

STEELE'S STOCK UP

Freddie Steele, Ex-Middleweight Boxing Champ, Finds Success on the Screen

By A. H. WEILER

FOR a man who had just lost a complete wardrobe en route to New York, Freddie Steele was strangely gay. The former world's middleweight boxing champion, who, if critical appraisals are close to the mark, is fast on his way toward film eminence, opined, "It'll probably turn up soon. No reason to worry. Life is like that. You've got to be a fatalist. It's the best philosophy in the world. I boxed twelve years—against some pretty rugged citizens, too—and never got marked up. It adds up the same way in acting. I guess the Boss upstairs had me destined to be an actor, so here I am, Freddie Steele, the actor."

The erstwhile 160-pound "Tacoma Terror," now a sedate, non-belligerent 185-pound heavyweight, paused momentarily in the staccato recital of his credo to point out that as the "Sergeant Warnicki" of the forthcoming Lester Cowan adaptation of the Ernie Pyle book, "The Story of G.I. Joe," he was making the grand tour in connection with openings of the film in various cities along the route. The experience thus far was as exhilarating as winning a title and as far as Steele is concerned could go on forever.

Not Too Loud

"Take the première in Albuquerque," for instance. "I'm sitting in a restaurant when this waitress asks me for an autograph. My buddy pipes up, 'Don't you get tired of all these people grabbing at you?' Me? says I, heck, no. It's when they'll stop asking that I'll start worrying. Besides," he grinned, "the guy doesn't know that not too many people ask me anyway."

The Steele saga from the hungry, four-round preliminary days in Tacoma's arenas through his hilarious depiction of the tough marine with the mother complex in "Hail the Conquering Hero," has been a combination of fatalism, fighting and the ineluctable yen for the limelight, coupled at each turn with an Algeresque twist. When the Steele clan (there are four now including 7-year-old Davey and 4-year-old Sharon) decided to quit Tacoma and the cigar store which was bringing in some \$600 a month, the move was governed by Steele's desire for excitement. The year was 1941, he had

Long Run



Danny Kaye of "Wonder Man," in its ninth week at the Astor.

hung up his gloves, and was developing an apathy toward talking about fights with cigar store habitués. There was a tidy \$200 a month annuity from his ring earnings and California looked exciting, so the family found itself "in a little place in the San Fernando Valley with nothing to do until something popped up."

"Shadow" Boxing

The quiet life was disturbed six months later when Mushy Callahan, ex-pug and adviser to Warner Brothers on fistic matters, called on Steele to double for Errol Flynn in "Gentleman Jim." At this point fate, in the shape of his boxing past, led him away from extra and stuntman anonymity to Preston Sturges and the limelight. Sturges, then making "The Miracle of Morgan's Creek," spotted the dark-haired, broad-shouldered and prognathous-jawed Steele milling about in a crowd sequence. Mr. Sturges, a rabid fight fan, recalled our hero upsetting Gus Lesnevitch with a prodigious wallop in a Hollywood bout in 1936. What, asked Sturges, was Steele doing stunting? He, Sturges, would write a small part for him in the picture.

When "Hail the Conquering Hero" came along, the producer-director-writer, impressed with Steele's four-line bit in the previous picture, wrote a longer part for the budding actor. "It was supposed to be a straight role—no comedy," Steele laughed. "But I played so darn straight—kept repeating that line, 'You shouldn't do that to your mother'—that it turned out to be funny. I guess it was a cinch for me to play a dopey guy after all those years of throwing punches." Mr. Sturges, it should be added, now has Steele under personal contract. Since then there have been Steele bits in "The Man From Down Under," "Pin-Up Girl" and the not yet released "Duffy's Tavern," after which the fat assignment in "G. I. Joe" was added to his gallery of character portraits.

Fistic Vista

The 13-year-old Seattle boy who told his late manager, David Miller, that "I know I want to be a fighter," and proved his point, looks back at the age of 32 on a vista that includes 165 fights with only five losses. The championship which he won in 1936 from Babe Risko and dropped to Al Hostak in 1938 was, fatalistically, his thirteenth defense of the title. There was, of course, the inevitable try for a comeback. But after running into the flailing gloves of one, Jimmy Casino, Steele, forsaking fighting forever, gave away some \$400 worth of ring equipment determined thereafter to face nothing more vicious than a director's bark.

As in the palmy days of the title, when he was partly "owned" by none other than Bing Crosby, Steele, as a Hollywood luminary, now maintains a connection with the "squared circle" by managing a light-heavyweight curiously named John L. Sullivan. But this, like cantering on his blooded, Palomino stallion, "Billy Boy," in non-emoting moments, comes under the heading of hobbies. Acting henceforth will be Steele's career. For, as he explains grinning, "Where else can a guy like me make 750 bucks a week?"