

THE RING MAGAZINE
APRIL 2004

'40s FLYWEIGHT CHAMPION RINTY MONAGHAN

Win Or Lose, He Left Irish Eyes Smiling

By Patrick Myler

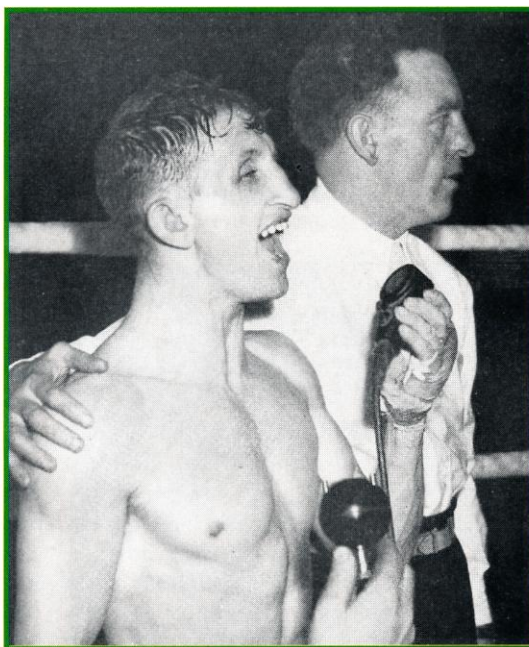
In any consideration of the best value-for-money fighters in history, Rinty Monaghan must be near the top of the list. Who else but the chirpy little Irishman, after a hard 15-round world title fight, gave the audience an extra treat by taking the mike and breaking into song?

The fact that he could find such surplus energy becomes more amazing when it's remembered that, for the last few years of his career, he was suffering from a chest ailment that hampered his breathing and would force him to retire in 1950 while still world flyweight champion.

It had gotten to the point that, if Monaghan didn't give his full-voiced rendition of "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling," and maybe "Hello, Patsy Fagan" as an encore, the fans would feel cheated. So, no matter how much pain or exhaustion he was suffering, he made sure he always sent them home happy.

But Monaghan was always an entertainer. From the time he started slinging punches for pay at the tender age of 14 to performing his cabaret act right up to the time of his death at 63, he could always be relied upon to put on a show.

"If I was starting all over again, I think I would try to be a top entertainer rather than a fighter," he once said. "Nevertheless, I can't grumble. Life really has been a load of laughs for me. I was only



Win or lose, Monaghan always serenaded the crowd after his bouts, frequently with "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling." After his career was over the popular Irish fighter had a cabaret act, singing and doing impressions.

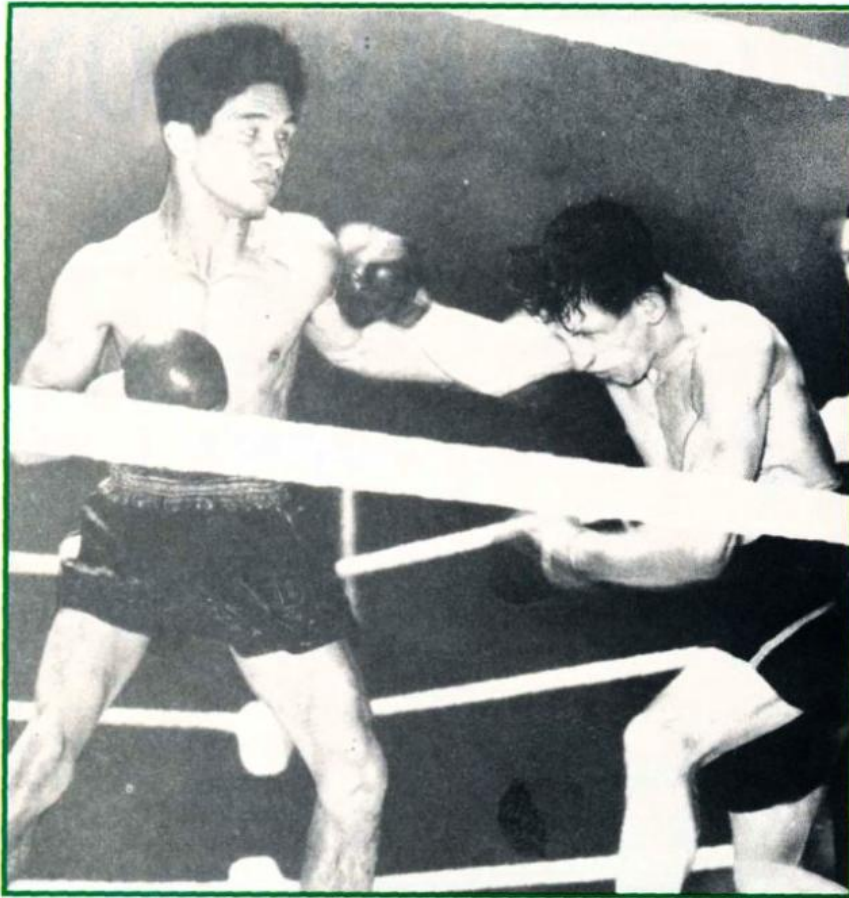
serious when I stepped into the ring."

Life, however, wasn't too much fun for Monaghan's parents, who struggled to provide for a hungry brood of 13 children,

eight girls and five boys, in the grim, dockside area of Belfast where they lived. The future world champion, born on August 21, 1920, was christened John Joseph. It was his grandmother who called him Rinty, because of his love for movies starring the wonder dog Rin Tin Tin.

Schooling was rudimentary and, at 13, he was put to work in the famous Belfast shipyards, where generations had toiled to turn out mighty ocean-going vessels, including the ill-fated Titanic. Monaghan sought the hardest physical jobs to build up his muscles and used up whatever spare energy he had at a local amateur boxing club. Encouraged by his father, a former Royal Marine who had boxed as a lightweight, he enjoyed the lively sparring sessions. He never had an amateur contest, and signed as a professional before his 15th birthday with Frank McAloran, a former Irish featherweight champion. The close relationship with his manager lasted throughout his 16-year career.

By the age of 18, Monaghan weighed just 105 pounds, but was regularly facing opponents at or above the flyweight limit of 112 pounds. Nonetheless, his busy, aggressive style took him through his first 33 fights with only one defeat, to Jim Keery, and four



Monaghan lands a right to Dado Marino's shoulder during their 1947 bout that the Irishman won via controversial decision. The victory earned him a version of the flyweight title, but it wasn't until Monaghan beat Jackie Paterson the following year that he was universally recognized as champion.

draws. His progress came to a sudden halt when Jackie Paterson, a hard-hitting Scottish southpaw, arrived in Belfast to knock out the local favorite in five rounds. It was a huge shock, as it was the 17-year-old Paterson's second professional contest.

To celebrate his debut as a top-of-the-bill performer, Monaghan had bought a lurid silk dressing gown, and a great cheer greeted him as he bounced into the ring and leapt around in his usual prefight display. For four rounds, the Belfastman dazzled his opponent with his speed and shots from all angles, but he got cocky and was caught with a superb left hook that put him flat on his back. Up at nine, but out on his feet, he was dropped by another left for the full count. It would be the only time Paterson, who would go on to precede him as world flyweight champion, would emerge victorious in their three encounters.

Nineteen days later, Monaghan was back in action to convincingly outscore Joe Curran, who would last 15 rounds with Paterson in a British title bout eight years

later. Curran put up such a game display in Belfast that English promoter Johnny Best enticed the Irishman to travel to Liverpool, Curran's hometown, for a rematch. Monaghan left nothing to chance, stiffening Curran in the fifth round.

As with all European boxers of the period, Monaghan's ring campaign was badly affected by Adolf Hitler's reign of terror. Throughout World War II, he boxed just eight times, winning four, losing three, and drawing one. He did his bit serving with the Merchant Navy, during which his ship was torpedoed, then as an ambulance driver for Belfast's Civil Defense, and finally, to his great joy, as a member of ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association), which entailed traveling all over Europe helping to keep up troop morale.

When the war was over, Monaghan considered taking up a show business career. As a member of a group called The Three Hillbillies, he sang to the accompaniment of his pals on the guitar and harmonica and did impressions of popular

personalities of the day. But boxing remained his first love.

Soon he was back to his rigid training routine, which included working on a farm, climbing up steep Cave Hill, just outside the city, chopping down trees, swallowing raw eggs, and washing them down with a pint of goat's milk. Then, in the evenings, he would train at manager McAloran's downtown gym.

Boxing boomed in post-war Belfast and promoter Bob Gardiner delightedly put up the "house full" signs on November 6, 1945, when Monaghan took on Eddie "Bunty" Doran for the vacant Northern Ireland flyweight title. Rinty knocked his local rival cold in the fourth round, and the celebrations only ended late that night when the champion sang from his bedroom window to the huge crowd gathered outside his home in Little Corporation Street. Rated number 10 in the world by THE RING back in 1939, he had been dropped for inactivity, but was now up to number four.

In April '46, Monaghan was coming up to 26 and knew that lost time had to be made up if he was to achieve the fistic fame he had always dreamed about. His opportunity came when Paterson, now world champion, was enticed over to Belfast for a return match. Rinty got his revenge—but not the title. The scheduled 10-rounder was at a catch weight, as the Scot was known to be struggling to meet the 112-pound flyweight limit. Paterson was forced to retire with a badly cut eye after seven rounds.

"It was generally conceded that I was well ahead on points and that I outpunched and outfought Paterson," Monaghan later recalled. "After the fight I obliged the crowd with a song, but for once I made a bad blunder."

The song he chose was "Broken Hearted Clown," a real party favorite guaranteed to have guests weeping into their drinks, and the many Scots in the audience took it as a slur on their defeated hero. Monaghan's next fight was against Alec Murphy in Glasgow, and the locals made clear their animosity to the Irishman before and after his points win.

"I never had the slightest intention of hurting Jackie's feelings," Monaghan explained. "In the exciting atmosphere I had simply sung the first song that came into my head. I didn't realize its implications until it was too late."



Monaghan poses with his wife, Frances, and their three children outside of their home in Belfast, Northern Ireland (above). Monaghan was a huge favorite in Belfast and his fans covered the walls of his neighborhood with graffiti in his honor (below).

Now rated top contender by THE RING, he was sure his world title chance would come. Much to his annoyance, he heard that Paterson would make his next defense in Glasgow against Dado Marino of Hawaii. As there was some doubt about the champion's ability to make the stipulated poundage, Monaghan was engaged to stand by in case he was needed as a substitute. A week before the scheduled date, he was told he would not be needed, so he went on holiday, indulging his voracious appetite on his standby pay.

Back in Scotland to watch the world title bout, he was enjoying a hearty meal in a restaurant when the news got out that Paterson had collapsed just before the weigh-in and wouldn't be able to fight. A search party organized by the frantic promoter found the Irishman and hurried him to the scales. Well over weight and in no

fit condition to face a fully trained, highly ranked opponent, he nevertheless agreed to go ahead with the non-title contest before a sellout crowd at Ibrox Park, home of the Glasgow Rangers football club. In a farcical affair, Monaghan mauled and spoiled against a frustrated Marino until, in the ninth round, he was disqualified for persistent holding.

Top British promoter Jack Solomons then stepped into the picture. He had seen Monaghan make a sensational London debut by halting Terry Allen in a single round and then outpointing French champion Emile Famechon. Solomons paired Monaghan with Marino over 15 rounds on October 20, 1947, and advertised the contest as being for the vacant world flyweight title, taking it for granted that Paterson would never again make 112 pounds.

Paterson, however, was a proud champion and was not prepared to concede defeat. He obtained a court order preventing the British Boxing Board of Control from recognizing anyone else as champion or approving any contest not involving him as being for the title.

So the Monaghan-Marino fight went ahead with just America's National Boxing Association and the Irish Boxing Board of Control accepting it as being for the world title. After a dull encounter, enlightened briefly when the Hawaiian scored an 11th-round knockdown, Rinty's hand was raised by referee Teddy Waltham, the sole





Nat Fleischer, editor and publisher of THE RING, presents Monaghan with his championship belt.

arbiter, as the winner on points. He had done most of the leading while Marino, keeping a tight defense, tried to steal the points with late rallies in each round. The 10,700 spectators at London's Harringay Arena only came to life when the Irishman gave his customary rendition of "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling," which drew sustained applause.

Back in Belfast, no one fell asleep as the radio commentators tried their best to make the dire affair sound interesting. Nor did anyone care that Monaghan was only a partial world champion. Bonfires were lit all around the fighter's home as crowds sang and danced in celebration of his victory. More relieved than excited was Monaghan's wife, Frances, who was so nervous that she spent the entire duration of the contest pacing up and down outside her sister's house while other family members sat inside glued to the radio. Only when someone rushed out to tell her that her husband had won did she permit a smile.

The only way the disputed championship could be settled was for Monaghan

and Paterson to meet in the ring. The British Board gave the Scot six months to agree to the match or forfeit his claim. Bob Gardiner scooped his promotional rivals by signing the pair to meet at the King's Hall, Belfast, on March 23, 1948. His only worry was that Paterson would be unable to make the flyweight limit. Jackie did, but at terrible cost.

On the day of the fight, Monaghan weighed in at a pound inside the limit, but there was no sign of Paterson. He had been due in Belfast the day before, but failed to show. Reporters were getting ready to write their stories that the fight was off when Jackie swept through the doors and stepped onto the scales. Looking pale and drawn, he made the weight with four ounces to spare. It was later revealed that he had spent the previous night playing cards in front of a roaring fire, smothered in heavy sweaters, in a desperate bid to lose the excess poundage. He left it to the last minute to catch a plane.

Monaghan, while aware that his opponent would be weak after his ordeal, remembered the damage that Paterson had done with his big punch in their first encounter and started cautiously. In the second round, however, he saw an opening



Monaghan walks Beauty the goat in the countryside outside of Belfast where he trained. Monaghan always drank goat's milk when training for a big match.

and dropped the Scot with a swift hook. Paterson survived and even had Monaghan on the run in the next round after shaking him with a right.

By the seventh round, however, Paterson was weakening badly, and a terrific right bounced him off the canvas. Lurching up groggily at eight, he was driven into a corner by the fury of Monaghan's attack. Propped up by the ropes, he took a ferocious pounding before sliding slowly to the floor to be counted out. After the now undisputed world flyweight champion took the mike for his usual party piece, Belfast again went mad. Fans marched from the arena to pull down fences near his home and light bonfires that blazed right through the night.

The first home-based Irishman ever to win a world title also picked up Paterson's British and British Empire crowns. He added the European championship to his collection in his first world title defense, against Maurice Sandeyron, again in Belfast. A top-form Monaghan was a clear points winner after 15 hard rounds against the durable Frenchman. It was noticeable, however, that he tired badly toward the end, and ringsiders could plainly hear his wheezes and sharp intakes of breath. Still he managed to perform his "Irish Eyes" act for his loyal supporters.

After a non-title points win over Italian Otello Belardinelli, Monaghan put all four of his prizes at stake against London barrow boy Terry Allen in Belfast on September 30, 1949. Little did anyone realize beforehand it would be the Irishman's last ring appearance.

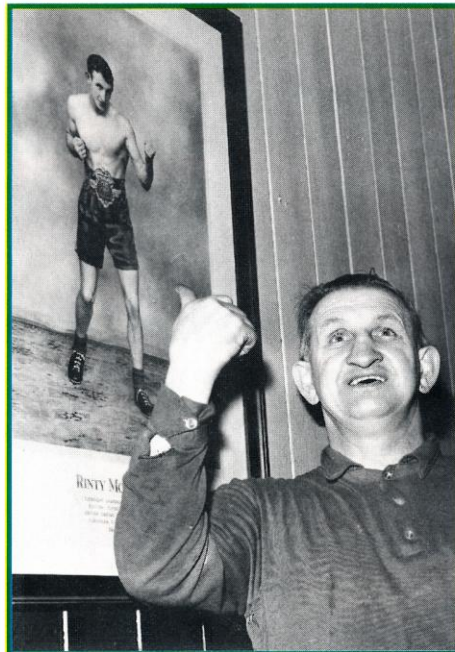
Allen had qualified for his big chance by outscoring Monaghan in a non-title bout seven months earlier, avenging his quick defeat by the Irishman in 1947. He brought over a big crowd of supporters from London to the King's Hall for his championship bid and had them roaring expectantly when he dropped the champion in the second round. But Allen failed to follow up his advantage and generally gave a disappointing performance.

Monaghan, clearly having difficulty



Monaghan, who suffered from chronic bronchitis, gasps for breath as arch-rival Terry Allen advances. They fought three times, with each winning once and the final meeting ending in a draw.

with his breathing, fought well in patches, but sought frequent rests in clinches. At the end of 15 tedious rounds, referee Sam Russell thought neither man had done enough to win and declared a draw. The



Three years before his death in 1984, Monaghan points to a photograph of himself during his championship days. Thousands lined the streets of Belfast for Rinty's funeral.

home crowd thought their man had been robbed and a threatened riot was only averted when Monaghan vocalized that Irish eyes were still smiling. Despite the unsatisfactory result, he was still champion.

On April 25, 1950, Monaghan announced his retirement due to chronic bronchitis. Almost 30, he stepped down as undefeated world flyweight champion and with a 51-9-6 (20) record. Two years later, he wanted to make a comeback, but was refused a license by the British Boxing Board of Control.

A happy-go-lucky character who couldn't resist a hard-luck story, Monaghan had little to show for his years in the ring, but he readily accepted that he would have to go on working to provide a living for his wife and four children. He drove a cab and then a truck while raking in some extra cash as an entertainer. Not all his stage performances were for pay.

Charity organizers never had to ask him twice and, as well as his singing, his Popeye and Olive Oyl impressions always brought the house down.

Failing health curtailed his cabaret work in his later years, but he was a familiar figure on big fight nights in Belfast and he was always ready to give useful advice to promising youngsters.

When Rinty died on March 3, 1984, thousands lined the streets of Belfast for the funeral. Father Myles Murray told the congregation in St. Patrick's Catholic Church, Donegall Street: "He brought good news. He was a gentleman, loved by many. That is what life is all about, touching people, bringing joy and happiness, making friends."

Terry Allen, who won the vacant world title on Monaghan's retirement and then lost it four months later to Dado Marino, said: "Rinty was a fascinating character. We were rivals in the ring, but like brothers out of it. He always seemed to be happy and made everyone in his presence happy. A great champion and a great sportsman." ■

Patrick Myler is a freelance writer based in Dublin, Ireland, who has written several books on boxing and is an occasional contributor to this magazine.

Two years ago, a 10ft high bronze statue of Monaghan, stripped for fighting but holding a mike as he sings 'Irish Eyes are Smiling', was erected in Cathedral Gardens, in Belfast city center, close to where he grew up. Among those at the unveiling was former WBA and IBF titleholder Carl Frampton, who observed: 'Rinty inspired generations of Belfast boxers. When he was world champion there was only one and everyone knew him. Now boxing is full of alphabet titles and no one knows who the world champion is.' 7/25/2017