

(ed. note - This article originally appeared in Dick Mastro's publication, "Official Boxing Record" in 1954.)

HISTORY OF AN EDIFICE

The First 25 Years

The Chicago Stadium, world's largest indoor boxing arena which came into being as the result of the dreams of a Chicago dancehall proprietor and sports promoter, starts its twenty-fifth year of operation next month with the promise of breaking the three world boxing records it now holds - indoor gate, indoor attendance, and most receipts for a welterweight fight.

Since its opening on March 28, 1929, the Stadium has featured the world's greatest fighters in all weight classes from heavyweight through flyweight. Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, Max Baer, Mickey Walker, Barney Ross, Ray Robinson, Tony Zale, Kid Gavilan, and Tony Canzoneri, have headlined Stadium cards.

Six world champions won their crowns in a Stadium ring, the latest being lightweight champion Jimmy Carter, who regained the title from the man to whom he had lost it several months previously, Lauro Salas, on October 15, 1952. Other champions who won their titles at the Stadium were Rocky Graziano, who beat Tony Zale on July 16, 1947; Ray Robinson, who dethroned Jake La Motta on February 14, 1951; Jackie Fields, who won the welter title by outpointing Lou Brouillard on January 28, 1932; Barney Ross, who took Tony Canzoneri's lightweight title from him on June 23, 1933; and Freddy Miller who won the NBA featherweight title by whipping Tommy Paul on January 13, 1933.

In the past twenty-four years the Stadium has seen many sensational battles fought in its ring. Over 50 world champions have appeared at one time or another in the huge arena. As a fitting celebration to mark its silver anniversary year the Stadium will be the scene on April 10th of the biggest fight of the year, the return heavyweight title match between Rocky Marciano and Jersey Joe Walcott. The bout will mark Rocky's first defense of the title, against the man whom he kayoed last September to gain the crown.

Preparations are being made to accommodate upwards of 26,000 spectators, the Stadium's full capacity, and a gate of more than \$800,000, for the fray. In the event either, or both, of these marks are met they will shatter the existing world indoor gate and attendance records, already held by the Stadium. (ed. note - the fight was held on May 15, 1953 and attracted only 16,034 fans who paid \$331,795.)

The record gate of \$422,918 (for an indoor arena) was set by the Zale-Graziano middleweight title match on July 16, 1947 and the record indoor attendance mark was set on February 19, 1932, when the old Manassa Mauler, Jack Dempsey, clashed with King Levinsky in a four round exhibition before 23,322 spectators. (ed. note - inflation has caused the indoor gate record to have been surpassed many times while the advent of the domed stadium has resulted in the indoor attendance record being shattered.)

The Stadium was erected as the result of the dreams of Paddy Harmon, Chicago sports promoter, ex-dance hall operator, and idealist. For several years prior to the arena's being built, Paddy sought vainly for financial aid to enable him to transfer his dream of a "big fight Stadium" from his fertile and imaginative brain to the reality of a construction engineer's blueprint.

After several years of trying, Harmon succeeded in 1928 in getting two Chicago brothers, Sidney and Harold Strotz, to lend a sympathetic ear, and with their aid Paddy at last got the proper financial backing to build the Stadium. Paddy knew the site he wanted, on Chicago's near west side, just a few minutes from the heart of the loop, at Madison and Throop Streets. Paddy had been born and raised just a few blocks from the site and was familiar with the entire territory surrounding the location.

Construction occupied over a year and the cost ran between six and seven million dollars. Paddy, who was not only a promoter, but also an avid fight fan himself, had definite ideas about the seating arrangements in his arena. Constructed along "bowl" lines, the Stadium consists of the main floor, or ringside section; mezzanine, first balcony, and second balcony. Paddy saw to it that the farthest seat from the ring was only 150 feet away, and also insisted that posts and similar obstructions be cut to a minimum so as not to interfere with the view of any spectator. Wherever posts were placed, the seats were so situated that none were behind the obstruction. These things serve to make the Stadium truly a dream arena and a veritable spectator's paradise for fights.

With Paddy as head of the Chicago Stadium Corporation, he cast about for a good opening attraction and in January, 1929, announced to the press that the Stadium would be officially opened on March 28th featuring the light-heavyweight champion, Tommy Loughran, defending his title against the middleweight king, Mickey Walker.

Paddy had high hopes of attracting a \$300,000 house and perhaps would have but for an unfortunate incident on the night of the fight. Just 45 minutes before the first bout was scheduled to go on, a fire broke out on the roof of the not entirely completed building and shortly after, the streets

around the new building were cluttered with fire fighting apparatus. Thousands of last minute customers who were lining up to buy tickets were dismayed and alarmed at the resultant confusion and many turned away from the box office. The fire was put out in a few minutes, however, and the thousands of fans already inside the arena were almost completely unaware of the occurrence.

Enough customers were already inside, 14,554 of them, to give Paddy a turnout amounting to \$186,267 for a slight profit. The fight proved an interesting one with Loughran building up an early lead and holding it against a strong Walker rally in the late rounds to retain his title on a ten round decision.

Later the same year Paddy came back with another title match, this time involving Sammy Mandell in a successful defense of the lightweight crown against Tony Canzoneri in ten rounds on August 2nd. The bout grossed \$136,000 and attracted 22,000 fans.

The Stadium, like other businesses in 1929, found the depression hard to buck and early in 1930 Harmon lost his control of the building, Sidney Strotz moving up as president of the corporation. Strotz appointed Nate Lewis as his matchmaker and shortly after Jim Mullen took over the reins as promoter. Shows were presented featuring Otto Von Porat, Young Stribling and Tuffy Griffiths in 1930 but gate receipts generally fell off, as they did in all parts of the country.

The year 1931 saw Mullen and Lewis really strike their stride and the matches they put on that year earned them the envy of boxing men all over the country. Battling Battalino, the featherweight titleholder, was brought in to oppose the great Chicago favorite, Earl Mastro, in a title match, and outpointed Earl in a thrilling go to retain his laurels. The same year Primo Carnera was matched with King Levinsky and Ernie Schaaf fought Tuffy Griffiths. These and other sensational brawls, involving the country's top talent, drew top gates and put the Stadium in the top spot among the nation's arenas. But Paddy Harmon, the man who turned the Stadium from a dream to reality, passed on soon after he lost his holdings in the building, and didn't see his dreams come true.

Mullen and Lewis racked up success after success through the years. It was on February 19, 1932 that the world's indoor attendance mark was set. 23,322 fans stormed the building to see Jack Dempsey attempt a comeback against King Levinsky. Jack after five years inactivity and an old man of 37, was clearly outpointed by his strong, rugged, 22-year-old foe, and gave up his thoughts of regaining a place in the fistic sun.

A welterweight title bout which saw Jackie Fields re-win the crown by beating Lou Brouillard, and two terrific battles

featuring a new heavyweight sensation, Max Baer, were also features of the year 1932 in the Stadium. Fields, after losing the title in 1930 to Young Jack Thompson, and then seeing it pass from Thompson to Tommy Freeman, to Thompson again, and then to Brouillard, made the most of his opportunity and took seven out of ten rounds from the New England southpaw to regain the crown.

Baer, after a 20-round win over King Levinsky in Reno, was brought in to face Ernie Schaaf in the Stadium and on August 31st the two hooked up in one of the greatest heavyweight battles ever staged. Schaaf, at that time rated one of the top contenders, built up an early lead but Baer kept coming on and in the tenth and final round dropped Ernie with a savage barrage of blows, the bell ending the bout with Schaaf on the floor. Baer was given the decision and a month later sold out the house again for his clash with Tuffy Griffiths whom he kayoed in round seven.

The big event of 1933 saw Barney Ross, Chicago battler, win the lightweight title by outscrambling Tony Canzoneri on June 23rd. Earlier the same year Tommy Paul, the NBA featherweight king was removed from his throne by the clever Cincinnati battler Freddy Miller, in the Stadium.

Two eventful proceedings took place at the Stadium just two weeks apart in 1934 which were to have a definite bearing on the heavyweight picture in just short of a year's time. On December 14th Joe Louis scored an eight-round kayo over Lee Ramage in his first big test in pro ranks after coming out of the amateurs just six months previously. On December 28th Champion Max Baer moved into the Stadium to oppose King Levinsky in a scheduled four round exhibition. Levinsky, who had delusions of grandeur, made the fatal mistake of making Baer angry in the first by cuffing him around and Maxie came out in the second to flatten the Kingfish for his audacity. This was perhaps the last serious moment Baer ever spent in the ring for the following summer he joked away the title to Braddock and then was himself kayoed by the young Joe Louis three months later.

With the advent of Louis on the heavyweight scene and the relentlessness with which he was mowing down all opposition, Promoter Mullen revived the old "white hope" heavyweight tournament in 1935. Heavyweights from all over the United States and Canada took part and the cards featuring the white hopefuls extended through 1936 with Red Burman climaxing the series by kayoing Buddy Knox in five rounds. Burman's career as a serious "hope" was shortlived, however. Negro John Henry Lewis, the light heavyweight king, kayoed Burman in two rounds just two months later in the same Stadium ring.

The tourney was not financially productive and so the Stadium corporation decided to forego future fistic promotions. Mullen retired from promotional activities and Lewis returned to managing fighters, taking charge of Leo Rodak and Harry Thomas. Various promoters rented the building for boxing presentations, however, including Mike Jacobs, who ran the only previous heavyweight championship bout in the arena. Titleholder Joe Louis kayoed Thomas in five rounds on April 1, 1938, before a disappointing turnout of 10,743 fans who paid only \$48,192. Chicagoans, it seems, were not sold on Thomas' ability despite the April Fool's Day promotion.

Late in the 1930's Bill Rand presented some cards in the building featuring such "name" boxers as Tony Zale, Davey Day, Tony Musto, and Booker Beckwith. He hit the jackpot with Zale. Tony beat Middleweight Champion Al Hostak in a non-title bout on January 29, 1940, in the Stadium before garnering the crown from Hostak later in Seattle.

Zale defended the newly won title twice for Rand in the Stadium in 1941, kayoing Steve Mamakos in 14 rounds in February and Hostak in two rounds in May.

Rand continued to operate in the Stadium and on an adjacent parking lot east of the building during the summer until 1942, when so many fighters, including Zale, went into service.

During the war years occasional cards were presented at the Stadium with the Marigold Gardens combine from Chicago's successful North Side club moving their bigger bout into the Stadium. Irv Schoenwald and Jack Begun, with Jack Hurley as matchmaker, turned out some good shows that starred Jake LaMotta, Fritzie Zivic, Nate Bolden and Henry Armstrong.

Starting in 1945 the combine came up with a terrific gate attraction in a boy who had gotten his start in their Marigold club - Johnny Bratton. Bratton's sensational style of battling brought the fans out in droves to see him perform and in eight main events, from 1946 through 1948, Bratton drew a quarter of a million dollars at the box office. Bratton holds the record for the greatest number of appearances for a fighter in a Stadium ring, having fought 24 times there.

The year 1947 saw the Schoenwald-Begun group put on their greatest promotional triumph, the second Tony Zale-Rocky Graziano war, on July 16, 1947. This bout drew the greatest indoor gate receipts of any fight ever held, \$422,918, contributed by 18,547 fans, who saw a sensational slugging brawl in which Graziano ascended to the throne by kayoing Zale in the sixth round.

The trio ran shows at the Stadium until 1949 when the International Boxing Club took over the reins. The first show at the Stadium promoted by the IBC took place on September 30, 1949, between Beau Jack and Livio Minelli with Jack taking a ten round decision.

Shows held during the first season of the IBC, the 1949-50 indoor boxing season at the Stadium, were not televised because the transmission facilities to send the program to the east were not available. Starting with the 1950-51 indoor season, every show held at the Stadium has been televised. The Dave Sands - Bobo Olson fight on October 3, 1951, was the first boxing show to be coaxial coast-to-coast. Dick Mastro, incidentally, editor of the Official Boxing Record, was the ring announcer for that show.

Three title fights were presented at the Stadium in 1951. In one of them Ezzard Charles successfully defended his heavyweight title against Joey Maxim on May 30th, the only heavyweight title bout ever to be fought on Memorial Day. (ed. note - there still have not been any others to this day.) Ray Robinson kayoed Jake La Motta in 13 rounds on St. Valentine's Day, February 14th, to win the middleweight championship, and Johnny Bratton won the welterweight crown on March 14th by defeating Charlie Fusari in 15 rounds.

A sellout crowd of 22,264 fans greeted the first of two title affairs held in the Stadium in 1952. Robinson kayoed Rocky Graziano in three rounds on April 16th and Jimmy Carter regained the lightweight title by beating Lauro Salas in fifteen rounds on October 15th.

The most recent Stadium show saw a third world record added to its other when Kid Gavilan stopped Chuck Davey in ten rounds on February 11th before 17,450 spectators who paid a new record gate for a welterweight title fight - \$275,415. This show marked the final card of the Stadium's twenty-fourth year of presenting fights.

Chicago has seemingly become the boxing capital of the world under IBC promotion. The Stadium has been host to more title bouts during the last two years than any other arena. According to plans, the building will most likely be the scene of many more such fights.

The IBC is being governed by sheer economic necessity in bringing the big fights into Chicago's Stadium. While New York may turn out more at the box office for some fights, the television sponsors will not pay for a New York fight in which that city is blacked out to 8,000,000 potential TV watchers.

The only alternative the IBC has is to move the fight to another city so they can still get the lucrative television money and the sponsor will be able to bring his product to the attention of the New York viewers. The sponsor will, and has, agreed to a blackout of the Chicago area for fights, and therefore the IBC the Marciano-Walcott rematch to the Chicago Stadium.

With a blackout of television for the Chicago area and the Stadium's 26,000 capacity, the bout can be scaled to draw \$800,000 with television rights selling for an additional \$200,000 or more, giving the IBC a possible million dollar gate.

Chicago fans have proved that given a worthwhile attraction they'll turn out at the box office regardless of whether the fight is televised there or not. The attendance at all of Chuck Davey's fights at the Stadium being ample proof of that. Chuck drew \$80,000 against Rocky Graziano and \$42,000 against Chico Vejar in bouts that were televised.

No matter what the future holds for Chicago boxing, the part the Stadium plays is sure to be an important one. For its almost a quarter of a century of existence, the Stadium can look back with pride on a wonderful record of exciting and glorious fights. Fights that could quite properly be called the century's greatest.

True sportsman that he was, Paddy Harmon, wherever he may be, must also be very proud.

Robert Soderman

(ed. note - Although Chicago Stadium still is the home of the Chicago Bulls NBA basketball team and the Chicago Black Hawks NHL hockey team, it has not been the site of a major boxing show in more than 10 years.)