STRANGE DAYS: The Johnny Saxton Story
By Carlos Acevedo

Johnny Saxton was one of the most controversial champions of the post-war era. Gifted, but ultimately baffling, Saxton trailed skullduggery—and worse—wherever he went. If Primo Carnera can be considered a dreadful symbol of gangland regulation of boxing in the 1930s, then Saxton may very well be poster boy of the Mafioso-controlled 1950s. Although he won the welterweight championship twice, no one can be certain about his accomplishments in boxing. His connections to mob figures Frankie Carbo and Blinky Palermo resulted in several peculiar situations, and his career was later overshadowed by tragic circumstances beyond the ring.

Born in Newark, New Jersey, on Independence Day, 1930, Johnny Saxton lived a life of nearly impossible symbolic significance. As a child, the luckless Saxton was bounced from relative to relative before being sent to the Colored Orphan Asylum in the Bronx. The Colored Orphan Asylum, founded in 1836 in Manhattan, was eventually torched to the ground during the Draft Riots of 1863; it then reappeared in Riverdale in the early 1900s. Its orphanage wing was closed after World War II in part due to neglectful conditions.

Saxton, as can be expected under the circumstances, was a troubled child. "From the very beginning he had the tendency toward mischief," wrote John C. Ross, "and required constant counseling. Later, when he was placed in a foster home, he had to be returned to the orphanage occasionally because of his inability to make the proper adjustment." Saxton took up boxing in the local Police Athletic League and eventually disciplined himself enough to remain permanently with his foster mother, Hortense Pierson, in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn.

After winning 31 of 33 amateur bouts, two National AAU championships, and a Golden Gloves title, Saxton turned pro in 1949 under the guidance of Bill "Pop" Miller. Early in his career Saxton trained at the Uptown Gym in Harlem and sparred with the likes of Sugar Ray Robinson, Ike Williams, and Sandy Saddler. Miller, perhaps in deference to the dark power structure of the day, introduced Saxton to Blinky Palermo who, in turn, bought Miller out for a reported $10,000.

Saxton (L) en route to victory over Virgil Akins

A cautious stylist with a busy jab and good footwork, Saxton was never a hit with the crowd. Like former lightweight champion Sammy Angott, Saxton, although a sound technical boxer who showed occasional flashes of brilliance, was prone to clinching and mauling.

Saxton went unbeaten in his first 40 contests. Among the fighters he defeated on the way to a 39-0-1 record were Ralph Jones, Charlie Salas, Joe Miceli, Tony Pellone, Luther Rawlings, Freddie Dawson, and future welterweight champion Virgil Akins. Blinky Palermo had once manufactured a similar record for one of his earlier prospects: "Blackjack" Billy Fox. Unlike Fox, however, Saxton had natural talent to burn. Bob Richelson summed up his early promise in a 1953 article for Boxing; Saxton was, he wrote, "generally regarded, with the possible exception of Floyd Patterson, as the greatest prospect to come out of the Golden Gloves since Ray Robinson."

But even then there were troubling signs. A curious lethargy, for example, often afflicted many of his opponents: Ramon Fuentes, Lester Felton, Johnny Bratton, and Livio Manelli all slipped into inexplicable hypnotic states when facing Johnny Saxton. Felton was disqualified; Minelli, who could not even manage to muster up family honor as motivation (since Saxton, after all, had whipped his brother Aldo in 1950), was tossed by referee Ruby Goldstein for sheer ineptitude; Fuentes was so passive that the crowd hurled trash into the ring; and Bratton nearly had his purse withheld for his somnambulism act.

Saxton was acutely aware of his unpopularity. "I've always been knocked," he told the press in 1957. "Let's face it. Saxton's always been a bad guy. I haven't been on the good side of nobody."

In 1953 Saxton had his undefeated run snapped by whirlwind contender Gil Turner, and six months later he dropped a decision to veteran Del Flanagan. Despite these two losses, and a subsequent draw against Johnny Lombardo, Blinky Palermo used his connections to obtain a title shot for his fighter.

Gavilan loses title by controversial decision

Johnny Saxton won his first championship at the expense of Kid Gavilan in a fight widely considered to be fixed. On October 20, 1954, Saxton slipped away with a fifteen-round decision in Philadelphia, but there would be no ticker tape parade thrown in his honor. "I congratulate you—on your luck," Frank Weiner, chairman of the Pennsylvania Athletic Commission, told the new champion after the match. Arthur Daley called the fight "the equivalent of a double no-hitter" and "undoubtedly the worst prizefight ever held." Little of note occurred during the bout. Saxton refused to lead, backpedaled meticulously, counterpunched sparingly, and, when the ineffectual Gavilan so much as hinted at a move, held brazenly. "That was just not his night," Saxton told Sport Magazine in 1963. "You have those off nights. Anybody has them. He had one."

Gavilan wept openly after the fight and complained bitterly about getting "the business." His accusations were bolstered by thunderclouds of rumors that had swirled prior to the match. Like the infamous Billy Fox-Jake Lamotta hoax (also a Carbo-Palermo co-production), the Saxton-Gavilan outcome appeared to be widely known in advance. Bookmakers in New York reportedly refused to accept wagers on Saxton. "It was an open secret," Budd Schulberg told The Observer years later. "All the press knew that one–and other fights–were fixed. Gavilan was a mob-controlled fighter, too, and when he fought Billy Graham it was clear Graham had been robbed of the title. The decision would be bought. If it was close, the judges would shade it the way they had been told."

Some of the curious decisions Gavilan received in his own fights raise the possibility that "The Cuban Hawk" followed storylines that were handed to him. When the script called for him to lose, however, Gavilan got testy. "A possible explanation of the putrid affair," wrote Dan Parker in Sports Illustrated, "is that…Carbo…saw that the Keed not only was getting balky but also was slipping rapidly, and, to keep control of the title, arranged with Blinky to pass it along to Saxton. Gavilan apparently was suspicious from the start, as he pulled out of the match twice." And his outburst to the media probably sealed his fate as far as title fights were concerned. In an era where rematches were the norm, it is impossible to account for the fact that Gavilan—one of the most popular fighters in America and a television staple—never received a return bout with Saxton.

DeMarco stops Saxton in the 14th round

After winning the welterweight crown Saxton participated in two non-title scraps: a monotonous decision victory against Ramon Fuentes (in which the only action of the evening was provided via audience participation) and a surprise points loss to talented, but obscure, Ohio contender Ronnie Delaney in a non-televised match that Saxton was widely expected to win. Then, on April Fool's Day, 1955, in his first defense of the championship, Saxton was demolished by Tony DeMarco in fourteen rounds. A raucous crowd of nearly 9,000 Bostonians watched hometown favorite DeMarco, officially a 3-1 underdog, drop Saxton with his trademark left hook and batter "The Fighting Orphan" along the ropes until referee Mel Manning halted the slaughter. Although he fought courageously and with more brio than previously noted for, Saxton took a beating from the rugged Demarco, and this fight, perhaps, may have been the catalyst for the downward spiral to follow.

After a string of soft comeback wins, Saxton regained the welterweight title by outpointing Carmen Basilio in Chicago on February 21, 1956, in a fight that raised as many—if not more—eyebrows as the Gavilan washout had in 1954. The New York Times reported that when the decision was announced, "The reading of these tallies…set off a derisive din that shook the stadium rafters. It was sustained for ten minutes, died down a bit, then rose again when the preliminary bouts that follow the main event entered the ring." All of Chicago, not just the crowd of 12,145 and the live television audience of millions, seemed to be in an uproar. The press hinted at sinister forces behind the scenes; Basilio spoke bluntly, but eloquently: "It was like being robbed in a dark alley;" the Illinois State Athletic Commission quickly launched an investigation that led, as most investigations do in boxing, to a dead end. In an interview with Dale Shaw several years later Saxton scoffed: "Fight writers. What do they know? I won it." Then, in an uncanny echo of the Gavilan match, he added, "Basilio had a bad night."

Saxton cashed in on his repeat notoriety the same way he had after the Gavilan fight: with three more non-title bouts, including a solid rematch win over contender Gil Turner. Then, on September 12, 1956, Saxton was stopped in a return with Basilio. Although Saxton had been banned from fighting in New York State due to his underworld associations, Julius Helfand, Chairman of the New York State Athletic Commission, convinced that Basilio could not get a fair shake in Chicago or Philadelphia—or anywhere else, for that matter—consented to stage the bout in Syracuse despite his animosity toward the "mobster" element.

A 2-1 favorite, Saxton was feisty and competitive in the early rounds, but Basilio, relentless as always, wore his opponent down with a body attack. By the eighth round, Saxton had been pounded to a near stand still. Referee Al Berl intervened in the ninth with Saxton reeling helplessly around the ring, blood streaming from a split lip. "I cut him, I banged him, I hit him real hard, took all the fight out of him," recalled Basilio, boiling a prizefight down to its brutal essence.

Basilio regains title with 9th round stoppage

Five months later, a third—and unnecessary—match with Basilio lasted only two rounds before Saxton was bludgeoned to the canvas. "When Saxton fell," reported John C. Nichols, "it was obvious that he was out. Indeed, it appeared that he would never be able to move before he was counted out, though he surprised everyone by getting to his feet again." Saxton rose, but–in what can easily be read as a symbol for the black days to come–was too wobbly to continue.

From 1956 to 1962 Saxton lived through the kind of nightmare scenario Kafka might have dreamed up. But even before he lost his title and slipped into despair, there had been signs of erratic behavior. In June 1954, for example, Saxton was arrested for threatening his wife, Vivian, with a loaded gun only three months after the couple had exchanged wedding vows. Only a few months prior to his rematch with Basilio, in June 1956, Saxton was arrested for an early, if peculiar, example of road rage when he attacked two waiters sitting in a car double-parked on a Queens street. Unable to squeeze past the offending vehicle, Saxton decided to play traffic cop with a baseball bat and a lug wrench. "BOXER IN NONTITLE BOUT" read the headline in The New York Times. Charges were later dropped.

If his personal life was pandemonium, the boxing ring offered no relief. In his first fight after the loss to Basilio, Saxton was knocked down twice and stopped by old foil Joe Miceli in four rounds. His advisor, Ben Stamper, summed it up concisely: "He just seemed to fall apart all at once." Saxton was next knocked out in a non-sanctioned match with a New Jersey state trooper on a roadside in Newark. Stopped for a traffic offense, Saxton claimed that the officer had insulted his wife and that he had emerged from his car to defend her honor. He was dropped by a single blow—a "sucker right" as Saxton put it—and became a running joke for newspapers along the eastern seaboard.

Saxton remained idle for a year before returning to score an unpopular decision over clubfighter (and previous victim) Barry Allison on October 10, 1958. A points loss to undefeated Denny Moyer followed, and, in his last fight, Saxton was bludgeoned by Willie Green in four rounds. The strange career of Johnny Saxton was over. He was 28 years old.

In retirement Saxton, a high school dropout, found himself adrift. And broke. He got a job as a dockworker to make ends meet. Like many boxers from similarly bereft backgrounds who suddenly hit the big time, Saxton spent his tens and twenties as if they had expiration dates stamped on the back of them. After the parties and the His and Hers Cadillacs, it was the IRS, patron boogieman of prizefighters, who relieved Saxton of his house in Flushing and an apartment building he co-owned in Harlem. After losing his job on the waterfront, Saxton became increasingly depressed. "I used to take these long walks," he told sportswriter Dale Shaw. "Vivian told me to get some help, to do something. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't fight. I was troubled."

On March 4, 1959 Saxton proved just how troubled he was when he was arrested on a burglary charge that netted him $5.20 and an "orlan" cape. Saxton jumped from a second-story fire escape and tried to dash down an alleyway to freedom, but he was caught and subdued by three police officers in a ferocious scrum. He languished in the bullpen for a few days before his bail was anonymously posted, and, after being released, walked the streets of Harlem with sunglasses to avoid being recognized. By then Vivian, unable to endure his volatile ways any longer, had left him.

On April 4 1959, Saxton was arrested for burglarizing a five-and-dime store in Atlantic City. Another scuffle with the police ended with Saxton being handcuffed and hauled to prison in tears. Saxton would later claim that he was hoping to be shot by the pursuing officers in a fruitless attempt at "Suicide By Cop." Nothing, not even the awful fulfillment of a death wish, seemed to be going right for Saxton. In prison he attempted to hang himself with a makeshift noose made of socks in a second pathetic suicide attempt whose failure could only have been another blow to his shaky sense of self. After being cut down from his useless gallows, Saxton became "hysterical," and when his volatile behavior continued, he was sent to Ancora State Hospital in New Jersey.

"When I came here," he told Robert Stewart Gordon during his stay in Ancora, "I wanted to get out of life. I knew I couldn't fight no more. I was supposed to have got big money from fighting on TV, but I never saw it. No one ever gave me more than a couple of hundred dollars at a time. Now I'm here in the hospital. That's what boxing did for me." After two years of therapy and psychotropic drugs, Saxton was released. The former welterweight champion of the world returned to New York City, rented a furnished room in Brooklyn, and geared up for another round with the legal system.

In 1962 District Attorney Frank D. O'Connor of the Queens County Courthouse dismissed outstanding charges against Saxton after he had been declared "punch-drunk and legally insane" at the time of his arrest. By contrast, in Atlantic City, the court ruled Saxton fit for trial even though Dr. Harry Brunt, medical director of Ancora, reported that Saxton "had the mentality of a 10 year-old child" and that his brain appeared to be one quarter damaged. Charges were eventually dropped in New Jersey as well, and Saxton shuffled into a new life. "It was hustle and bustle ever since I quit fighting," he lamented in 1964.
Over the years Saxton lived the patchwork life of many down-and-out fighters. He worked as a "floor manager" at a nightclub; he volunteered for a youth program in Harlem; occasionally he trained an aspiring fighter; he spent time as a security guard at the Brownsville Community Center in Brooklyn; here and there he gave private boxing lessons. By the 1990s he was found living in squalor in a New York City apartment sans electricity. Eventually he wound up in a retirement home in Lake Worth, Florida, where he was diagnosed, for the second time in his life, with dementia—this time the pugilistic kind.

Although his career was marred by smoke and mirrors, there is no doubt that Johnny Saxton was a talented boxer. His achievements as an amateur are particularly impressive. At the time Saxton was dominating the amateur ranks boxing was still the #2 sport in America, and hundreds—perhaps thousands—of tough youngsters competed every year for amateur trophies in the late 1940s. In the end, however, it seems that he was willing to cut corners in order to achieve success and, ultimately, a sense of distinction.

Not many fighters had kind words for Blinky Palermo. Johnny Saxton, on the other hand, although left nearly penniless despite earning several large paydays during his career, never showed bitterness about the man of whom Coley Wallace once said: "He ruined boxing for me." In 1955 Saxton issued a strange and ambiguous statement to the press after being singled out by Julius Hefland for consorting with unsavory types: "Since my first professional fight in 1949 Frank Palermo has been my manager, friend, and adviser. He has been honest

and trustworthy in every dealing we have had during my career. I now hold the welterweight championship of the world. I am going along with Palermo."

Blinky Palermo

Even after his career was over and his life was in shambles, Saxton was magnanimous about his former manager. By then Palermo was already serving a long prison sentence for his various crimes against boxers and boxing. "I blame myself," Saxton told Dale Shaw. "What I wanted, I wanted. What I wanted, I got, man. From the beginning. Right from the beginning." What Saxton wanted more than anything was to be like his idols Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson. Perhaps he wanted to be like them too much.

W.C. Heinz once related an interesting story, one with an O. Henry twist, about Sugar Ray Robinson. "One afternoon I got to the gym early," he wrote, "and over in a big corner, in the half light, I saw Robinson working on the big bag. I stood there and marveled at his natural grace, the speed and fluidity with which he turned on his variety of combinations. It seemed to me that at the age of thirty he looked better than ever, and then he stopped and turned around. It was Johnny Saxton. . ."

Saxton fought professionally from 1949 to 1958 and retired with a record of 55-9-2. He was, despite the half-light, a good boxer. For a little while, as welterweight champion of the world, he managed to shuck off bleak anonymity. He died on October 4, 2008 at the age of 78.

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Carlos Acevedo's work has appeared in Boxing Digest Magazine, MaxBoxing.com, Boxing World Magazine, and Boxing Insider. He is a member of the International Boxing Research Organization (IBRO) and a full member of the Boxing Writers Association of America. He is also the American Editor for ESQUINA and a contributor to Undisputed Fight Magazine. In addition to The Cruelest Sport, he also runs another boxing website, The Living Daylights.