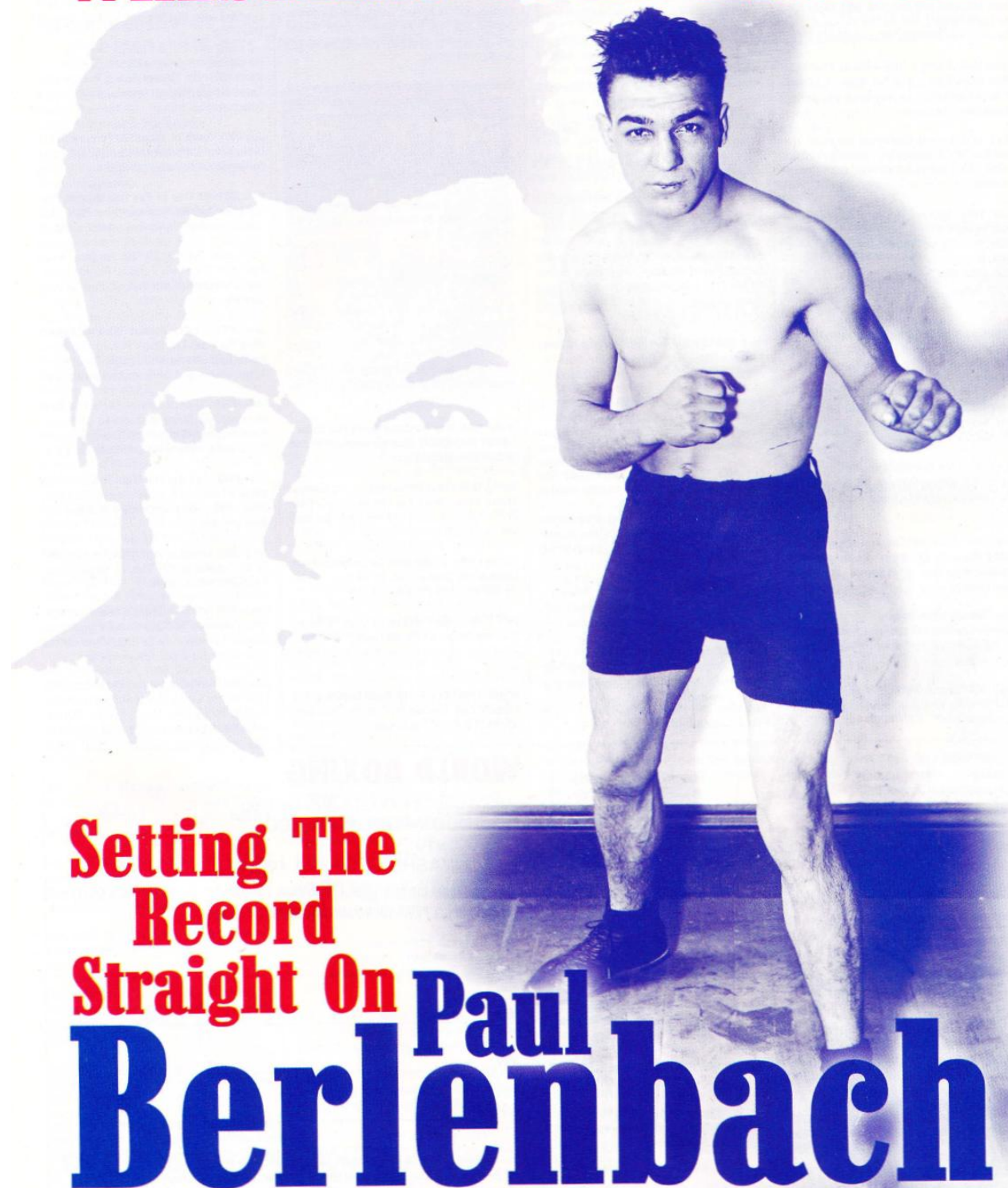


WRESTLING WITH HISTORY



Setting The
Record
Straight On **Paul**
Berlenbach



Wrestling was Berlenbach's first sporting love, and his decision to box professionally instead was fueled primarily by money. Berlenbach is seen here caught in an arm lock from Ray Steele during a training session, as boxing legend Benny Leonard referees.

By Pete Ehrmann

Even after you cross out the Olympic wrestling medal he didn't win and one or two other clinkers on his resume, there's still plenty of gold in the legend of Paul Berlenbach. Without the hysteria caused by the brick-fisted light heavyweight champion known as "Paralyzing Paul" and "The Astoria Assassin," boxing would've contributed considerably less din to the Roaring '20s.

Sportswriter Hype Igoe referred to the angular Berlenbach as the "belting beauty," but in his photos there is an unmistakable flinty, almost feral quality to Berlenbach underscored by contemporary descriptions of him as "phlegmatic," "slow-

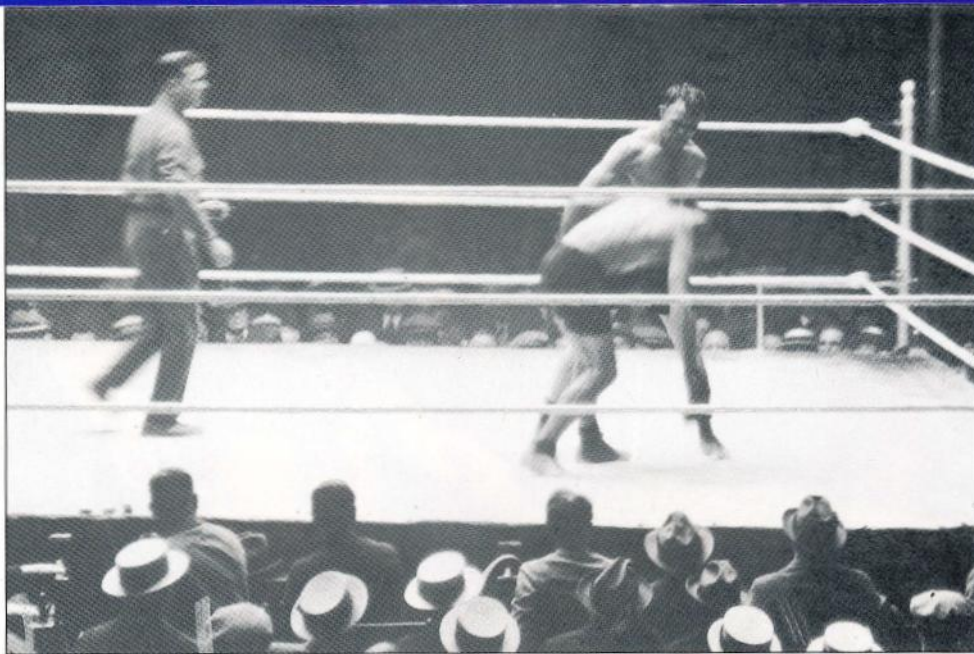
thinking," and "dour." That's entirely understandable against the backdrop of Berlenbach's formative years, which he spent in a cocoon of silence.

According to various sources, Berlenbach either came into this world on February 18, 1901, without the power to speak or hear, or he lost those faculties after a bout of scarlet fever when he was just a few years old.

Growing up deaf and mute in Astoria, across the East River from New York City, Berlenbach was withdrawn and isolated. That ended with a bang when he was 15 and brushed against a live electrical wire. The shock he received knocked him unconscious, and when he came to, Berlenbach could hear. The ability to speak followed soon after.

But communicating with his hands was second-nature to him, and Berlenbach's articulateness using that mode reached a whole new level after he was befriended by Nat Pendleton, an amateur wrestling champion who started Berlenbach training on the mat at the New York Athletic Club.

In 1920, they made the U.S. Olympic wrestling team together. In the 175-pound freestyle finals at the Olympic Trials on July 13, Berlenbach's decision win over Lt. F.W. Maichle of the U.S. Navy came with some controversy. "Charges of professionalism were made by Navy men against Berlenbach, and the coach announced he would carry the protest to the American Olympic Committee," reported *The New York Times*.



Berlenbach is on the receiving end against Mike McTigue in this picture, but he would rally back to win a unanimous decision over McTigue and claim the world light heavyweight title. "The Astoria Assassin" had been fighting professionally for less than two years before becoming champion.

The protest was disallowed, and Berlenbach went to the Olympics in Antwerp, Belgium. However, contrary to assertions that he won a gold medal, which first appeared in print after Berlenbach

won the light heavyweight boxing title in 1925 and have been endlessly repeated over the years, he never even wrestled in the Games. According to Mike Chapman, executive director of the International

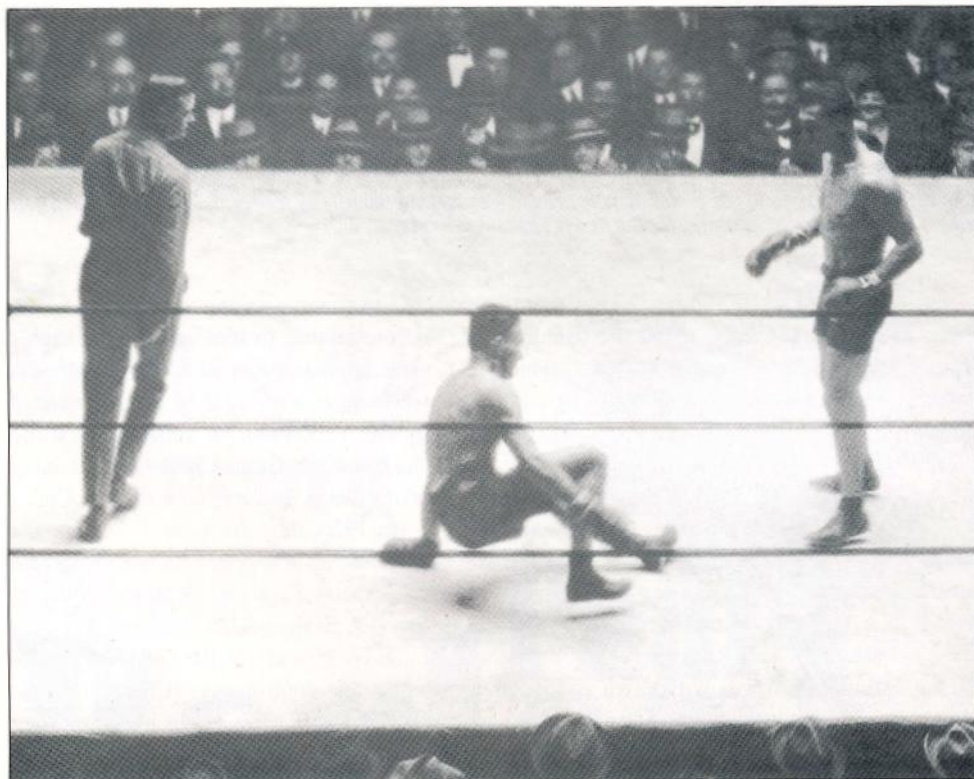
Wrestling Institute and Museum, Berlenbach suffered an injury aboard the ship carrying the U.S. athletes to Europe and was unable to compete.

"All I can say about him being called an Olympic gold medalist," said Chapman from the museum in Newton, Iowa, "is that once an error appears in print it is easy for it to be perpetuated by lazy writers. Someone probably read that Berlenbach was an Olympian and added once that he was a gold medalist, and then the falsehood continued to bloom."

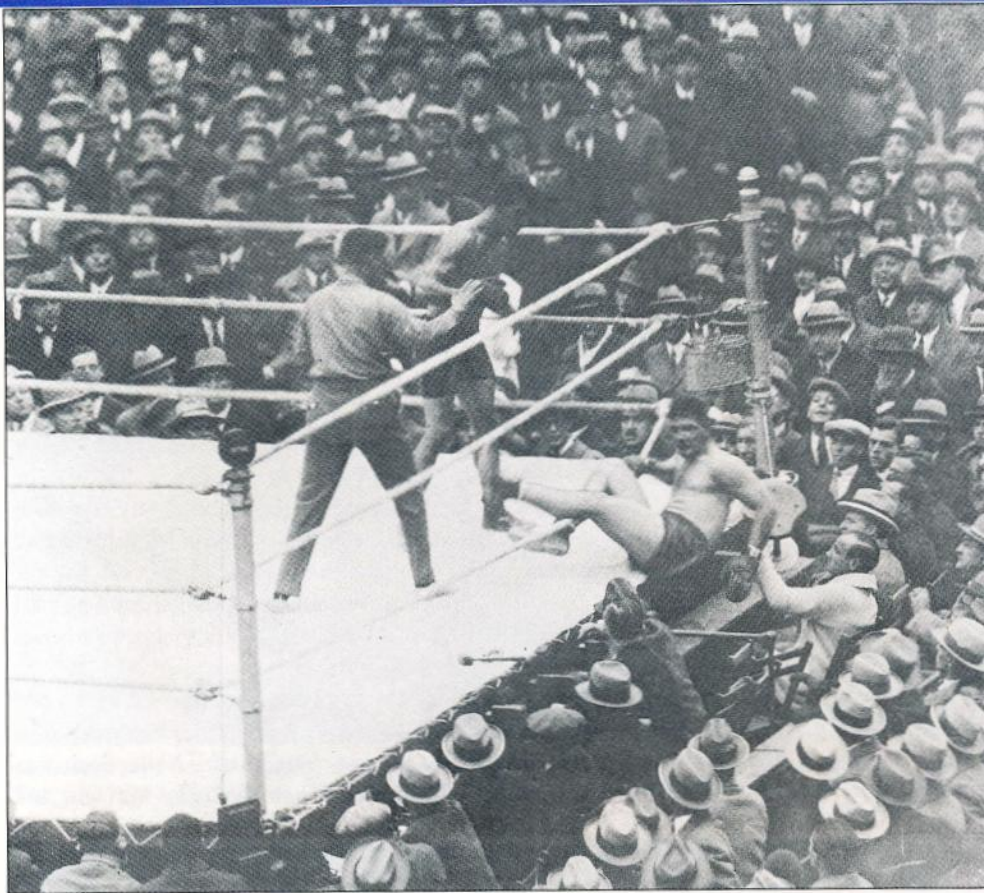
Even without a gold medal, Berlenbach was unquestionably one of America's best amateur matmen. In 1922, he won the 175-pound championship in the national Amateur Athletic Union tournament, and the following year he did it again.

Sometime between those achievements was when Dan Hickey, the boxing instructor at the NYAC and onetime trainer of three-division boxing champion Bob Fitzsimmons, persuaded Berlenbach to put on the gloves for the first time and discovered that wrestling wasn't the only language in which those hands were fluent.

Some accounts say it was one of Hickey's prized contenders whose lights were put out by Berlenbach's awkward clouts; others say it was the old man himself. Whether he saw or felt it, Hickey was so blown away by Berlenbach's power that from then on Berlenbach was up to his ears in two sports, and a standout at both—but not, however, on the same weekend in April of 1923. Like his Olympic medal, reports that Berlenbach won the national AAU wrestling and boxing light heavyweight titles within hours of one another are fiction probably whipped up by a press agent for whom it somehow wasn't remarkable enough that the same month he repeated as national 175-pound wrestling champion, Berlenbach made it to the semifinals of the national AAU boxing tournament



Many critics didn't expect Berlenbach's reign to last long, but those doubters were hushed when Berlenbach dropped and ultimately stopped highly regarded Jimmy Slattery in his first title defense, on September 11, 1925, at Yankee Stadium. The end came at 1:28 of the 11th round.



Berlenbach blasts Emilio "King" Solomon through the ropes during a non-title fight in New York in October '25. The heavy-punching champ would prevail by ninth-round TKO.

in Boston. The New Yorker lost a decision to eventual champion Harry Fay of Pittsburgh.

Though wrestling was his first love, the opportunity to make more money faster by punching people for a living put Berlenbach in the opposite corner from Jimmy Roberts in his pro debut on October 4, 1923. He knocked out Roberts in one, and as the kayos quickly added up, New York fans and the press went nuts over the plodding slugger writers liked to call a "reformed wrestler."

After Berlenbach stopped veteran Frank Carbone in the sixth round for his seventh straight knockout, *THE RING*'s Eddie Borden wrote that he ranked below only heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey and his top challenger, Harry Wills, on the list of boxing's hardest punchers.

Berlenbach credited his power to the long hours he spent whacking the heavy-bag. "I was taught never to stand full face with an opponent," he said in a 1962 interview. "One should stand at an angle so that he can get full leverage behind his punches as I did. I punched with my

whole body behind my blows."

"Some fellows who have fought him say he slams so hard that a blow on the arm from Paul will paralyze the muscles for at least three rounds," wrote columnist Westbrook Pegler. Hence the "Paralyzing Paul" sobriquet.

Ten-thousand frenzied customers jammed Madison Square Garden to watch Berlenbach take out Carbone, and a month later 12,817 watched Berlenbach stop Young Fisher in six rounds.

Even promoter Tex Rickard was stunned when all the reserved seats for Berlenbach's fight against Jack Delaney sold out two days before the March 14, 1924, match at the Garden. "Never in his career as a promoter had he seen such an early 'sellout' in a bout in which no championship was involved," said *The Times*.

In what was considered an upset, Delaney, who'd been fighting pro since 1921 and had beaten Tommy Loughran in his last fight, knocked out Berlenbach in four rounds.

The comeback—and another kayo streak—started less than three weeks later,

but his loss to Delaney had a cold shower effect on Berlenbach's earlier red-hot rooters in the press, who now regarded his plodding style as too one-dimensional and said he relied too much on his left hook.

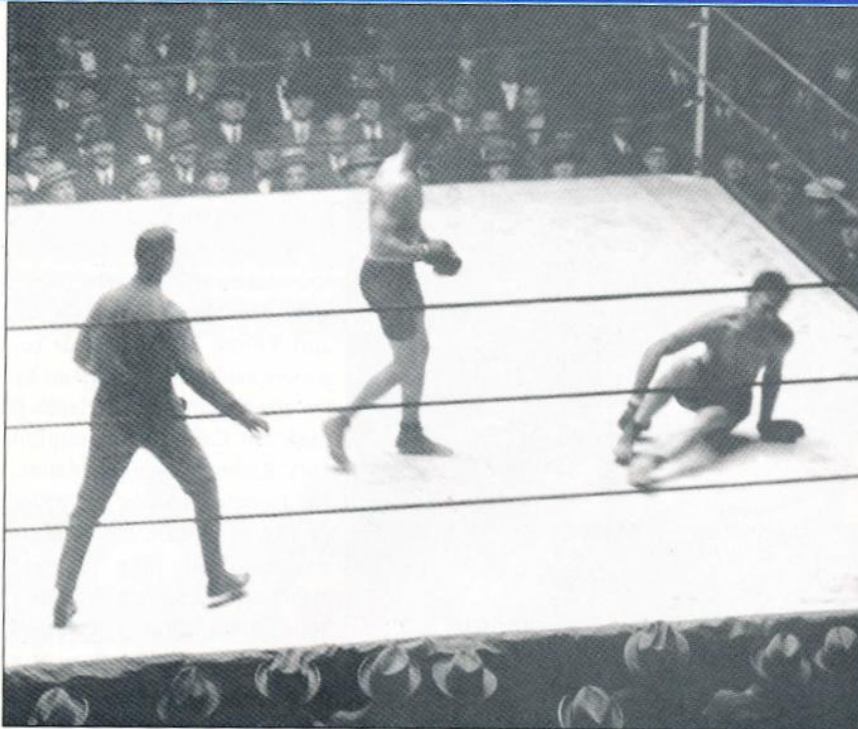
Amidst the knockouts that got only lukewarm reviews, there were draws with Augie Ratner and Young Stribling that reporters said were really won by the other guys. After Berlenbach took out Canadian champion Jack Reddick in eight rounds, Nat Fleischer, founder and editor of *THE RING*, said the problem was that Hickey was "trying to make him a boxer, and as such he is a total failure ... Paul is a fighter and should continue as a fighter and forget all his trainers are trying to teach him about boxing. Then and only then will Berlenbach be the Berlenbach of the past year."

Whether he was going about it the wrong way or not, Berlenbach kept winning. He knocked out former light heavy champ

Battling Siki on March 13, 1925, and then went on to win the 175-pound title by decision over Mike McTigue on May 30. *The New York Times* predicted a brief reign for "the Astoria lad [who] can boast only of strength."

It didn't help matters when both Berlenbach and Young Marullo were thumbed out of the ring by the referee for not trying in the former's first fight as champion. "He is a terrible bust as a titleholder," declared Eddie Borden after the non-title bout. "Looks like he'll never do."

All that changed after Berlenbach stopped 21-year-old Jimmy Slattery in 11 rounds in a title defense on September 11, 1925. Slattery was a boxing wonder for whom greatness was predicted by most fight pundits. But the ex-wrestler wore him down and, according to *The Times*' James Dawson, "established himself as a greater champion than many have given him credit for being. He still is sluggish and awkward, but he was faster against the fleet-footed Slattery than he has been in many other ring engagements and the result demonstrated that Berlenbach is effective.



Berlenbach's number-one rival was Jack Delaney, pictured here rising from the canvas in the second of their four meetings. The December 11, 1925, bout, the only one in the series that Berlenbach won, opened what was then the new Madison Square Garden.

He attains his objective regardless of the method."

The win sure did a lot for the champion's confidence. "In another year I expect to see [Jack] Dempsey in the corner opposite of me and the heavyweight championship in my hands when the bell rings," Berlenbach said afterward.

Obviously that didn't happen, but Berlenbach completed his rehabilitation by getting up from a fourth-round knockdown for a convincing points win over Delaney in a fight so big it inaugurated the new Madison Square Garden on December 11, 1925.

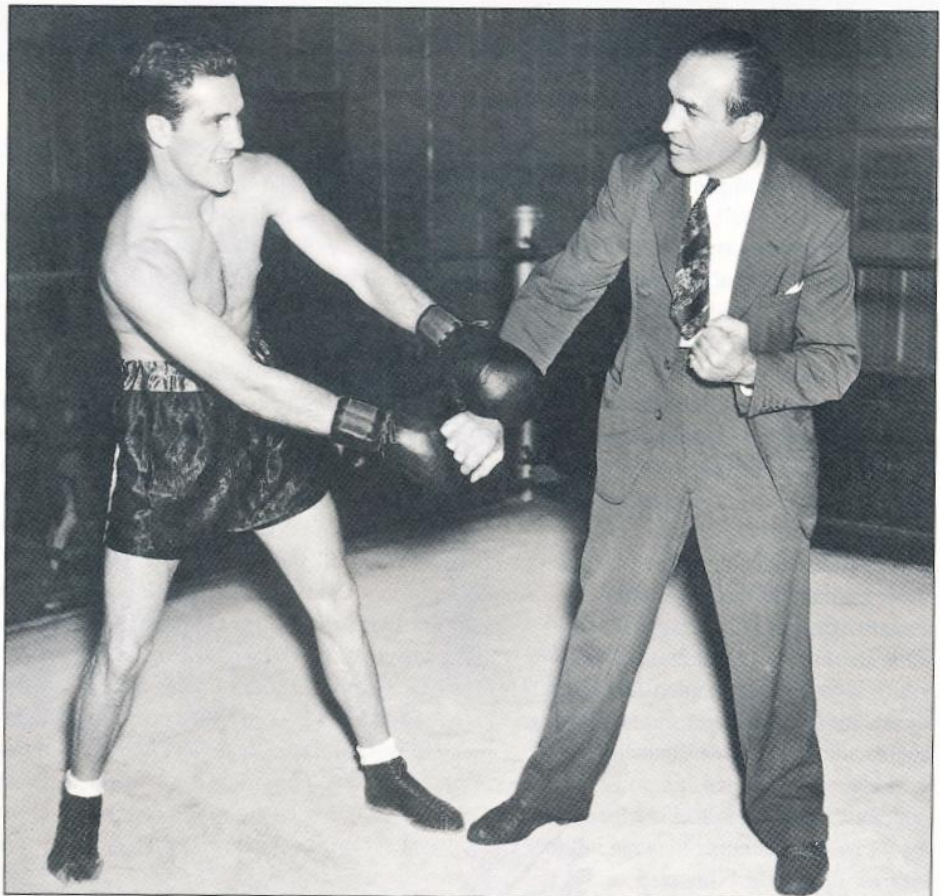
Suddenly the light heavyweight champion was the toast of boxing. "The only titleholder who seems to fear no one," was how Fleischer described Berlenbach. Igoe praised him for putting "kick into his division at last," and said that while Berlenbach "may have his shortcomings as a finished boxer ... he has the heart of a tiger and the courage of his convictions. He thinks he can whip any man in the world at his weight."

Berlenbach was disabused of any heavyweight title aspirations by

Johnny Risko, who knocked him down and won a decision in their March 19, 1926, bout. But The Astoria Assassin rebounded to take a resounding decision over Young Stribling in a 15-round light heavyweight title match, and that set the stage for what was the most anticipated fight in New York City since the Dempsey-Firpo demolition derby three years earlier.

The rubber match between Berlenbach and Jack Delaney on July 16 was so huge that 5,000 people turned out just to watch them weigh in. Forty-thousand fans packed Ebbets Field, with thousands more unable to get in, for the exciting battle won by Delaney on a clear-cut decision. "I want to give credit to Berlenbach for being one of the gamest men in the ring and also the possessor of the hardest left hand punch I ever took," said the new champion afterward.

After a comeback win and then a rest occasioned by what he acknowledged as a nervous breakdown, Berlenbach was stopped in four rounds by McTigue and



Seven years after his retirement, Berlenbach shows some of his old moves to then-light heavyweight champion Billy Conn. You won't find two 175-pound champs more opposite in style than slickster Conn and pure puncher Berlenbach. Both are now immortalized in the International Boxing Hall of Fame.



Berlenbach hops into the Madison Square Garden ring in 1973 along with fellow retired legends Tony Galento and Jake LaMotta. "Paralyzing Paul" lived another 12 years before passing at age 84.

retired. That lasted just a few months, and then Berlenbach came back for several brutally exciting fights that proved he had nothing left but the kind of guts that made fans stand on their chairs screaming his name. Against heavy-weight Bob Lawson at the Garden on July 28, 1927, Berlenbach was floored by the first punch he took, but got up to slog and slug his way to a seventh-round kayo in what *The Times* called "as great an exhibition of courage and gameness as has been seen in any ring." Berlenbach needed smelling salts before he could give a postfight radio interview.

"Former Wrestler Easy For Irishman" headlined the *Milwaukee Journal* after middleweight champion Mickey Walker trounced Berlenbach that November, and then Delaney knocked him out in six two weeks later.

Not long after that, just as the New York boxing commission was getting ready to lift his boxing license ("Paulie, one of the greatest scrappers that ever lived, is almost punch-drunk," reported THE RING), the onetime amateur grappling champion returned to the wrestling mat for several matches.

But after three years out of boxing, he returned to that ring in 1931. He

needed the money. A woman named Claire Feidner had sued Berlenbach for breach of promise, claiming he'd promised to marry her. In court it came out that a Berlenbach trust fund originally containing \$150,000 was down to \$20,000. She got \$3,500 of that in a judgment against the ex-champion, who finally quit boxing and wrestling for good in '33. He died at age 84 on September 30, 1985.

Berlenbach, who finished with a record of 39-8-3 (33) with 1 no-decision and 1 no-contest, was voted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 2001. He would probably be just as tickled, if not more so, to find his picture on the wall in Mike Chapman's museum in rural Iowa, in a section called "Tough Guys."

"Paul Berlenbach was truly one of America's greatest warrior athletes," said Chapman, "and his story is a source in inspiration to anyone who has ever had to work hard to overcome obstacles in life."

Even if not quite everything written about him has been entirely true. ■

Pete Ehrmann is a freelance writer living in West Allis, Wisconsin, and a regular contributor to this magazine.

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