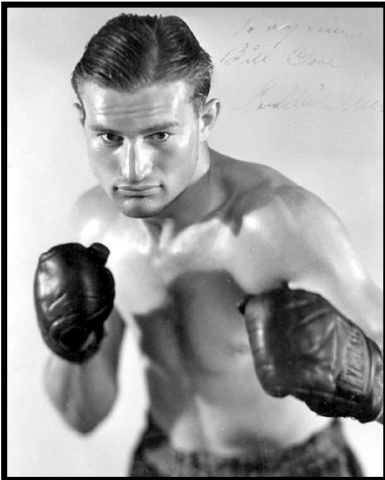


FREDDIE STEELE ... "RED HOT CHILI PEP"

By Tracy Callis (The CyberBoxingZone)



One quick glimpse of Freddie Steele and you had the feeling that he could hit - and hit he could! The man could light it up with blows that exploded like sticks of dynamite.

A man with an athletic build, lean but muscular, well-coordinated, agile and strong, that was Freddie. He was good-looking, popular and athletic. All the girls liked him and the guys did too.

Writer George Tickell (1937 p 24) called Freddie, "... a pugilist who is at once a polished boxer and battler equipped with a devastating wallop. But Steele, when in action, shapes up both as a scientist and fighter whom it is a pleasure to watch, as he feints an opponent into an opening and crashes his right through a futile guard to a vital spot."

McCallum (1975 p 151) described him, "... chisel-chinned, handsome, was a beautiful thing to see in boxing trunks. Ducking, weaving, moving all the time. Smothering punches with flurries of punches. Hitting with blinding speed. Landing four or five times for one. Blotting out the attack with counterattack. He could Fancy Dan with the best, and blast your head off with either hand."

Steele was a sizzling puncher, bouncy on his feet and an extremely dangerous hitter, who posted a record of 123-5-11 with 58 knockouts/stoppages in his nearly fifteen-year ring career. He also had one "no contest" bout. Thirty-one displays of his sensational punching and early exits came during the first two rounds. During his prime years, he lost only two times. Of his five career losses, three came during his last six contests; he lost his final two matches.

Among his victims were Ceferino Garcia (two times), William "Gorilla" Jones (two times), Fred Apostoli, Vince Dundee, Ken Overlin, Solly Krieger, Gus Lesnevich, "Baby" Joe Gans, Eddie "Babe" Risko (three times), Joe Glick (two times), Frank Battaglia, Carmen Barth, Eddie Ran, Paul Pirrone, Joe Cardoza, Sammy O'Dell, Mike Payan (two times), Andy Divodi (two times), Eddie Murdock, Johnny "Bandit" Romero, Allen Matthews, Ralph Chong, Jackie Aldare, Swede Berglund, Leslie "Wildcat" Carter, Battling Dozier, Young Stuhley (four times), Tommy Herman, Frankie Stetson, Billy Townsend, Babe Marino, Al Gracio (two times), Don Fraser, Jimmy Britt and Tony Portillo (two times). He also fought a draw with William "Gorilla" Jones. (Author's Comment: Steele defeated seven men who held the world title during his career. He always claimed he was at his best against Vince Dundee in 1935.)

Walsh (1993 pp 114-115) stated, "Freddie Steele was perhaps the best American middleweight of the 1930s. A gutsy and talented Irish-American, he overcame appalling luck to win the title." Freddie worked his way through some unfortunate occurrences such

as his father leaving the family when he was an infant, serious kidney problems and an automobile wreck in which the vehicle caught fire, to go on and win the middleweight title.

The Ring (Jun 1936 p 7) stated, "Freddy Steele, although born in Seattle, is accepted by Tacoma fans as their own. He is one of the greatest middleweights to come out of the Northwest. Stepped into the spotlight when he crashed the jaw of Vince Dundee and knocked him out in three rounds. Most of his knockouts have been scored in the early rounds."

DeCristofaro (1982 p 74) wrote, "When only 16, he embarked on a knockout spree and a string of 44 wins without a loss, all of them fought in the Tacoma region. He shifted the action to nearby Seattle where he met his first defeat in a 6-rounder against Tony Portillo. In his next appearance, Freddie redeemed the loss to Portillo, then moved about the West Coast, chalking up 32 more wins in a row that included a second round knockout of future champion Ceferino Garcia ..."

Over the next four years, Freddie garnered wins over some men who would hold a world title at some time in their career - Fred Apostoli, Vince Dundee, William "Gorilla" Jones and Eddie "Babe" Risko. He then gained a second win over Risko, this one for the world middleweight championship. Freddie held the crown for almost two years and defended successfully against William "Gorilla" Jones, Eddie "Babe" Risko, Frank Battaglia and Ken Overlin.

He lost a non-title bout to Fred Apostoli, but quickly followed it with a win over Bob Turner and successfully defended his crown against Carmen Barth. When he balked at fighting Apostoli in defense of his title, the NYSAC took his title and recognized Apostoli. Still holding his NBA recognition, he fought and lost to Al Hostak afterwards.

Bromberg (1958 pp 126-127) contended, "There was a promise of class taking over for a change when Freddie Steele of Tacoma, Wash., displaced the crude Risko on the throne via a 15-round decision in Seattle in mid-summer of 1936. Steele provided further encouragement with a clean-cut repeat over Risko in New York early the next year."

He continued, "Steele was a picture performer, with a classic stance, a crisp left hand and an accurate right cross. He was managed by Dave Miller and an intimate, devoted relationship existed between them. Suddenly, at the peak of Steele's success, Dave died. This bereavement sapped Steele of ambition, energy, even self-confidence."

Tickell (1937 pp 24-25) wrote, "Steele can slug with the toughest of them ... But his slugging is never of the wild order ... it would be no exaggeration to assert that none of Steele's punches are fired at random. He hits the target nine times out of ten."

Fighters heaped praise upon him. Mickey Walker called him "the hardest short-puncher in history." Gorilla Jones picked him as "the best all-around fighter I ever fought." Fred Apostoli said the same thing. "He heaved his bombs in all directions," Apostoli recalled (see McCallum 1975 p 151).

Writers also remarked about Freddie. Bill Miller, LA sportswriter, claimed Freddie gave Gus Lesnevich a whipping like none he had ever seen before. Dan Walton, of The Tacoma News Tribune, contended, "He could kill you with either that left hook or the right hand. He could adapt his style to different fighters. He had incredible speed." Steele's manager, Dave Miller, lauded his ability to recover his stamina. According to Miller, Freddie could really take a punch and his footwork was superb. His inside punching was deadly (see McCallum 1975 pp 151-152).

Writer Kelly Nicholson (2015) recorded, "Freddie Steele (Frederick Burgett) was born late in 1912 in Seattle, Washington. Standing a lean and rock hard 5'10", he turned professional, it is recorded, at the remarkable age of 13 in October of 1926. Highly accomplished during his school years in golf, swimming, and horseback riding, he would become proficient also in table tennis and billiards. Exploited and mismanaged in the latter part of his career, the Tacoma Assassin, as he would be known, compiled nonetheless an amazing record during his ring years, winning the National Boxing Association world middleweight title with a 15-round decision over Babe Risko at Seattle's Civic Stadium in the summer of 1936. A terrific puncher with either hand, he scored knockouts over Ken Overlin, Gus Lesnevich, and Fred Apostoli that number among his career highlights. In July of 1938, he took a 123-3-11 record into the ring against Al Hostak and fell in the first round. (Rumors persisted afterward that he entered that ring with a cracked breastbone and was severely limited in his movement.) Following another KO loss in 1941, he called it a day."

In 2014, Dan Cuoco, former IBRO Director, said, "Freddie is one of my all-time favorites. He has never received his just dues as a great champion and one of boxing's all-time great punchers. His resume of knockout victims is quite impressive: Ken Overlin, Vince Dundee, Gus Lesnevich, Ceferino Garcia, Fred Apostoli, etc." He added, "Freddie's overall record of losing only five fights out of a career total of 140 is outstanding. And his list of opponents is a virtual who's who of his era."

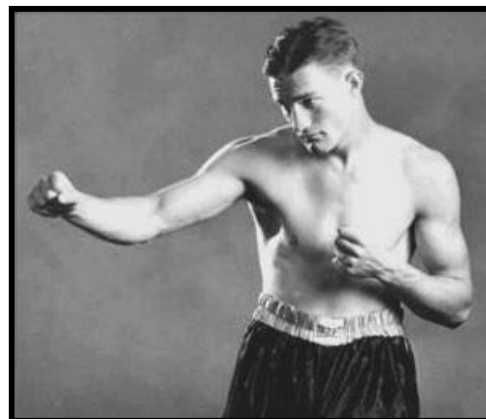


Hap Navarro, matchmaker at the old Hollywood Legion Stadium between 1953 and 1955, said this about Steele: "Freddie was a gangly sort as a fragile welterweight at the start of his pro career, long before he hit it big. But he could box with the best and had a devastating punch. Check out the film of his two-round annihilation of a rising Gus Lesnevich at the LA Olympic Auditorium" (see the Mike Casey internet article Tacoma Assassin).

Historian and writer Cliff Rold (2010) ranked Steele as the #5 all-time middleweight. In an internet article entitled The Top 25 Middleweights of All-Time - The Top Ten on the www.boxingscene.com website, the following is part of what Rold had to say about Freddie, "Steele might be the most underrated Middleweight in boxing history but there are reasons for that, fighting the bulk of his career in the Pacific Northwest and his rapid descent from

his peak strong among them. None of those things outweigh the body of work he built or the skills he had. An excellent boxer, blessed with speed and great feet to go with finishing power, Steele took no losses and a lone draw in almost sixty fights between his second and third losses. He had a great chin until the very end with all of his three stoppage losses coming in his last six bouts. The impact of the sudden death of his manager, injury, over 120 contests by his mid-twenties and the wear of the savage second Apostoli war explain much of his quick fall from grace. At his best, Steele faced nine champions and defeated eight.”

Writer Mike Casey had him ranked as #9 as did John McCallum's 1975 poll of old-timers. Historian Dan Cuoco placed Freddie as the #10 middleweight. Herb Goldman saw him as #17 while the International Boxing Research Organization (IBRO) in its poll of 2005 ranked Freddie as the #18 all-time middleweight. In the opinion of this writer, Steele ranks among the all-time best middleweights.



Steele was one of the three original inductees into the Tacoma-Pierce County Sports Hall of Fame when it opened in 1957. He was inducted into the World Boxing Hall of Fame in 1989 and the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1999.

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