arreola, 28, who cited McCline’s fights against Wladimir Klitschko and Samuel Peter. “The guys I fought before were good undefeated fighters like Travis Walker, Bolo (Damian Wills), and even Malcolm Tann. But people didn’t know who they were so they thought I was fighting nobodies. These guys were not nobodies.”

McCline stands in Arreola’s way to a heavyweight title challenge.

“I’ve seen a lot of his (McCline) fights back in the day when I didn’t think I would ever be fighting as a heavyweight,” said Arreola, who won the National Golden Gloves as a light heavyweight. “He’s fought a who’s who of heavyweights.”

Those assembled at Arreola’s recent workouts were impressed with the Mexican-American heavyweight.

“I think he can do it,” said O’Neil.

Arreola is taking giant steps.

Photo by Joe Esquivel.