

# Walter McGowan: Scottish Boxing Master, Dies at 73

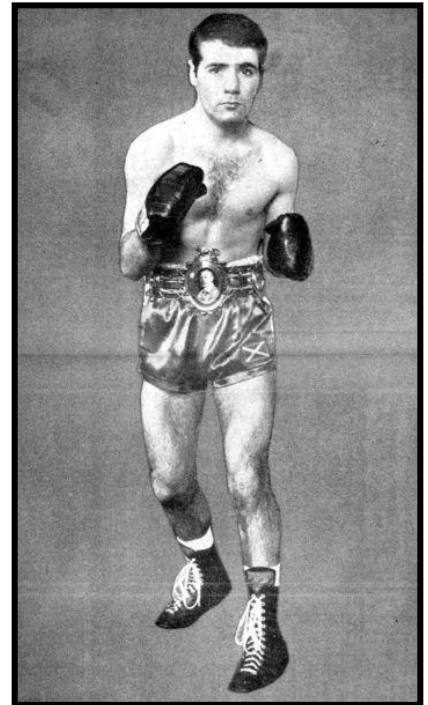
by Mike Casey

In the sixties, when Walter McGowan was in his pomp and charming us with his deft boxing skills, there was still a great appreciation of the little men of boxing.

McGowan's peaceful death at Monklands Hospital in Scotland on Monday night February 15, 2016 at the age of 73 reminds us of a simpler and richer time in the fight game when we could recite boxing's weight divisions and world champions off by heart.

Wee Walter was the world flyweight champion in 1966 when that great division was the anchor point of the weight classes for men not weighing over 112 pounds. There was nothing below it in the way of light flyweights, minimumweights or tiddly piddly weights and the only thing above it was the bantamweight division.

With silky skills, speed and great movement, Walter McGowan was a wonderful boxer, and I do place a special emphasis on the word 'boxer.' McGowan wasn't a knockout artist and his professional record of 32-7-1 looks modest now when compared to the inflated records of today. Yet Walter, from Burnbank in Scotland, fought a succession of world-class flyweights and bantamweights with great success despite an unfortunate susceptibility to cuts. His two world flyweight championship matches with Thailand's Chartchai Chionoi were both bloody affairs and on each occasion it was McGowan's spilt blood that decided the outcome. The unlucky Scot was leading both fights when his cuts forced the referee's intervention.



The omens were good for Walter when he turned professional in 1961. How could he fail with a father named Joe Gans? Dad Thomas McGowan, who had also been a professional, was such a fan of Gans that he fought under the Old Master's name.

Walter McGowan made steady and impressive progress through the ranks after winning his debut against George McDade at the Kelvin Hall in Glasgow. After losing his third fight to Jackie Brown on a points decision for the Scottish Area flyweight title, McGowan came of age and improved impressively with each fight as he won eleven in a row on his way to a European title challenge against Salvatore Burrini in Rome in April 1964. McGowan lost on points over 15 rounds, but the two little men would clash again for the world championship two years later when revenge would be sweet for the Scottish maestro.

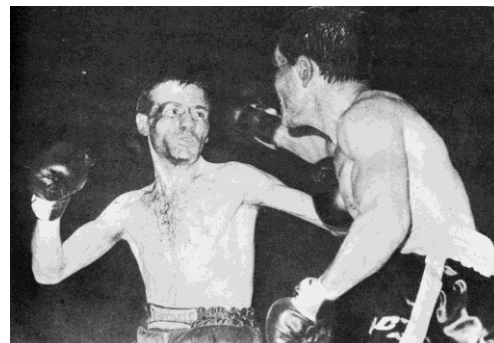
McGowan kept winning in the meantime but then had a frustrating end to his 1965 campaign when he bit off more than he could chew in his London match with dangerous Mexican bantamweight, Joe Medel. The tough and worldly Medel hit too hard for Walter and knew too many tricks as he stopped the Scot in six rounds. In his next fight, Walter suffered another reverse as a cut eye canceled out his lead against American Ronnie Jones and forced a sixth round stoppage.

In his final bout of that year, McGowan was once more left to gnash his teeth when he was only given a draw against Tommaso Galli in a challenge for the Italian's European bantamweight crown. Walter just couldn't help picking on the big men and the good times were just around the corner.

## Summer

The summer of 1966 proved to be a treasure haul for the Scottish wizard as he hit two jackpots in successive fights. In June, at the Empire Pool in Wembley, he met old Salvatore Burrini who had since lifted the world flyweight championship and was looking to achieve a double success over McGowan.

The Scot had other ideas and boxed superbly to win the decision and the crown, though not without an almighty fright. A badly gashed eye caused referee Harry Gibbs to take a long and seemingly endless look at the injury in the seventh round before allowing McGowan to fight on. And how the little Scot fought, using his jab superbly, striking home with flashing rights and staying out of harm's way with some nimble footwork.



*McGowan (left) en route to winning flyweight title on points from Salvatore Burruni*

Two months later, I had a good feeling about Walter's somewhat impudent challenge for the British Empire title held by another splendid and plucky boxer in Liverpool's Alan Rudkin. I was only 11 years old and what does an 11-year-old kid know? It seemed that Walter always got his fingers burned when he tackled the bantams, and the tough Rudkin had given world champion Fighting Harada a terrific contest in Tokyo the year before. But I stuck by my guns and picked Walter to win. He did indeed win by a razor thin and hotly disputed decision. On that occasion, to be fair, it was McGowan who got lucky, but it was a truly wonderful scrap of skill and wits.

Walter was sailing along and heading for an unblemished year when things suddenly went wrong in the heat of Bangkok in December. Defending his world flyweight championship against Chartchai Chionoi, McGowan's vulnerability to bad cuts once again struck and ruined his chances.

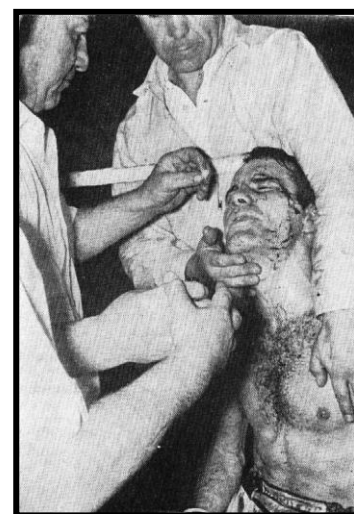
The Associated Press reported: "Thailand's Chartchai Chionoi Friday night became boxing's new world flyweight champion by stopping defending champion Walter McGowan of Britain by a TKO in the 50th second of the 9th round of their 15 round title bout. The fight was stopped because McGowan was bleeding freely from the nose. A ringside doctor declared McGowan unfit to continue. McGowan's nose started bleeding in the 2nd round after Chartchai landed a right on his face.

"McGowan was bleeding slightly at the start of the 9th. After the first exchange of blows, McGowan's nose bled profusely when the Thai swung a fast left at his face. McGowan bent over, covering his blood-covered face with his hands, and walked back slowly to his corner. His manager jumped into the ring to assist him while the doctor followed."

Walter's dad Joe Gans had no protests about the stoppage, telling reporters, "The referee did the right thing. I would never have let it go another round myself. Walter was winning, but I would have stopped it."

Chionoi was a fierce and talented scrapper, who gave his all for king and country in a land where honor and commitment is everything. The King of Thailand even personally intervened after arguments between Chionoi and his father led to the distressed boxer banging his head violently against a wall in frustration.

McGowan got the defeat out of his system by reeling off three straight wins before his eagerly awaited rematch with Chionoi at Wembley in September 1967. Surely the cuts bugbear couldn't strike again. Walter would win this time! But watching the fight on television with my father proved to be a painful experience.



*McGowan's corner works feverishly to try and stem the flow of blood from his left eye*

Re-reading the United Press International report on the bout just a few days ago brought it all back to me: "Chartchai Chionoi of Thailand retained his world flyweight title Tuesday night when his fight with Scotland's Walter McGowan was stopped in the 7th round because of a fearsome cut above the Scot's left eye. Referee Ike Powell of Wales stopped the 15

rounder at 1:12 of the 7th as blood pumped from McGowan's face. The injury was sustained in the 5th when the Thai scrapper connected with an overhand right.

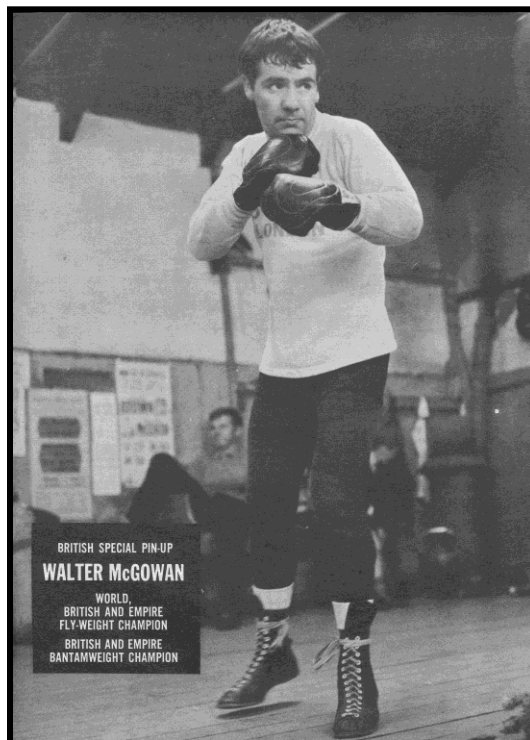
"The Scot, realizing that he had to win by KO, threw everything into a furious charge in the 5th and 6th rounds. McGowan came out for the 7th, still looking for the KO, but the first punch he received on the injury produced another flow of blood and Powell stepped between the two fighters. Chionoi was made to miss badly but he was dangerous at close quarters and also tough. McGowan appeared to be cruising home until he decided to mix it and that was his downfall."

## Discernible

Slowly, though with no discernible decline of his skills, Walter McGowan's career began to wind down. It was eight months before he fought again and this time he couldn't beat Alan Rudkin in their rematch at the King's Hall in Manchester. The verdict went to Alan and would go down as the last defeat of Walter's fine career.

It was a career that had a somewhat curious and tame conclusion in the form of six straight wins against fairly modest opponents. In November 1969, after an eight rounds points win over Domenico Chiloiro at Grosvenor House in Mayfair, London, Walter hung up his gloves.

Walter McGowan was an honorable successor to former world Scottish champions Johnny Hill, Benny Lynch and Jackie Paterson. How good was Wee Walter? At his best, and when luck was with him, his pure skill could take people's breath away. His 1965 points victory over Felix Brami was a near faultless boxing masterclass. In 1966, when Walter mesmerized Nevio Carbi to defeat in six rounds, ringsider and former triple world champion Barney Ross couldn't find sufficient praise for the little Scottish wizard.



On hearing of McGowan's death, promoter Alex Morrison said, "People talk about legends but Walter really was a Scottish boxing legend."

***Mike Casey is a Boxing.com features writer and Founder & Editor of ALL TIME BOXING at <https://sites.google.com/site/alltimeboxingrankings>. He is a freelance journalist and boxing historian and a member of the International Boxing Research Organization (IBRO).***