

SAMMY MANDELL - Bob Soderman

They called him "The Rockford Sheik" and he could have been featured as the handsome male model who graced the mid-1920s Hathaway Shirt magazine ads.

Instead, he early on chose to follow a somewhat more demanding profession, one which many other young Italian immigrant boys chose as the sure way to fame and fortune in the United States.

He was Sammy Mandell, world lightweight champion (135 pounds), from July 3, 1926 to July 17, 1930 and he had been born in Piana De Grece, Italy, on February 5, 1904. The youngest child in a family of three boys and two girls, the family left Italy and emigrated to Rockford, Illinois when Sammy was two years old. His mother having died shortly after his birth, Sammy was raised by older sister Marion.

It was brother Joe, three years older, who brought Sammy into boxing and it was World War I that brought the two Mandell boys into the sport. In 1917, when America entered the war, military training was quickly organized and Camp Grant, situated just outside of Rockford's corporate city limits, became one of the country's principal military staging areas. An important part of the extensive army training at all of America's military sites was the teaching of boxing and hand-to-hand combat.

Weekly boxing shows became a feature at Camp Grant, involving local and military talent. Joe Mandell was booked on Camp Grant shows quite often and soon established himself as a flashy and crowd-pleasing fighter. By war's end, Joe's services as a boxer were in demand not only at Camp Grant shows, but in cities like Chicago, Kenosha, Wisconsin and other communities in Northern Illinois. What more natural than using younger brother Sammy as a sparring partner, to train for these contests.

Sammy took to boxing as naturally as he did most things, devotedly and enthusiastically. He was three weeks shy of his sixteenth birthday when he made his professional debut, at 110 pounds, on January 14, 1920, at Camp Grant. He met a fighter named Stub Lowry, and the many spirited sparring sessions with brother Joe served Sammy well as he boxed his way to a four round decision victory.

The night of his sixteenth birthday, February 5, 1920, Sammy fought his second pro contest, in St. Louis. He was matched with Benny Shapiro, a highly touted amateur champion making his own professional debut, for eight rounds. Mandell dazzled the St. Louis audience that night with his speed, his repertoire of punches and his fancy footwork, as he boxed his way to a well-earned victory.

While his official record doesn't show his next bout taking place until April 7th, at Camp Grant, Sammy was able to add to his professional earnings by boxing in a pair of exhibitions against 116 pound brother Joe, at Sterling and Freeport, Illinois. Of course, Sammy was still of school age and his professional boxing outings had to be fitted into his high school education which included his participation in other sports, and in March, 1920 he was chosen to Rockford's all-star high school basketball team, at forward.

SAMMY MANDELL - (continued)

In that first year of his career Mandell fought eleven times, with only a draw against a Philadelphia veteran, Joe Flannery, on September 7th at Camp Grant, preventing him from achieving a clean victory slate. In July, 1921, Mandell, who had been managed by Rockford wholesale meat dealer, Teddy Bodkins, purely as a sideline, came under the management of a pair of highly skilled boxing figures - the two Eddies, Kane and Long, both highly respected fight managers out of Chicago. From that point on, Mandell's career was removed from that of a small town boxer, battling for purses of less than a hundred dollars, to that of a boxer with an influential manager, able to command purses of several hundred dollars.

It was the new managers who arranged for lucrative main event showings for Mandell in Aurora, the Chicago area's boxing mecca, due to boxing being illegal in Chicago. Mandell quickly became a popular and in-demand attraction at Aurora and other nearby arenas. His new managers also exposed him to one of the sport's premier boxing trainers, a trainer who would achieve world-wide recognition some years later, Jack Blackburn.

"Gentlemen," Jack told Sammy's new managers, "this boy is a natural! He already knows more moves than guys been fightin' ten years! But, I can polish him some."

It wasn't until August 26, 1921 that Sammy tasted defeat for the first time, in his twentieth bout. He was decisioned in ten rounds by a 27 year old cagy veteran out of Tennessee, Memphis Pal Moore, who had fought such legendary fighters as Benny Leonard, Johnny Dundee, Pete Herman, traveled to London to win and lose to flyweight champion Jimmy Wilde and had fought over 200 times since 1913!

Sammy's boxing knowledge was greatly enhanced that night in Aurora, Illinois when he faced Memphis Pal Moore. He was overly cautious initially against the grizzled and daunting Moore. Moore's peculiar slouch, with head thrust forward and arms dangling, disconcerted the young Mandell. The early rounds saw Moore spring menacingly with sweeping blows to the body, piling up points. It took Sammy a few rounds to figure out his opponent's style but he eventually learned to step inside and beat Pal to the punch, and then quickly dance away out of range. Moore's early lead was too much for Mandell's last two rounds' surge to overcome, however, and the veteran gained the win.

Mandell won his last five bouts in 1921 and then won thirteen of fifteen in 1922, losing only to Joe Burman and battling Memphis Pal Moore to a draw, in a rematch in Moore's hometown of Memphis on July 4th. Through 1922 Mandell had fought 40 contests losing just two decisions, with a pair of draws and one no contest and winning 35 bouts.

Mandell didn't appear before an Eastern audience until December 11, 1922 when he delighted 7,000 fans in New York's Madison Square Garden by winning a ten round decision over Harvey Bright, of Brooklyn. By this time Sammy had taken on a little weight and was campaigning at 126 pounds. The New York Times called Mandell's performance convincing and said his cleverness, plus his whirlwind hurricane finish had the Garden crowd wild with excitement.

SAMMY MANDELL - (continued)

Utilizing for the first time those advantages he possessed - height and reach - Mandell rallied strongly to keep the action at long range, furiously but accurately punching with both hands. As the rounds went on Mandell's pace grew even faster as his spirited bursts of fistic activity forced Bernstein to grab and hold, and fight defensively to simply remain in the fight.

Everyone present at the Garden that night had much to recall later, as their thoughts dwelled on that evening's activity. The semi-final bout, featuring a pair of top-rated bantamweights (118 pounds) had been as equally exciting a battle as the main event. Bud Taylor, from Terre Haute, Indiana, Mandell's stablemate, had knocked out Frankie Jerome, from The Bronx, in the twelfth and final round, after a fight that featured round-after-round of non-stop action. Unfortunately, Frankie Jerome died the next day from the effects of his beating.

Shortly after this bout, the two Eddies - Kane and Long - split up, dividing their stable of fighters, Kane taking Mandell and Long taking Taylor. It wasn't a bad division of talent; both Mandell and Taylor were destined to become world champions.

On May 16th of 1924, Mandell and Bernstein fought a second time, in Louisville, on the night preceding the running of the Kentucky Derby. This time Sammy galloped off with a twelve round decision. On June 9th another champion was bested by Mandell, featherweight and junior lightweight title holder, Johnny Dundee, the fabled "Scotch Wop". Dundee was enticed to East Chicago, Indiana to face Mandell before a sell-out audience. Sammy handed out a nifty two-handed shellacking to the double champion and easily romped home with the ten round decision.

Later that year Mandell made his first fistic visit to California, where fights were limited to lengths of just four rounds. Sammy won four of these abbreviated contests, but then lost the last of his five California bouts, to Phil Salvadore, on a much disputed decision.

The last battle of the year for Mandell was a third meeting with Jack Bernstein, on November 7th in New York's Garden, only this time their bout took on much greater meaning. The winner of this bout and the winner of a November 26th bout between ranking contenders Sid Terris of New York and Luis Vicentini of Chile, would then be matched in early 1925, that eventual winner to clash with lightweight champion Benny Leonard, for that crown.

Mandell weighed 135 pounds, the full lightweight division limit, for this key contest in his still-young career. Bernstein carried three pounds less, at 132, and was at the crossroads of a career which had begun in 1914.

From the opening bell it was obvious to experienced ringsiders that Mandell had learned his lessons well, since his last New York appearance against Bernstein. He was a cool and deliberate boxer, stemming Bernstein's rushes to get inside and work to the body, with stiff left jabs and unerringly-directed right crosses and right uppercuts to the jaw and face. Keeping constantly on the move, Sammy invariably upset Jack's attack with his stabbing left then nimbly moved to the side and raked Jack with counter rights.

SAMMY MANDELL - (continued)

The year 1923 saw Mandell suffer two more defeats: a points loss to Frankie Garcia, at Chicago on February 9th, which loss he avenged by decisioning Garcia on May 29th, and a technical knockout loss to hard-punching Joey Sangor, at Minneapolis on March 9th. In the Sangor loss, Mandell committed one of his rare, inside-the-ring mistakes. In round seven, a Sangor right caught Mandell off balance and he went down. He jumped up before the referee could start a count and then, inexplicably went down again, to one knee. He was promptly ruled a technical knockout loser by the referee, for going down without being hit. Explaining his conduct afterward, Mandell said he realized he should take advantage of the opportunity to rest for a few seconds but had become temporarily confused when knocked down for only the second time in his career.

Mandell, fighting now at 130 pounds, came back to rack up a string of sixteen consecutive victories in 1923, after the Sangor defeat, winding up the year by fighting a ten round draw with sensational East Side New York lightweight Sid Terris, on December 17th at New York's Madison Square Garden. Two previous 1923 New York outings on October 20th and November 13th, again saw Sammy get rave reviews from the New York critics. In the first contest, the writers credited Mandell with winning all twelve rounds from Harry Kid Brown of Philadelphia, with his "speed and cleverness." The second bout credited Mandell's cleverness, along with his boxing skill and his "seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy" as making all the difference in his twelve round win over Babe Herman. Strangely enough, Babe Herman, himself a shifty, fast, dangerous-hitting boxer, couldn't do a thing against Mandell. Sammy won every single round out-speeding, out-punching, out-maneuvering, out-boxing and out-punching a thoroughly surprised opponent.

Mandell, at five feet six inches, was a perfectly coordinated athlete. His reflexes were amazing - a slight drop of a shoulder, a quick move of the head, a raising of an elbow, a shifting of his feet - and an opponent's carefully aimed blow missed, or was parried, or was countered by a rapid-fire assortment of punches. And there stood a cool, imperturbable Sammy Mandell not a hair on his head out of place or ruffled. As handsome as ever and without a mark of combat on his face, testament to his fast hands, quick punching and superb defensive skills.

As the year 1924 dawned, Mandell had fought 62 fights and had still not yet reached his twentieth birthday. He started 1924 with another scintillating New York Madison Square Garden performance. On January 11th Sammy met former junior lightweight (130 pounds) champion, Jack Bernstein, and for the first time in his career was being asked to step fifteen rounds. The New York State Athletic Commission, which carried a rule on its books that said boxers appearing in New York rings were limited to contests of six round duration until they had reached their majority of twenty-one, made no protest at Mandell's appearance in a 15 round contest, probably having been convinced, by someone, that Sammy was well past his 21st birthday.

A closing rally earned Mandell a draw, in a battle that had the 8,559 persons in the Garden cheering both fighters. Out-boxed and out-generated by the wily Bernstein, especially in the early rounds, and out-fought severely in the in-fighting at close quarters, it wasn't until the ninth round that Mandell was finally able to reverse the tide of battle.

SAMMY MANDELL - (continued)

It wasn't all that easy, however. Bernstein was ever on the aggressive, breaking past Mandell's defense just often enough to beat out a tattoo to Sammy's body in close. As the rounds sped by the action accelerated, with both men stepping up their pace.

Early in the sixth round Bernstein rushed in and his head caught Mandell over the left eye producing a flow of blood which streamed down from the eye, forcing Mandell into some desperate defensive maneuvers as he was forced to cope though blinded in one eye. The accident (it was not a deliberate move on Bernstein's part) served to swing the crowd in the Garden even more toward Mandell. Bernstein was roundly booed from then on whenever he forced Mandell into a clinch.

Mandell's handlers did a yeomanlike job between rounds in repairing the cut and halting the flow of blood. Sammy came out for the seventh round seemingly no worse for wear and intent on handing out a convincing beating to his ring rival.

In the ninth, a glancing right re-opened the cut and a frustrated Bernstein, at every opportunity in the clinches, rasped his glove laces over Mandell's face, seeking to add to the damage. The more desperate Bernstein became, at his inability to control the fight, the more erratic he was in his punching and his attack sputtered.

The last two rounds Mandell was able to stop a charging Bernstein in his tracks with jarring right crosses and right uppercuts, and in the last round he determinedly met every rush with stinging counters and flashy bursts of punching. The final bell brought the crowd to its feet yelling and shouting at such a brilliant and exciting fistic entertainment. The decision was unanimous for Mandell and was greeted with thunderous cheering that lasted until the fighters had left the ring.

Bob Soderman