

HISTORIC
BERWYN HEIGHTS

SPORTLAND BOXING RING

"That's the best ring I have ever seen in the State. It is the first ring that strictly conforms with the regulations and it is a real credit to the owner," said Latrobe Cogswell, Chairman of Maryland's State Athletic Commission, after the Sportland Heights Arena opened in June 1922.¹ The boxing ring John O. Waters built on his property in Berwyn Heights filled a demand in the Washington, D.C. area. The sport had become a national pastime after World War I; popularized by war veterans who had boxed while in the military.

A sport from the original Olympic Games in ancient Greece and a regular entertainment in Roman times, boxing was revived in England during the 17th century. Officially recognized as an amateur sport in England in 1880, the first Olympics in 1896 did not include boxing because the Olympic Committee thought it too dangerous. The sport was becoming popular and in 1904 boxing debuted at the St. Louis Olympics. Only the USA entered the competition, winning all the medals. It was omitted in the 1912 Stockholm Games because Swedish law banned boxing. Boxing became a permanent sport in 1920 and that same year the Association Internationale de Boxe Amateur (AIBA) was founded (now known as the International Boxing Association). In the United States, the National Boxing Association was formed in 1921 (now the World Boxing Association), followed in 1922 by the publication of the boxing magazine, *The Ring*. During this period, champions such as Jack Dempsey, Gene Tunney, and French boxer Georges Carpentier, boosted the sport's popularity.

Capitalizing on the rising interest, Berwyn Heights resident John O. Waters (1866-1946) organized the Sportland Heights Athletic Club in 1922 to sponsor boxing matches in the town. Waters built the open air 4,000 seat arena on the property he and his wife Maria (1868-

¹ "Saturday's Fight Card is Arranged: Darneille Opposes La Blanche in Feature - Free Busses to Run," *Washington Herald*, 21 June 1922.

1943) had bought in 1915. The house and farm had become known as Sportland during Edward C. Carrington's ownership in the mid 19th century. Waters told the *Washington Times* that he believed "Washington fans will support boxing of the first class" and that he intended "to bring to Sportland Arena any boxers the fans want to see, no matter what the card costs."² Waters ensured that spectators from the District would be able to attend. He arranged for special buses to shuttle visitors from the train and streetcar stations in Berwyn up the hill to the arena. For fans arriving by automobile, there was ample parking since the area was sparsely populated and rural. Shortly after the first fight, Waters added electric lighting for night games. The Club, under the supervision of the Maryland State Boxing Commission, held its first bout on June 17 at 3:30 p.m. The card included Young Goldie Ahearn of Washington, D.C. Ahearn (1898-1974), legally adopted his nickname because of parental objections to fighting under his given name, Isidore Goldstein, would go on to become a well known promoter in the District of Columbia.

Since boxing was not permitted in the District, with military clubs being the exception, a number of boxing clubs were organized in Prince George's County. Spectators came from the surrounding areas and the District to attend the bouts at Sportland. The arena was improved in 1923 with new entrances, a new exit, the ringside floor was covered with a new concrete layer, and seating was expanded. That same year, Harvey L. (Heinie) Miller became the matchmaker. Miller, who had been boxing since 1903, while servicing in the U.S. Navy during World War I (1914-1918) had won bantamweight, featherweight, and lightweight service championships. Miller had been part of the Sportland arena since opening night, serving as one of the referees.

From the beginning, the Sportland Athletic Club generated controversy and battled with state and county commissions and boards to stage boxing exhibitions. A French woman featherweight,

² "Arena Stages July 4 Card, Says Owner: Bateman and Waters Declare Laurel Opposition Will Not Deter Their Plans," *Washington Times*, 16 June 1922, p. 23.

identified in the *Washington Post* as Mlle. La Marr, booked for a four-round exhibition on August 25, 1922, was not allowed to show because of the Maryland Boxing Commission's "some foolish ruling" not allowing a woman to enter a public ring. The *Post* also noted that the crowd, "heavily sprinkled with women," was disappointed.³ This French woman was probably Jeanne La Mar, also known as the Countess for the count of ten. An American, she had lived her early years in France, trained as a ballet dancer and was a well known professional boxer. Throughout her career she was hampered by never-ending conflicts with boxing commissions. Eventually she moved to California where she died in obscurity.

A few weeks later, on Labor Day, Waters asked Miller to set up a match between his sixteen year-old son Edward and a young amateur boxer from the naval air station in Anacostia. Arrangements were made and the parties agreed to a payment of \$20 for the station's athletic fund weeks before the opponent, Vincent Plumpton, was selected. Nonetheless, Plumpton was eventually charged with "professionalism" by the board of high school principals, which made him technically ineligible to fight in other amateur matches. Plumpton hired a lawyer to get the decision reversed. Those who testified on Plumpton's behalf noted that the 1½ round bout was not a serious fight. Plumpton had appeared in swim trunks and tennis shoes, and turned over the \$20 to the station's athletic director.

In 1924, the Maryland Boxing Commission again denied Sportland to hold a match. In this case, the boxer was Battling Siki (Louis Mbarick Fall), from Senegal; he had recently married a woman from Memphis, but had neglected to divorce his Dutch wife. Siki had a reputation for drinking in speakeasies, carousing, and fighting. The commission claimed that his appearance "would not be for the good of boxing . . . following his various escapades which culminated in his marriage in New York . . . to a Memphis octoroon."⁴ The French

³ Johnny Reno Wins From Young Ahern," *Washington Post*, 26 August 1922, p. 11.

⁴ "Maryland Boxing Body Vetoes Bout For Siki" *Washington Post*, 26 July 1924, p. S2.

boxer, Siki (1897-1925), was briefly in 1922 the world light heavyweight champion, defeating Carpentier in a controversial bout. Siki's reputation may have been exaggerated in the press and there were accusations of him being involved in match fixing. In the United States, his career failed and he was murdered in 1925. The press at the time reported that he was killed while returning home intoxicated; however, another theory is that his murder may have been a mobster hit, the result of his failing to follow through on a deal to throw fights to novices.

In 1924, Waters faced competition from a new boxing ring, Kenilworth arena, which also seated 4,000 spectators. In addition, a new law in Prince George's County required permission from the commissioners for each fight. The bouts were popular with fans, but residents, ministers, women's clubs, and the president of the University of Maryland protested the permits. That same year Berwyn Heights established a town government. At the first meeting on May 21, the elected commissioners drafted Ordinance No. 1 and granted Waters a license of \$50 for each performance. A few days later the commission finalized the drafts for Ordinances 1, 2, and 3. The minutes noted that Waters was to be notified as he was the only party operating a venue for which a license was required. Waters objected to being required to obtain a license for the coming bout on May 29 and the commissioners agreed to rescind the requirement. They redrafted Ordinance No. 1 and set the license fee at 3½% of the gate receipts with a minimum fee of \$25 for each performance. Waters paid the \$25 fee for the June bout. The ordinance, formally adopted on June 2, required licenses for exhibitions, shows, entertainments, carnivals, flying horses, boxing exhibitions, wrestling exhibitions, athletic exhibitions or dance performances where admission was charged. A few weeks later the town notified the county commissioners that Waters had been granted a weekly permit for 3½% of gate receipts.

Waters' troubles continued into July with the town refusing give him a license unless the fee was paid, and the county canceled the scheduled bouts at both Sportland and Kenilworth because the promoters failed to obtain the permits. On August 5 the county

commissioners denied a license for the August bouts at arenas. Citizens argued that the “brutal contests” lowered the morals of the community and claimed the boxing rings were impacting property values. The promoters countered that the bouts had been sanctioned by the Maryland Boxing Commission and “were conducted in a proper manner, and that no minors were admitted and that the attendance at the shows was not comprised of a rough Washington element, but drew a high class of people from the Capital City.”⁵

At the end of August, the county in a compromise decision granted the licenses to both arenas for September, but prohibited boxing after October 1. Waters, through his attorney, had pleaded for a final opportunity to recoup some of his investment in the ring. Community residents had argued against the arena which swayed the county commissioners to end the season at the end of September, but allowing Waters an additional month for boxing matches. In another twist, two commissioners claimed that the Kenilworth manager had offered bribes to keep Sportland out of business and to allow Kenilworth to continue holding fights.

In the spring of 1926, Waters once more applied to the county for a license to open the arena for the summer. The Berwyn Heights commissioners held a special meeting and adopted a resolution condemning boxing exhibitions as “subversive of the best interests of the community.” In a letter dated March 30, 1926, the commissioners urged the county not to grant the permits.⁶ In an effort to influence the fate of his boxing ring, Waters entered the race as a candidate in the May 1926 town election, but was soundly defeated, coming in last place. He was one of three boxing supporters defeated in this election. Waters, a plumber by trade who worked in the District, does not appear to have been part of the local boxing scene after his arena was closed.

⁵ Povich, Shirley L. “Promoters Denied Boxing Privileges in Prince Georges: Commissioners Unanimously Refuse to Approve Licenses,” *Washington Post*, 6 August 1924, p. S1.

⁶ Berwyn Heights Commission, Meeting Minutes, 29 March 1926, p. 28-29.

In 1931, *Washington Post* sportswriter Shirley Povich lamented that boxing was still not legal in the District of Columbia. Washington boxing fans had to travel to the suburbs to see matches. Many of the boxers trained in the city, also had to travel far after both the Sportland and Kenilworth arena were shut down in 1926. He noted that a non-licensed club flourished for years in Ardmore, Maryland. By 1931, only a club at Fort Washington continued to operate.

Boxing was finally legalized in the District in 1934. Heine Miller served as the first secretary of the new boxing commission. The first professional fight took place at the Riding and Hunt Club on May 28, 1934. Goldie Ahearn, the first promoter licensed in the District, was the matchmaker. Ahearn, nationally known as a boxer and promoter, in the 1950s owned a restaurant, Goldie's, on Connecticut Ave. He is credited with pioneering broadcasting boxing over national radio and television. From matchmaking at a small local boxing ring, Miller went on to become the boxing coach and journalism professor at the University of Maryland. After his term as secretary of the D.C. Boxing Commission, he served as president of the National Boxing Association. He also served in World War II (1939-1945), returning to the University afterwards. He served as chair of the D.C. Boxing Commission from 1946 to 1955 and was the treasurer of the U.S. Olympic Boxing Committee.

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Berwyn Heights Historical Committee
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