

The Sport of Boxing (1899-1939)

Second in a Series of Articles on the Sporting Legacy of the Town

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Boxing in the twentieth first century no longer has its magnetic appeal. But at the turn of the twentieth century no other sport surpassed the popularity of boxing both in our town and in the country. In the past the greatest superstars of our time were the heavyweight champions of the world. Today most people do not even know what individual or what country holds that title.

One of the most famous world championship fights, for weight classes other than heavyweight, took place in this town on September 12, 1899 when Terrible Terry McGovern, featherweight champion of the world, knocked out Pedlar Palmer, in the first round. The following excerpt is Bob Creamer's version of the fight that was published in the Eastchester Historical Society publication, *A Story of a Town: 1664-1964*.

"The fight took place in Tuckahoe, on the site of today's Parkway Oval, with the ring situated just about where second base is now. Despite its brevity (a popular joke for years was the one about the city slickers from New York who arrived late and paid to get in just as the fight was ending); the match was of historic significance..." McGovern's manager, Sam Harris, took his "fight out of the New York City clubs and promoted it as a spectacle, setting an example that is still followed today. He picked Tuckahoe because it was set up for boxing matches (the Westchester boxing Club presented bouts there regularly), the country setting was pleasant and attractive, and the arena was close to the depot train stop of the New York Central station.

Out to Tuckahoe came 9,000 people, which would be an immense crowd in our town even today...Terrible Terry delighted and disappointed the crowd by ending the fight almost as soon as it began, and perhaps that is the reason why big-time boxing never came back to Parkway Oval. It was a long trip from New York for two minutes and three seconds of entertainment."

While big-time boxing never returned, boxing remained popular in the town. On Saturday nights people came to the saloons at Waverly Square and watched the primitive and illegal sport of cock fighting. Also on these nights bare knuckled boxing matches took place, with wages being placed on men as they had been placed on birds.

For young boys growing up in town it was a sign of manhood to be able to defend yourself with your fists in a fair fight. In 1923 a mother of two boys who were in trouble with the law for vandalizing a candy machine was frightened about what the Tuckahoe village judge would do to her sons. She approached a Tuckahoe police officer named Milt Gibbons, an amateur boxer and wrestler of great ability, to intercede in her behalf. Milt approached the judge and the boy's

were placed on probation under Officer Gibbons' supervision. Not only did the village judge put these two boys under Gibbon's care but as other boys got into trouble, he placed them under the care of "Milt" as he was called.

It was at this time, with these boys as a nucleus, that Gibbons organized the Tuckahoe Police Associates. Nightly, ever growing numbers the youngsters flooded to the cellar of the patrolman's home. Here he had installed such athletic equipment as he could afford. Later the gym was moved to the basement of the Main Street School (Now Tuckahoe Village Hall Within a year these boys were carrying off prizes as amateur boxers throughout the east.

Milt's program expanded to include other boys in the community beside ones in trouble with the court. Twice a week he took boys interested in boxing to the Yonkers Hollywood Inn boxing gym. By 1930 branch clubs similar to the one in Tuckahoe had been formed in Yonkers, Mt. Vernon, and Eastchester. It would be at the Knights of Columbus Hall in town that the first Police Athletic League tournament was held. These tournaments became annual affairs and as its popularity expanded had to be held at the newly completed Eastchester High School.

But probably the most famous boxer- athlete of that period was Jack Vecciarelli. In the early thirties Jack was a great football and baseball player at Eastchester High School where he also perfected his skills at boxing. Jack received a full scholarship to play Big Ten football at Michigan State. But his most outstanding achievements came in the ring. He was a major contender for the light heavy weight championship. He was a contemporary of James Braddock who held the heavy weight championship of the world from 1935-1937. Braddock and Vecciarellieven sparred in the same ring at a gym in Mount Vernon. More shall be learned about Jack in a future article.

By the end of the thirties the Tuckahoe Police Associates under the tutelage of Patrolman Milt Gibbons and Charlie Mara were training some of the best fighters in the east.

In the next article the story of the high point of the Tuckahoe Police Associates and the famous Eastchester Boxers will be told.