

A SECOND LIFE FOR
**BOBBY
SCANLON**
LITTLE BROTHER WON'T
LET THE WORLD FORGET

THE RING
MARCH 2008



Former lightweight champion Willie Ritchie presents Scanlon with the 1957 Northern California Boxer of the Year Award (left). Decades later, Scanlon's half-brother, Ron Ashburn, who has dedicated himself to keeping Scanlon's memory alive, accepted Scanlon's plaque from the Buffalo Veteran Boxers Association Hall of Fame (above).

By Pete Ehrmann

Bobby Scanlon was Ron Ashburn's half-brother, but there is nothing halfway or half-hearted about Ashburn's determination to get, as he puts it, "one more raise of the hand" for the 1950s lightweight contender whose 39 years were etched with sadness and tragedy.

A toy painter for Fisher-Price in upstate New York, the 47-year-old Ashburn was born 24 years after Scanlon, who was the oldest of the nine children borne by their mother. Ashburn is the youngest.



The baby-faced Scanlon winds up with a left hook en route to a 10-round unanimous decision over Bobby Rogers at Chicago Stadium in May 1958. At the time, Scanlon was one of the hottest young fighters in the country.

Ashburn was about six when he first got to know the brother who had been a boxing legend in their hometown of Buffalo, New York. By then, Scanlon's ring career was over, and, Ashburn says, "He was having difficulty with his health, with headaches and depression."

Worst of all, "he felt like he was not important anymore."

But to the adolescent brother with whom Scanlon took long walks, the ex-contender was a superstar.

"We didn't have much when I was young," said Ashburn, "so you can imagine how much Bobby's legend as a world-class fighter gave us something to brag about."

Almost 38 years after Scanlon's death, Ashburn still thinks and brags about him every day. And Ashburn is on a mission to learn everything he can about his brother, collecting

articles, talking to people who knew him, and enthusiastically "celebrating the good things Bobby went through."

So he wears clothes with "Bobby Scanlon" emblazoned on them when he travels around Buffalo, and when he volunteers at the local Veteran's Hospital, always proudly "representing Bobby's memory and career" and doing everything he can to give the brother who died so young a second life.

Bobby Scanlon learned to fight in the orphanage he grew up in after his father took off and his mother wanted her children better provided for than she could manage herself. Short and slight, with the cherubic features of a natural-born victim, Scanlon "fought for his life at 10 years of age," according to his brother, and "he whipped everyone, big and small."

At 15, Scanlon ran away and got

work as a messenger for the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, and started going to a Buffalo gym. He won 15 of 16 amateur fights, reversed the loss, and won a New York Golden Gloves bantamweight title.

Though he considered himself more of "a lover than a fighter," the handsome Scanlon turned pro of May 31, 1954, beating Gene Donaldson in four rounds at St. Nick's Arena in New York City.

(Scanlon's favorite fighter was Willie Pep, the ex-featherweight champion. In the lobby of the hotel as he prepared to leave for St. Nick's, Scanlon was thrilled to run into his idol. "Pep told him to stay away from drinking and women," relates Ashburn. "Then a friend of Pep's came into the lobby with two beautiful, tall women and said to Pep, 'Let's go.' Pep turned to Bobby and said, 'I'm not the champ anymore. I can do this.'")

After four wins, Scanlon fought a

draw against Frankie Madison, and then beat 17 straight opponents (including Madison in a return) over the course of the next two years.

In 1957, Scanlon and his stablemates—future middleweight contenders Joey Giambra and Rocky Fummerelle, and lightweight Richie Todoro—relocated to San Francisco with their manager, Mike Scanlon (no relation to Bobby). After four more wins on the West Coast, Bobby closed out the year by beating former 135-pound world champs Wallace “Bud” Smith (TKO 10) and Lauro Salas (W 10).

Equally thrilling to Scanlon were the assessments of two other former champions. Ex-welterweight king

Jimmy McLarnin called him the best Irish fighter since Billy Conn, and predicted that Scanlon would win the lightweight crown.

Seconding that was Willie Ritchie, the early 20th-century lightweight champion. “I’ve watched Scanlon from the time he moved over here,” said Ritchie, who personally presented Bobby with the 1957 Northern California Fighter of the Year trophy. “His prospects are tremendous and the improvement he’s shown convinces me that he might well win my old title in a year or so.”

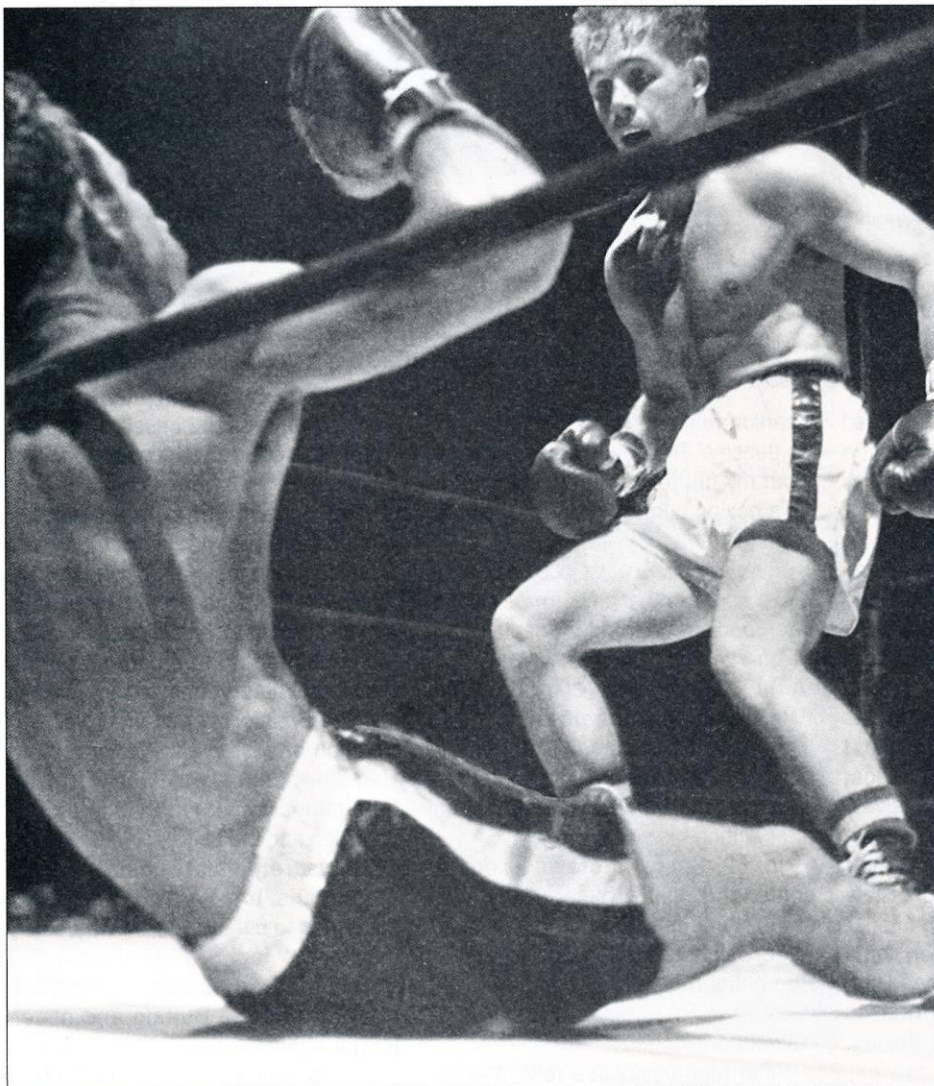
The wins and accolades continued piling up through late-1958. In nationally televised bouts, Scanlon

won decisions over Bobby Rogers and Gale Kerwin.

“It beats the hell out of me how one guy can throw that many gloves,” groaned the battered Kerwin after their fight at Madison Square Garden.

THE RING and *Boxing Illustrated* ran features about the new lightweight sensation. In a piece titled “Face Of An Angel, Heart Of A Killer,” noted boxing writer Eddie Muller of the *San Francisco Chronicle* mentioned that Scanlon had become “the idol of the bobby-sox brigade” at City College, where he was a freshman.

The 22-year-old boxer’s equally attractive personality also won Scanlon friends in high places. He



palled with singers Johnny Mathis and Jerry Vale, and at dinner with Kim Novak the bombshell actress may have agreed with Sugar Ray Robinson’s pronouncement that Scanlon was “too pretty to be a fighter.”

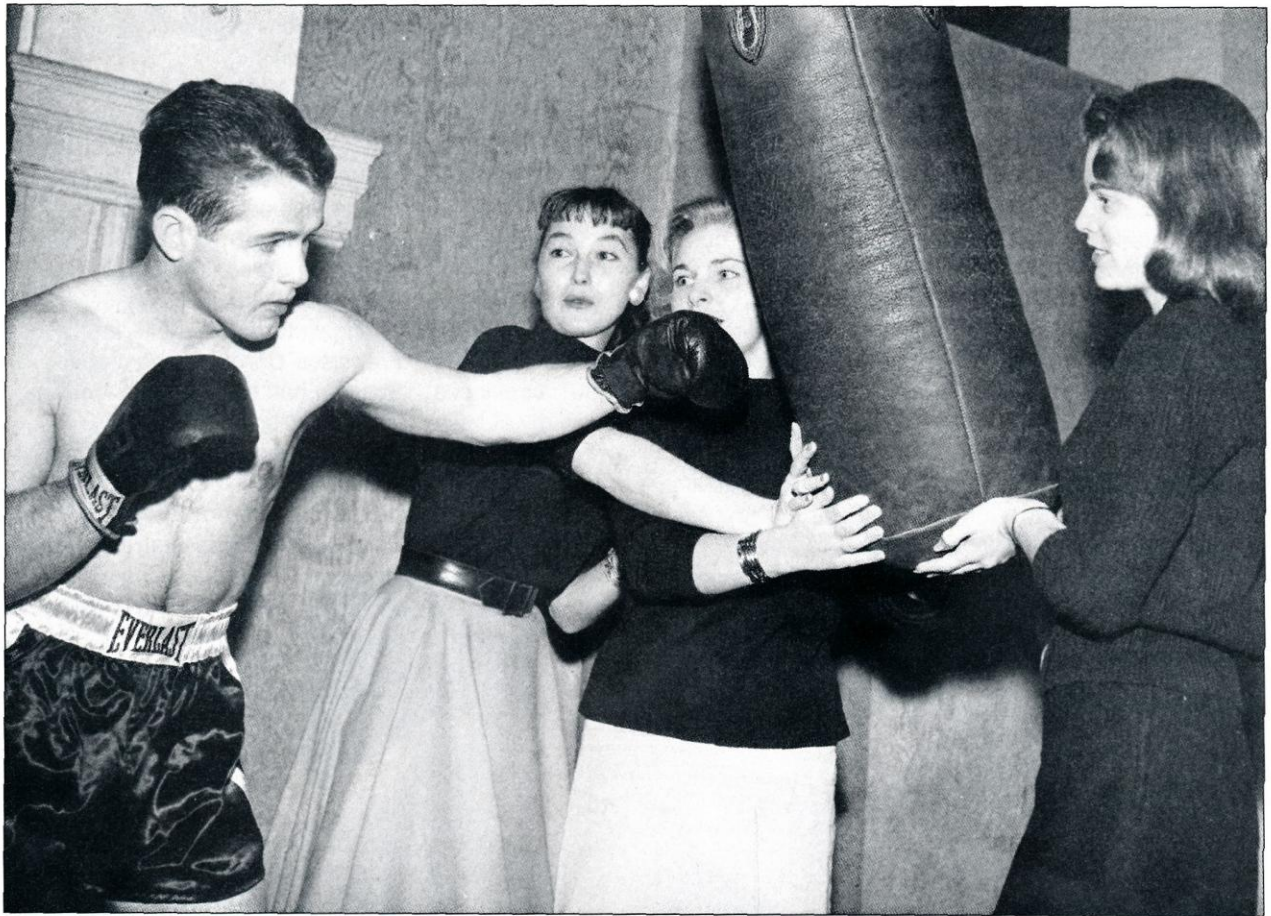
(“I dislike being referred to as handsome,” Bobby told THE RING’s Fred Eisenstadt. “So becoming a fighter is gradually solving the problem, as a close look at my pan will disclose.”)

That pan and Scanlon’s ring record got their first big blemish on October 15, 1958, when Bobby, then 30-0-1 and ranked third by THE RING, tangled with number-two Paolo Rosi.

In the third round (“one of the wildest rounds of San Francisco boxing history,” reported United Press International), the Italian knocked Scanlon down, then Scanlon knocked Rosi down, and then Rosi knocked him down again for keeps.

Rosi copped a split-decision in a bloody rematch two months later. After rebounding with a win over contender Orlando Zuleta

Scanlon has Gale Kerwin on the floor in the second round of their July 1958 bout at Madison Square Garden. Kerwin beat the count, but still lost a unanimous 10-round decision to the undefeated Buffalo fighter.



Although Scanlon didn't like to be referred to as "handsome," he didn't mind all the attention he received from the female students at San Francisco's City College, where the boxer enrolled as a freshman when he was 22 years old.

in early-1959, Scanlon was knocked down in the seventh round and lost a majority verdict to Johnny Gonsalves on April 9 of that year.

Thanks to that fight, Bobby's whole future, and not just as a boxer, became blurry. Literally. When he looked in the mirror the next morning, two Scanlons looked back, thanks to damage to a nerve in his right eye.

The double vision worsened as Scanlon defeated Italian lightweight champion Mario Vecchiatto and lost decisions to Al Urbina and Gonsalves. On May 5, 1960, he returned to Buffalo and won a 12-round decision over Jackie Donnelly for the New York State lightweight title.

Less than two weeks later, local newspaper readers saw the headline, "Life's Lost Chances Are Mirrored In Bobby's Eyes; Scanlon Quits Boxing, Faces Toughest Fight Ever."

"I asked one doctor point blank: 'What happens if I keep on fighting?'"

Scanlon related. "He said, 'You'll wind up punchy.' That did it. I may not know what my future is, but I won't want to be a boxing bum. I'm only 24. I can do something else."

But he didn't. Regular jobs and normal hours were for other guys. Three months later, back in California, Scanlon beat Chico Santos in 10 rounds.

By '62, there were other problems to go with the double vision and increasing headaches. Scanlon and his wife of three years split up, and he was treated at a San Rafael hospital after slitting his wrists.

In '63, Scanlon lost decisions to contenders Luis Molina, Pauly Armstead, and, in a non-title bout, junior welterweight champion Eddie Perkins. Ron Ashburn has heard that the night before the Perkins fight, his brother was out drinking.

After four losses in a row, in early-'66, Scanlon returned to San Francisco to start over. "The Irish kid said he

decided to behave himself," reported Eddie Muller. "He said he wasn't drinking anymore."

Top lightweight contender Luis Molina held two decision wins over Scanlon when they fought on May 24, 1966, but this time Bobby dominated him and won a technical decision after Molina butted open a bad cut on his face in the ninth round.

"The Scanlon of this fight was the Scanlon of yesteryear," reported THE RING, "a hungry gladiator who was determined to win and who had the condition and the ability to do just that."

He "surely must regain ranking among the top lightweights if he continues to fight the same way," said the story.

But instead, Scanlon, 42-12-1 (11), returned to Buffalo and never fought again.

It was not a triumphant homecoming.

"He entered another world in late-

1966," reported the Buffalo newspaper in a story after Bobby's death, "and the next nine years brought him one heartbreak after another."

According to the piece by Warner Hessler, "Bobby was a nice guy who wouldn't harm a fly, and he was not mentally stable for several years before his death.

"He led a lonely life," reported Hessler. "Neighbors heard him screaming quite frequently at night with nightmares ... He took frequent walks and always greeted people with the words, 'Say a prayer for me.'"

Says Ashburn: "Concussions kicked his ass. You can't fight for 13 years and not get damaged. The double vision really messed him up, and he had bad headaches when I knew him."

Scanlon ended up living across the street from the orphanage where he'd grown up, in a \$75-a-month room at the Lackawanna Inn. Early on the morning of June 23, 1975, he fell asleep there with a lit cigarette in his hand. The resulting fire ended his life.

"He was a nice young man who got caught up in the frenzy of the fight game and came out second best," said the *South Buffalo-West Seneca News*.

Ashburn says nuts to that.

"He was special and a lot bigger than he thought," Ashburn said, "but he never bragged, and so I'm doing all the bragging."

Ashburn accepted his brother's plaque when Scanlon was inducted into the Buffalo Veteran Boxers Association Hall of Fame in 2003, and he wonders what's taking the Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame so long to honor the man Ashburn says "was like a god in this town."

Wearing Bobby's name on his clothes is only part of what Ashburn does to keep his brother's memory fresh and positive.



Scanlon was THE RING's third-ranked lightweight when he suffered his first defeat. It came at the hands of second-ranked Paolo Rosi in a wild fight that saw Scanlon floor Rosi in the third before the Italian rallied back to twice deck and stop Scanlon the same round.



Losing a majority 10-round decision to Johnny Gonsalves (left) in April 1960 was bad enough, but Scanlon also suffered a serious eye injury. He continued to fight, but went 10-9 in his next 19 bouts, finally retiring May 1966.

"Some people stop me and say Bobby was a great fighter, and I always ask them if they would like some pictures of him and a fight film. They say, 'How much?' and I tell them I appreciate them remembering him and never ask for a penny.

"Kinkos is getting a lot of my money, but it brings me joy."

But nothing like what happened last October, when Ashburn went to Las Vegas and sat down with Joey Giambra, who told him stories about Bobby from their days as boxing stablemates.

"When we parted," Ashburn recalls, Giambra "said he felt like he was shaking Bobby's hand."

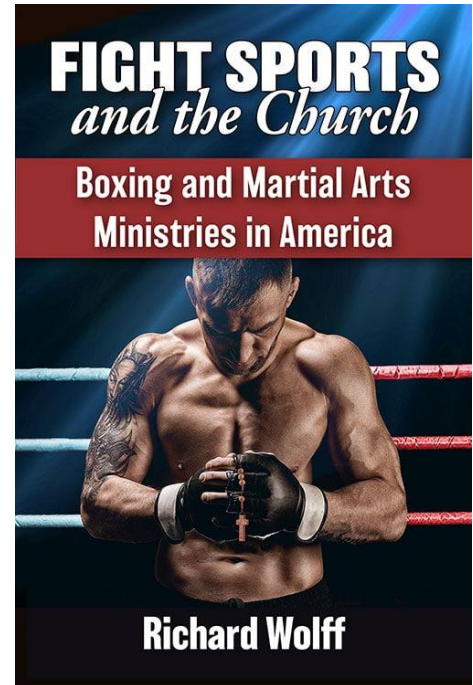
"That was the best thing anyone ever said to me." ■

BOOK ANNOUNCEMENT

Fight Sports and the Church: Boxing and Martial Arts Ministries in America

by Richard Wolff

BOOK DETAILS: Fight sports and the church might at first seem like an unusual combination. Even so, modern fight sports ministries thrive, from martial arts programs of suburban churches, to urban boxing ministries geared towards at-risk youth. History finds substantial practice of fight sports in the church, offered for evangelism, formation, and social outreach. It also finds the church using fight sports to present itself as a masculine institution, appealing to male congregants. Popular culture reflects this relationship, as film, television and novels use fight sports to depict church leaders as both peace-loving and tough. Meanwhile, news media often sensationalize fight sports ministries, in ways that misrepresent the approach of many programs. Christian ethicists argue about whether and how boxing and martial arts are compatible with church teachings and settings. Indeed, both Biblical references to fight sports and modern models of discipleship have something to add to this discussion. This book reflects upon all of these matters. Its highlight is a series of interviews with boxing and martial arts ministry leaders, who describe their programs and reflect upon the relationship of fight sports and faith.



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