

Rosie Burns—she holds the first fight promoter's license granted to a woman.



1950

Johnny Burns—The Man in The Iron Hat. He founded the Blood Pit in 1914.

The oldest home of boxing in the country is a battle-scarred arena in Philadelphia's Fishtown which is billed as "the place where a bout is a fight"

By H. WIEAND BOWMAN

Through this arcade have passed some of the greatest names in boxing history. But only once has the Pit seen a championship bout.

# The College of HARD KNOCKS

IN the scrambled-ear industry the place is known as The Blood Pit or The College of Hard Knocks. It's just a dive with practically no paint on the walls—and the little that still remains hangs in flaky streamers, but the fans don't care. It's just beyond the Somerset El Station on Kensington Avenue in Philadelphia, in a little arcade that looks like something lifted right out of a carnival midway.

If you happened to wander in some weekday afternoon you'd turn around and run out fast for fear the place would fall down around your ears. But any Saturday night, from mid-September until early summer nights make the place steam, it's jammed with yelling, screaming fans who don't care whether the building collapses or not. They're the ringsiders and gallery birds of The Cambria Athletic Club, advertised as the "Oldest Home of Boxing in America," and a place where a bout is a fight.

The fact that the Cambria can honestly boast a longer uninterrupted existence than any other swatatorium in the world is of interest, but the important thing about The Pit is that many of boxing's most noted practitioners got their start or fought their way into mitten-busir

ence in the Cambria's moldy, and resin soaked ring.

The Mauler, Jack Dempsey, had his night at the Cambria when, back before his KO of Giant Jess Willard, he was matched at The Pit against Billy Miske. Miske, the California heavyweight, was stranded and broke and was given the bout to earn enough money to pay his fare home.

Joe Borrell, undefeated middleweight champion of Europe, was carded a half dozen times in the early twenties. Boston's Tar Baby, Sam Langford; heavyweight contender Harry Wills; Joe Lynch, 1923 bantamweight champion; Irish Patsy Kline, Joe Luber, Georgie Ward, Willie Meehan and Benny Valger were some of the chin-busters who thrilled Cambria crowds.

The names that appeared on Cambria's boxing cards read like a Who's Who in boxing history. Mickey Walker, one-time holder of both welterweight and middleweight titles, was a favorite at The Pit. The Little Fish, Benny Bass, former lightweight champion, tangled with and beat Tommy Crawley for \$1093.20, the fattest purse ever paid any scrapper at The Cambria.

Tommy Loughran, ex-lightweight champion, appeared in a prelim spot on the Cambria's card in March of 1920, the night Joe Borrell pinned back Soldier Katarsky's ears. Tommy mixed with Joe Welling in that show for \$25. A month later Tommy was good for thirty bucks against Johnny Dougherty and was moving up fast. Thirty days more and he took in fifty

beat Lew Tendler in a 10-rounder.

Other well-known alumni include: Jack Renault, Canadian heavyweight champion; Battling Murphy, Joe Burman, considered by many as the world's cleverest bantamweight; Gusie Lewis, Johnny Tillman, Pat Haley, Johnny Nelson, Billy Papke, ex-middleweight claimant following Stanley Ketchel's murder; Billy Donovan, Marty Gold, Jimmy McNulty, Young Chappie, Midget Wolgast, Little Jeff, Lew Massey, Billy Ketchel, Ken Overlin, Leroy Haynes, Eddie Cool, Ad Stone, Tony Falco, and others too numerous to list.

And to go way back in The Cambria's records we find the name of Ad Wolgast listed for a wind-up. Wolgast was lightweight champion from 1912 to 1914. He fought at The Pit after he'd lost his title. The Cambria, which only seats 2,000, seldom got a crack at signing a top-flight after he'd arrived. But the promoter of The College of Hard Knocks had an uncanny instinct for spotting the promising newcomer and giving him a push up the fistic ladder to success.

Actually, only once in its history has The Cambria ever had a championship bout, and that one got booked into The Blood Pit on a bit of a fluke.

The section of Philadelphia in which The Cambria is located is slangily referred to as Fishtown or more formally as the Kensington-Richmond area. It's no beauty spot and seldom, if ever, is included in a Chamber of Commerce conducted tour. While for most Philadelphians, Betsy Ross's handiwork with the needle is the high-

# Hard Knocks

in a Cambria prelim against Tommy Toomey, and the following fall found Loughran good for \$100 in a wind-up bout.

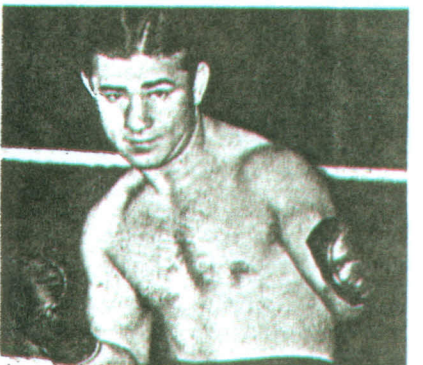
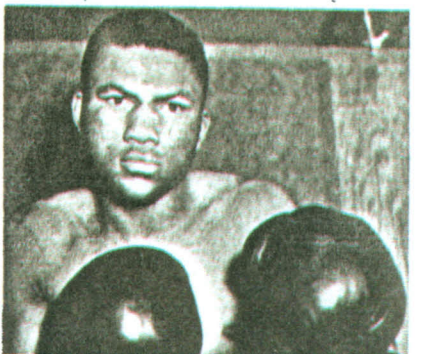
Vince Dundee, middleweight, and Kid Williams, bantamweight, were two other champions whose names appeared on Cambria cards.

Johnny Jadick, one-time world's junior welterweight champion, (a non-existent title today) fought his first fight in The Blood Pit and peddled leather fourteen times in Cambria semis and mains with only one defeat, that one an eight-round decision that went to Harry Kid Decker another alumnus of The College of Hard Knocks.

Nate Goldman, a contender for the lightweight title who never quite made it, was another great crowd pleaser at The Cambria and reached the peak of his career the night he

point in city history and Betsy's house, along with Independence Hall, are the city's historical focal points, Fishtowners disagree. The most dramatic moment in Philadelphia's history for a Fishtowner was the night newly-crowned lightweight-champion Bob Montgomery tangled with Tommy Spiegel at The Cambria with the title at stake. And their choice for Philadelphia's outstanding personality is Johnny Burns, founder and promoter of Fishtown's only edifice devoted to "higher learning."

When the Cambria's promoter, Johnny Burns, (fondly referred to as Mr. Iron Hat because of his headgear) announced the signing of Champ Montgomery for a title-go at his fistatorium, Fishtowners greeted the pronouncement with loud cheers, but not so Frankie Thomas, manager of the new (Continued on page 39 )



These men fought in The Pit for pay ranging from \$25 to \$1,000—a fraction of what they went on to earn in the bigger arenas. From top, Mickey Walker, Joe Walcott, Jack Dempsey, Bob Montgomery, Benny Bass.

## COLLEGE OF

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champion or Herman Taylor, promoter of Philadelphia's Arena, flossier and considerably larger building also given over to the biff-bang business.

Montgomery won the Pennsylvania State Championship from Billy Maher at Taylor's Arena in October of 1939. Taylor immediately signed Montgomery for a bout with Mike Evans and billed it as the "State Lightweight Championship." He expected, since it would be Montgomery's first defense of his new title, to pack his Arena.

However, Mr. Taylor's face was red when he learned that prior to Montgomery winning his title, Promoter Burns had signed Bobcat Bob to a fight at The Cambria, and that that bout was scheduled exactly one week before Taylor's advertised championship event!

Frankie Thomas, manager of Montgomery, was further embarrassed because the stipulation in the contract he'd signed with Burns called for Montgomery to weigh 135 pounds, which made it mandatory for Montgomery to place his new title on the block.

"I had a personal friend who works for Burnsie," Thomas explained. "He comes to me and wants Montgomery for a fight. So just for a favor to him we sign up. That's before Monty knocks off Maher for the title.

"I asks Burnsie if we can't make the fight after the Arena title bout, but he won't go for it and so we gotta go through with the Cambria match. And for fishcakes, too!" Frankie explained, disgustedly. "We get \$300 for risking the title with a tough guy like Tommy Spiegel when we woulda got a minimum of \$1500 at the Arena."

Taylor beefed to the press and the boxing commission. Frankie Thomas tried to squirm out of the contract, but Johnny Burns refused to be argued out of the bout—or bought off. Montgomery collected \$261.20 for his beating and lost the title to Spiegel who walked off with the crown and \$280.20 as his share of the gate. Johnny Burns cleared \$32.51 but he became Fish-town's hero for good.

Strangely enough, the same Frankie Thomas is now matchmaker for The Cambria, but it's doubtful if Frankie will ever pull off a coup like Promoter Burns and book another championship bout into the Blood Pit.

The Cambria is only a fight club, not a big-time swat palace like Madison Square Garden, but even through two wars that saw The National Sporting Club of London, famed home for fighting men, shut its doors, the College of Hard Knocks has conducted an uninterrupted schedule of fights for the past thirty-five years.

The founder, who, until his sudden death in 1940 managed and promoted the Cambria, was Irish Johnny Burns, the Man In The Iron Hat, born, appropriately enough on St. Patrick's

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Day in 1875. Johnny was a one-time flyweight turned liquor and wine salesman. His first contact with the business side of fighting was a brief job as secretary and treasurer of the Nonpareil Club in 1901. He left to join Philadelphia's Central A. C. as a manager and promoter and brought out a promising light-heavy, Dick Gilbert, who won the light heavy-weight championship of the South.

In 1914, Johnny decided to take a try at promotion on his own and selected for his debut a rundown building in Fishtown. That same ramshackle building, with few improvements and more than a bit of deterioration houses The Cambria today.

Blood and thunder is an old story at The College of Hard Knocks, even older than its third of a century as a boxing arena. It got its start as a thrill-provoker with The Great Train Robbery and Perils of Pauline in the days when it was a silent movie house. Fifty percent of its 2,000 seats date back to those silent flicker days and some of the gum wadded under them was checked there when Mary Pickford was still in pigtails.

For twenty-six years Johnny Burns gave Fishtowners what they wanted, hard-fought fights with plenty of blood, and fistic courage going at a higher premium than boxing skill. One morning in 1940 Johnny Burns was found dead on his own doorstep in a Philadelphia suburb—apparently a victim of a heart attack.

Mrs. Johnny Burns, better known as Rose or Rosie in boxing circles, applied for and was granted a fight promoter's license, the first ever to be issued to a woman in the United States. Rosie took over. And it's still Rosie Burns' show although she gets an assist from matchmaker Frankie Thomas.

On fight nights, the crowd is liberally sprinkled with one-time punchers who bob and weave about in their seats and take an unmerciful mental beating few of them can afford. Ex-managers, referees, and former bottle holders usually outnumber the non-professional fans. The joint is strictly a fighter's fight-haunt and rates as a lush scouting spot for fresh talent in the ring and characters at ringside. Even the head usher, Bill Schwartz, is an ex-manager. Bill handled fighters for seven years until he decided he could make more as a factory worker and part-time usher.

Schwartz is fairly sizeable, must top two-twenty, and in a pinch he could double as bouncer. At times the Cambria fans need a restraining hand. But tough as their expressions may seem during the fights when their favorite seems to be floundering, at heart the fight crowd at The Pit is more sentimental than a Wellsley or Bryn Mawr senior at graduation exercises.

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JANUARY 1926

# Cambria Athletic Club

THE  
College of Hard Knocks



JOHNNY BURNS, PROMOTER  
Kensington Ave. and Somerset St.  
PHILADELPHIA, PA.

Established 11 years

\*  
A FEW MISTAKES IN THIS  
PIECE. EX. MONTGOMERY  
WON STATE TITLE FROM  
MIKE EVANS - NEVER BOXED  
MAHER. DEMPSEY NEVER  
FOUGHT AT THE CAMBRIA.

## COLLEGE OF HARD KNOCKS

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Rosie Burns figures the best illustration of the Cambria fans' sentimentalism occurred the night back in 1933 when welterweight Pat Haley fought Johnny Peppe.

It was obvious soon after the fight started that Peppe would be no push-over for the local favorite. Both boys were floored twice in the first three rounds. Coming out for the fourth, Haley connected with a wild left hook that belted Peppe onto the canvas. Evidently the referee failed to clean all the resin from Peppe's gloves after this knockdown.

Peppe came off the canvas with murder in his eyes, hate in his heart and dynamite in both fists. Seconds later he exploded a barrage of rights and lefts to the County Mayo-born Irishman's eyes and Pat began to stagger around the ring in a daze.

Haley was a crowd-pleaser, and for five years this stringy Irishman had packed the club whenever he was billed. But for a moment or two his supporters were amazed to see Pat apparently quitting.

"Get in dere and slug, ya bum!"

"Come on Haley, stop waltzin' an' fight!"

From all directions the gallery birds picked up the chant and for the first time in his career Haley was booed.

Pat continued to stumble, groping futilely with extended hands like a wounded June bug. Peppe backed slowly out of reach and looked to the referee for some sign.

Suddenly the ring-savvy spectators became silent as they realized Haley

wasn't quitting. He was badly hurt.

The referee stepped between the two fighters, stopped the match. Haley's seconds led him from the ring as the announcer officially awarded the fight to Peppe. Then he paused, and forgetting his mike manner, explained softly that Haley was, temporarily at least, blinded.

The fans sat dumbstruck as Haley's sloping shoulders disappeared in the direction of the locker room.

"I feel worse'n if I'd kicked me old lady in the gut when she was scrubbin' de floor," one fan philosophized.

"Scarcely a single fan left his seat that night until an hour later when word came from the hospital that Pat would be okay. The cheers all but shook off what little paint was still on the walls," Rosie Burns recalls.

"An' alla time Peppe is waitin' back in the locker room. He hadn' even took off his trunks he's that upset," Bill Schwartz added. "The oney guy I seen leave was a fellow who goes out to the ticket booth lookin' for Rosie here to offer Haley one a' his eyes. He meant it, too. He keeps sayin' if Haley's blind he wants ta give 'im one a' his own peepers. Boy, that's a real fan for ya! Huh?"

The "locker room" where Peppe sweated out the doctor's decision and where scores of fighters have waited to be called for their bouts hardly rates that term for the quarters provided. The room, though, is in keeping with the flavor of The Pit.

There are no lockers to begin with, so maybe it had better just be called

the room. It is roughly thirty feet long by eight feet wide with one battered, tin, stall shower (a relatively new innovation) and three narrow, wood benches. Between each bench is a partial partition jutting out a few feet into the hall-like room. In each partition, on fight night, three or more fighters, their managers and seconds wait their turn to go on.

Don't confuse The Cambria with the typical movie-set in which each fighter has his own dressing room complete with rub-down table, chairs and a private bath. The Pit star performers are offered about as much privacy and luxury as is found in a front-line G.I. latrine.

One good feature of it, though, that a new fighter can't get nervous because he's so jammed in with the rest of the night's fist-flinging talent, he hasn't even trembling room.

"Where do the handlers give their boys a rub-down—and where do the fighters warm-up?" I asked, naively, of Rosie Burns. Joe Wenke, an assistant, answered that one. Joe sounds as if he has chronic laryngitis, a souvenir of his fighting days when he took one too many under the chin.

"These kids are tough," Joe rasped in a hoarse whisper. "They don't need rubdowns."

"How about warming up?" I persisted, not being able to visualize a guy skipping rope or shadow-boxing in a set-up more crowded than a bookie's telephone booth.

Joe pointed to a gas-burning hot-water radiator against one wall. I got the idea.

Literally thousands of hopeful fighters have crawled through the ropes at The Cambria. Some of them moved on and up, and perhaps made an occasional re-appearance at The Pit in main-bout events, as did Tommy Loughran. Others, like Benny Bass, were to be seen coming and going, since Benny fought at The Cambria long after his prime. But like the other old-timers on the way back into pugilistic oblivion, courage was still there even when timing and speed had dropped off, and the fans remembered them as game youngsters fighting their way to the top.

The Benny Bass that Cambria fans witnessed after Bass had run his string and was on his way into fistic history, was the same courageous featherweight who fought 12 rounds of a furious 15-rounder against Tony Canzoneri with a broken collar bone.

The College, under Rosie Burns' supervision, is banging into its 36th consecutive season. Just selected at random from among recent Pit comers, keep an eye on such promising new blood as Johnny Bernardo, hard-slamming new welterweight; Frankie Sodano, bantamweight; Joey Fagan, welter; Mayon Padlo, Vince Capcino, Ray Haas and others whose early fistic education is under the tutelage of Fishtowners' critical eyes.

### THE CAMBRIA CLOSÉS DOORS FOR LAST TIME

The passing of the Cambria A.C. in Philadelphia removed another historic landmark from the boxing scene. The long-time "Little College of Hard Knocks" was torn down to make way for a new building project. The Cambria, with Johnny Burns promoting, opened in 1914 in an old theatre in the Kensington section, and although its seating capacity was a limited 1,600, the club enjoyed tremendous popularity through the years as a fertile developing center for most of Philadelphia's top ringmen. It continued its success when Joe Wenke succeeded Burns as promoter. Like so many other once popular clubs throughout the nation, the Cambria began to fade with the advent of television and the gradual decline of local talent. In the last few years a couple of other promoters took turns in trying to keep the Cambria going, but they were bucking the inevitable and, so, another old fight arena which had contributed so much to boxing lore vanished from the scene.

CLOSED 12/1963