

# "CAVEMAN" BOB MOHA

"The White Walcott" Missed Out On His Time In The Sun

By Pete Ehrmann

**B**ob Moha was no fair-weather fighter. Probably more than anything else, that accounts for the fact that the long-ago claimant of the middleweight and light heavyweight titles, who beat a lot of future Hall of Famers in the opening decades of the 20th century, never became one himself.

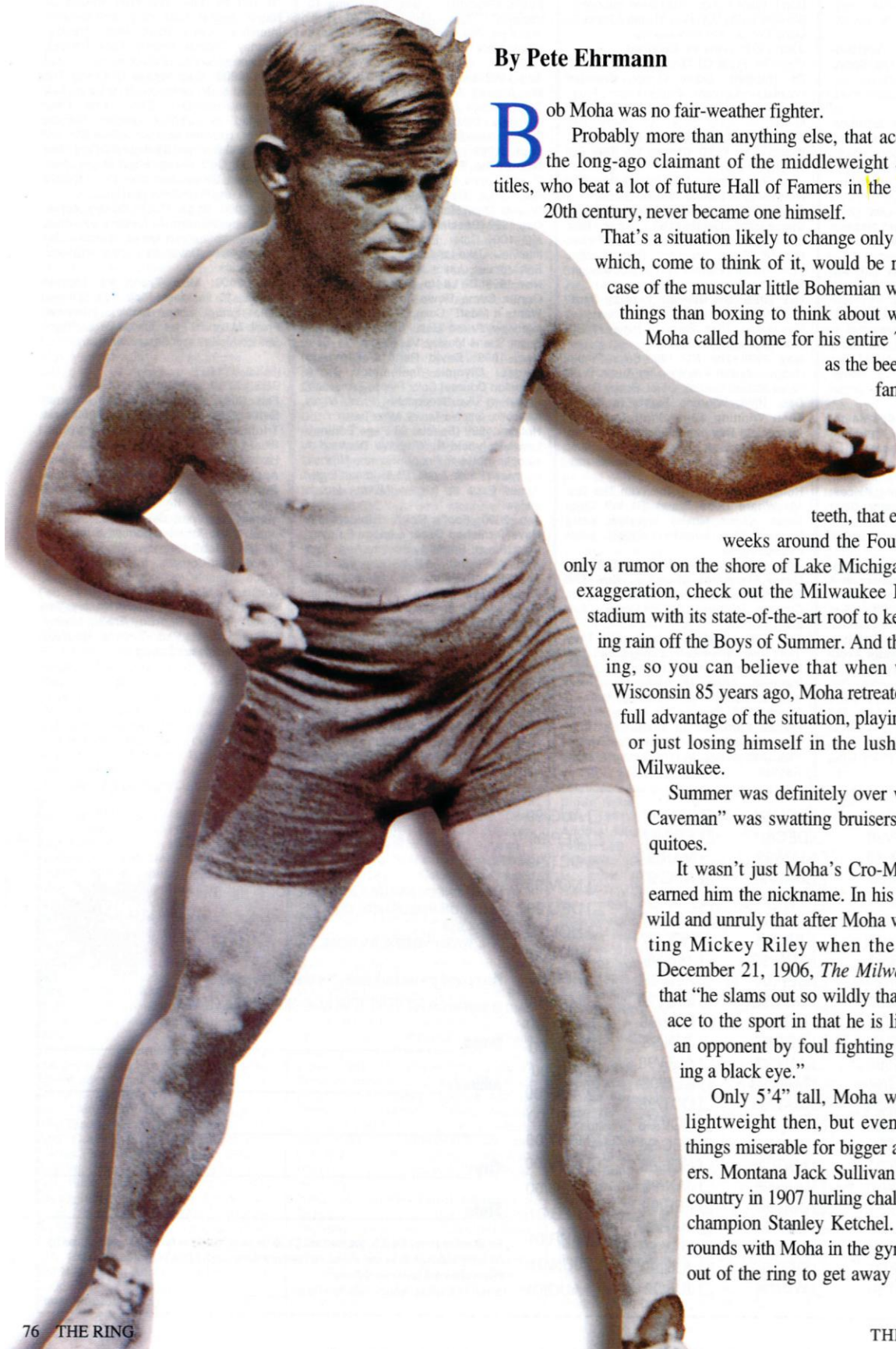
That's a situation likely to change only when hell freezes over, which, come to think of it, would be most appropriate in the case of the muscular little Bohemian who usually found better things than boxing to think about when the climate where Moha called home for his entire 70 years wasn't as cold as the beer that made Milwaukee famous.

Veteran denizens of Wisconsin's largest city will testify, through chattering teeth, that except for a few fleeting weeks around the Fourth of July, summer is only a rumor on the shore of Lake Michigan. If you think that an exaggeration, check out the Milwaukee Brewers' new baseball stadium with its state-of-the-art roof to keep the snow and freezing rain off the Boys of Summer. And that's with global warming, so you can believe that when winter retreated from Wisconsin 85 years ago, Moha retreated from the ring to take full advantage of the situation, playing baseball, swimming, or just losing himself in the lush lake country west of Milwaukee.

Summer was definitely over when "The Milwaukee Caveman" was swatting bruisers again instead of mosquitoes.

It wasn't just Moha's Cro-Magnon appearance that earned him the nickname. In his early fights, he was so wild and unruly that after Moha was disqualified for hitting Mickey Riley when the latter was down on December 21, 1906, *The Milwaukee Journal* worried that "he slams out so wildly that he is a constant menace to the sport in that he is liable to severely injure an opponent by foul fighting and thereby give boxing a black eye."

Only 5'4" tall, Moha was barely more than a lightweight then, but even in the gym he made things miserable for bigger and better-known fighters. Montana Jack Sullivan was going around the country in 1907 hurling challenges at middleweight champion Stanley Ketchel. But after a few fierce rounds with Moha in the gym, Sullivan literally ran out of the ring to get away from him. Around that

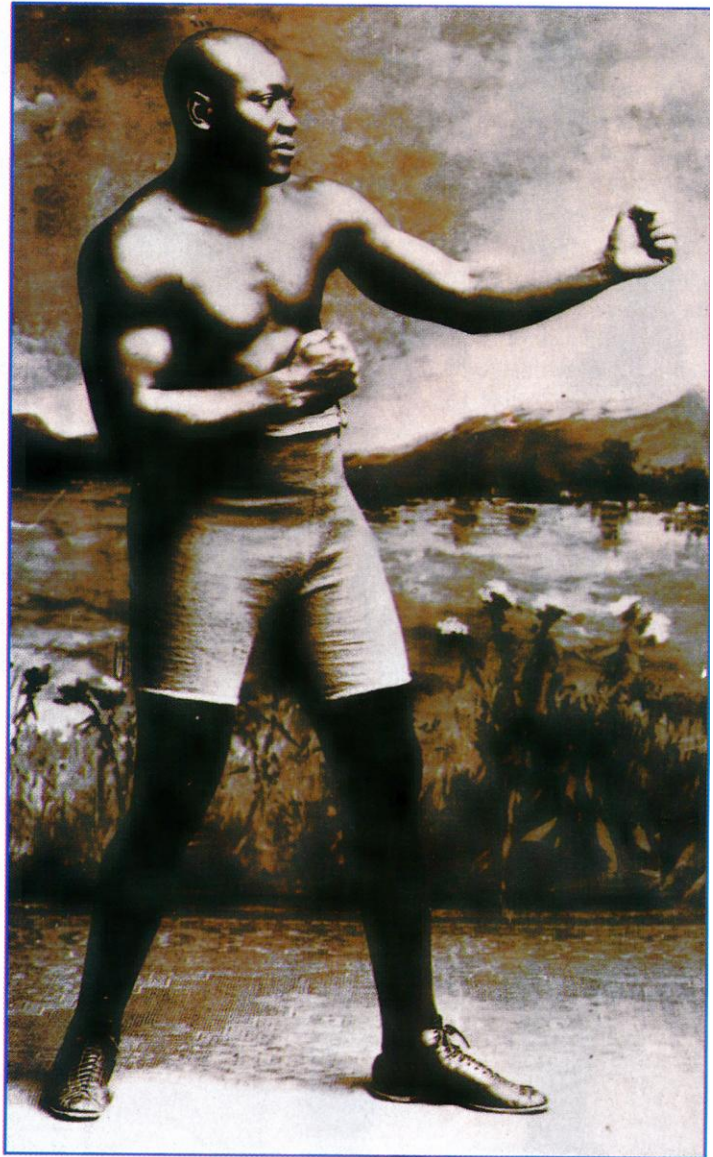




**Future lightweight champ Ad Wolgast was in for an unpleasant surprise when he bragged that he would knock out Moha in a sparring session. Instead, it was Wolgast who ended up seeing stars.**

same time, Ad Wolgast, swarming his way to the lightweight title and then headquartering in Milwaukee, put out the word that he would knock Moha out in an impending sparring session. Instead, it was Wolgast who ended up seeing the black lights, and when the poster boy for ring durability woke up, Moha told him: "Be careful how you talk about me hereafter, Ad."

Wolgast had a pal, another well-known hardcase of that era called Indian Joe Gregg. He publicly vowed to avenge Ad when he sparred with Moha the next day. Gregg spent three days in the hospital after the



**After sparring with Moha, heavyweight champion Jack Johnson was so impressed, he wanted to manage the Milwaukee slugger. But Moha preferred to stay at home, so they never formed a partnership.**

Caveman worked him over.

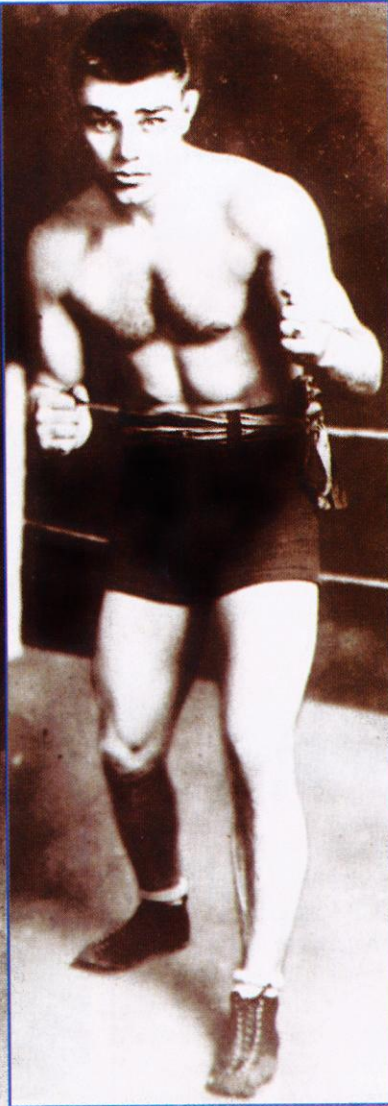
Nothing like that happened when Jack Johnson worked with Moha in 1909, but for the next few years, every time the heavyweight champion came to town, newspapers reported that Johnson wanted the Caveman to leave with him to fight under his management.

But not even that could pry Moha loose from his home base, where, by unwritten law, the boxing season ran from fall to late-spring, thus enabling him to take his pick of the offers from semi-pro clubs bidding for his services on the baseball diamond. "Moha is one of the fastest infielders in the city, saying nothing of his ability

as a batter," reported the *Milwaukee Free Press*. "Many a game was broken up through some of his mighty clouts."

Future welterweight title claimant Jimmy Clabby was hailed as the boxing wonder of the age. But Moha basically used him for fungo practice in their 10-round no-decision match in the spring of '10. The Caveman, reported the *Free Press*, "pounced upon Clabby like a terrier going to a bone." It was his most impressive and important performance to date, and a natural springboard to bigger and better things. But Moha signed to play shortstop for the summer instead, and didn't put the padded mitts back on until fall.

After getting the better of a no-decision



*Moha got the better of several fighters who would go on to earn legendary status, including Billy Papke (left) and Jack Dillon (above). After beating Papke, Moha claimed the middleweight championship, but few took his claim seriously.*

bout with former welterweight champ Mike "Twin" Sullivan early the next year, Moha was scheduled to face another fast-rising Midwesterner named Jack Dillon in Indianapolis. The Milwaukee man sprained an ankle playing handball—another favorite pastime, which Moha always played barefoot—and asked for a postponement. Too late for that, said the Indy promoter, and when Moha showed up on fight day, he was at least 10 pounds over the stipulated weight of 154 pounds. Dillon refused to go ahead with the match, so the Caveman shrugged and went with his manager and a

Milwaukee physician to a restaurant around the corner. The fighter was just mopping up after a huge steak and potatoes meal when Dillon and the promoter rushed in to announce that the fight was back on.

That didn't appall the Caveman half as much as his doctor friend's suggestion that he pump Moha's stomach before he entered the ring.

"You mean you want to get that steak and potatoes out of me?" The Caveman howled. "Nothing doing! Think of what a job I had getting it down."

Moha had a harder job, under the cir-

cumstances, coping with Dillon, who of course had spied on him in the restaurant and then decided to go through with the fight, figuring the heavy meal would make the squat visitor a sitting duck in the ring. Even so, it was close, unlike a rematch a few months later in Buffalo when a trim Moha put the future light heavyweight champion on the floor several times in another no-decision bout.

Since the murder of Ketchel in October 1910, just about everybody weighing near the division limit, which was 158 pounds at the time, anointed himself middleweight champion. That included Billy Papke, who'd traded the belt back and forth with Ketchel in a trio of championship fights and figured with Ketchel out of the picture it automatically reverted back to him. A surprising number of fight experts went along with him, but then furiously backpedaled from that position after Papke and Moha put on a truly scary performance on Halloween Night, 1911.

The Caveman at least had the excuse that he broke both hands early in the 12-round match. What Papke's

problem was, nobody knew (later his brother would call it "Australian fever," contracted in an earlier trip Down Under). With Moha unable to hurt Papke and Papke unwilling to try to hurt Moha, the crowd at Boston's Armory Club kept itself awake by jeering from the fourth round on. After about two minutes of the final round had elapsed, members of the audience climbed on their chairs and perversely started chanting, "Don't ring the bell! Don't ring the bell!" Siding with them, timekeeper Billy LeClair deserted his ringside post, and over seven minutes passed before somebody gonged the sorry mess to a close.



***"The Milwaukee Caveman" dressed up in his fancy duds during a visit to New York City. Even though he stood only 5'4", Moha beat numerous light heavies and heavyweights.***

Moha was the decision winner, and his followers proclaimed him champion. But in fact the match had been made at a catchweight, not 158, and the winner himself acknowledged the flimsiness of his new mantle by pronouncing himself "willing to meet any of the other boys who feel they have a claim to the championship ... because I want to clinch my right to it beyond question." Oddly enough, 10 years later Moha would decide that not only had he been middleweight champion after all, but took a page from Papke's book and announced that "since then I have not fought around

that weight, so I never lost the crown."

That was a hoot, but the reaction to the Caveman's invasion of New York in 1912 was anything but. "The White Walcott" is what critics called him after Moha won a newspaper decision over Sailor Burke on March 21, and followed up two weeks later by knocking out Jim Smith in eight. That was some compliment, since the black Walcott—Joe, "The Barbados Demon," who was welterweight champion in the first decade of the century—was considered one of the ring's all-time greats.

"Moha is a wonder among the middles," wrote Bob Edgren, who described him as,

"short and stocky, built something on the lines of a steamroller. He had short arms as thick as the average man's legs. His back is broad and his shoulders wide and chest deep. His round, wide-jawed head is connected to his trunk by a neck as thick as [wrestler George] Hackenschmidt's."

As if that didn't paint a formidable enough picture, Edgren added that Moha "seldom smiles, and when he does his smile is more appalling than his scowl."

Former heavyweight champion James J. Corbett called Moha "the sensation of the hour in New York," and remarked that "a month ago very few Gotham sports fans knew such an individual existed, in spite of the fact that [Moha] has been before the public in a professional capacity for five or six years, and has the credit of a victory on points over Billy Papke. Now the Easterners are raving about the Milwaukeean and touting him for the middleweight championship."

Two months later, nobody knew where Moha was. After a few more appearances in the Big Apple, The White Walcott returned home in June and promptly became downright invisible. Offers for bouts with Papke, Frank Klaus, and Georges Carpentier died on the table because nobody could find Moha, who'd typically decided to take the summer off. When finally tracked down, Moha said that after the hard work he'd put in all winter, he was entitled to a long vacation.

It lasted until the following January, when the overweight Caveman reported back to the gym to melt himself down to 170 pounds for a February 17, 1913, fight in Milwaukee against "Cyclone" Johnny Thompson. Thompson had also once beaten Papke for recognition—at least when he looked in the mirror—as middleweight champion. And, also like Moha, his days as a middleweight were behind him. So their fight was sanctioned and advertised as a contest for the 175-pound "commission weight" (later the light heavyweight) title recently created by the New York boxing commission.

Moha won the newspaper decision, but the general attitude toward his new title was summed up in the *Milwaukee Free Press* the next day: "This morning Mr. Moha is a world's champion, if that gets him anything." It would be another year before the light heavyweight division, moribund since

the reign of Philadelphia Jack O'Brien in 1905, got on firm footing again, with the cunning Jack Dillon gaining wide recognition as champion.

For the duration of his career, which went until 1922, Moha was either the brilliant White Walcott again, as when he whipped middleweight title claimant Eddie McGoorty and future light heavy-weight titlist Battling Levinsky with breathless ease (both were officially no-decisions, but all agreed Moha won), or looked like he'd just crawled out from under a rock. Or, more likely, off a chuckwagon.

Two months before he fought middleweight contender Mike Gibbons on December 14, 1914, the 24-year-old Moha reportedly weighed 245 pounds. But he worked out frantically, even boxing 12 rounds in the gym the day before the fight in Hudson, Wisconsin, to get down to 160 and show everybody he was ready to make a run at the title again.

He ran, all right, only it was for the door after Moha drilled the Minnesota "Phantom" south of the beltline with an uppercut in the second round that sent Gibbons to the floor and one of Gibbons' handlers after Moha with a chair. Disqualified, Moha had to borrow train fare home because the promoter refused to pay him his \$944.77 purse.

More upset about that than anything else, Moha sued the Hudson Boxing Club all the way to the Wisconsin Supreme Court. In a landmark decision issued two years after the bout, Chief Justice J.B. Winslow ruled against the Caveman on the ground that he had "contracted to box 10 rounds under certain rules," one of which (no fouling) "he violated ... and as a result thereof disabled his opponent, and this, by his own act made substantial performance [of his contract] impossible. Whether this act was deliberate or not cuts no figure. It was an act which he had contracted not to do and it prevented performance."

Two months after that, Moha tried to take it out on Gibbons' brother Tommy, but with Mike sitting at ringside loving every minute of it, the younger Gibbons, who would eventually challenge Jack Dempsey for the heavyweight title, dished out what the *Milwaukee Sentinel* called "the worst licking of Moha's life" in winning an easy newspaper decision. "Moha has stopped many



**After impressive outings against Sailor Burke (pictured) and Jim Smith in New York, critics began calling Moha "The White Walcott," which was about the biggest compliment that could be given a fighter in those days.**

punches in his ring life," said the *Sentinel*, "but never so many at one time."

It was an uppercut thrown by former middleweight champion George Chip a month later, on March 12, 1917, that accomplished what nobody else in about 100 professional bouts ever managed

against the Caveman. The punch, which landed flush on Moha's jaw in the fourth round, staggered him, and the referee stopped the fight. Moha's alibi was that he'd spent too much time in a Turkish bath the night before, trying to sweat himself down to the 163-pound contractual limit.

"I can whip any boxer in the world today from 158 pounds to 230 and up," Moha said. He was never loathe to try, either. Joe Cox, who'd once stopped Jess Willard before Willard became heavy-weight champion, stood two heads taller than the Caveman and had about 70 pounds on him. But the sawed-off Milwaukeean wowed a New York crowd by shellacking Cox over 10 rounds in 1916. Moha had trouble reaching Cox's head, but the big guy's ribs ached for weeks afterward.

It took future Dempsey foe Billy Miske 10 rounds to earn a newspaper decision over Moha, and it's significant that in several meetings the Caveman gave Harry Greb all he could handle. Yet interestingly enough, considering the notable series he had with Greb, Dillon, Levinsky, and other big names of his era, Moha's most bitter rival was a middleweight who lived just kitty-corner from him on North Breman Street in Milwaukee. Gus Christie split two grudge matches with the Caveman.

"His arms appeared long in contrast with the rest of his body," Christie recalled upon Moha's death on August 4, 1959. "When he came out of his corner and started to move those arms, it looked like three pairs of fists coming at you all at the same time."

Walter Houlehan briefly managed Moha, but was more notable as one of the country's top referees who saw close up most of the great fighters of that time. "Moha was the best in America in his day," Houlehan said in his published memoirs.

That may be a slightly biased judgment, but the fact is that, at his best, Moha was good enough to make it hot for anyone. Trouble was, on his hottest days, The Milwaukee Caveman preferred to be doing something else. ■

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