There were two career options for Jason Litzau as he progressed from pre-teen to teenager in Minnesota. He could be a thief, a budding con, a superstarbooster. Or he could use his talents in the ring to make something of himself in a nobler, if similarly risky, endeavor.

One could understand if the super featherweight Litzau, who fights on Saturday night on HBO's Boxing After Dark against Jose Hernandez in Miami, took the more familiar, easier path, and continued to excel as a shoplifter.

After all, he had plenty of experience, he tells TSS, as his father taught him and his older brother Allen tips on how to slip out of stores with prime merch without getting snagged by store security.

The Litzaus, who have tagged themselves the American Boys, were well on their way to becoming the Incarcerated Boys as they piled ups score after score on cross-country larceny jaunts with their dad, the boxer tells TSS.

Instead, the Litzaus spurned that lifestyle, and took up boxing. Instead of stealing candy, and going in to bars and selling it to patrons who believed proceeds were going to charity, they've built up their fistic skills. Now 20-0, Jason is the younger of the American Boys tag-team, and is being scouted by HBO for a possible spotlight role in 2007 and beyond. Certainly, his Dickensian backstory, with his own father taking a starring role as the odious Fagin, is a selling point in his bio. That's the outsider's take on the 23-year-old from St. Paul, who hasn't yet stepped up in competition with name opponents. But to Litzau, the sting of being left to fend for himself stings still.

He lived with his mother and stepfather until he was 10, and that decade was no picnic, to put it mildly. His guardians, he tells TSS, were substance abusers, and his stepfather, who he's on good terms with today, sometimes took out his frustrations on the brothers physically. The Litzau's then moved in with their dad, who was not, Jason says, a positive role model. He encouraged them to make money through legal and illegal means.

Sometimes they'd go to the airport, and help travelers with their luggage for tip money.

Or they'd hop the counter at shooting game in the Mall of America, Hunter's Paradise, and grab tokens, which they'd then sell to patrons outside.

"I didn't go to school at all my sixth grade year," Jason says.

The boys and dad piled into his Cavalier and drove to different parts of the nation, looting department stores on the way, the young boxer says. Then, they'd go to truck stops and unload the hot goods.

“Big and small, whatever was expensive,” says Litzau, who last fought on Oct. 20 (TKO2 win over Sam Ventura in Illinois).

At 14, Jason left the thieving life, he says, and got deeper into boxing. His dad took him to a gym when he was 11, and he followed in the footsteps of his mom’s brother, Frankie Newton (12-11-5, 3 KOs), a Minnesotan who fought as a pro from 1989-1997.

Stability, though, wasn’t introduced into Jason’s life just yet. He and Allen (now 11-2 as a super featherweight) bounced from their grandma’s house, to their uncles’, and at age 19, Jason and his brother were residing in the gym he worked out of.

Through all that tumult, Jason stuck by the sport. He could have, it goes without saying, succumbed to the blueprint that was laid out for him, and flirted with him so shamelessly. Thievery, dope, aimlessness, functioning with no other purpose than to work towards keeping the substance stash at acceptable inventory levels, there was no shortage of role models to give picture-perfect directions on that arc.

Instead, he’s traveled down the right path, and spurned that fork in the road that has snagged too many people close to him. He has two children of his own to attend to now, daughters Hailey (3) and Morgan (1), so that makes his urgency to rise in the ranks of 130-pounders that much stronger. He also takes a patriarchal interest in his brothers Travis (17) and TJ (15), and sister Rebecca (13), so the pressure to perform, and move into big-payday territory, is tangible.

“I do this so they can have an easier life,” he says. “So they don’t have to go through the struggles.”

Litzau can’t even conceive of losing to Hernandez, a Mexican-born Illinois resident who has built a 21-3 mark against mediocre opposition.

“I can’t think of a loss,” Litzau says. “I can’t even think like that. A guy can be 0-100, but that night he ain’t going down. The guy might show up and he’s trained harder than ever before. I’ve got to be careful.”

Litzau, therefore, won’t predict a KO, or even a win, but he will be so bold as to offer that he’ll give viewers an enjoyable show come Saturday.

“I want to make sure that the people who come and buy a $1,000 ringside seat get what they pay for every time,” he says. “I’m not just going to win on points, if I see an opening I’ve got to take an opponent out. I’m bringing back life to boxing.”

Litzau sees a vacuum in the sport, as the PPV movers and shakers get grayer.

“It’s everybody’s last hurrah,” he says. “De La Hoya, Floyd, everybody’s recycling right now.”

The boxer tells TSS that even though he doesn’t talk to his dad, he doesn’t hold a grudge that will hamper his upward mobility in the rankings.

His life, which we see as “backstory” that serves to feed our desire to see him in action, see if he can rise above the copious hurdles that fate has piled before him, could still go the other way. Even if you’ve chosen correctly at the last fork, you can be sure there will be another fork up ahead. Litzau has chosen right so far, for several years now. He won’t touch substances that could impair his decisionmaking. But certain emotions can be a deadly contagion as well, if left untended. Bitterness at role models who failed him, he says, doesn’t factor in to this American Boy’s march to prominence. So far, so good.

But the forks in the road will be there for the taking, long after we stop caring about Jason Litzau’s “backstory,” years after HBO’s cameras are trained on another American boy who’s hurdled everything fate has tossed in front of him. That’s when the choice of which route to choose gets harder to make.

But for now, in the spirit of the holidays, let’s just revel in the good cheer that comes with knowing that Jason Litzau will be toiling at a fully legal enterprise Saturday night, a task far more noble than snitching tokens from a carnival game stand, or boosting merch from a department store, or the next logical step up the ladder of larcency that would have inevitably followed.