

BOXING IN SINGAPORE

Father Time Marches On

In my childhood days I watched a few boxing promotions held in the Happy Valley stadium which was situated opposite the present Tanjong Pagar Police Station. In those old days (approximately from 1922 to 1929) the late G.H. Kiat was instrumental in putting Singapore boxing in the limelight and was, in fact, the pioneer boxing promoter of the day. The Happy Valley was owned by the late Lim Hoe Chiang.

Lightweight kingpin at that time was none other than the late Battling Key (Tan Teng Kee) and his great battle with the Philippines' bustling battler, Young Pelkey was one of the highlights of boxing during that period. Young Pelkey later on fought many big battles in USA - as Lope Tenorio - including a 10 rounds points victory over the 1925 New York lightweight champion, Jimmy Goodrich and a "no-decision" contest with the "Fargo Express" Billy Petrolle over 10 rounds in 1931.

Singapore boxing fans also saw many other spectacular boxers in action especially the invaders from the Philippine Islands. A few names I recollect were Silvino Jamito (the first Filipino to fight in Australia - Silvino Jamito lost to Eugene Criqui (1923 French World Featherweight champion) over 20 rounds in Sydney on 19.2.21), Gavino de Leon, Domy Santos, Young Santos, and Bagani Tawidi.

Among the most outstanding Filipino importations during this period must certainly be included flyweights Pablo Dano and Speedy Dado, both of whom later on also fought in USA.

Some of the world champions that Dano met were Newsboy Brown, Corporal Izzy Schwartz, Midget Wolgast, Tony Marino, Juan Zurita, Chalky Wright, Lou Salica and Georgie Pace. Dado's foes included world champions Wolgast, Salica, Panama Al Brown, Baby Arizmendi, Freddie Miller, Frankie Genaro and Small Montana.

Speedy Dado was at one time the chauffeur cum bodyguard of that sex bombshell of the Hollywood screens of yesteryears, Mae West, who was herself a 'big-time' boxing enthusiast!

Old-time fight fans will not forget fighters like the Japanese bantamweight, Taiho, who died an untimely death due to a kidney ailment, and also local gladiators like Red Warren, Sam Foxy, Ong Chin Beng and Tan Soo Beng. That hustling and bustling Malay "Human Steampipe", Young Hassan, was another very popular scrapper.

We remember the Walley brothers, Boy and Bud, and the

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Federated Malay States' star flyweight, Yeo Chai Lai from Ipoh.

During those pioneering days of boxing in Singapore, one big-time personality should also be remembered and he is none other than Nai Kim Lin, manager/trainer. Kim Lin brought up many good local boxers and it was he who brought the Walley brothers to USA. Boy Walley lost over 10 rounds in San Francisco on 12.4.1929 to Corporal Izzy Schwartz (1928 World Flyweight champion). Bud Walley did not fare too well on Uncle Sam's shores. Kim Lin, many years later, played a giant's part in putting Thailand on the boxing map of the world - Thailand produced her first world flyweight champion Pone Kingpetch in 1960.

Whilst on the subject of boxing in Singapore, it might be of interest to note that Marcario Flores, welterweight of the Philippine Islands, was the first Filipino boxer to fight in the USA and Pancho Villa was the first Filipino to win the Oriental flyweight title. Villa also won the American title beating Johnny Buff in New York on September 14, 1922 and then captured the World Flyweight championship when he knocked out the great "British Atom" Jimmy Wilde at New York Polo Grounds on June 18, 1923. Pancho Villa also knocked out Australia's flyweight king, George Mendies in Manila on December 8, 1921.

Japan produced her first world flyweight champion, Yoshio Shirai in 1952.

Other local managers/trainers in those days whom I remember included Tan Yong Nghee, Matthew de Souza and Tan Soo Ban.

Prominent among the local fighters just after the Happy Valley days must be mentioned featherweights Yeo Choon Song (better known as Y.C. Song), Amin Rusher (more popular as Mohamed Amin) and flyweights Little Lewis, L.S. Pond and that tough and rugged Malay boy, Young Aman.

Singapore boxing scene shifted from Happy Valley to the New World Stadium. The New World which was owned by the late Ong brothers, Pang Hock and Boon Tat, was the venue of many great boxing promotions. The late Julian Frankel (under Bertie Bell's Promotions) made it a boom period for boxing and Singapore was captioned the "MECCA of Boxing in the Orient".

Once again, the Filipino importations dominated the scene. We saw handsome Spanish-Filipino welterweight, Young Frisco in action. Young Frisco eventually went "down under" and fought stirring battles with Australia's aboriginal

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middleweight champion Ron Richards and finally settled down in the Land of the Kangaroos.

Frisco's compatriots, featherweight Young Tarley, flyweight Little Abayan, featherweight Ventura Marquez, lightweight Joe Eagle, welterweights Tiger Flowers and Clever Henry and that rugged Rocky Mantanez were some of the stylish fighters from the Philippines who fought in our rings at this period.

Then there were that fine gentlemanly American Negro and versatile showman, Gunboat Jack, Al Rivers and that crafty Frenchman, Aime Raphael, also Egypt's Mohamed Fahmy. (Fahmy later on fought in USA but was knocked out by Fred Apostoli (1938 World Middleweight champion) in 3 rounds on 7.8.39 in Springfield, Massachusetts.

Singapore fans during that period will remember that game Japanese featherweight Sherlock Warren and his fellow-countryman, flyweight Tiny Murota. The Japanese boxers were always popular for their fighting spirit and gameness. Then we saw Abyssinian Peter George and that sporting Red Indian, Young (Joe) Thunderface, who died an untimely death after his second bout with Frankie Webber. Thailand's rugged hard-hitter, Nai Som Pang was a great favourite with the crowds. Battling Guillermo was another crowd-pleaser.

Local boxers of note included Joe Diamond, Frankie Webber, Nicky Sullivan, Young Gauder, Boy Quee, Kid Carpentier, Al Nicholas and Fighting Choo.

The Olympic Stadium (where the Rax Theatre is now situated) was also the venue for some fine promotions during this era of boxing in Singapore. The outstanding promoter was Eng Chwee Song.

Prominent foreigners who fought in the Olympic Stadium were Frank Malinao (the first Filipino to box in Japan) and his compatriot, Young Alde; that scientific lightweight Baby Johnson (who certainly can be captioned the pocket edition of Sugar Ray Robinson) - Baby Johnson outwitted that clever and crafty French veteran Aime Raphael; and Joe Mendiola, who was captioned "The Tiger of the Ring" (Mendiola gave Frankie Webber a thrashing on his arrival in Singapore after finishing a long campaign in European countries).

Perhaps, the most outstanding Filipino (apart from Pablo Dano and Speedy Dado) to fight in Singapore was none other than Ignacio Fernandez, a Madison Square Garden rage in 1929. Fernandez arrived in Singapore after his exploits in the USA boxing rings and he fought many world champions. Included among them were Ceferino Garcia, Abe Goldstein, Tony

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Canzoneri, Bud Taylor, Andre Routis, Frankie Klick, Al Singer, Kid Chocolate, Fidel La Barba and Battling Battalino.

I remember vividly Ignacio Fernandez's first fight in Singapore at the Olympic Stadium. Fernandez was well within the lightweight limit and his opponent, India's middleweight ace, Arthur Suarez was so overawed by Fernandez's reputation that it turned out to be a David's easy victory over Goliath. Fernandez chased Suarez all over the ring throughout the fight. Later on, Fernandez repeated the same performance in the New World Arena when he won the local lightweight title. He chased Kuala Lumpur's lightweight champion, Young Johnson over 15 rounds and captured the lightweight crown so easily!

Many Singapore boxing fans of those days will not forget Ignacio Fernandez who loved Singapore so much that he decided to stay on our tiny island. I remember during the Japanese Occupation period, his then Japanese-Hawaiian manager, Johnny Masuda tried unsuccessfully in Singapore, to make a life film story of Fernandez and his boxing exploits for propaganda purposes!

Many Singapore boxing fans who saw Fernandez would remember seeing him hanging around at night in Albert Street "opening motor car doors" for the people who visit the foodstalls there. Fernandez for many years when he was 'down but not out' was a gentleman with self-respect in his own way - he never put his hand out but it was the other party who pitied him and offered him a dollar or ten cents! Of course there were so many who spat and humiliated him! But he took it all with a grin!

Another new era of boxing in Singapore came into being when the venue was changed to the Happy World stadium (at present known as the Gay World). Promoters who were real "live-wires" were Abdul Razak and Little Nene.

Boxing fans then had the opportunity to see Boy Brooks (who lost to Carl Bobo Olsen (1954 World Middleweight champion) over 12 rounds in Manila on 17.1.48); Flashy Sebastian (who was kayoed by Bobo Olsen in 1948 and also by Sugar Ray Robinson (World Welterweight and Middleweight champion) in the 1st round in New York City); Dave Sands, Australian triple champion, who was KO'ed by Yolande Pompey in 7 rounds in London and who was killed in a motor accident in Newcastle, Australia on 11.8.52; Mel Brown; Puerto Rico's Atilio Sabatino (who was KO'ed by Archie Moore (1952/62 World Lightheavyweight champion) in 10 rounds in London and KO'ed by Randy Turpin (1951 World Middleweight champion) in 2 rounds in Birmingham, UK in 1958).

Local boxers in the limelight during this period were

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Tiger Aman, Mok Kai Khoon, Sonny Chia and Lim Kee Chan.

After that boxing went into the doldrums and eventually died a natural death due to the 33 1/3 per cent entertainment tax imposed by the Government.

Amongst the best boxing referees I've seen in Singapore must certainly be included P.C. Johnson, Eddie Robinson, Herman Rappa and Eric Dunsford. A very popular personality at boxing promotions was none other than that "Small Man with a Loud Voice", time-keeper and announcer, J.D. Campbell. In those days no microphones were used, but Campbell's voice could be heard so clearly even from the gallery seats.

Two great boxing journalists who helped to stimulate the game with excellent reports were the late Herman Rappa and the late Norman Siebel.

I have not been able to remember so many other names - boxers, referees, promoters, managers and trainers who also did their part to make boxing so popular in those good old days.

Thus , I say FATHER TIME HAS MARCHED ON WITH BOXING IN SINGAPORE!

My problems right now seem to be: -

- 1) Where are those old-timers today? It would be nice to meet them again and to bring back happy memories of their old days in the RING. I shall be delighted if you can help me here.
- 2) Can you help me with this question? Is it possible for BOXING to be revived, of course, I refer to professional boxing.
- 3) Can Singapore produce a World Champion like the Philippines, Japan and Thailand? Personally, I believe that it is possible.
- 4) The Battling Key-Young Pelkey fight in those really GOOD-OLD-DAYS prove that Singaporeans can fight. So perhaps somebody in Singapore, today's Singapore, will be able to make a start, I hope.

Tan Wee Eng

(ed. note - This was originally written in 1971 and was addressed to the editor of the leading newspaper in Singapore - The Straits Times Press - in a plea to help restore professional boxing in Singapore.

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Pro Boxing Revival in Singapore

(ed. note - this was written in May, 1985 in response to an inquiry about the possibility of reviving the sport there.)

Looks to me it's a long lost battle. Both Lim Kee Chan and I had met with former promoters like Abdul Razak and Little Nene. We even discussed the subject with Gabriel Elorde and his wife, Laura, who promotes fights in their Sports Centre today. Papa Lope Sarreal, the GOM of Asian boxing, who promoted no less than 28 world title fights in his 56 years in the fight game, sums it up "They've got no heart." He was talking about the decline of boxing in the Philippines today. In Singapore it would be this plus finance. Nobody would risk putting money into boxing! Even in amateur boxing out here ... Syed Abdul Kadir is now involved ... petty sports politics abound today's boxing and sports involves money, money and money no dedication at all. Thus, the answer for revival of pro boxing in our tiny island Republic State is "No Way" still. Maybe, outside promoters might want to venture? I still believe it can be done, but must be on a long-term basis.

Singapore today, in my opinion, is really a United Nations. Made-to-order, we have Americans, British, Europeans, Middle East Arabs, Japanese, Koreans, Thai, Filipinos, Australians etc. International boxing supporters, speaking from an idealistic point of view. If we can get not expensive world champions, but maybe a rated (lo and behold! which rating - your guess is as good as mine, WBC, WBA, NABF, USBA, EBU, OPBF, FECARBOX????? !) boxer from abovementioned countries - like in wrestling promotions, put them into the cheaper lodging houses. Hold weekly promotions perhaps. Long term basis. But most important, Singapore being predominantly Chinese, a "Chinese" fighter must be produced to create interest and draw the Chinese population to the fights. Maybe a Malay or even Indian class fighter might also help to pull in the fans. We had been seeing visions and dreaming dreams on above lines of guidance for over two decades! I still believe it's better to have dreamt dreams and seen visions than never at all. What do you say?

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Ignacio Fernandez

He stunned the boxing world on May 17, 1929 in Madison Square Garden when he kayoed New York's Hebrew favourite, Al Singer in the third round. The fight was watched by 9,115 spectators who paid \$33,798 and was promoted by the legendary Tex Rickard. In his first fight on Uncle Sam's shores on June 24, 1927 - after his glorious campaign in Australia and return to capture the Orient bantam and featherweight titles (..... he captured the Lightweight Orient title in 1931) he koed Abe Attell Goldstein in Chicago.

He was once the rage of New York City's Madison Square Garden, having also fought Tony Canzoneri, Dominic Petrone and Kid Chocolate there. Fernandez battled 'em all in the Roarin' Twenties - in Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Hartford, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Vancouver, Portland and Phoenix. Big names apart from those abovementioned like Joe Lucas, Archie Ball, Harry Forbes, Gaston Charles, Eddie Shea, Santiago Zorilla, Bud Taylor, Andre Routis, Jimmy Piela, Frankie Klick, Ritchie King, Baby Sal Soria, Harry Dublinsky, Joe Mancillas, Vic Foley, Fidel La Barba, Battling Battalino, Cecil Payne, Bobby Pacho, Dud Eades, etc.

Ignacio is today still remembered by many old-timers all over the U.S. He is especially respected in New York and on the Pacific Coast. A member of the Cauliflower Alley Club, his name is often mentioned more so because George 'Dud' Eades (recently honored by CAC) fought Ignacio in Pasadena, Calif. in 1930. On February 15, 1927 Ignacio battled a 12 rounder draw against Ceferino Garcia in Manila.

The 79-year-young gladiator has been my old idol and great pal. Yes, since his arrival in Singapore. I visited him last Christmas Eve. He keeps punchin' but looks like he's having a tough time battling the hardest battle of his life against 'Kid' Senility.

Tan Wee Eng