

## Johnny Papke - The All Time Great Trainer

By Jerry Fitch



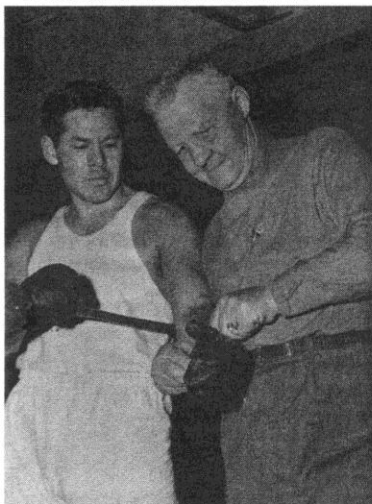
When it comes to naming the greatest fighters of all time in Cleveland I did the best I could in my book Cleveland's Greatest Fighters of All Time. Those selections can be debated by fight fans of all

ages for a number of reasons and it is all in good fun.

But when it comes to naming the all time great in the history of trainers in Cleveland I personally feel it is a lot easier. While there have been many excellent and good trainers, who as individuals you can list certain fighters they took to the top and were very successful with, one man stands out alone for his overall success and his longevity of producing excellent fighters and also working with the most famous fighters in modern Cleveland ring history, both amateur and professional.

Johnny Papke's name is simply the one name that the survivors of his era would automatically blurt out when asked who they thought was the best. He was someone who even the casual fan heard of. His name went hand in hand not only with various gyms in the Cleveland area; Old Angle when it was at West 25th and Franklin, the Teamsters(Big Ten) Gym at East 14th, and Carnegie (the last gym he managed) and the most famous place his name was affiliated with, "Papke's" at East 55th and Lexington.

Years later he had a tavern on the



Johnny puts on the gloves of Oscar "Chico" Elias, another Papke amateur hopeful, in December of 1960.



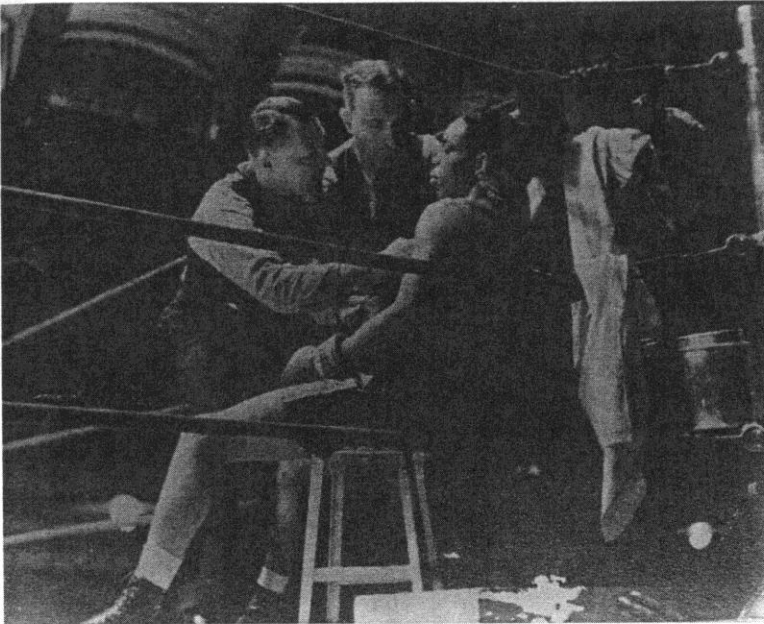
Johnny Papke

southeast side of town and he worked for Cuyahoga County. But even the most casual of fans knew the name Papke, and even today 38 years after his death, people still sing the praises of Johnny.

Johnny Papke bummed his way here by accident, riding a train from Superior, Wisconsin, trying to make the Jack Dempsey-George Carpentier fight in Jersey City, NJ in 1921. Hunger forced him off the train here and he liked it so much he stayed. He took a job as a sparring partner for Bryan Downey, the Columbus middleweight, who was a claimant to the middleweight title and was about to fight Johnny Wilson. Papke got 50 cents for his first session with Downey and got knocked

down twice in the process. He was mostly a preliminary fighter, who is said to have fought 93 professional fights, many of them "smokers" which there are no records of. However you can find his name in the record book under the great middleweight, Harry Greb's record, from a bout in Zanesville, Ohio on January 19, 1925. The results were a seventh round knockout in Greb's favor. Johnny always said he fought Greb twice, and this was quite possible, records were often shoddy in those days.

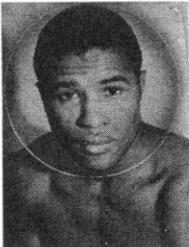
Johnny met his wife Emily here and they were married and had a daughter, Olga, also known as "Babe" who eventually ended up owning and raising horses at various area tracks.



November 24, 1939, Johnny works in corner of George Pace, during his fight with Jimmy Webster at Cleveland Public Hall. Also in photo is Tom Stanley, manger of the NBA champion.

When Johnny Papke finally decided (a damaged eye helped speed this process) he was no longer going to go anywhere in the fight game as an active combatant, he started to train fighters. And he seemed to have a gift when it came to tutoring others. And the one thing that became apparent before too long is how he loved to work with the youngsters in the ring, teach them the ropes, make men out of them. He started training fighters in 1928.

Statistics are a wonderful thing and they don't always tell the whole story. But it is hard to argue with the credentials left behind by Johnny Papke. In all his years of entering youngsters into the Plain Dealer (the then long time sponsor of the tournament) Golden Glove Tournament, he sent 3,500 fighters into the ring, had 105 champions, including National Champions such as: Jack Pallat, Jimmy Reeves, Charley Lester and Sampson Powell. And each year the outstanding trainer was given an award and he won Best Trainer in the tournament 26 times, including a streak of 23 straight years.



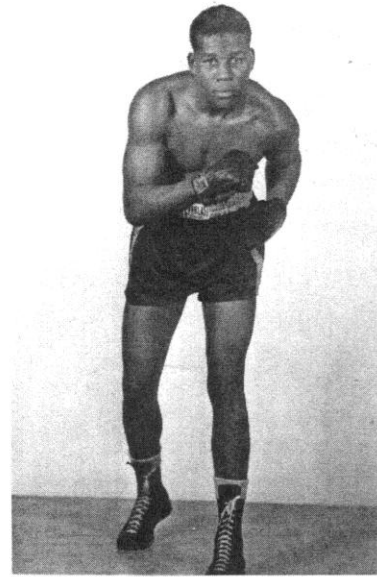
Jimmy Reeves

In the later years he was slowed by a heart attack and other ailments, but at one time when the Golden Gloves were huge

here he entered 134 boys in a single tournament and he was also a charter member of the ABTA (Amateur Boxers Trainers Association) and other local organizations.

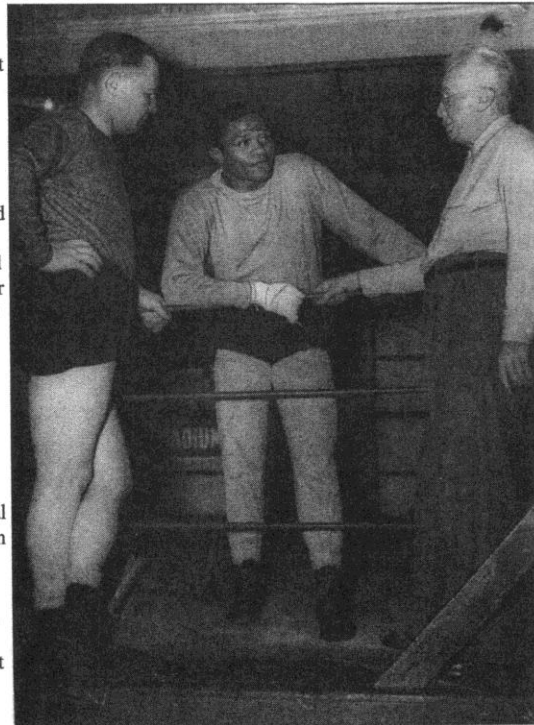
Papke's expertise did not stop at the amateur level however. When you think of Cleveland's "Golden Era" of boxing starting in 1939, until it all but ended in the early 60's, he worked the corners or trained most of the prominent Cleveland professionals at one time or another. The names Jimmy Bivins, Joey Maxim, Georgie Pace, Lloyd Marshall, Jimmy Reeves and Chuck Hunter are just a few who graced his resume.

At times even Papke could become controversial as he got caught in between various fighters and loyalties. For example in the summer of 1943, when Jimmy Bivins was set to defend his "Duration" light heavy title against fellow Clevelander, Lloyd Marshall, at Cleveland Stadium, Johnny worked with Lloyd. As a matter of



Chuck Hunter

fact he was quoted in the newspapers as saying Lloyd would win easily. Having worked with Jimmy Bivins many times I am sure this did not sit well with Jimmy at the time. And Bivins stopped Marshall in



Johnny Papke, who would get into the ring, and work with his fighters, even in later years, is shown planning strategy with Lloyd Marshall and his manager, Johnny Rogers, prior to his fight with Curtis Sheppard

the 13th round to prove his prediction wrong.

But as the years went on you would often find Johnny Papke back in Jimmy's corner for many major fights including those against Archie Moore and Ezzard Charles, and if you are fortunate to watch any of the fight footage available of these fights you will see Papke's face in the corner.

While watching Joey Maxim fight Archie Moore in 1952, in defense of his light heavyweight title, there is Johnny Papke in the corner once again. It seems like anytime the best Cleveland pros had a major fight, Johnny Papke either trained them or at the very least worked the corner the night of the fight.

In 1955 when a heart attack prevented him from climbing the steps at the Golden Gloves tournament, he still entered 35 fighters and his associates Paul Williams and Pat Yates worked the corner. But Johnny was at ringside giving instructions to his men as each fight went along. He was never too far from the action even when illness prevented him from being where he really wanted to be, in the corner.

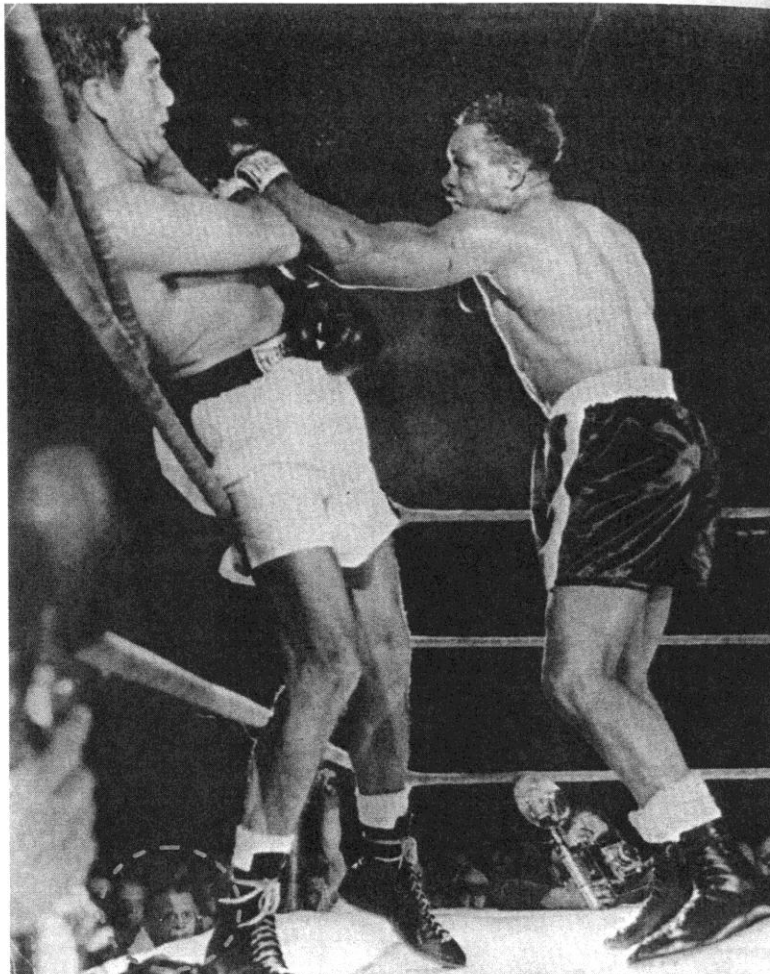
Of course as Cleveland's premier amateur trainer he worked many tournaments and trained teams of outstanding fighters against International competition. Anytime I would go out of town to a boxing dinner I would hear some of the "oldtimers" talking about fight shows they were involved with "Johnny Papke's fighters" from Cleveland.

I never had the pleasure of getting to know Johnny Papke. When I saw him it was from a distance and unfortunately when I started to get much more involved with boxing, he was no longer around. I did get to chat with his daughter, "Babe" several times however and it was interesting. Sadly someone had broken into her house and stolen most of the memorabilia that she had on her father.

Johnny passed away on March 10, 1966, he was only 65 years old. But he will always be the "Dean of the Ring" here.

(Photo to right) Johnny Papke is surrounded by Bobby Haymon (right) and Earl Johnson (left), February 1960, Golden Gloves Tournament, he sent 3,500 aspiring youngsters into the ring, had 105 champions, and won the BEST TRAINER AWARD, 26 times, including a streak of 23 years.

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Archie Moore pins champion, Joey Maxim on the ropes, in route to winning the light-heavyweight title, December 17, 1952, St. Louis. Johnny Papke is in the corner, lower left.

