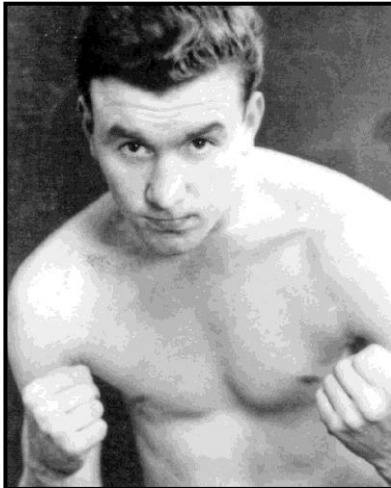


# Rest in Peace John McNally

By Patrick Myler



John McNally, the first Irish boxer in history to win an Olympic Games medal, has died in Belfast at the age of 89.

The stylish 19-year-old bantamweight returned home with a silver medal from Helsinki, Finland, in 1952, with many observers insisting it should have been gold.

McNally had won his three previous contests by unanimous decision to reach the final against the home country favourite Pentti Hamalainen, but lost on a split decision. The British judge voted for McNally but the American and the Austrian officials gave it to the Finn.

“I couldn't believe it when his hand was raised,” John would recall. “It was like a nightmare come true. I was devastated and in floods of tears because I was convinced I had won the gold medal.”

He faced additional agony on return to the dressing room to be treated for severe rope burns on his back. As he lay face down on a bench, a medic applied pure alcohol to the wounds.

Trying to stop himself screaming, McNally found his hands gripped tightly by another boxer who was reclining while awaiting his own bout. Only later did he realise that the helping hands belonged to a member of the American team, Floyd Patterson.

In a huge upset in the following year's Irish championships, McNally was beaten in the final by Dubliner Andrew (Ando) Reddy. Sadly, Ando also died recently.

Compensation came to the Belfastman on being chosen to represent Europe at bantamweight in the US Golden Gloves international tournament in Chicago. He won his three contests and was presented with a token pair of Golden Gloves.

In that year's European championships, held in Warsaw, McNally won a bronze medal. And he was made an honorary champion of Germany for beating three of that country's former bantamweight champions in a space of 18 months.

Finding himself without a job in 1954 and about to get married, McNally decided to try his luck as a professional. It was a decision he learned to regret.

Under the terms of his contract with joint managers Sammy Docherty and Jimmy Callaghan, he would receive a signing-on fee of £40 and a promise of at least £15 per fight for the first year.

“There are no friends in professional boxing and all the enjoyment you get as an amateur vanishes,” he told Barry Flynn in his book *Legends of Irish Boxing*. “In reality you become just another means to an end for others. I was boxing out of London and I never settled as a professional.”

McNally hung up his gloves in 1962 with a professional record of 14-9-2 and became a founder member of popular folk band The Freeman. Many followers of the band had no idea the talented banjo player was also a legend of Irish sport.

**Patrick Myler is the author of several boxing books including *The Fighting Irish: Ireland's role in world boxing history* (1987)**