

SEAN McDERMOTT BOXING CLUB, MANORHAMILTON

Margaret Connolly

OF ALL THE sports, boxing has probably undergone the most radical changes from the days of bare-knuckle fights to the sophistication of the present day sport—a sport requiring sharpness of mind, speed and skill. Ring archaeologists trace American boxing roots back to the late 1840's. Many Irish, fleeing the horrors of the famine and carrying only a valise of hope, were swindled or coerced into this dangerous world. By the 1880's, the great John L Sullivan was the hero of the ring. Known as the Boston Strong Boy, he was recognised as the first heavyweight champion of gloved boxing. Of Irish descent, his father came from Abbeydorney, Co Kerry and his mother from Athlone. His visit to Ireland in 1877 attracted much interest and inspired the aspiring boxing hopefuls to emulate his success. The participation of the immigrant Irish in the American boxing scene greatly influenced the progress of the sport at home and in 1911 the Irish Amateur Boxing Association was founded. For the early years of its existence it floated from venue to venue. The exodus of young men to the battlefields of WW1 took its toll and following the hiatus of the Great War period, the association reformed in May 1920. The first major tournament took place in Dalymount Park in July 1920 and the first championships in the Abbey Theatre in February 1922. The organisation was headed up by William McDonald and William Carroll, two former champions and the general council had a broad representation drawn from army, police, civilian and university boxing sectors.

After the Civil War, the Irish Government was most anxious to enhance the profile of the embryonic state through sport. General

Eoin O'Duffy, Commissioner of the Civic Guards/*An Garda Síochána*, was a strong supporter of this thinking. Looking at the 1924 Irish team at the Paris Games, the domination of army boxers is evident and the team coach was army instructor James 'Taney' Lee. Although no medals were won on that occasion, the performance of the team was very creditable, particularly that of Sergeant Patrick Dwyer from Thurles who subsequently was appointed trainer to the 1928 Olympic team.

The IABA, whose function it was to organise, develop, foster and control amateur boxing across Ireland, went from strength to strength and in 1937 it proposed the construction of a stadium solely for the purpose of boxing. The cost of building the National Stadium was £12,000. It was completed and officially opened in 1939, renovated and modernised in 2000 and is the only purpose built boxing stadium in the world.

The Birth of a Club

Back in Manorhamilton, the stirrings of interest in the sport are evident in the 1930's. A railway timetable (SL & NCR) for the Manorhamilton sports in 1931 included a boxing tournament. The youth of the town, in that decade, gathered to hone their skills in the loft at the rear of J S Golden's shop. Their efforts were greatly aided by the expertise of Robbie O'Malley, from Tullyskerney, himself a former British Army Lightweight Champion. For the years of that early club, Robbie filled the dual role of coach and referee. The



■ Jimmy Kilbride, Fabien O'Donnell, Jim Mulligan, Senan Bergin & Ken Golden. Sean McDermot Boxing Club. c.1943. PHOTO: COURTESY OF KEN GOLDEN


transfer from Kells to Manorhamilton of Superintendent J J Bergin in 1940 was surely a case of their loss, our gain. This man became part of just about every worthwhile project in the town. With army and boxing experience, he threw his weight behind the formation of an official local club and the Sean McDermott Boxing Club was born. Its first President was Rev Fr Brady and Supt Bergin acted as Secretary/Treasurer and general organiser. A 'try out' tournament was organised for the 9th of January 1941 in McGloin's Hall. Its purpose was to make the public aware of the excellent work being done in the interests of the youth of the area. Thirteen contests, each of two 2 minute rounds were staged, with no decisions or judgements made. Juveniles on the night were Frank Mulligan v Paddy O'Brien, Frank Lynott, Sean McPoilin, Jack McSharry. John McGoldrick and the youngest competitors were Ken Golden who took on Reggie Sommers. On a night when there were neither winners

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Programme.

BOXING

UNDER I.A.B.A. RULES

—AT—

MANORHAMILTON.

ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 26th. 1941.

COMMENCING AT 7.30 p.m.

REFEREE:

Mr. O'MALLEY

(A Former British Army Lightweight Champion)

JUDGES:

Dr. DEASY, M.D.
Gda. E. SMITH, (Irish Lightweight Champion)
Mr. MEAGHER.

TIMEKEEPER:

Supt. J.J. BERGIN.
Mr. E. FITZGERALD.

M.C.

M. CEAN DDADIV

REFEREE:

Mr. O'MALLEY

(A Former British Army Lightweight Champion)

JUDGES:

Dr. DEASY, M.D.
Gda. E. SMITH, (Irish Lightweight Champion)
Mr. MEAGHER.

nor losers, victors nor vanquished, it is interesting to peruse the opinions of the onlookers as reported in the *Leitrim Observer*. In the juvenile section we are told the Mulligan/O'Brien bout was 'an excellent boys' bout with Mulligan 'cool' while O'Brien 'showed fire and was quick and determined in attack'. Frank Lynott was 'aggressive' and McPoilin 'good at avoiding punishment'. Jack McSharry and John McGoldrick were assessed as 'a pair of hard hitting boys' while in the Ken Golden/Reggie Sommers bout, Ken was 'much more scientific, showed good understanding and was clever in attack and defence'. The senior contestants were Paddy Mulligan v Patrick Hagan, John P O'Donnell v Mick Kilkenny, Paddy Bergin v Dermot Martin, John Sommers v Brendan Wilson, Corp. Manning v J McGovern, Sean Brady v Wendell Armstrong and Packie McDermott v Mick J McMorrow.

With the sweet smell of success and the evident public interest and enthusiasm a further event was held on January 23rd and this was followed by a well publicised tournament on March 26th. With the army based in Manorhamilton

at that time, it is not surprising to find on the programme names like Troopers Wadden and Conroy and Corporals Connolly and Farrington. The RUC was also well represented by Constables Jackson, Fraser, Andrews and Goodall. Nine contestants from Sligo BC also took part. The Sean McDermott club was evidently well regarded and over the early years of the 40's it hosted visiting clubs from Belfast. Enniskillen, Banbridge, Drogheda, Athlone, Dublin, Boyle, Sligo, Garrison, Drumshanbo and Killargue. We will never know the names of all those who joined the local club but from the programmes, we have a record of those who competed in the tournaments. Apart from those already mentioned M O'Connell, F O'Donnell, G. Moore, J Kelly, J O'Connell, A O'Hagan, P McManus, P Mitchell, J Giblin, W McFarland, J Conway and P McKenna (who later became Fr Peter) are also recorded.

The first AGM, of the club took place in Supt. Bergin's office in the Garda Barracks on Friday 17th October 1941. Those present were Mr Fitzgerald, Supt J J Bergin, Benny Rooney, Michael P McGovern, John H Dolan, Bernard

Connolly, Michael T O'Donnell, Jack McKenna, Garda P Mulligan, Garda E. Gormley and Garda J Byrne. Officials elected were Rev. John Brady, P P Mullies, Patron, Mr Fitzgerald, Chairman, Mr M T O'Donnell, Secretary, Supt Bergin and Mr H Raftery, *Joint Treasurers*. It was decided to limit the committee to nine and those elected were William A Murphy, John H Dolan, Benny Rooney, G F Egan, E Gormley, Michael P McGovern, P Mulligan, G Wilson and A McMorrow. At the meeting of this new committee the following week, a tournament date of the 31st of November was agreed.

The contest held on January 7th 1942 was of special interest. The famous Maxie McCullagh, Irish Army Junior Champion in '41, took on T Langan, Knockmore B C in the ring in McGloin's Hall. This was not Maxie's only visit to Manorhamilton. In 1943 we find him facing C. Mullen of Drogheda BC. On those visits he stayed with Mrs McLoughlin, Castle Street. Many years later on meeting Eamonn Gilligan in the National Stadium, he recalled, with great fondness, his time in the McLoughlin house. Connacht Championship titles came to club member Fabian O'Donnell in 1942 and to Ken Golden in 1943 and Benny Foley from Dromahair had the honour of claiming an All Ireland title at the National Stadium in '42/'43. The tournament held on April 26th 1944 saw another two famous boxers in the ring in McGloin's Hall when Capt Dowdall, Irish Army, European Champion 1937 fought G Smyth, Belfast, Ulster Champion 1943. Then the inexplicable happened. This flourishing club just faded away.

A Revival of Interest

Why boxing interests slumbered in North Leitrim in the late '40's, through the '50's and into the 1960's is puzzling. At national level the sport was vibrant and in the 1950's several Olympic medals won. Silver medals were secured by John McNally, Whitecity B C in

Finland in 1952 and Fred Tiedt in Melbourne in 1956. Three Irish boxers, John Caldwell, Fred Gilroy and Tony Byrne brought home bronze from the 1956 Melbourne Olympics and Jim McCourt earned a bronze in Tokyo in 1964. In the late 1960's a revival of interest in the sport was apparent in Manorhamilton and the Leitrim Observer informs us that a meeting of the re-formed Sean McDermott BC was held in the Community Centre on January 5th 1971. The former flourishing club had risen, phoenix-like, from the ashes. Among those present at that meeting were Barney Gilmurray, Jimmy Gilbride, Eugene McNulty, Wendell Armstrong, Ken Golden, Joe McKiernan, Mick O'Dell, Seamus Reynolds, Paddy Mulligan, Liam McBride, J McGoldrick, M J Dolan, M Dolan and S McGoldrick. In addition there were about twenty five juveniles who fancied themselves as potential Cassius Clays.

Special Contests

CRUISER WEIGHT:		Round	Min.
Const. W. JACKSON, R.U.C. Belfast.	v A. CONVEY (Sligo B.C.) Connacht Champ.	4	2
LIGHT-HEAVY WEIGHT:			
Const. R. FRASER, R.U.C. Belfast.	v M. LYNCH (Sean McDermott B.C.)	3	2
WELTER WEIGHT:			
Trooper WADDEEN (Army)	v M. McPARTLAND Sligo a.c. Connacht Champ. 1940.	4	2
Trooper CONLAN	v Const. ANDREWS R.U.C.	3	2
MIDDLE WEIGHT:			
J.P. O'DONNELL (S. McDermott B.C.)	v Const. GOODALL R.U.C.	3	2
J.P. McINTYRE	v J. CONWAY Sligo B.C. Runner-up Connacht Champ. 1940.	4	2
Corpl. CONNOLLY Army	v M. HENNIGAN	3	2
LIGHT WEIGHT:			
Corpl. FARRINGTON Army	v J. McGUIRE (Sligo B.C.)	3	2
J. McGOVERN (S. McDermott B.C.)	v F. McAWEE Sligo	3	2
Corpl. MANNING	v P. MULLIGAN (S. McDermott)	3	1½
FEATHER WEIGHT:			
P. MORAN (S. McDermott)	v F. CURRAN (Sligo B.C.)	3	1½
B. WILSON do.	v C. FOLEY do.	3	1½
BANTAM WEIGHT:			
P. BERGIN (S. McDermott)	v V. O'BOYLE (Sligo B.C.)	3	1
JUVENILE:			
J. GILBRIDE (S. McDermott)	v E. COATS	3	1
PAPER WEIGHT:			
KEN GOLDEN (S. McDermott)	v S. McDONAGH (Sligo B.C.)	3	1

The Committee of the Sean McDermott B.C. wish to offer grateful thanks to all who subscribed to Prize Fund, or gave Prizes for this Tournament.

LIST OF SUBSCRIBERS:-

Mr. Desmond Keany, Manorhamilton.	£2	0	0
Mr. P. L. Coyle, do.	1	0	0
Dr. O'Carroll "	1	0	0
Dr. Fitzgerald "	1	0	0
Mr. J. Golden "	1	0	0
Mr. McSweeney, M. & L. Bank	1	0	0
Mr. Henderson, Ulster Bank	1	0	0
Mrs McEnroy, Central Hotel	1	0	0
Mrs. J.J. Bergin, Manorhamilton	1	0	0
Mr. S. Roddy, "Sligo Champion"	1	0	0
Mr. Egan, Manorhamilton	1	0	0
Rev. Fr. Brady, P.P. Mullies	1	0	0
Mr. C. A. Flattery, D.J. Sligo		10	0
Mr. F. Fox, Manorhamilton		10	0
Mr. A. McArthur, Sligo		10	0
Mr. R. A. O'Malley, Tuillys Kearney		10	0
Total	£15	0	0

PRIZES WERE PRESENTED BY THE FOLLOWING:-

Nelson & Sons, Sligo.
 Mr. E. Fox, Manorhamilton.
 Mr. J. H. Dolan, "
 Mr. T. A. Golden, "
 Mrs. M. Gilbride, "
 Mr. T. R. Armstrong, "
 Mr. McMorrow, B.A., L.L.B., Manorhamilton.
 Manorhamilton Garda District Force.

Gilmurray, Michael McGauran and Eugene McNulty soon paid dividends and by December 1971 the Leitrim Observer reported that 'the Sean McDermott Boxing Club excelled themselves in a very entertaining tournament in Carrick-on-Shannon with Gabriel McSharry beating the experienced Rory Mulhern (Carrick-on-Shannon) and Johnny McGauran (Lurganboy) beating Seamus Mulhern (Carrick-on-Shannon)'. Gabriel and Johnny were two of a very successful threesome, the third being Sean Mulligan, all of whom claimed Connacht titles between the years '72 to '75 and represented their club at the National Stadium in April 1973.

On a night recently (Aug. 19th) boxers from the 70's and 80's gathered to recall their time in the Sean McDermott Club. Those present were John Gilligan, Gabriel McSharry, Sean Mulligan, Felim Gurn, Seamus Reynolds, Dessy McNulty, Tommy Heraghty, Michael McDermott, Charlie McDermott, Pat McDermott and younger members Mark McDermott, Laura McDermott, Cathal O'Dowd and Sean McSharry. Long-time faithful supporter,

Ken Golden, was also present. The enthusiasm and excitement of that period, thirty to forty years ago, was palpable and names of absent friends were recalled—Arnold Reynolds, Pauric Mulligan, Mickey McGauran, Eamonn Gilligan, Gerry McGinley, John McGauran, Liam and Frank McSharry, Joe and Jim Darcy, Ronan Duffy, Michael McGuinness, Declan O'Brien, Vincent and Dermot McMorrow, Denzil Lee, Raymond, Dessy, Seamus and Kevin Kerrigan. Memories of past successes flowed, Pat Gilligan's Connacht medal in '78, Michael McGuinness's Connacht Juvenile Championship win in 1981, John Francis McGowan's two All Ireland titles in '79 and '80.

A short break in the club's activities took place from about 1982 -1985 when, due to a road accident, Seamus Reynolds was unable to coach but 1985 saw the club up and running again and new helpers Michael Lonican and Noel Healy came on board. That year of 1985 is one of very special significance in the history of the club. That was the year John Gilligan returned from Australia and took up the mission of steering the club from success

to success through the nineties and up to the present. Eamonn, John's brother, tells of bringing John, all of eight years old, to join the club in 1972.

The Victorious 90's

The young boxing enthusiasts of the nineties are the young parents of today and a dip into the membership list is a reminder of how quickly time passes. It is unlikely that all the names from that time got mentioned at a recent recall session but those that did were James Kelly, Kevin, Joe and Alan Bradley, David and Stephen Clancy, the Reynolds lads -Francis, Philip, Joseph and John, Shane Healy, Seamus and Joe Connolly, Jason Clancy, Liam, Vincent, Declan and Jeffrey Taffe, Paul Lonican, the Hickey brothers -Gary, Alan, Gerard and Aaron, Derek Stewart, Sean Boylan, Joe McLoughlin, Harry McGinley, Michael McKeown, Christie and Paddy McGowan and from Killargue, Steve Feeney, Brian Feeney and the Rooney boys—Thomas, Aidan, Patrick, Mark and Gary. The four Reynolds brothers all achieved Connacht titles as did Joe and Alan Bradley, David and Stephen Clancy, Shane Healy and Gerard Hickey. But the star of that period was, without question, James Kelly, who, from 1987 attained six consecutive Connacht titles. He had the honour of being selected to captain the Under Seventeen Irish Youth Team in Scotland in '93 and went on to claim a National Title in Ireland in '94. How

proud his father, Seamus, must have felt. He, with John Gilligan, Larry McDermott and Vinnie McKeown, was a club coach at that time. That successful decade closed with a further two National Titles—John Flanagan in '98 and Kieran Maguire in '99.

In the 1990's, the idea of girl's boxing was still frowned upon by the boxing authorities. This was the period when young Katie Taylor was listed on programmes as K Taylor so that she could fight against boys who didn't realise their opponent was a girl until her headgear was removed. However, opposition to female participation gradually lessened and in 1997, women were finally admitted to boxing clubs. In October 2001, fifteen year old Katie Taylor beat Belfast's Alanna Murphy in the first ever sanctioned female boxing match at the National Stadium. She is, without doubt, the greatest female boxing champion in the world today—a five times EU Champion and current triple World Champion. She did her country proud when she stood on the podium at the London Olympics in 2012 holding her precious Olympic gold. Back home in Manorhamilton, the first girls to join the Sean McDermott Club were Anne Marie Kelly and Aisling McMorrough and the first girl to box in the Manorhamilton ring was Pauleen Clancy who took on Mairéad Keane from Sligo.

A Bright Future

Today's vibrant club with its membership of

eighty, is one of four Leitrim clubs, the others being St Patrick's, Dromahair, Drumsna and Ballinamore and of the eight current champions in the Sligo Leitrim area, the Sean McDermott Club has three, the Inishfree B C three and one each in Ballinacarrow and Ballinamore. Young local boxers like Alanna Ward, Dervilla Rooney, Niall Gallagher and Dita Kodolina have shown exceptional talent and all are holders of National Titles. The club is fortunate in the expertise and loyalty of its officials. Martha McGuinness has given twenty years of dedicated service. Initially she became a judge and then progressed to referee status. Very recently Martha has been promoted to the ranks of a world competitions boxing judge, a qualification which opens, for her, global doors.

James Kelly's experience in the ring translates into coaching expertise and this he generously brings to the club. He is recognised as the finest and most successful boxer in the history of the Sean McDermott B C and, as such, is a superb role model to those he coaches. If ever there was a kingpin to an organisation, John Gilligan is that to the Sean McDermott Club. Now in his third decade of coaching, guiding and leading, he runs a club in which good competition, good comradeship and respectful discipline are nurtured and encouraged. His energy is boundless and his enthusiasm for the sport infectious. *May his stewardship continue for many years.*

SNIPPET

ELECTRIC BIKE TRAILS GOING FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

In the last year this innovative Leitrim Business have expanded their regular and electric bike hire operations with an outlet at Carrick on Shannon and Lough Key Forest and Activity Park. They have formed a network with six other electric bike hire companies around Ireland and the Wild Atlantic Way to attract tourists to the cycling experience. Electric Bike Trails are also involved with 2 other Leitrim based businesses, *Adventure Gently* and *Leitrim Landscapes Guided*

Walks offering groups a "Big Day Out in Leitrim" experience with a one hour cycle, a one hour Canadian Canoe trip and a one hour nature/foraging walk in local woodlands. They are also actively involved in the newly formed *Leitrim Tourism Network* to help to put Leitrim on the Tourism map.

For more details on above please visit: www.electricbiketrails.com and www.bigdayoutinleitrim.com

