

Steve Canton: Fighter, Trainer, Cutman, Promoter, Historian, and Good-Will Ambassador

Interview by Don Cogswell



Marvelous Marvin Hagler, Iron Mike Pusateri, and Steve Canton

Steve Canton has been everything in boxing what one can be. Fighter, trainer, cutman, promoter, historian, good-will-ambassador. The list goes on, he's done it all. Information on this dynamic individual is abundant. For a start links can be found at the bottom of this piece. Steve's early years are less frequently known. He agreed to an at-length interview of those formative years.

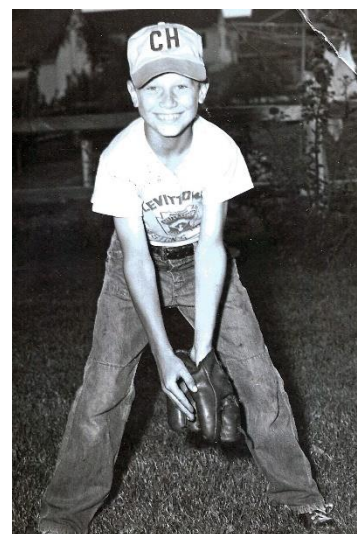
Born 7/11/46 in Brooklyn, NY. At two, we moved to Long Island, spending most of my time in Levittown and Mineola, LI. The family moved to Ohio. My father got a job as a civil engineer in charge of the magazine for the Air Force at Wright Patterson Airbase. I had just finished my sophomore year in high school. My last two years of high school were at Fairborn HS, outside of Dayton, near Wright Patterson. I graduated in June of '64 and three days after graduation, at age 17, I enlisted in the Air Force. I got out 4 years later in 1968. Now for the details:

Family Boxing

My uncle had boxed professionally under the name Eddie Tremaine. The talk is that Carl Tremaine, the well-known bantamweight out of Canada, was my uncle Carl Kent. I heard the name Tremaine from my father several times. My father boxed as an amateur and his two brothers, my uncles, were professionals. I started boxing as an eleven-year-old at the Police Boys' Club in Levittown, NY.

Cy Cahn

Boxing and baseball are my two sports from then until today. The interesting thing is, growing up in New York boxing was second and baseball first, and my dream was to be a professional baseball player. I had a Little League coach named Cy Cahn who was a former professional player. My father did not want me to pursue sports at all because he felt it was too dangerous, risky is the word, I guess. You get an injury and you're gone. He wanted me to pursue an education instead, so he was trying to hold me back. All I wanted was baseball then. Cy Cahn, this former professional player, he went to visit my father, and my father tried to get rid of him. "We need to talk in private." They went down to the basement, and I snuck up into the stairwell where I was out of sight and could still hear them. I can still hear till this day the words of Cy Cahn. He told my father that he should be encouraging me because I was a once-in-a-lifetime talent in baseball.



Fathers and Sons

From Little League at age nine, all the way through Babe Ruth and high school, I led every league that I played in in batting, not just the team but the league. I was the first freshman to make high school varsity and played center field. When my parents left to move to Ohio, there were six weeks left in my sophomore year. That let me stay with a neighbor, because they didn't want to pull me out of school. School was ready to let out that particular Friday six weeks later and they had already bought the plane ticket for me to join the family on Saturday, the next day. So, I'm there with the neighbor, finishing my six week stay, and a week before I had gotten a letter from the Yankees inviting me to come to a look-see tryout on that Tuesday after school ended. I'm so happy, that's all I wanted, and on the next day I got a letter from the New York Mets, inviting me to come there on Thursday. This is the first year for the Mets, 1962. I was so excited; this was all I was going for. My neighbor was fine, stay another week, no problem. When I called my father, he said, "Absolutely not. I told you before, I don't want you to put any stock in sports, it's too risky, an injury, you don't make it, fate, and it's not secure. We bought the plane ticket, we can't afford to lose that and buy another one, you're going to be on the plane on Saturday". There was a wedge between my father and I for the rest of our lives. In truth, being invited to a tryout camp is not a big thing. They invite lots of people. But I've been told by people in the business that what was more impressive was that I was on the radar of the two teams as a 15-year-old.



The PBC

I started boxing at age 11 at the Police Boys' Club. I was with some bad people in the street, in trouble. Not doing good. Leading a gang of kids. Somebody mentioned it might have been one of the cops, to go to the Police boxing club. I walked in there and started boxing. The first year I was there with them I gave up all those bad influences in the street, it straightened me out. The funny thing about it is that I won my first title in the Police Boys' Club at 82 pounds and 11 years old. They put me in with a 14-year-old, who had experience and was a head taller than me. He beat the hell out of me the first round and a half. They were telling me afterwards: "You pulled him into a clinch and started yelling at him, 'Is that the hardest you can hit, as big as you are.'" He stepped back, dropped his hands, I moved in and knocked him out. That's my first title.

The last time I saw my father he was bad with Alzheimer's. He was 85 years old when he passed away. I was out on the porch, talking to him, he was all gone. Suddenly, out of the clear blue, he had a lucid moment. He had been gone mentally for a couple of years. He looks at me. "The worst thing I ever did, the thing I regret the most, was not allowing you to go to the tryouts with the Yankees and the Mets back then when you were in NY." And he apologized. That was the last thing he said to me. Isn't that unusual, then his mind again was gone. He passed away soon after that.

Sign Me Up

When I graduated from high school, he wanted me to go to college. I was accepted in nine schools. You put the paperwork out. It was a matter of making a choice, but I didn't want to, I wanted baseball or boxing. I was 17 years old; it was three days after graduation, I went in the Air Force and they didn't have baseball. I saw this soft pitch softball game. I didn't know what it was. I got on the traveling team over in Europe. I had never seen that game before. A day or two later I see this fast pitch softball and think that it's closer to baseball, I'll play that. And the guy goes, you can't play both because it will mess with your timing one day after the other one. I said screw it; I played on both traveling teams for the Air Force and led both leagues in batting. I played for something like 20+ years and had over a .700 batting average.

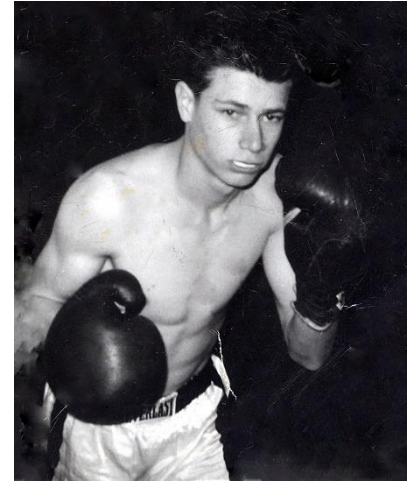
Since there was no baseball, I started boxing more. The Air Force had all those tournaments overseas. I enlisted in June of '64, six weeks of basic, sent to tech at Keesler AFB and didn't like the school at all, it was a ten-month course, I said how do you get out of here? A guy said, "You can either quit, change your field, or push ahead". I said I never quit anything in my life, so I just pushed ahead. I finished the 10-month course in 4 or 5 months and ranked 2nd in my class. I shipped out to Italy December 15th, 1964, as an 18-year-old. I get off the plane, in Southern Italy in Brindisi on the heel of the boot, a beautiful area, and I go to report in. I got my little suitcase and I'm walking to check in, but something strange happened along the way. As I'm walking, I see the base gym, so I walked in there first. I see this giant board on the wall with various sports and dates and cities running across like a chart. I saw boxing, January 15th, Torrejon AFB, Spain. This is December 15th. I want to go there, I'm thinking, because I've been boxing in the Police Boys Club.



When I moved out to Ohio for the last two years of school, also moving to Ohio from El Paso, Texas, was a guy named Tommy Fitzgerald, who was a top-notch amateur boxer. We became good friends, and we sparred every single day for the two years. So, I was getting all that work in with him. This guy was a spitting image of Terry Downes. Tommy Fitzgerald could have been his twin brother. I wish I could find him, but he disappeared after high school

Military Service Boxing

In the Air Force I was fighting as a welterweight and a junior middleweight. I went into the office looking for the person in charge of the gym. It was scary for a second, because I saw a guy with two bars on the sleeve of his shirt and I'm trying to recall what to call him. I know one bar was a lieutenant. I'm new in the service, right. So, I called him a double lieutenant. He got pissed. He told me he's a captain. When he got over that, what are you doing here? I want to go to that boxing tournament in Spain next month. "You can't go there, that's the best fighters in Europe. This base has never had any representatives, we've got no equipment, we got no trainer." The base was never involved with boxing. We argued for a little bit and then he said, "Alright, you want to go, it's your funeral. I'll send you up there early and you can work with the team in Torrejon." I had studied Spanish in school for five years, so I was looking



forward to speaking Spanish in Spain. "Where are you assigned?" I said I didn't know. "You came in here before reporting for duty?" After another argument about that, he called to find out where I was supposed to go and gets me off and sends me TDY to Torrejon Airbase. I go there and we have several tournaments, and I end up winning the championship. I make great friends with guys like Joe Souza, he was my roommate, the oldest on the team, the great cut man. The greatest amateur boxer I ever saw, Formus White. We had great teams. I was the youngest on the team. A heavyweight named Willie Blaylock, also a light-heavy, worked my corner and was a member of my team and a top fighter. We're friends to this day, he came out to visit me not long ago.

There was a Sgt. Benedict that ran the Air Force boxing team in Spain, he was the coach for the team, and then he had helpers like Joe Souza. This was in '65. Joe had been in the '52 Olympic trials, so he was much older than us. You had Joe, you had Formus White, Willie Blaylock, and Raul "Sugar" Ramos. We all became close friends. Now when I came back to my base in Italy, it was all different. Now they wanted to order equipment for me to train. I trained on my own. They set up an area in the base gym by the basketball court where I could workout boxing. They would have open houses where the base would come in and just watch me work out, which I thought was kind of stupid for a young kid. And then the next year, when it was time for the tournaments, the base commander called me into his office and said we'd like you to represent the base again. We had one other guy representing the base in wrestling, Joe Kurtz. He was 171 pounds, and he won the championship as a wrestler. Joe and I became close friends because we were the only ones representing the base beyond the base.



Mike Ryan, Steve Canton, and Raul Ramos

We had invitational tournaments in Germany, France, England, and with the other service teams; we traveled all over boxing with various base teams and civilians. Army, navy, marines. So next year they want me to represent the base. I said okay, I'm looking forward to it. We'll have a military hop for you to go up to Torrejon again. You want me to represent the base, you're going to buy a first-class plane ticket on Italia Airlines. And he goes, "We can't do that. And I said, you want me to represent the base, don't you? Last year you didn't even want me to go. I got a first-class ticket as a little 19-year-old kid. Now he says you'll be staying at the barracks at Torrejon airbase. I said no, I want a hotel room in downtown Madrid. I ended up with a room in a hotel in downtown Madrid. We came back after winning the championship again, in June '66, and shipped out to Texas. I did a year and a half in Europe. Of the 18 months, I was on the base 11 months and traveled throughout Europe for 7 months on the boxing team. I got paid TDY pay for those 7 months. I took that TDY pay and sent it home to my father. When I came back from Europe, I had a month between coming back from Europe and reporting in to Kelly Airbase in Texas, my new station. During that month I went to visit my family, and my father took that TDY money I had been sending, and bought my first car, a '62 Chevy Corvair Monza. Forty-six thousand miles, red with white interior, a beautiful car, I kept it till it died. I got that car from the cash I got from boxing, that was pretty cool, wasn't it. He had the car picked out, I said pull the trigger, and I had that car waiting for me when I got home.



While you were in Europe, was there talk about the Olympics in the competitions you fought in?

See, I was there in '65 and '66. Boxing in the Olympics was in '64 and '68. So, I was between years. I knocked out some Italian Olympic fighter that was undefeated in his hometown in one of the local shows. At that time, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. Baseball I wanted but there was no hardball for me to play anywhere. I had real bad hands. Each day I would get up in the morning and I would do my roadwork and from my roadwork I'd go to the gym. From the gym I'd go to the base hospital every day for treatment on my hands. They would put me under heat lamps, they would try all kinds of therapy on my bad hands. The doctors would tell me, you can't fight, your hands are too bad. I would say, okay. The next day I'd get up do my road work, go to the gym, go to the hospital. That's what I did for the whole year and a half I was there.

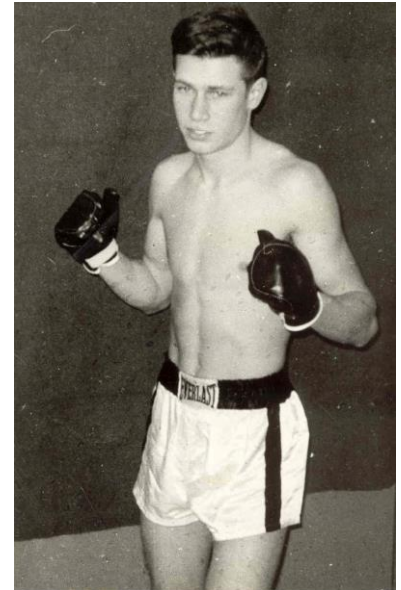


I finished up my last year and a half at Kelly Air Force base in Texas and there I played on a base softball team. A week after I was there, I met my first wife. I promised her I wouldn't fight because my hands were bad. I quit boxing. I got out of the service, Memorial Day '68, and we moved back to Ohio. I was trying to find work and I walked into W.T. Grants where I had worked part time while in high school and looked up the district manager. He used to tease me about being a store manager. I said, just checking to see about working for the company. "We're about to start a new management training course nationwide. We're hiring 50 new trainees and I'm putting you in the program." Out of the 50 people I was the only one that didn't have at least two years of college. I

remember him saying during orientation that you'll work 50 hours a week, and you'll get a store in about five years. Are there any questions? And I said if you work 100 hours a week do you get a store in 2 ½ years? He laughed and said no one's ever done that. Well, I did, I put in over 100 hours a week and I was the first of the group to get a store 2 ½ years later. I ended up managing seven stores until 1976 when they went bankrupt.

SJC's Roots

While I was doing that, I was missing boxing, so I walked into this gym in Dayton, Ohio and there's a guy named Shelton Bell, he becomes my trainer. He's telling me we're going to go pro right now. He put me in the ring right off the bat with a guy named Sammy Maul, I didn't even know who he was. Sammy later became the national AAU champion. He was a southpaw. We worked great together, and it shocked everyone. It turns out Shelton Bell was the brother of Tommy Bell. He was the national light-heavy weight champion as well. We really became close. What happened was my wife stepped in again, no fighting, and just then Grants transferred me out of town to Cincinnati. It was 1969. I walked into this gym in the Emanuel Community Center downtown on Race Street, a very bad area. I'm in the gym for about five minutes and there's a guy in the ring shadow boxing. He looks down at me, says would you like to come in and spar a little bit. I said okay. Hadn't conditioned, hadn't trained in forever, I finished putting on my shoes and we jumped in the ring, and we sparred eight vicious rounds. He goes, "That's the best sparring I've had in forever." He's Larry McCall, a finalist in the '76 Olympic trials. I started managing him. In 1969 I started the SJC Boxing Club in Cincinnati out of the Emanuel Community Center downtown. That's the beginning, right there.



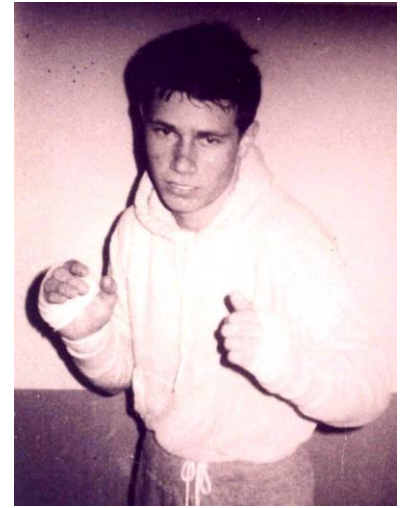
We had some fabulous fighters, Don. Working at the Emanuel Community Center with me, was an old guy who was retired, and his name was Jim Brown. He had been the trainer of Ezzard Charles. His partner, who was also training guys, was a guy named Frankie Williams senior who was Ezzard Charles' everyday sparring partner. Aaron Pryor came in as a 15-year kid. Tommy Ayers was outside shooting marbles in trouble in the streets as a 12-year-old, I helped get him in. He was a 1980 USA Olympic alternate, but the U.S. boycotted, and we didn't send an Olympic team. Tommy later became the number one welterweight contender after that as a pro. We had Frankie Williams junior who I was training along with his father and Jim Brown. And Billy Joiner was there. We became best friends over 50 years. The people there were phenomenal.

Listen to this lineup: we had Frankie Williams Jr, who beat Leon Spinks in '76 but he broke his elbow in the fight. Leon went and won the gold medal. We had Anthony Jones, a light-heavyweight, southpaw. He beat Michael Spinks, gave him three standing 8 counts. He robbed a 7-11 and went to jail. Michael won the gold medal. We had Larry McCall, who was in the semi-finals and got ripped off against Roger Leonard, who was Ray's brother. At that time Ray was the number one 39 pounder in the country. Roger was the number one '47 pounder in the country, and Odell, the cousin, was #1 at 156. And Larry beat Odell Leonard in the Eastern Olympic Trials and shocked everyone. So, Roger was given a decision over Larry, but the fight took a lot out of him, and he had nothing left in the finals against Clint Jackson, who beat him and went to the Olympics, winning a bronze medal. Then I had Jeff Whaley. Jeff was the national flyweight champion. We

had Sonny Long who was the national Bantamweight champion. I had a lightweight who was a national champion. I was in Cincinnati all those years, from '69 through '84. We had Jaime Thomas who was another champion. We had Clifford Wills and Roy Dale. They were world-class top professional fighters. The Muhammad Ali amateur team was made up of top fighters with about six of our guys. There was a guy in '84 named Parnell Bonner, called him slick Bonner. You know who Pernell Whitaker is, one of the all-time greats. As an amateur he supposedly had a 246 and 6 record. Of his supposed 6 losses, Bonner beat him twice. Bonner was another one who held up a store and was in jail in '84 and Whitaker went to the Olympics and on to greatness. Bonner spent the rest of his life in and out of jail.

You grew up at a time when there were televised fights with great fighters.

It was a really great time, and I went to many of those cards. As a 14-year-old I met Don Dunphy, and we became close, and he was urging and encouraging me to be a great fighter, and I would get Christmas cards from him every year. As a 14-year-old I met Joe Cortez. He was 16 years old with his brother Mike, and they were in the New York Golden Glove Tournament. We're still close friends to this day. When I was 14 years old, I was in a gym in New York City. It might have been Times Square Gym, in 1960. I'm hitting the heavy bag and from far away in a corner of the gym a guy had been rope skipping. I'm hitting the heavy bag and this voice yells, you don't throw a hook like that, it's too wide. I look up and this guy that had been rope skipping was walking towards me and when he got closer, I go, oh my god, Ray Robinson. My idol. I watched him on TV and loved him. Now he's teaching me how to throw a left hook and to this day that's the same way I teach the left hook. So, I had great influences, watching the Friday night fights and the Sunnyside Garden fights, and I watched all the fights I could. I used to get the magazines and study them. I had a big influence from that era.



In 1984 I moved out of Cincinnati, and I went to Austin Texas for a few years. My kids lived there, and I wanted to get close to them. They didn't have much boxing within the city of Austin, and yet Texas was one of the best states in the country for boxing. I put together a gym right away and when I left, there were 7 gyms going strong in Austin. I helped develop some national champions out of the gym and I worked closely with the military. That's where I met Kenny Adams. He was at Ft. Hood. Al "Ice" Cole had his first novice fight on my amateur show. And we had all those military guys. Kennedy McKinney, Al Cole, one after another. Tony Ayala, Mike Ayala, Paulie Ayala and Tony junior. Those guys used to come to my shows. I had my new kids in the gym and they're in there fighting on even terms, winning some and losing some, split decisions, and close fights for them. Carlos Valdez and a couple of others won national titles. We started in March, '69 in Cincinnati, Ohio and I came to Ft. Myers, Florida in March '89. It was the same month, twenty years apart. So, in March 2025 we'll be 56 years altogether and 36 years in Ft. Myers. Mike Silver did some research and said your gym is the longest, sole owner, continually open, boxing club in the history of the world. You know what that means? "Yes, I said, it means I'm very old".

SJC Boxing: <https://sjcboxing.com/board-of-directors/>

SJC boxing's ongoing programs: <https://sjcboxing.com/>

SJC Boxing Mentoring Program: <https://sjcboxing.com/mentoring/>

Documentary "Worth the Fight": <https://www.news-press.com/story/life/2023/05/17/fort-myers-sjc-boxing-documentary-movie-premieres-film-festival-worth-the-fight-steve-canton-boxer/70187709007/>

Steve's ongoing work at the Florida Boxing Hall of Fame, where he is currently president:
<http://www.floridaboxinghalloffame.com/index.html>



Steve Canton, right at home, at the Ft. Myers SJC Gym, for the 2019 FBHF induction announcements. Steve is in the back row, third from the right.