

NEW ORLEANS

puts up its "DUKES"

The Docusen brothers smash
ahead on the royal road to
three boxing championships

By LLOYD GLAUDI



Attorney Sam Monk Zelden enabled the Dukes to resume fighting in New Orleans by proving in court that they weren't part Negro.

★ Way down yonder in New Orleans, fight fans—who haven't had a hometown world champion to cheer about since Tony Canzoneri dominated the featherweight and lightweight divisions 15 to 20 years ago—may soon have a trio of handsome ring kings in the fighting Docusen brothers, Maxie, Bernard and Regino.

These olive-skinned, curly-haired Docusen (*pronounced Dook-uh-san*) boys, with a combined record of less than ten defeats in more than 300 amateur and professional bouts, are ready for boxing's bigtime in a big way.

Let's have a quick rundown on the three "Dukes" whom New Orleans is putting up for the world's lightweight, welterweight and middleweight titles respectively.

Maxie Docusen—20 years old—Conqueror of bantamweight champ Manuel Ortiz in a non-title match last year—Winner of 57 amateur fights against no defeats—Victor in 60 straight pro bouts without a loss through the first of this summer—Rated second by Nat Fleischer's Ring Magazine (June issue) among the contenders for Ike Williams' lightweight crown—A two-handed puncher with dynamite in each fist, Maxie is the surest bet among the three devastating Dukes to cop a world title eventually.

Bernard Docusen—22 years old—Lost a whisker-close 15-round decision to welterweight king Sugar Ray Robinson in June, 1948—Rated seventh by Nat Fleischer's Ring Magazine (June issue) among the pretenders to Robinson's throne, although this rating zoomed after his May victory over Hawaiian welterweight champ Frankie Fernandez—Winner of 48 amateur fights against two defeats—Victor in 48 pro bouts, with five draws and three losses up to the beginning of this summer—Conqueror of former featherweight champ Phil Terranova in a 1945 go—A colorful ringman and an expert puncher (a murderous left jab is his chiller-diller), Bernard is the best crowd-pleaser of the three brothers.

Regino Docusen—23 years old—Eldest of the three Dukes, Regino once was considered the most able boxer of the lot. Five years of wartime Navy service, however, have retarded his drive for the world middleweight crown—Won 60 amateur fights with no defeats—Pro record at beginning of summer stood at 17 wins against three setbacks—Beginning to hit his stride and some experts predict he'll soon soar into the top ten in Nat Fleischer's middleweight rating because of his youth, speed and savvy—That is, of course, if he gets the breaks in landing "name" bouts.

Although the three Dukes still face many a rugged battle before they wind up at the top of boxing's royal road by wearing world championship crowns, they unanimously agree that their toughest fight is behind them. That's the four-year legal battle they won last spring. The City of New Orleans was ordered by Civil District Judge Rene A. Viosca to correct its records to show the Dukes were sons of a full-blood white mother and a Filipino father—and that they were not part Negro.

Louisiana's Jim Crow law specifically states that: "*No fistie combat, match, sparring or wrestling combat or exhibition between any person of the white or Caucasian race and one of the African or Negro race can be held. . . .*"

Back in 1945 when Bernard and Maxie were slamming their way to gold and glory before jammed houses in their hometown, somebody—general opinion in New Orleans is that it was a rival fight promoter or manager—called public attention to the fact that the Docusen boys were registered as Negroes on the city's birth records.

Mike Culligan, special assistant attorney general at the time, said he was guided only by the existing racial laws and therefore ordered the Dukes not to engage in matches with white fighters—and they had been boxing only such ringmen—in Louisiana. Culligan also informed the boxing

Photos by Anthony Longreco

Bernard, Regino, Maxie Docusan (r. to l.) are the boxing brothers on whom New Orleans' fans are pinning hopes for a trio of world titles.



Bernard Docusan (left) lands a right on Ray Robinson during the welterweight championship fight Sugar won in June, 1948.

Wide World



Ernest (Whitey) Esneault was the boys' first coach and led them to 165 triumphs out of their 167 amateur bouts.

THE "DUKES" (continued)

commission that it had no authority to change registrations as to age and race, and that court action only could erase the Docusens' classification as Negroes.

For the next four years the Docusens did not appear on a single card in Louisiana. Although New Orleans fight fans and sports writers were unanimous in their protests against the Culligan edict, the racial traditions in the South seemed stronger and it began to look as though the Dukes were exiled from hometown rings for good.

The boys resumed their ring wars elsewhere, mostly on the West Coast and in New York. Hometowns had to depend on wire service accounts in newspaper sports pages to follow the Dukes as they grew in popularity and climbed upward on the ring rating polls.

But there was one citizen in New Orleans who was righteously indignant at the injustice of the Docusen case and he did something about it. He was a tough-bitten, ex-high school football coach turned lawyer, named Sam Monk Zelden. Zelden was convinced that the boys were not only free of Negro strain, but he also felt strongly that no city official should have the dictatorial power to put a "W" (for white) or "C" (for colored) on the birth and marriage records in his charge according to his own personal prejudices.

"It's no crime to be a Negro," said Zelden, "but these boys want to fight in New Orleans and raise their families here. And since they do, they are subject to the prejudices and restrictions of the South if we allow this arbitrary decision in regard to their racial strain to stand."

Zelden worked tirelessly. He made nearly 50 trips by pirogue and rowboat to the bayou communities in search of records of the family's forebears. He discovered, among other things, that the great grandfather of Mrs. Viola Lytel Docusen, mother of the boxers, was Col. Jean Baptiste DuMolle, commander of one of the Mississippi River forts for the Confederate Army.

The lawyer, who undertook this case with no promise of profit, also discovered that the official who registered the birth of the Docusens was P. Henry Lanauze, city recorder of births, deaths and marriages for the 64 years preceding his death in 1940.

Lanauze, Zelden proved, was a man who set himself up as the personal and arbitrary judge of racial lineage in New

Orleans. Zelden dug up a record of testimony, which Lanauze gave before the State Supreme Court in a case similar to the Docusen affair, in which the recorder had testified that, in his opinion, all Filipinos were Negroes.

After three years of research, Zelden's well-documented case was accepted by the court and Judge Viosca ruled that the Dukes were not Negroes, thus clearing the way for their appearance in New Orleans' rings again.

Zelden, a rabid boxing fan, believes that with their worries about racial background cleared up, the Dukes are now free to fight with clearer minds and that their chances of taking world titles "have improved 100 percent."

The saga of the socking Docusens began about 16 years ago at the St. Mary's gym in New Orleans' downtown French Quarter where ring-wise Ernest (Whitey) Esneault was and still is the professor of pugilism. Now 57, the slim, silver-thatched Esneault can look back on 40 years in the fight game as a boxer, trainer, manager and promoter. Just as he did when he broke in the Dukes years ago, Whitey still opens the doors of St. Mary's gym to the kids of New Orleans who want to take up amateur boxing. Between rounds he chats with promoters and hangers-on about his current stable of 10 pro boxers, all newcomers.

"Yes," said Whitey, sweeping his hand toward the dozen or more leggy, bony youngsters who were fooling around in the gym, "the Dukes came down here just like the kids out there today. Emile and Regino Marello, uncles of the Docusen boys, first brought their three spindly little nephews down here to learn the manly art.

"Regino was first. He was seven at the time. Then Maxie started when he was about six. Bernard was the last one to go at it seriously," said Esneault, who is known as "Mr. White" to the more than 500 boys who made their amateur debuts under his guidance during the past 15 years. Whitey, incidentally, served in the Navy from 1908 to 1912 and fought most of his 128 pro bouts ("I won about two-thirds of 'em") during that period.

Whitey schooled all three Dukes during their spectacular amateur days.

Bernard (Big Duke) was the most successful during this phase of their ring careers. When Bernie was 13, Esneault passed him off for 16, and the boy took the Southern A.A.U. 112-lb. title. That was in 1941. The following year, still concealing Bernie's real age, Whitey took him to the National A.A.U. competition in (Continued on page 84)

Maxie Docusen (right) ended Buddy Jacklich in the tenth in November of '47 for one of his thirteen straight wins that year. Little Duke's pro triumphs now exceed sixty.



Manager Otis Guichet, Bernard, Maxie and manager Bill Geigerman (l. to r.) smile happily over the court's verdict declaring the boys white. A city clerk had registered their folks as Negroes.



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Boston and Big Duke copped the duke from a 10-to-1 favorite for the 118-lb. crown.

Bernie made his pro debut on February 8, 1943, and won 25 of 26 bouts under Esneault's guidance until he went into the Army for nine-months service in 1945.

Maxie (Little Duke) also fought for Esneault as a pro, but Regino had only 12 bash-for-cash fights before he enlisted in the Navy early in the war. Max was too young for military service.

With Bernard in the Army, Regino in the Navy and Maxie unable to fight in New Orleans because of the racial ban, Whitey decided to release the commitments he held on the Dukes. He sold Bernard's contract for \$5,000 to the current managers of all three Dukes, Otis Guichet and William (Bonnie) Geigerman, two young businessmen in their early thirties who are taking their first flier in the sock market. Esneault returned Maxie's contract to the boy's mother and dropped his option on Regino. Later, the G-men—Guichet and Geigerman—signed both Max and Reggie to monopolize the Dukes' talents.

Neither Guichet—a native of New Orleans and part-owner of Tujague's, a noted French Quarter restaurant—nor Geigerman—a transplanted New Yorker who has been in business in Louisiana for 14 years—ever owned a fighter before they bought up Big Duke's contract. Guichet knew and admired the Dukes and convinced his longtime friend, Geigerman, that they would get a kick out of handling a boxer.

The pair of managers hired veteran trainer Sammy Cherin and started to campaign through the East with Bernard and Maxie in 1946. The brothers fought 26 tough bouts without a loss that year.

After that, with the racial ban still in effect back home, they concentrated on the West Coast where the heavy Filipino population swelled the crowds which jammed in to watch their ring wizardry.

How does it feel to own boxing's outstanding brother parley? "Great!" says Guichet. "This is on the level. If we didn't feel that Maxie and Bernard have real good chances to own titles, we probably wouldn't stay in this business." And Geigerman nods agreement, adding: "And Regino, who now divides his time between operating a commercial fishing boat and fighting, will come along fast too, if he decides to stick ex-

clusively to flailers instead of flounders."

Regino, incidentally, is following the career of his father who was lost at sea with one of his six sons (Nolan) when their 55-ft. fishing boat, the "Charles D," was caught in the hurricane which pounded the Gulf of Mexico in 1947. Their bodies never were recovered.

"Fighting is better for my boys than fishing," says Mrs. Viola Docusen, handsome mother of ringdom's Dukes. Although she is no keen student of boxing, Mrs. Docusen knows that the ring has brought her family more comfort and wealth than the sea. "I'm proud of my sons and I want them to be champions," she says simply.

Mrs. Docusen brought her brood up as Methodists, but that didn't prevent them from boxing in Catholic Youth Organization shows under astute Whitey Esneault. "I was fearful of letting them fight when they were younger," she recalls now, "but I needn't have been. They are still gentlemen, good boys to their family and unmarked for all their battles."

"Regino is married to a nice girl named Mona and they have a fine son named Regino III," she adds with grandmotherly pride. "Bernard's wife is Ernestine and his two children are: Patsy, four, and Jackie, two-and-a-half. Maxie is still a bachelor, but he is the father of the house now. He is saving his money to buy me a home.

"Hundreds of my friends ask me when the boys will fight in New Orleans again, now that they have won in the courts. I know they will come back here soon to fight, and to taste the fish dinners I make. Every letter they send back mentions my cooking."

When and if the dazzling Dukes hit New Orleans again—perhaps on the same fight card—they'll be setting up bleacher seats as far back as Baton Rouge in order to accommodate the crowds. There's nothing a New Orleans fight fan likes better than a hometown hero—and the Dukes offer three in the same family.

Besides, guess what? There are two more Docusen brothers still to come. Daniel, 14, is in boarding school and young Charles is five.

It looks like Whitey Esneault's work is cut out for him and Messrs. Guichet and Geigerman will be busy putting up the Dukes many years hence. ■