

MECCA of MAYHEM

Stillman's Gymnasium, Eighth Avenue's Emporium of Sock, New York's Fistic Landmark, the Training Place of World's Greatest Fighters

By IRVING RUDD

THE red-hot boxing fan or chance passerby who scurries up the long flight of stairs leading to Stillman's Gym on Eighth Avenue between 54th and 55th Streets in New York City, and plunks thirty-five cents into the outstretched palm of Jack Curley, who mans the turnstile, buys himself a grand afternoon's entertainment.

From 1 o'clock to 3 in the afternoon on any day including Sundays and holidays, the fan may sit back comfortably and watch a parade of pugs go through their training paces. Champions and near-champions, has-beens, and up-and-coming youngsters clamber in and out of the two large rings up front. A stairway at the rear of the gymnasium leads to the exercise floor where the fighters skip rope, punch the light or heavy bag, or go through loosening-up calisthenics.

It's an afternoon well-spent, but it's a pity that the customers can't be let in on the real entertainment supplied by many characters who play the leading roles in this scenario of sock. These include the boxers, managers, matchmakers, trainers, and publicity men. The belly laughs their authentic antics provoke, would put a top-flight Broadway musical to shame.

The lunch counter at the back of Stillman's is the center of the stage. You see a matchmaker of a boxing arena like Max Joss, Moe Fleischer (no relative of Nat's), or Joe McKenna, usually has an office for which he pays a fairly high rental but generally, when he wants to transact some very important business, he hies himself to the gym and haggles with the managers over terms for the use of a fighter. Many an important match has been closed over a cup of coffee and doughnuts, or in one of the numerous niches near the lunch counter.

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SUDDENLY a voice attracts your attention. "... so I'm fighting in the semi-windup at the Broadway Arena the other night and this guy is a cutie and a pretty fair banger to the bargain. He puts me on the deck twice but I come back to win. It's a helluva fight so they put us back on top the follerin' week. I'm swingin' on the gate for twenty pernts. This time I'm in great shape, weigh only about



Lou Stillman, proprietor of the gym that bears his name, enrolling a newcomer.

the manager usually refers to that "bum of mine, the blankety-blank stiff."

Translating the confusing jargon of the ring, fight manager Walker, one of America's outstanding figures in boxing, was simply explaining how his battler boxed in the semi-final at the Ridgewood Grove against a clever, hard puncher. His pug was on the floor twice but came back to win a sensational brawl.

The promoter at Ridgewood Grove put both men back in the main event the following week with Walker's charge drawing down twenty per cent of the net receipts. In the second encounter, our hero is in good condition, weighing 143 pounds, and wise to the tactics of his adversary. He jabs and moves cleverly throughout the fight, and smears his foe's face red with blood to win the decision.

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SPEAKING of fighters reminded the boys of "Bat" Norfolk, a huge rubber, who stood well over six feet and weighed about 260 pounds. A mild-mannered Bible student who believed in constantly "turning the other cheek," poor "Bat" was set afire enough times via the hotfoot method to warm half the population of New York City. Although he possessed a massive pair of maulies that could stave in a brick wall, Norfolk managed to keep cool



Johnny Dundee, who set a record for rope-skipping at Stillman's Gym.

43 pounds, and I'm hep to this gee. All I does is stick and move, stick and move. Soon, I'm givin' him a paint job and I cops the duke."

We know you're amazed because the speaker is a portly, pot-bellied gent of at least forty-five. We can't blame you if your jaw droops in dismay and you exclaim, "Ye gods! Is he a fighter?"

Well, the portly personality is Eddie Walker, a leading manager of fighters. The majority of fight managers always use the first person when describing a bout which any of their boxers have engaged in. It's never "my fighter" but more often "me" or "I." For example, when a match is offered, the average fight pilot will reply, "Sure, I'll fight your guy." Some of the more modest managers condescend to use "we" or "us."

However, when it comes to taking a punch on the chin,



This is the home of the famous Stillman's Gymnasium, where the world's greatest fistic stars prepare for their bouts.

under the constant torment to which he was subjected.

The story goes that "Bat" Norfolk did lose his temper one day when he was a pretty fair heavyweight fighter. Bat was piloted by an unscrupulous individual who continually paid him off in peanuts. One night when Norfolk was scheduled to box, he found out that he was supposed to be getting \$100 instead of the \$50 his manager said was due him.

He cornered his pilot and in no uncertain terms let him know that he'd practice his bag-punching exercises upon that worthy's chin if the pay-off was incorrect. Norfolk's handler, without a murmur of protest, instantly acquiesced. This seemed strange to "Bat." The payoff was set to take place after the bout in a garage adjacent to the arena.

It was pitch black when the fight mentor stepped inside the garage and called, "Bat! Oh Bat! Where are you?"

"Heah Ah is," rumbled the Negro heavyweight who was standing beside him all the time!

"O.K. Norfolk. Here's the dough." Holding ten ONE dollar bills in his mitt the manager began to count: "Ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty dollars . . ." Norfolk interrupted the count.

"Jes' a moment, boss. Yo' is bein' too damn nice to ol' Bat. I'd like to see dis dough 'stead of feelin' it. Le's come outside heah where there is mo' light."

The manager sensed a murder and beat a hasty retreat. The scurrilous scoundrel is still among the missing.

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LITTLE CHARLIE GOLDMAN, an outstanding trainer, storms up the stairs and heads for the lunch counter. "What's this fight game comin' to?" he demands of no one in particular as he orders a "cuppa cawfee."

"Bunch of Johnny-Come-Latelys ruining this business. I'm up in Zunk's (Mike Jacobs' assistant matchmaker) office trying to

close for a match for this new preliminary kid of mine. Zunk says, 'Will yuh fight this McCormick kid? He's a beginner like your kid. Wait, I'll call his manager.'

"So he gets on the phone and dials a number," Goldman relates between sips and bites, "and the next thing he's asking 'is this Goldsmith's Department store? Well, I'd like to speak to Mr. Saunders of Ladies' Wear!'

"Ladies' Wear Department.

"A fine thing boxing comes to when a manager must be located in such a place!

"All we have today is cloak and suiters, buttonhole makers and ladies' underwear salesmen handling fighters. Ye Gods! What's boxing coming to! No wonder so many poor kids get socked around until they get punchy!"

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WHITEY BIMSTEIN, another greater trainer, joins the gab-fest. "Did I ever tell you about the time I managed a fighter with a floating rib?" he inquires.

"Well, it seems that this 'tiger' of mine had been hurt around the ribs in a previous fight, and before you knew it he was an honest to goodness hypochondriac about his rib. One night he was boxing in the Queensboro Arena and halfway through the third round he was clouted hard in the midsection. When he got back to the corner, he started complaining about his side and wanted to quit. I coaxed him to go out for the next round and he started out fine, but as soon as he was belted in the belly, he looked to quit again!

"He kept back-pedaling," Whitey related, "and when he reached my corner he hollered, 'Whitey throw in the towel!' I ignored him and he stayed on the bicycle, clinching and running. He came around to the corner again, and once more he shouted, 'Whitey, throw in the towel!' I acted as if I hadn't heard him. He was desperate and kept circling his man. Finally he came around to the corner for the third time in the round, and then he screamed, 'Whitey, you better throw in that towel, I ain't comin' around again!'"

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STILLMAN'S GYM is quiet and almost deserted now as the last sparring session comes to an end. The crowd of fight guys has thinned out to a mere handful.

Tex Sullivan, stellar publicity man for Jimmy Braddock when the latter was champ, and now a manager of several name fighters and a promoter, is discussing some publicity angles for his next show at the Ridgewood Grove. Someone asks him if he's heard from Braddock lately, and it isn't long before likeable Tex, manager of Lee Oma, George Kochan and Lee Q. Murray, is reminiscing about some experiences Braddock had on a barnstorming tour when he was at the peak of his popularity.

"You know," said Tex, "Jim once picked up an easy \$200 just for chewing the fat.

"The champ was on a tour," Sullivan revealed, "and he received a wire offering him \$200 to umpire the first inning of a baseball game in the backwoods of Kentucky. Braddock was in Louisville at the time and he wired back accepting the offer. Jim started out by car on a cold, gray morning with a threatening overcast sky above. As Mushky Jackson, the Malaprop King would have phrased it, 'Braddock and his gang arrived just in the knack of time 'cause it was grizzling furiously.'

"Although the ball game was probably called off because of the heavy rain," Sullivan went on, "the champ decided to drive down to the ball field. Braddock entered the deserted grandstand and was bemoaning his tough luck, when suddenly a tall stranger who looked as if he had just emerged from a Li'l Abner comic strip approached Jim.

"Yer the champ, ain'tcha?" he inquired. "Muh name is Ezra Hawkins and I'm the promoter of this hyar baseball game. Sorry about the rain."

"The hillbilly joined Braddock in his moody silence and then slapped his thigh as if struck with an inspiration. 'Say,' he beamed, 'my grandpappy is over to the house with a bunch of his pals. I wonder if yuh'd mind a-comin' down there and shake hands with the boys for the two hundred?'"

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Nat Fleischer Says:

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to hit the spotlight. Who is the Kid? None other than Marcus Lockman who began his professional career in 1941 and quit the ring for the bigger fight against the Japs, after having engaged in twenty-six ring contests with only six defeats. When he was discharged recently, he started his comeback campaign in New Jersey, where during a hot mix-up, some galleryite called him "Kid Chicken" because of his quick action, and the name has stuck to him since. He has won eight of his nine recent fights, one being a draw. He is a clever boy, a most brilliant performer, one the fans are pleased to see.

Marcus had two fights in 1943 when he drew with Tommy Bell in Detroit and beat Chet Slider in California. During his three years in the army he carried off the middleweight and light-heavyweight crowns of the South Pacific. Shelton Bell was his victim in the heavier class and Chico Romo was defeated by Marcus for the middleweight honors.

Lockman served with the 93rd Division at Guadalcanal, New Guinea and Bougainville. A member of his division was Wildcat Henry, the welter sensation managed by Jack Barrett. It was Lockman's outfit that saved Henry's company from being wiped out in an ambush. The 93rd Division is proud of its two ranking ringmen, Lockman and Henry, and expects much from these Negro battlers before their retirement.

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THE latest contribution to boxing literature is a biography, "Joe Louis, American," written by Margery Miller, a Wellesley College graduate. The author has turned out a story on the life of the Brown Bomber, far different from the biographies that have hitherto been published. Her story is one of human interest that takes the reader through all the cycles in Joe's life, from his humble birth, through his early schooling and his work at the Ford Motor plant in Detroit, along his rise from an obscure amateur to the winning of the world heavyweight championship, a million dollar attraction.

Though there is nothing new in her book, the first she has written, Miss Miller's portraiture of the Brown Bomber is different from the usual treatment given the subject by sports scribes. She tells her story simply and clearly with a touch that retains the interest throughout. I highly recommend the book to those who seek a complete life story of the world heavyweight champ.

Mecca of Mayhem

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"After that," Tex concluded, "Jim used to kid us and pester about some more of 'them thar handshakin' assignments."

A pall of silence envelopes the now almost empty gymnasium. Only Lou Stillman and his efficient manager, Jack Curley, are present. Lou Stillman has been conducting a gymnasium in New York for over thirty years, or ever since Alpheus Geer and Hiram Mallinson induced him to run one for the Marshall Stillman Movement, an organization devoted to the rehabilitation

of convicted men. Marshall and Stillman were the names of Geer's grandparents.

Stillman's real name is Louis Ingber, but everybody called him Mr. Stillman at the old place, and when it became necessary for him to take it over as a private undertaking the name was too valuable to be changed.

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I ASKED Stillman whether he ever took a vacation, since every time I have visited his boxing landmark I have seen him on the job.

"I'm afraid it can't be done. You see I run this gym as a personal problem. I personally take charge of everything here. I leave nothing to others when my attention should be given to it, and I play no favorites. The ordinary novice and palooka get the same treatment that I give to the top lads. A preliminary boy some day may become the champ, is the way I look upon the fighter and therefore I treat him with the same respect as I do the ranking men of the game."

"For thirty odd years I have been doing this and nothing can change me now. I stay on the job day after day—Saturdays, holidays, Sunday, rain, shine or snow. That gym is just me and I couldn't desert it for a vacation."

"Did Jack Dempsey do much training here?" I inquired of the master of Eighth Avenue's Emporium of Sock.

"Yes, often. He was the greatest fellow in the history of the sport in my book. Often when I needed a friend badly, he was the one to come to the rescue. He would call up and ask: 'How are things, Lou?'"

"Not so good, I would tell him. And he'd reply: 'Don't worry pal. Pass the word around that I'll be up to do some training today.'"

"And before Jack got here, the place would be jammed with scribes and patrons who had learned of Dempsey's intention."

"How that fellow could draw 'em in! Only once in all my career did I see anyone who could pack 'em in here in greater numbers than did Jack and that was the day when Primo Carnera, led by Bill Duffy and Leon See, brought Primo Carnera here for his first workout. Italians came to the gym from all parts of the city. They flocked to Eighth Avenue in such numbers, I had to call upon the police to keep order. Even women with babes in their arms came to see Satchel Feet. The place was jammed as never before or since and I should judge that 2,000 persons were chased from the avenue by the bluecoats."

Stillman declares crowds attending workouts are the best barometer on attendance at a boxing show, and contends he can guess the size of the gate within a few hundred dollars after watching them for three or four days.

He never saw a fighter who enjoyed training as much as Dempsey, and names Johnny Dundee as the most extraordinary boxer he ever looked at in a gym. Several years back the renowned Scotch-Wop skipped rope an hour and ten minutes to beat Babe Herman in a contest. Lou timed the boys and did the counting.

There were many unique happenings in the old place, and one of the strangest was Soldier Bartfield and Frank Carbone winding up what started as a friendly workout kicking and biting each other on the floor. It was all half a dozen huskies could do to pull them apart.

"Boxing is a great sport," wound up Lou. "There is nothing wrong with it or the thousands who attend the shows all over the country wouldn't be spending millions per year to see the men in action."

Hitting the Spotlight

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ELLIS PHILLIPS

THE upsetting of the proverbial applecart was nothing in comparison with the one lightweight Ellis Phillips scored at the St. Nicholas Arena on October 19, when he knocked out Gus "Pell" Mell, highly favored Canadian lightweight, in three thrill-packed rounds. A hurriedly acquired substitute, Phillips was not given an outside chance to stand off the hard-punching and fast-boxing kid from Montreal, who had been battering his way to the top by beating the best in his division. Smart money, in fact, backed Mell to halt the Philadelphia Negro in five or six heats. The fight, while it lasted, was interesting from a scientific angle as well as full of excitement. By winning so decisively, Ellis, who has lost a number of close battles, got back into the fistic spotlight where he hopes to remain.

Born in Luisa, Va., on May 4, 1920, he was brought up in North Philadelphia, where he quit high school at 16 to work in Herman Diamond's grocery store.

Phillips, who is now a resident of Germantown, Pa., said his ambition was to be a fighter from the time he was in his early teens. "I had 21 amateur contests, but," admitted Ellis with a frank smile, "I wasn't so good. Fact is, I won only six fights. So Mr. Diamond and I decided that I might as well box as a pro—and get paid for losing. Well, in my first pro battle in September 1939, I was knocked out in one round."

Ellis was married the following day. He was 19 then. About six weeks later he returned to the ring and he knocked out six opponents before dropping a duke to Joe Amico. After losing another fight in 1940, he battled along for two years without a loss. He beat his two conquerors, Amico by decision and Johnny Buff by a kayo. He trounced Vince Dell'Orto 4 times, kayoed and drew with Frankie Donato, beat Johnny Marcelline; also Pete Scalzo, former featherweight champ, twice, in ten round bouts.

"Ellis didn't do so well in 1944," related manager Herman Diamond. "He lost ten-rounders to Lulu Costantino and Bobby Ruffin, in Philly, and was halted by Roman Alvarez in Madison Square Garden. Phillips lost seven out of eleven bouts that year. He beat Frankie Carto, Dorsey Lay, Cleo Shans and flattened Donnie Maes."

Lightweight champ Ike Williams kayoed him before the bout got well started. Then he lost to Julie Kogon, Al Guido, Cleo Shans, Eddie Giosa and Mike Delia.

"Mr. Diamond then decided I needed a good rest," explained Phillips. "So I took it easy until a few months ago, when I began to feel the itch to fight again. I kayoed Al Cella in 2 heats last September, lost an 8-rounder to Eddie Giosa the following month and knocked out Gus Mell. That was my 45th pro battle."