

# AFTER THE CROWD GOES HOME



## Patsy Brannigan and His Life Beyond the Ring

By Vincent T. Ciaramella

What happens to a professional fighter once the final bell is rung, the lights come on, and the crowd goes home? This is a tough question all pugilists must face. Some hang around the ring and work in a different capacity such as manager or commentary. Others, leave the sweet science behind for other avenues of employment. Regardless, for some the siren song of the crowd and excitement of attending a fight is too much to resist. So, just like the swallows of Capistrano they return to watch the upcoming generation duke it out. This is exactly what Patsy Brannigan did. In an article published in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* on January 11, 1947, the writer reports that:

*“Brannigan goes to every one of the local boxing shows and gets a lot of enjoyment out of watching the boys in action. He sways and ducks with every punch thrown, and often yells encouragement to the fighters.”*

Patsy was a living relic of a bygone era, but he was still active in his own way. But what happened to one of Pittsburgh's most famous sons in his 75<sup>th</sup> year remains a mystery to this day and will most likely never be answered.

John Patrick "Patsy" Brannigan was born on April 11, 1886, to Irish immigrants Martin and Margaret Brannigan née McMahon in the Limerick neighborhood of what is today's Southside of Pittsburgh. In an era of ethnic and racial pride, Patsy grew up admiring Jack McClelland, a boxer of mixed Irish and Scottish ancestry from the Hill District of Pittsburgh. McClelland, also known as the "Pride of Pittsburg" was part of the first generation of boxers in the city to fight solely under the Marquis of Queensbury rules and fought the best of his day including a non-title bout against Abe Attell at the 1904 World's Fair held in St. Louis, Missouri. For many young fighters of Celtic descent, McClelland was a hero.

*"He was the best," said Patsy, his blue eyes flashing an appreciative smile. "He could do everything-punch, box, and step around like a champ."*



**\*Photo dated February 3, 1912.**

**Taken at the *Chicago Daily News* office.**

On December 17, 1900, Brannigan began his own career in the squared circle. Though as Pittsburgh boxing historian Douglas Cavanaugh points out in his book *Pittsburgh Boxing: A Pictorial History*, Brannigan's record is most likely incomplete. According to BoxRec, Patsy's first fight was against a man only listed as "Kelly." The four round bout went to a draw.

Brannigan spent the first years of his career fighting out of Pittsburgh before moving north of the city to New Castle, Pennsylvania to join up with former boxer turned manager, Jimmy Dime. Brannigan, along with Tony "Italian Bearcat" Ross, George Chip, Jimmy Dunn, Tommy Crawford, and Tom McMahon, made up Dime's stable. Competing against and working with Red Mason, and his boys back in Pittsburgh, Dime's crew helped establish Western Pennsylvania as a fight destination.

As Jack McClelland's star began to fade, Patsy's was on the rise. He became the new hero of Irish fight fans across the city. The featherweight "will-o-the-wisp" was considered a "spoiler" by those in the fight game as he ruined many championship aspirations, though he himself never held a title in either the featherweight or bantamweight divisions. But there was no doubt, he was one of the most popular fighters of his time.

During his career, Brannigan fought all over Southwestern Pennsylvania and even ventured as far as Australia to duke it out in "the land Down Under." However, he is best remembered for his rivalry with Northside battler, "Young Ziringer."

Born Frederick G. Ziringer Jr, the Teutonic prizefighter hailed from Pittsburgh's Northside, then a separate city nicknamed "Deutschtown." Patsy and Ziringer put on some of the best fights of their day and had Pittsburgh fans asking the hard question, "*Who was better, Patsy or Dutch?*" In fact, the last fight of Ziringer's career was against Brannigan on May 16, 1910, at the St. Clair theater in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, with Patsy winning when Ziringer's seconds threw in the sponge. Later that same year, Ziringer mistakenly drank carbolic acid which he mistook for peppermint to aid in alleviating a stomach ache and died. His archrival, Patsy was one of the pallbearers at his funeral.

Just like milk, every fighter has an expiration date. Patsy's came in the year 1923 when he hung up the gloves for good. After his career came to an end, the Irishman became an elevator operator at the City-County Building in Pittsburgh until he retired in 1948. Unlike his hero, Jack McClelland who hated attending fights and rarely made public appearances, Patsy was all too happy to watch the new crop of scrappers. But Brannigan's involvement in pugilism didn't end there. At the age of 61, Brannigan returned to the world he loved, and with the help of his nephew opened a boxing gym with hopes of training a new generation of champions.

A lifelong bachelor with no known children, Patsy spent the final years of his life living with his sisters at 2202 Atmore Ave in what is today the California-Kirkbride neighborhood of Pittsburgh (now an empty lot). Patsy kept healthy by "putting in the road work" and taking daily strolls along Ohio River Road. That is until January 4, 1962.

What exactly happened will most likely remain a mystery but somehow on his walk, Patsy ended up on the railroad tracks near the Jack's Run Tower in the Bellevue neighborhood of Pittsburgh

and was struck and killed by a train. His death certificate states that he died from “shock and hemorrhage” along with “crush of body.” What made him wander onto the tracks is unknown as Ohio River Road (now Ohio River Blvd) is some distance from the railroad tracks. While no foul play is being suggested, his deviation from his routine route remains puzzling. In 2020, the author traveled to the location of Brannigan’s demise and photographed the approximate spot where he was struck by the train. While it is unclear where exactly he met his end, the tracks in either direction are straight and visually unobstructed. So, why didn’t he hear or see the train coming? That’s the million-dollar question. His body was discovered by Track Forman, Pete Similik at 7:30 AM on Thursday morning who alerted the police. What is also unclear is just exactly when he went for his walk. Most articles state that he went for an early morning stroll and met his end. However, his sister states in an article published by the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* on January 5, that he left home at 1 P.M Wednesday January 3 and never returned. So, again we are left with the question of how long he was missing and why exactly he was on the tracks to begin with?



**\*The former location of Jacks Run Tower and where Brannigan’s body was discovered.  
Photo taken by the author on 03/01/2020.**

In the following days, the papers reported his passing and offered readers quotes from those that knew the “Smiling Irishman” along with summaries of his career. Friends and family were received at O’Conner Funeral Home at 3724 California Ave in Pittsburgh’s Northside and Requiem High Mass was said at St. Andrews Church. Patsy was then taken to Calvary Catholic Cemetery and buried, though the exact location of his final resting place has been lost and is still unknown at the time of this writing.


In the end, Patsy was like most prizefighters, he never really got the fight game out of his system. Boxing was in his blood, and he inspired many young men to try their luck slinging leather. So, what happens to a professional fighter once the final bell is rung, the lights come on, and the crowd goes home? In the case of John Patrick “Patsy” Brannigan, your legacy is remembered well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and hopefully beyond.

**Sidelights on Sports**  
By AL ABRAMS, *Sports Editor*

---

**Patsy Brannigan**  
There was a touch of irony besides the twinge of sadness to the news yesterday that **Patsy** Brannigan, a local fighter some 50 years ago, was killed by a train near Bellevue.

All his life, John Patrick (Patsy) Brannigan had two simple rules for guidance, a clean mind and a healthy body. He abided by them religiously for 75 years and there wasn't a happier, more chipper man among the greats and near greats I have met in sports.



**Patsy**, according to friends, was doing his 'usual road work' yesterday morning on the Ohio River road near the Jack's Run Bridge when some way, somehow, he got walking on the railroad tracks and was reportedly hit and killed by a train.

Al Abrams

Pittsburg Post Gazette, January 5, 1962