

STEVE HAMAS

From Campus Hero to Heavyweight Challenger

Steve Hamas was one of those rare participants in the 1930s fight game, a handsome, modest, bright college graduate who probably could have been successful in several other pursuits.

Born of Slovak (not Austrian) parentage in Passaic, New Jersey, January 9, 1907, Steve, as well as his four brothers, was well known locally for his athletic ability. When the boys were of high school age, their father organized the quintet into a basketball team and they toured the state. Steve attended Penn State University on an athletic scholarship and won more varsity letters there than any other student. He also kept his grades up while winning three letters in football, three in boxing, two in basketball, two in track, and one in lacrosse. In his senior year, 1928-29, he won letters in five sports. This did not include baseball, which he played well, but could not fit into his schedule. The Hamas in Penn State box scores was his brother Mike, who also was basketball captain in 1926-27. Steve's schedule was so cramped that once in the early spring of 1928 he boxed in a dual meet with Temple University in the afternoon (winning a third-round knockout) and played a full game of basketball that night. The campus hero then topped off the evening by going to a school dance.

Hamas was intercollegiate heavyweight boxing champion as a sophomore in 1927 and as a senior in 1929. He was outpointed in 1928. In football under coach Hugo Bezdek, Steve was an outstanding fullback but failed to Get All-American honors. Nevertheless, after graduating with a BA in 1929, he agreed to play pro ball with the Orange (N.J.) Tornadoes in their debut season in the National Football League that fall. The team finished in a tie for sixth place in a 12-team league. Hamas functioned as a fullback and blocking back.

Steve wanted to go to medical school in 1930 but needed financial support in that early Depression period. Although pro boxing was not his favorite sport, he had attracted some notice as intercollegiate champ. Slightly over six feet and weighing about 190 pounds, he showed a good blend of offensive and defensive skills. Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney were both retired and the heavyweight division needed some new blood. Steve decided to give it a try under veteran ring manager Charley Harvey.

He won his first six bouts in Passaic or Newark. Then, in mid-1930, his older brother Mike became ill and needed rest in a dry, warm climate. Steve drove him across country to Southern California. There, financially strapped, he contacted various promoters known by his manager, who did not make the trip. Hamas scored nine consecutive knockouts in Los Angeles and Pasadena by April 1931, at which time his brother had essentially recovered and Steve returned to New Jersey. He then scored 11 more knockouts in the New York City area, giving him 20 straight KOs before Hans Birkie went the route with him on November 27, 1931.

Most of Hamas' opponents up to this point had been journeymen of limited distinction. Therefore, it was surprising that Harvey should arrange a January 15, 1932, bout with Tommy Loughran, the sixth ranked heavyweight. Loughran, who had relinquished the world light heavyweight title in 1929, had victories in 1931 over such names as Johnny Risko, Paulino Uzcudun, and Max Baer. He had fought 135 times and was still regarded as the master boxer in his division.

Manager Harvey, however, thought Loughran was slipping. He coached Hamas on specific tactics to use against the crafty veteran. Steve followed orders and in the second round at Madison Square Garden he rushed Loughran against the ropes and dropped him with a tremendous left hook to the jaw. Loughran was up at the count of eight, but Hamas put him down again. This time there was no need to count as referee Ed (Gunboat) Smith waved Steve to a neutral corner. Surprised at the sudden ending, Hamas went over to help the fallen star to his feet. The crowd was strangely quiet in seeing Loughran knocked out for only the second time in his long career.

Hamas suddenly became a hot property. He was off to Los Angeles for another knockout victory and then was matched with Lee Ramage, a rapidly rising young heavyweight from San Diego. He was a quick, clever fighter who could not hit very hard but "could sting you to death with hooks and jabs." Steve thought he could handle him like he did Loughran but wound up swinging wildly against the defensive wizard and losing the ten-round decision. This was his first loss in 30 fights and he returned to New York somewhat chastened.

On May 11, 1932, Hamas fought a return match with Loughran in Philadelphia and won the 10-round decision. Ironically, Steve enjoyed this win more than the first fight because he felt he defeated Loughran at his own game — by outboxing the classy performer. They fought again in Philadelphia six weeks later and this time Loughran won the decision. Then it was off to Los Angeles again where on July 25 Hamas defeated Lee Ramage decisively in a return bout. He knocked him down twice in the second and won going away.

In all, Hamas had four fights with Loughran, winning two and losing two. He also had four with Ramage, winning two, losing one and drawing in the other. He enjoyed these encounters with great defensive boxers who seldom made mistakes. They were like chess matches with eight ounce gloves. Steve could hit harder but he wasn't quite as fast as Ramage and didn't have the lightning left hand of Loughran. At the end of 1933 Ring Magazine ranked Loughran second, thanks to his victory over former champion Jack Sharkey. Hamas was ranked ninth and Ramage tenth.

Just as the knockout of Loughran in early 1932 gave Hamas his first boost to stardom, the February 13, 1934 fight against former champion Max Schmeling in Philadelphia boosted him high on the list of heavyweight challengers. For this fight, according to writer Paul Gallico, Steve was instructed by his manager to avoid a slugging match with Schmeling and to lean right with his shoulder shielding his chin from the German's powerful right hand. Hamas boxed expertly for 12 rounds and won a clear-cut decision over the "Black Uhlan" before 15,000 fans. According to Gallico, "the licking that Max took from the youngster finishes him as a top flight heavyweight in this country."

In June 1934, Max Baer knocked out the champion Primo Carnera in 11 rounds. Hamas was signed to fight big Art Lasky of Minneapolis with the winner to meet Baer for the title in June 1935. A 6-5 underdog, Steve won the 10-round decision over Lasky at Madison Square Garden on October 5 and was looking forward to the championship go. At the end of 1934 he was ranked as the Number 1 challenger.

Unfortunately, Charley Harvey got into a spat with James Johnston, boss of Madison Square Garden, who suggested that Hamas fight Lasky in a return bout to fill the time void. Harvey peevishly withdrew Hamas and accepted a \$25,000 offer to meet Schmeling in a return match in Hamburg, Germany. Interviewed many years later (1951), Hamas summed up the episode this way:

"When I beat Schmeling in Philadelphia and Art Lasky in New York, both in 1934, I was No. 1. All Charley had to do was sit back. We were sure to get Max Baer the next summer. . . You had to know my manager. He was old and proud and stubborn. Years earlier, when he had been on top, Jimmy Johnston had been his office boy. Now Johnston, the man who could give us Baer, was running Madison Square Garden. Jimmy always had the needle out and one day he said to Charley, 'What are you doing with that bum of yours?' (meaning Hamas). Charley suddenly snapped, 'He's going to Germany to fight Schmeling, that's what.'"

Harvey took Hamas to Germany in early 1935 in what Ring Magazine later reported "turned out to be one of the most ruinous moves ever made by a fight manager." Steve injured his left elbow in training, but to protect the \$25,000 guarantee, the March 10 bout in Hamburg went forward. The New York Times' correspondent reported that a large crowd of Nazi sports enthusiasts were brought in by train to swell the crowd to 25,000. Schmeling had an edge in the first five rounds but really exploded in the sixth when he knocked Hamas down three times. From then on, the American just hung on, taking tremendous punishment. The fight ended in the ninth when Hamas collapsed on the ropes. There was criticism of Belgian referee Valoni for not stopping the fight and of Harvey for not throwing in the towel much earlier. However, according to Steve Jr., in a 1982 interview, his father insisted on continuing and Harvey should not be blamed for that lapse.

There was a minor political undertone at the end of the fight when the Nazi contingent stood with right arms raised in Party salute. Schmeling, however, did not lend himself to the demonstration. He left the ring and made his way to Hamas' dressing room where he commiserated with the badly beaten American.

Battered in head and body and bleeding from his kidneys, Hamas was taken to Berlin for a thorough medical examination. He was found to have numbness in his left leg, double vision in his left eye, and a possible spinal injury. He apparently received a hard smash to the back of his head which impaired brain/body coordination. Hamas was placed in a hospital sanitarium for about ten days. Released on March 21 he showed in outward appearance only a slight hitch in his walk. Asked about his left arm injured in training, he said he "didn't want to hand out any alibis" for his defeat. He spoke well of Schmeling and the German people. Even the German press lauded him for his courageous stand.

He continued his recuperation after returning to the U.S. In that period he made the decision not to return to the ring. His share of the earnings from his 41 professional bouts from 1930 to 1935 came to about \$50,000. There were really no big paydayes such as would have come from the planned fight with champion Max Baer. As it happened, Jimmy Braddock, considered little more than a journeyman heavyweight, defeated Baer for the title in June 1935. Hamas displayed none of the bitterness which might have been expected under the circumstances. He was married with two children and it was time to get out of the fight game and into other work.

Jobs were not easy to find in that Depression era, but Hamas became a tester for Anaconda Wire and Cable Company. After the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941, he joined the Army and received an Air Corps commission. One of his assignments was to provide physical training for fighter pilots at Glendale Air Force Base in California. Later he was Chief of Special Services for the 8th Air Force in England. As a major in 1945, he was retired on disability with ulcers.

After World War II he was a salesman for several different companies. He also was employed by the New Jersey Department of Motor Vehicles. In 1956 he was elected to a term as mayor of Wallington, N.J., a city of 9,000 persons. He was a good speaker and an efficient administrator but had a low key personality. He preferred the quiet home life with his wife Kathryn, a former concert singer, a son and a daughter. Later his health began to deteriorate. He was largely forgotten by the boxing community when he died in the Veterans Hospital in Northport, Long Island, N.Y., on October 11, 1974. He was 67. The obituaries brought back some recollections of a brief but remarkable sports career -- winning all those letters at Penn State, playing football in the NFL against such players as Red Grange and Ernie Nevers, and becoming a ranking heavyweight boxer.

The nagging question persisted: How could a nice guy like Steve Hamas get involved in the somewhat sleazy atmosphere of professional boxing in the 1930s? The question was put to his son, Steve, Jr., in an October 1982 interview. He admitted that his father didn't care for the shady side of boxing, but his manager, in spite of minor character flaws, was an honorable man and usually shielded Steve from the low life. Hamas enjoyed the competitive aspect of boxing as a sport, much like when he was engaged in intercollegiate bouts. He didn't fight dirty and didn't expect his opponent to do so. He fought no grudge matches. In fact, he lacked a natural "killer instinct," and that was a drawback for him in the ring. He was a gentleman in and out of the ring and conducted himself with credit throughout his career. His son noted in conclusion that there were only three professionals who defeated Hamas, and he defeated each of them.

Steve Hamas, Jr. died of a heart attack a year after the 1982 interview. However, the name lives on through his son, Steve Hamas III, who resides in Florida.

— L. Robert Davids