

## **THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A BOXING PIONEER**

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This is the story of a man who was a boxing pioneer in two nations, a feat lost in history but retold by yellowed news clippings of a century ago.

Juan Budinich Taborga was born in Coquimbo, Chile, sometime in 1881, growing up of middle class background, the son of a merchant marine captain, a glamour career of the era. As a boy from a seafaring family he was groomed to be a naval officer.

An athletic teen, John Budinich was mesmerized by boxing and tales of the ring, yet the sport did not exist in Chile. There was interest in pugilism but the country –in fact all the Southern Hemisphere- lacked skilled coaches or experienced fighters. Without trainers or fighters, promoters could not exist. .

It was logical that Chilean boxing would start in a seaport town like Valparaiso, where some of the British or American merchant mariners passing through had knowledge of boxing basics, quite a few being willing to trade punches with a local for a little side bet. By 1897 the Urriola Athletic Club in Valparaiso started to host amateur smokers in which local brawlers fought with more zest than skills.

Budinich was one of the pioneer boxers at the Urriola Club but unlike most of the warriors participating in the smokers, John already had professional training. As luck would have it, at the tender age of fifteen –while living at the city of Iquitos- Budinich struck a friendship with a blacksmith named McDonald, who had acquired some ring experience in his younger days in Ireland.

The young teen asked McDonald to teach him to box and the old fighter –probably flattered by John’s enthusiasm- obliged.

“He taught me the ABC of boxing,” Budinich said in an interview, “How to hold your guard, how to cover up and the proper way to deliver punches.”

Over the next few months, the strapping teenager learned footwork, jabbing, balance, honing his basic skills in dozens of sparring sessions with his teacher at the back yard of the veteran fighter’s blacksmith shop. In 1897, when the Colonel Urriola Athletic Club in Valparaiso hosted the first amateur smokers, sixteen year old Budinich was ready, out boxing his eager but inexperienced competitors, most of them full grown men.

In the four years that followed, Budinich became the star attraction at the Urriola Club amateur smokers, consistently winning, outclassing the brawling dock workers, mariners and local youths who tried their luck in the ring.

By 1902 Budinich had become Chile’s most experienced and well known amateur fighter. He had dropped out of the naval academy and opened up his own boxing school in the city of Santiago, in partnership with a transplanted lightweight named Daly. Besides training fighters and promoting his first amateur cards, Budinich also worked as an English translator and sports writer for the newspaper “La Union.”

Encouraged by the fact that amateur boxing was now developing in several cities in Chile, Budinich decided to introduce professional boxing in his homeland, featuring himself in the main event.

The first pro boxing card in Chile was held at the Santiago Theater in 1902, where Budinich made his pro debut by knocking out a roaming British light heavyweight named Frank Jones. A few months later, sometime in 1903, Budinich won a twenty rounder on points over a recently transplanted American fighter named James Perry.

Twenty-three year old Budinich had achieved a measure of national fame in Chile, being its first amateur and pro star. Most young men would have enjoyed their local fame and never left Chile, content to be headlining local club shows, running a gym and working as a sportswriter, but John Budinich liked to travel.

He left Chile sometime in 1903, working –or stowing away- on merchant boats until he reached the United States, surviving the San Francisco earthquake of 1905 before heading for New York.

The Chilean had a good knowledge of English that improved with practice. He enrolled at Columbia University where he studied physical education. He paid for his studies by working ring corners, boxing in prelim bouts and claimed having been a sparring partner for the magnificent Philadelphia Jack O'Brien as well as his second for several bouts.

“The most pleasant moments of my boxing career,” Budinich said in an interview years later, “were spent with that man. He was phenomenal in his ability...”

Indeed, the cultured former naval cadet and university student probably had the personality to mesh well with the champion, for Philadelphia Jack was also from a middle class background and was intellectually verbose and charming.

After his university studies, Budinich continued his roaming ways. A cargo boat took him to Europe and a merchant vessel brought him back; by 1908 Budinich landed in Colon, Panama, looking to fight a local hero named Sam Odon.

Panama was a busy country, where thirty three thousand workers toiled building a historic canal across the isthmus. The many Americans and Europeans working on the project had introduced boxing in Panama and Odon was one of the early pioneers, having a reputation as a knockout puncher.

Budinich –at twenty seven years of age- was probably at his peak with more than a decade of ring experience under his belt; he was well conditioned and knew the fight game. He saw Odon work out and figured the Panamanian fighter to be a strong, unschooled brawler, so Budinich set out to convince a couple of local gamblers to partner with him to bet that he would defeat Odon.

“In the very first round,” Budinich said in an interview, years later, “I was dropped to the canvas by a well timed blow...at the beginning of the second round I was still groggy...I defended myself and suddenly, I landed a right and to the floor he went. From there on, I went full gallop.”

The fight went the distance and the technically superior Chilean won on points, pocketing five thousand dollars from his purse and a generous cut of the winning gamblers bets.

In 1910, John Budinich headed for Cuba, where he found a virgin territory for his pugilistic ambitions.

Boxing in Cuba was non-existent. A couple of natives – Eugene Garcia and Emilio Sanchez- had boxed professionally in the United States some years before, but had never fought in their own country. Although boxing was not yet practiced, it was well covered by Havana newspapers and tabloids of the time.

American service men stationed at Guantanamo Naval Base often presented amateur cards but Cubans were not usually involved as participants. In 1899, American soldiers boxed amateur bouts at the Sauto Theater in Matanzas. These military bouts were held often as documents of the era credit lightweight Sam Robideau as having fought thirteen military bouts in Cuba between 1911 and 1912. The American amateur bouts raised local interest in the sport and a few pioneers of Cuban boxing in Guantanamo and Santiago picked up basic skills from sparring with Yankee sailors and marines.

In a land without trainers or organized boxing, John Budinich provided a solution. As in his native Chile, he became Cuba's boxing messiah. He rented living quarters at 72 Aguila Street –in a busy section of Havana- and proceeded to rent a locale, set up a ring and gym bags and print flyers to advertise the grand opening of Cuba's first boxing academy.

Within weeks his boxing school was packed with eager young men willing to pay for gym fees and private lessons. The group of hopefuls included longshoremen, construction workers, blacksmiths, soldiers and a considerable group of well-bred university students, the young sportsmen of Havana's society set.

A cultured conversationalist, the educated Chilean also possessed good social skills, for within weeks of his arrival he was appointed boxing instructor at the exclusive "Vedado Tennis Club," teaching the aristocracy how to jab. With a prosperous gym and a salary at the country club, the enterprising fighter was ready for the next step in his career as a boxing impresario.

In order for boxing to progress, there had to be fights and paying audiences. Budinich became a promoter, running boxing shows at the Actualidades Theater, as well as in dance halls or even in private homes with large courtyards, where he was also –very often- referee and sole judge. He toured some small towns boxing exhibitions with his troupe of willing novices.

Budinich promoted several pro cards at the Molino Rojo Theater in Havana in 1910, featuring a friend he imported to Cuba, an American club fighter named Jack Ryan.

The Molino Rojo had promoted a number of Greco-Roman wrestling cards, featuring a group of grapplers from the Fuerte Athletic Club, an organization geared to body building and wrestling. The wrestlers were willing to lace on gloves to make a few extra bucks and Budinich promoted Ryan in six round main events matching him against a couple of the local pro wrestlers moonlighting as pugilists. Both bouts resulted in draws but generated enough public interest that Budinich then promoted himself against Ryan.

A week before facing Ryan, Budinich fought Cuban Jack Johnson –probably another grappler- in front of a packed house at the Payret Theater. The Cuban Jack Johnson put on a spirited display but was outscored by the Chilean. At this time the Cuban press credited Budinich as having won 35 out of 41 professional bouts.

The Budinich vs. Ryan fight took place at the elegant Payret Theater in downtown Havana, a venue used for opera and concerts. The Chilean went into the ring with a bandage on one of his legs. A few days before the bout, Budinich was gored by a deer while doing roadwork in wooded area on the outskirts of Havana.

Fighting in front of a full house, Budinich won a six round decision but Ryan picked up five hundred dollars extra for a contracted bet that he would last the distance against the Chilean.

This fight has sometimes been erroneously reported as taking place in 1912 with a different result. Clippings of the era show the bout to have taken place in 1910 with Budinich winning an entertaining match.

Budinich decided –for a while- to stick to training and promoting. He toured several cities in Cuba with a crew of young fighters, fighting exhibitions, picking up loose change while creating a growing interest in the sport throughout the whole island.

One of his prospects –and public sparring partner in the exhibition tours- was a heavyweight named Anastasio Penalver, proclaimed as the new “Heavyweight Champion of Cuba,” based on a few prelim victories over other raw novices and a twenty round win over Sebastian Coana, who was billed by Budinich as being the “Heavyweight Champion of Mexico.”

Top American heavyweight John Lester Johnson was matched to fight Penalver in a main event bout in Havana in 1915. The muscular but over matched Penalver was stopped in the second round, towel thrown in by his corner as Johnson pummeled the Cuban.

Not content with one beating, Penalver faced Johnson in a rematch and was stopped even faster. The Cuban heavyweight was not gracious in defeat, causing an incident after the end of the fight card, when he threatened Johnson, using a stone as weapon.

Budinich decided to return to the ring to avenge Penalver’s fistic demise.

John Lester Johnson was a fringe contender, one of a group of dangerous black fighters who often fought each other in what was called the “Chitling Circuit.” Johnson had faced Joe Jeanette, Harry Wills, Sam Langford and Bill Tate, all of them quality fighters.

At the time he fought Budinich, John Lester was a dangerous body puncher with solid skills, destined to break Jack Dempsey’s ribs in a future bout. Johnson stopped Budinich in the very first round with a wicked body shot.

In five years –from 1910 to 1915- Budinich had successfully introduced a sport in a nation. Although none of his students attained international acclaim or contender status, the Chilean did train a crop of good local fighters, creating a generation of pro battlers, future trainers and gym owners, including clever Victor Achan, tough Mike Febles, lightweight slugger Tomas Galiana and feather weight Chau Aranguren.

Victor Achan was quick to lace on gloves when Budinich opened Cuba's first private boxing academy. Achan was Cuban-Chinese and a fast learner, becoming one of Cuba's early pros, recognized as the country's first national flyweight champion in 1913-1914. By 1916, as he ended his pro career, Achan became a partner in a boxing gym and trained dozens of pro fighters over several decades, including several headliners and national champions.

Mike Febles, another pioneer from the Budinich Academy, would become a well known boxing figure in his native Mexico. Born in Veracruz, Febles spent some of his teen years in Cuba where he turned pro. Besides boxing, Febles practiced jiu-jitsu, beating a master in a 1916 Havana match.

Febles started his pro career as a lightweight in Cuba, but moved to Mexico where he became a headliner and multiple national champion, served as a cavalry captain under the orders of General Obregon during the Mexican Revolution and became a well known trainer, supervisor of boxing for the army and head coach of the 1932 Mexican Olympic boxing team.

Achan and Febles were only two among dozens of amateurs and pros schooled by Budinich. A few became main event fighters for a short time but no great national heroes would emerge for several years; Cuban pros started out as fillers on cards featuring imported foreign fighters.

By 1915, although other gyms had opened and an American named Brandt was new competition in the promotional level, the Chilean was doing well. Budinich was not wealthy but his income was enough to live in modest comfort. There was the gym and the local pro he managed, plus his country club salary and a small profit from promoting boxing shows at small venues. He married a Spanish woman and many believed that he would stay in Cuba, involved in the development of the sport, but the Chilean had a sense of adventure.

One day he left Cuba. Some claimed and newspapers printed the story that the Chilean had decided to fight in the great epic in Europe, where men were fighting in bloody trenches and tiny planes engaged in aerial combat over a war torn land. It was announced that John Budinich had sold his gym and was off to France, to wear the Kepi Blanc of the French Foreign Legion

Whether he did or not go to war, not much is known. John Budinich never returned to Cuba and for a time it was believed that he had died in some forgotten barricade, like the poet Allan Seeger.

Luckily, the reports of his death were highly exaggerated. His ring career over, Budinich eventually returned to Chile with his wife, opening his third boxing academy, a well run operation on the first block of Ahumada Street in Santiago. He became a boxing instructor at Juan Enrique Concha University and was also in charge of the boxing program for the Carabineri, the Chilean national police.

In 1945, the National Boxing Federation of Chile awarded him a well deserved pension for his lifelong achievement in boxing. He died later that year at the age of sixty-five.