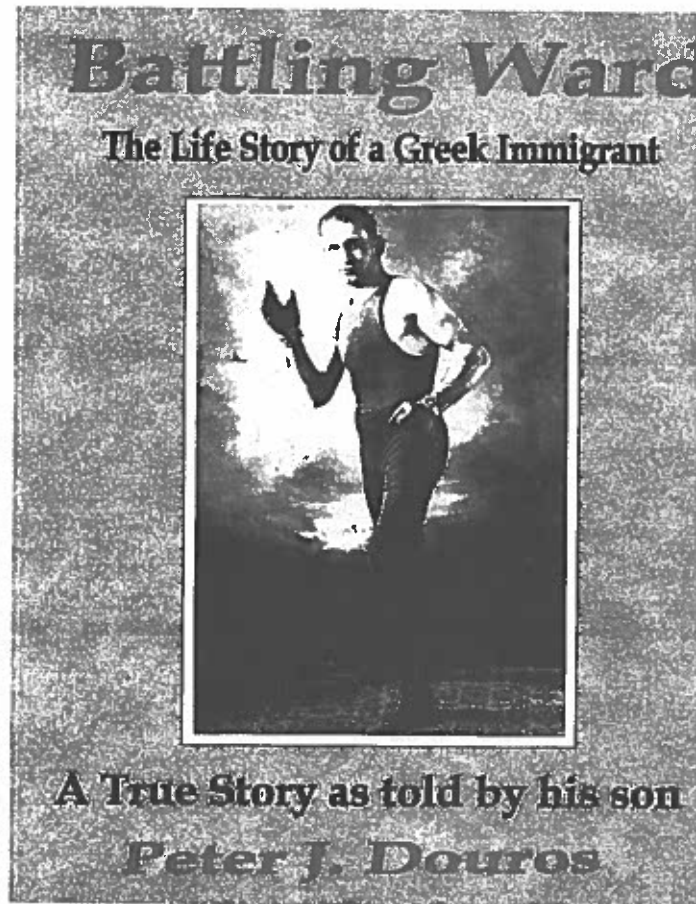


Greek-American Boxers: an Oft-Ignored History

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CHICAGO- Greeks in the United States have a long and distinguished history as professional boxers. The very same could be said for the presence of Greeks in amateur boxing contests. Beginning in the early 1900s, Greek immigrant boxers in both professional and amateur matches were well-recognized (and feared) contenders all across the country. For those solely interested in so-called serious historical accounts of Greeks in North America, sporting events might seem to be merely the brutal-end of popular cultural entertainments. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. How Greeks were perceived by the general American public as well as how Greek immigrants perceived their own presence in this country are at the very core of Greek-American studies. Symbolism has as much to report upon as does demographics.

American immigration studies generate as predictable a narrative genre as detective or romance novels. Only certain well-established viewpoints are acceptable, specific authors cited and re-cited and new facts or explanations are only admissible within the established narrow framework of what is accepted as "an immigrant study." Sports in North America are well-covered in sociological accounts that do not seem to be read by historians. The fixing of matches in wrestling, boxing, or most famously in American baseball games has cast a long shadow on the authenticity of sports as a realm of subject matter for inclusion in historical studies. Realism and actual events, which are at the very basis of all modern historical accounts, can also involve cheat-



The cover of the "Battling Ward" novel.

ing, lying, and foul play, exemplified by the events surrounding the 2008 Wall Street bailout.

Reviewing popular cultural venues, in terms of Greek American history, allow for a reevaluation of the entire field. Rather than retread one historical account after another with the presentation of how the poor ignorant immigrants (who inevitably owe America everything) struggle and succeed against great difficulties (these "difficulties" rarely name names or identify specific classes of people) we find Greeks in a wild mix of news accounts, changing

popular cultural images, and positions where rather than being the "poor ignorant immigrant" Greeks (and other foreign-born immigrants) are in fact leaders, innovators and the very creative power behind and infusing the wider society.

Greek boxers experienced the same level of popular support and admiration as all other professional athletes experienced. Just a short list of well-known Greek-American boxers would have to include Charis Anagnostos, Mike Arnaoutis, Theodore Antonopoulos, Pet-

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Buzukos, George Chemeres, Anton Christoforidis, George Contas, George Cordosh, James B. Douros, Chris George, Lou Jallos, Jesse James, Xenophon Kakouros, Mike Kutchos, Steve Marmakos, Nick Masters, Phil McGraw, Mike Merkle, George Nicholas, George Pappas, Gus Placos, John Pergantes, Nick Peters, Peter Phillipopolous, Hugo Ryder, John L. Smith, Nick Spillios, Stanley Stewart, Sergeant Strattgos, Nick Sugar, George Theodoratus, Fanis Tzanatopoulos, Demetrios Waklerlis, Gus Yatron, George Zengaras and Frank Zunner.

Newspaper accounts that often span decades, as well as the statistics of the Greek boxers are all available for anyone that wishes to sift through the available documentation. Also, histories and sociological studies of professional wrestling and boxing in North America do exist, so locating these boxing statistics is hardly a daunting task.

To give some historical perspective to this specific issue of professional boxing, "Greek George" Costaky, the fabled Greek wrestler of the 1880s also competed professionally (or at the very least for money in front of a large crowd) in sword fights, weightlifting contests, horseback, wrestling matches and even boxing contests. Many of the early Greek wrestlers and strongmen of the early 1880 to late 1890 era would accept, on occasion, the challenge to a boxing match. Having said that these early Greek champions were primarily known for their professional skills as wrestlers and made no sustained claims to be as equally competent as boxers. Here, we are in that era's notions of men as warriors and what was expected of a professional fighting man.

Among the champion Greek immigrant boxers we must note

Theodore Antonopoulos, Peter Buzukos, Anton Christoforidis and George Contas (who was better known to his fans as "Chicago Knockout Brown.") Peter Buzukos and Anton Christoforidis were both holders of championship titles in their various weigh-divisions. For those interested in the "Beer Wars" as Prohibition was known in the Chicago land area the tragic and still unsolved death of Theodore Antonopoulos aka "Anton the Greek" is often cited as a turning point in the escalating violence.

Phil McGraw (Mitchell Karmanos) (1905-1968) was another championship contender who had a huge following in Detroit. Typical of McGraw's early career was his first meeting with Luis Vicentini: "Philly McGraw, of Detroit, the only Greek boxer with championship pretension made a successful New York debut, last night when he easily earned the decision over Luis Vicentini, of Chili, South American lightweight champion, at the end of twelve rounds. McGraw, tirelessly aggressive, started punching at the opening bell and was still at it after the final one had sounded, its signal being lost in the din that was created by Vicentini's last round rally (Logansport Pharos-Tribune December 23, 1925)."

Among the most well-known of the early Greek boxers was George Placos, better known to his many fans as "Kid Greek." A rising star just before World War I, at the outbreak of the war, Placos, like Theodore Antonopoulos and various other Greek-American immigrant athletes gave up their profitable professional careers and joined the American army. Numerous newspapers around the country ran variations of this brief news account of Placos' enlistment, "Company A has been named

the 'Fighting A.'" The name was given the organization, when "Kid Greek" posted signs proclaiming the company's title. He is willing to uphold the name, too (Washington Herald August 9, 1916)."

Racism and anti-Greek sentiments are also evident in the public record. Snide asides, by Anglo journalists, such as references to Mike Merkle as "a shifty Greek boxer" or Frank Zunner's winning of various boxing matches as due to simply his being "a clever Greek" are but two of dozens of such thinly veiled slurs. Racism was never limited to just words. As we hear in the case of Paul Barrere's fight with a Greek immigrant, "Paul Barrere, former New Orleans pugilist, who is serving a life penitentiary term for the murder of Vesilios Wieliamos on December 26, 1924, Friday applied to the state board of pardons for clemency. His plea is scheduled to be heard with other applications in a session of the board beginning Monday.

Barrere has applied for pardon on several occasions and each time granting of clemency has been opposed by the Andrew Jackson Chapter 133, Order of AHEPA, a Greek organization, upon the contention that the pugilist killed Wieliamos merely because he was a Greek and that the crime was based solely upon Barrere's hatred of all people of that nationality (Times-Picayune October 7, 1933)."

Greeks as professional boxers have a long and highly successful history in the United States. We must learn more of their collective accomplishments. Or more to the point, we should ask why are these fabled champions omitted from the pages of Greek-American histories?