No wonder they call them the “Fighting” Irish.

For the second time in four years, Top Rank founder and CEO Bob Arum has signed a boxer from the hallowed halls of the University of Notre Dame, which is better known for producing scholars and All-America football players than guys with the aspiration of becoming the next Sugar Ray Leonard or Manny Pacquiao.

In the summer of 2006, Arum helped fill the down time of the Irish’s All-America safety and punt returner, Tommy Zbikowski, but having him turn pro in a high-visibility heavyweight bout against Robert Bell in Madison Square Garden, on the undercard of June 10 a show headlined by WBO welterweight champion Miguel Cotto’s unanimous decision over Paulie Malignaggi. Zbikowski, who was cheered on by a number of his teammates who made the trip from South Bend, Ind., made $25,000 for stopping Bell only 49 seconds into the first round. The bout almost had the feel of a big-time college football game, with Zbikowski – a national Silver Gloves finalist in 1998, 1999 and 2000 – wearing Notre Dame-themed trunks while Bell, from Akron, Ohio, wore the colors of his favorite team, the Ohio State Buckeyes.

Zbikowski, who recently completed his second season with the NFL’s Baltimore Ravens (and was voted his team’s top special-teams performer), has an open invitation from Arum to resume his ring career if and when the pro football things stops working out. It could happen sooner than anyone thinks if there is a work stoppage after the 2010 season, with owners indicating they will exercise to opt out of the current collective bargaining agreement with the players’ association ends.

Mike Lee, Top Rank’s latest signee from Notre Dame, follows in Zbikowski’s footsteps, but only to a point. Yes, the 6-foot, 180-pounder played football, at Benet Academy in Wheaton, Ill., about 30 miles northwest of Chicago, but he never suited up for the Fighting Irish. His sport of choice in college was boxing, which he didn’t even take up until the summer following his senior year of high school.

“Michael was a tremendous athlete in every sport he participated in, whether it was baseball, football, you name it,” said John Lee, Mike’s father. “He was always first-string in the most competitive programs since he was six years old. He could have played football at the Division II level, but he wanted more than anything to go to Notre Dame. And when Michael sets his mind to something, that’s pretty much it.”

What the 22-year-old Lee, who graduated from Notre Dame in May 2008 with a 3.83 grade-point average (of a possible 4.0) in finance, wanted nearly as much as a degree from his dream university was a chance to become a world champion in a sport, boxing, that got into his blood stream as much as any of the other ambitions he has pursued with undisguised passion.

Despite having had only 16 amateur bouts – most of those having come at Notre Dame, where

he was a three-time Bengal Bouts champion – Lee decided that making a cushy living on Wall Street could be put off until he had satisfied his boxing jones.

"The pain of regret is a lot worse than the pain of a broken nose or whatever happens in the ring," Lee said. "For me, I'm always going to want to live my life and do what I love.

"I loved getting my degree in finance; finishing my degree was really important to me. I didn't want to turn pro until I did that. Now I know that whatever happens for me in boxing, I have that degree in my back pocket.

"That said, I've loved boxing since I got into it. Whether you're coming from a ghetto or from Notre Dame, when you're in the ring, it's all the same … two guys going at it. I got a taste of that adrenalin from Day One. In the amateurs whenever I knocked somebody down and the crowd was going nuts, there's nothing in the world I'd rather be doing at that moment."

Make no mistake, Top Rank isn't in business to help smart lads with bright futures outside of boxing scratch an itch that involves punching somebody in the mouth, and getting punched back. Arum signed Zbikowski for all the right reasons, although he probably showcased him a bit more given his college affiliation, and he insists he's taking a chance with Lee for boxing purposes only.

"It'll be a project (developing Lee), but we'll see," said Arum, who intends to turn his latest addition from Notre Dame pro on May 29, during a Top Rank Live telecast from the University of Illinois-Chicago Pavilion on Fox Sports Network. "We usually don't showcase four-round fighters until they've had a bit more experience, but we're making an exception in this case.

"Are we doing that because he's got that Notre Dame thing going for him? Oh, absolutely. Notre Dame has a cachet to it in athletics and in the popular culture. But you can only take that so far.

"Mike is woefully inexperienced. All of the young boxers we sign have extensive amateur backgrounds and he doesn't. But he has great attributes. He punches very well, he's extremely intelligent and he can learn a lot in a short time. His upside is tremendous. He is going to be a very good attraction in the Chicago area, and elsewhere. Hey, there are a lot of Notre Dame fans all over the country."

Lee, who expects to make his pro debut as a light-heavyweight, with a goal of whittling himself down to super middleweight, had better show something from the get-go. In a sense, he's starting out at the top, with Top Rank's well-oiled promotional machine behind him and a savvy trainer, Ronnie Shields, to tutor him on the finer points of the sweet science. The downside to starting out at the top, of course, is that the only way you have to go is down.

Shields, however, believes that Lee will disprove the widely held perception that boxing is a sport exclusively reserved for the poor and disenfranchised hoping punch their way to a better life.

"I tell you what, this kid is so determined," said Shields, who has been working with Lee in Houston. "He's determined to be a fighter. That's not something you'd expect from someone who just got a finance degree from as prestigious a school as Notre Dame.

"We're talking about somebody that truly loves boxing, who truly wants to learn. This kid is so enthusiastic about everything, he even inspires me. Mike wants to become champion of the world. He doesn't want to get into this just to say he's a professional boxer.

"I ask a lot of the guys I work with, which is why he's not fighting until May 29. The kid is a sponge, he absorbs everything, but I'm taking baby steps with him for now. I don't want to rush him into anything before he's ready. We're going to do this the right way and take things step by step."

What Shields doesn't have to teach Lee is the art of power-punching. That's something you can improve upon, technique-wise, but mostly it's a case of whether you're born with the gift or not. And, Shields insists, Lee has it.

"This kid has a right hand that's out of this world," Shields said. "It's straight, strong and fast. It's unbelievable, the right hand he has.

"When I first started working with him, I really didn't noticed the right hand. I knew he had a good left hook; his left hook is really strong. But I had him spar with a small heavyweight, a guy around 200 pounds, and the first day they boxed, Mike hit him with a clean right hand in the second round and dropped him. It was so fast! I was, like, wow."

John Lee said boxing at Notre Dame is a bigger deal than most people imagine, with the Bengal Bouts drawing reasonably large crowds. But Notre Dame boxers only engage in the sport for four months or so, followed by eight months of waiting until it's time to glove up again.

"Michael followed that schedule for a while, but as he got to enjoy the sport more, he began looking at it from more of a full-time perspective," the father noted. "I don't think you can really compete with people doing something only four months a year."

Lee showed he had something more than flash-in-the-pan ability when he entered the ultracompetitive Chicago Golden Gloves, in which he won five straight bouts en route to the title.

Zbikowski, not wanting to overshadow Lee's big moment, asked for permission to attend Lee press conferences at both Notre Dame and in Chicago and was there to show his support.

"Michael knows Tommy, who is a couple of years older, and obviously we appreciate that he's taken an interest," John Lee said. "But what Michael is doing with boxing doesn't have anything to do with Tommy. This is simply chasing his dream, like anyone else. He's shown himself athletically to be worthy of chasing that dream. As a father, I'm just going to sit back and enjoy the ride. If this is what he wants to do, he deserves the opportunity."

If Mike Lee's educational background wasn't unusual enough, his plans for what he intends to

do with his purses early in his boxing career stamps him as even more unusual. Basically, he plans to give a large chunk of his ring earnings to charity.

In January 2008, Lee spent 15 days in Bangladesh during a break from his studies at Notre Dame, as part of the university's Holy Cross Missions of Bangladesh program. What he saw left a deep imprint on him.

"It really changed my perspective on things," he said. "Oftentimes you see something on TV and you hear statistics and what-not, but until I went over there I had no idea as to the extent of the poverty. Bangladesh is a Third World country; the problems the people there face every day are no joke.

"When I returned to the United States, I stopped complaining about little things. At least for my early fights, I intend to donate a substantial percentage of my purses to the Holy Cross Missions. And if there are other causes down the road I feel this passionate about, I'll do whatever I can to help out."

Until then, though, Lee intends to train his butt off and look forward to the NFL draft in April, in which several of his friends – Central Michigan quarterback Dan LeFevour, Notre Dame wide receiver Golden Tate and Iowa tight end Tony Moeaki – figure to be early-round selections.

"I've been friends with Danny (a teammate at Benet Academy) since I was 13 years old," Lee said. "I'm so happy for him. It's pretty cool that two kids from the same high school who graduated in 2005 can be turning pro at more or less the same time in the sports they love. It's really pretty interesting when you think about it. Danny's in Pensacola, Fla., getting ready for the NFL combine, and I'm in Houston getting ready for my pro boxing debut."

Make no mistake, the Notre Dame/Top Rank love affair is a two-way street when it comes to football.

"When we did our press conference on campus, we took (Top Rank officials) Bob Arum, Carl Moretti, Todd duBoeuf and Lee Samuels into the football locker room at Notre Dame Stadium," Lee said. "They were like little kids in a candy store."