

The odyssey of Orlan Ott

By Pete Ehrmann

On April 4, 1949, after his fourth defeat in 18 professional fights, heavyweight Orlan Ott was advised by the Illinois boxing commission to find a safer way to make a living.

Three of the losses were by KO, and the last two had each left the 27-year-old native of Hartley, Iowa out cold for five minutes.

“Look, it isn’t as if you were going anyplace in boxing,” commission chairman Joe Triner told Ott. “Be honest with yourself. If you had the talent to be a great boxer, it would be different. But you don’t have the talent and you’ll never go anywhere.”

Ten years earlier and with a mere eight amateur bouts under his belt, Ott was proclaimed Iowa’s Great White Hope and a future threat to heavyweight champion Joe Louis. Two months after he stepped into the ring for the first time, Ott kayoed two opponents in the 1939 Golden Gloves Tournament of Champions at Chicago Stadium, and despite losing in the quarter-finals was heralded by well known boxing trainer Lou Gross as “the best prospect I’ve seen in the Golden Gloves” since Louis himself won the national tournament as a light heavyweight five years before.



“That farmer boy can take a good belt, can sock and likes to fight,” enthused Gross.

Even Grantland Rice boomed the Hawkeye tyro in his newspaper column. “The fighter who can handle Joe Louis is still some years away,” he wrote in the spring of ’39. “One entry may be Orlan Ott of Iowa. Ott will be 18 years old in May. He is six feet four, weighing 207 pounds... Western experts who know their way around write me that he is the most promising kid boxer they’ve yet seen. He knows how to handle himself and has already made amazing forward strides. The kid has tremendous hands and can hit with either. He is being well handled and within a year you’ll hear more about him.”

In 1940 Ott made the semi-finals of the Golden Gloves Tournament of Champions, and that summer thousands turned out to see the boxing prodigy in amateur fights around Iowa. On August 11 a capacity crowd of 4,000 at Riverview Park in Des Moines was stunned almost as much as Ott when he was knocked down five times in two rounds and lost by TKO to local heavyweight Don Turner.

For the next three years Ott forsook the ring and played tackle on Morningside College’s football team. In ’44 he was an aviation cadet training at Chase Field in Texas, and when Corpus Christi hosted its first Golden Gloves tournament Ott entered, won the heavyweight title and returned to Chicago Stadium for the Tournament of Champions.

He won four bouts (three by KO) to advance to the finals, and won the championship by defeating Ragon Kinney on points.

The Orlan Ott bandwagon was off and running again.

“We saw a young heavyweight in Chicago’s Tournament of Champions who may be destined to become the Gene Tunney of the prize ring when the Allied Nations bring the war to a successful conclusion,” wrote George Barton of the Minneapolis Star Tribune. “Just as Tunney came out of the First World War to win the world’s heavyweight championship from Jack Dempsey, so Aviation Cadet Orlan Ott may emerge from the Second World War to defeat Joe Louis... The young Iowa giant moves around the ring with the speed and grace of a middleweight. He is a clever boxer and a sharp and punishing hitter with both fists.”

A few months later Ott won his wings and the rank of Ensign, and for the duration of the war was pilot of a torpedo squadron at Pearl Harbor and Guam. On the eve of the '46 Golden Gloves Tournament of Champions, a headline in the Chicago Tribune warned, "Orlan Ott is back; watch out, heavies!" He won three fights, but in the semi-finals lasted only two minutes against eventual champion Joe Frucci. "Ott was on his feet but he did not know what was going on when Referee (Dave) Miller stepped between the two boys ending the unmerciful beating of the lowan," reported the Des Moines Register.

In early '48 Ott won his first three pro fights before Joe Dawson (2-2) stopped him in 47 seconds at Chicago's Marigold Gardens. Ott took Dawson out in a rematch and scored two more knockouts before facing Enrico Bertola on June 1. Heavyweight champion of Italy, Bertola had won 26 of 32 bouts but hadn't been made much of an impression since invading the States that year.

He made a big one against Ott, decking him three times and knocking him out in 1:08 of round one. It was five minutes before Ott regained consciousness, and mindful of the death of Sam Baroudi after he was stopped by Ezzard Charles at Chicago Stadium the previous February, the commission doctor ordered Ott to the hospital for overnight observation.

The Iowa White Hope knocked out his next four opponents, lost a 10-round decision to 6-0 Bill Roberts, and then scored four more knockouts over nondescript opposition. In January of '49, Ott finally got in the ring with Joe Louis. They were four round exhibition matches, one in Kansas City, the other in Rochester, Minnesota, and the headline in the Des Moines Register about the first — "Ott tries hard – Louis smiles" — applies to the second as well.

On March 16, 1949, former heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey told Frank Mastro of the Chicago Tribune, "I've got a fighter on the card in the Stadium March 25, an Austrian named Jo Weiden. Of course, he's no champion, but he's a good belter. He is six feet one inches tall, weighs 208 pounds and is 23 years old... I don't know whom he will fight next week, but somebody's going to get knocked out. I feel sorry for the lad who's going to have to take Jo's punches."

For two rounds Weiden was the pitiable one as Ott punched him bloody. But in the third round a roundhouse Weiden right put the lowan out for five minutes, and at their next weekly meeting the Illinois commissioners laid it on the line.

"You can take only so many of those knockout punches," Joe Triner told Ott. "The doctor said you were a poor risk. We don't want to see anything happen to a nice clean fellow like you. That's why we earnestly implore you to seek another form of employment."

He was driving a gravel truck back in Iowa the following October when Enrico Bertola died of a cerebral hemorrhage after a 10-round beating by Lee Oma.

Iowa's Great White Hope raised a family, belonged to the American Legion, was an usher at his church, and when he died last January 14 in Waterloo, Iowa, was 95 years old.

Take a bow, Joe Triner & Co.

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Pete Ehrmann's work as a boxing journalist/historian over the past 40 plus years speaks for itself. Pete's first by-line appeared in The Ring magazine at age 14, and ever since he has written about the sport (and other matters) for newspapers, magazines and websites. Pete has been a valuable member of the IBRO since April 2013.