

An artist in the ring

Del Flanagan was a master of elusion during boxing's heyday. The former St. Paul resident still ranks No. 1 in victories by a Minnesota professional fighter.

BY JIM WELLS
Pioneer Press

Del Flanagan was the consummate boxer, so slick and elusive he could fight 10 or 12 rounds without messing up his hair, a fact documented by a 1954 Associated Press photo of a fight against Allie Gronik in Detroit.

Flanagan was a master of timing, so quick and evasive in his prime he could stand directly in front of many opponents and they couldn't lay a glove on him.

Del Flanagan, in the estimation

of more than one boxing historian, was the last great fighter from Minnesota. The former St. Paul resident was among the very best during boxing's golden era, when televised Friday night fights were seen in countless American households.

He was skilled enough to beat several world champions and ex-champions in nontitle fights during a career that spanned three decades, but he never got a title shot. He won his first 52 profes-

DEL FLANAGAN, 4C



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Del Flanagan

(continued)

sional fights before losing a decision to Tommy Campbell in Minneapolis.

From his first fight on April 11, 1947, when he stopped Merle Van Cleve after three rounds in St. Paul, through his last fight, on June 20, 1964, when he was stopped by Blair Richardson in Nova Scotia, Flanagan fought 130 times. He compiled a record of 105 wins, 22 losses, two draws and one no-contest. He scored 37 knockouts and was stopped seven times, six by technical knockout. Only rugged middleweight champion Joey Giardello knocked him out, in the first round of a fight in St. Paul. His 105 wins are the most by a Minnesota professional fighter.

Flanagan fought on national television 11 times, but that served only to give many of the country's best fighters, including champions, an opportunity to scout him.

"They didn't want anything to do with him," said George Blair of St. Paul, a respected boxing historian who wrote for Ring Magazine for two decades.

In October, Flanagan was inducted into the World Boxing Hall of Fame in Los Angeles, but he was unable to attend. Afflicted with Alzheimer's disease, he was at home in Phoenix. His son Terry accepted the award in his absence.

"We took a picture of him with the plaque and the trophy," Terry said, "but I don't think he knows what it means."

Flanagan, 75, is recuperating in a Phoenix hospital from a heart attack he suffered two weeks ago.

"He's improving. He's better," said his wife, Bev.

WIFE STAYED HOME

Del and Bev Flanagan have been married for 53 years. They met on a blind date in 1948 and were married two years later, but Bev can't comment on a large part of her husband's career.

"I never went to one of his fights," she said. "I guess he considered it bad luck, but he didn't want me there."

Jim Glancey has published a boxing newsletter from his St. Paul home for the past decade, and operated a boxing gym on the East Side for years. He recalls running into Del and his brother Glen, who was the No. 2-ranked featherweight in the world at one time, more than once at a bar near White Bear Lake.

"Any time we wanted action, we'd go out there. It was worth a price of admission," Glancey recalled. "The tough street fighters were always trying to prove they could beat the boxers, and it was common to see a fight in the parking lot as the night wore on. The Flanagans never backed down from anyone."

Unlike Del, a master boxer, Glen was a puncher who fought Tommy Collins

onship while the reigning champ, Sandy Saddler, was in the Army, and lost a 15-round decision.

Later, Del was a stalemate to featherweight champion Willie Pep, who lost three of four rough, dirty fights to Saddler, and Flanagan got even when he beat Saddler in Detroit.

"Pep and Joe Louis were making comebacks on the same card, and Del wanted to get even for what Saddler did to Willie," Blair said.

Flanagan lost a decision in Butte, Mont., to rugged, punishing Gene Fullmer, who later won the middleweight title from Sugar Ray Robinson. An article in the Butte newspaper said Flanagan deserved no worse than a draw.

Flanagan fought former welter-

weight champion Johnny Bratton twice. He lost on points the first time and knocked out Bratton the second time. Flanagan also outpointed former lightweight champion Beau Jack.

He lost to and then beat Ralph Dupas, who won the junior middleweight title after that weight division was introduced, and in 1953 he decided Willie Pastrano, who 10 years and several pounds later won the light heavyweight title.

PRAISE FROM HISTORIAN

Hank Kaplan, widely thought of as the foremost boxing historian in the United States, thought highly of the St. Paul fighter. "He told me that if Del

were fighting today, he would hold every title in his weight divisions," Blair said.

Flanagan's reflexes were a big part of his style.

"A lot of guys talk about timing, but they never really learn what it is," said Del Bravo, who trained amateur and professional boxers in St. Paul for more than 20 years. "I would say that Del Flanagan was a master."

As a fighter himself, Bravo frequently trained in the same gym as Flanagan and recalled his skills. "He was never off-balance, always in control," Bravo said. "No matter what position he wound up in, he could hit you. You didn't want to make a mistake with him, or you paid."

Virgil Aikins was the reigning world welterweight champion in 1958 when he fought Flanagan at the St. Paul Auditorium.

"Del was too quick for him," Bravo recalled. "Aikins could never set himself to punch, and he couldn't hit Del."

It was nearly the same when Flanagan fought ex-welterweight champion Kid Gavilan.

Former Pioneer Press sports columnist Don Riley interviewed Gavilan afterward.

"Kid Gavilan had fought on pretty even terms with Sugar Ray Robinson," Riley said. "After fighting Del, he said he'd never fought a guy who was harder to hit. Del had beautiful footwork and tremendous quickness."

Riley said Flanagan also was one of the funniest men he knew. "He could have been a stand-up comic," Riley said. "I remember him saying one time that there would be no problems in the world if every baby were born with two martinis in him."

Riley first interviewed Flanagan when Flanagan was a track star at St. Paul Wilson High School.

"People don't remember that about him. He was very fast outside of the ring, too," Riley said.

Former Minnesota State Boxing Commissioner Don Evans accompanied his father, Tony, a trainer, to the St. Paul gyms and frequently saw Flanagan work out.

"If you ever hit Del a good one, you wouldn't hit him again," Evans said. "He could really rally. He was very slick. He had the greatest left jab. If he hit you with one jab, he'd hit you with four."

ONCE RANKED NO. 2

Flanagan cracked the world ratings as a lightweight in April 1949 and for the last time in October 1959. He was ranked as high as No. 2 as a welterweight.

Flanagan was at his best in the lightweight and welterweight divisions, but moved up as he aged, and still excelled, although many of the middleweights, such as Giardello, were too big and strong for him.

Flanagan regularly drew crowds of 5,500 to 6,000 fans to the St. Paul Auditorium. "St. Paul was looked upon as one of the top five fight centers in the country at the time," Blair said.

Flanagan lost to lightweight champion Jimmy Carter on a TKO on Aug. 2, 1951, when his shoulder gave out and he was unable to come out for the seventh round. Flanagan was leading on all of the judges' scorecards at the time.

That incident served as sort of a metaphor for Flanagan's career. He flirted with greatness and could fight with champions, but he never got the opportunity to become one.

That is Blair's first thought whenever he recalls the St. Paul boxer.

"He was a great fighter who should have been a champion," Blair said.

Legendary St. Paul boxer Del Flanagan dies at 75



Del Flanagan

BY JIM WELLS
Pioneer Press

Del Flanagan, a legendary figure in Minnesota boxing, died Friday in Phoenix, from complications of a heart attack suffered two weeks earlier.

Flanagan, 75, was the No. 2-ranked welterweight in the world at the peak of his career in the 1950s, and defeated

several reigning and former world champions in nontitle fights.

Though he never got a shot at the title, many boxing figures considered him the one of best boxers in the world during his prime.

Many champions, aware of his skill and quickness, preferred to sidestep him in title bouts, and he retired in 1964 with a record of 105 wins, 22 losses, two draws and one no-decision.

Flanagan was born and raised in St. Paul and fought many of his fights at the St. Paul Auditorium. He and his family moved to Phoenix in 1984, where he raised Arabian horses.

His brother Glen, a world-ranked featherweight in the 1950s, died several

years ago.

Del Flanagan suffered from Alzheimer's for the past 10 years and was admitted to John C. Lincoln Hospital on Dec. 12 with congestive heart failure.

"He was making progress but then he came down with pneumonia," said Flanagan's wife of 53 years, Bev.

Flanagan is also survived by two sons, Tim and Terry, and Terry's wife, Cheryl, of Phoenix; two brothers, Art of St. Paul and Jerry of Phoenix; three sisters, Pat Gawlik, Della Mae Zilka and Grace Grove, who live in suburban Minneapolis; and two granddaughters, Michelle and Megan.

Bev Flanagan said her husband will be cremated and that the family plans a private memorial service in Phoenix.

Denny Nelson of St. Paul has refereed or judged 50 world championship bouts. He was just getting started in professional boxing at the end of Flanagan's career.

Nelson ran into Art Aragon, a top-ranked middleweight during Flanagan's career, a few years ago at a World Boxing Hall of Fame banquet in Los Angeles.

"I asked Art if he had ever fought Del," Nelson recalled. "And he told me that he didn't want to fight him, that Del was simply too fast for him."

Flanagan fought during the golden era of professional boxing, when Friday night fights were televised through the U.S. and competition was fierce.

"It was an exciting time. It

was when champions were truly champions," Nelson said. "There were eight weight divisions and eight champions and to get ranked then you had to be pretty damn good."

Flanagan's style was sometimes boring to fans because he did what it took to win. "He wasn't crowd-pleasing all the time," Nelson said. "He'd tie people up."

Many boxing figures who saw Flanagan fight agree with this assessment by Nelson:

"Del was the best boxer in the world in his prime," Nelson said. "Most of us were in awe of him. He was so fast, with his feet and his hands."

Nobody knew that better than Bill Kaehn of Minneapolis. He and his father, Earl, trained Flanagan for his first 30 professional fights.

"He was a combination (of) boxer (and) puncher," Kaehn said. "He had the typical Irish wit and the thought process to make a great boxer. He had the physical tools, but it was his headwork that made it work. He was a very smart fighter."

Kaehn said Flanagan was a terrific right-hand puncher as an amateur and knocked out many of his opponents. "I asked him after he turned pro why he didn't knock more people out," Kaehn said.

"He told me that he got paid the same amount of money if he won on points or knocked out an opponent and that he didn't want to bang up his hands. So he utilized his skills. That's how smart he was."

A feature article about Flanagan's career appeared in Friday's Pioneer Press. "It's so ironic," Bev Flanagan said. "I guess Del went out the same way he lived life — with a bang."

Jim Wells can be reached at jwells@pioneerpress.com.

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