

Harry Forbes, champion boxer, once made Bloomington home

Regarded as one of the greatest pound-for-pound boxers of his era, world bantamweight champion Harry Forbes lived and trained in Bloomington for a stretch of his title defense and several years afterward.

In a professional career that began in 1897, Forbes was known for his fluid footwork, deft parrying and coolness under pressure, as well as having a smartly tactical and strategic approach to the “sweet science.”

Early boxing records are notoriously incomplete and inexact, and various sources provide conflicting—sometimes wildly conflicting—lifetime records for Forbes and his fellow late 19th and early 20th century “glovemen.” One of the more definitive boxing sources credits Forbes with 86 wins (45 by knockout), 17 losses and 26 no decisions.

Born in Rockford, Ill. in 1879, Forbes’ parents hoped that their son would become a classically trained violinist, but young Harry had other plans—to say the least! “The kids of the neighborhood in which Forbes lived gave a boxing show nearly every Saturday afternoon and Harry soon proved to be one of the star performers,” noted a 1911 profile in the Chicago Tribune.

Such exploits “brought down the wrath of the Forbes household on his head.” One morning, for instance, Harry found his new pair of boxing gloves burnt to a crisp in the kitchen stove, courtesy of his mother. “To this day they are opposed to it,” the Tribune said of the parents and the sport of boxing, “and although Harry has occupied the prominent place of champion they are not proud of the career he chose.”

Fighting primarily at the bantamweight class of 115 to 118 pounds (the term bantam comes from bantam roosters), Forbes faced many elite practitioners of the “fistic arts,” including “Terrible” Terry McGovern; “Torpedo” Billy Murphy; Charley Goldman, who would go on to train the great heavyweight Rocky Marciano; Benny Yanger, “The Tipton Slasher;” Billy “Turkey Point” Smith, the model for Thomas Eakins’ wondrous painting “Salutat;” Matty McCue, “The Belle City Bomber;” and, most famously, the incomparable Abe Attell, a featherweight champion known as “The Little Hebrew.”

On Nov. 11 1901, Forbes captured the world bantamweight title with a second round knockout of Danny Dougherty at the West End Athletic Club in St. Louis.

Forbes not only lived and trained in Bloomington in the early 1900s, he also fought in the city on several occasions. For several decades, local boxing fans spoke in reverent tones of the epic 20-rounder between Forbes and Walter “The Fighting Jew” Bloom. Staged at the old east side fairgrounds, which once encompassed an area bounded today by Country Club Place, Mercer and Oakland avenues, and Vale Street, the Independence Day 1900 match was sponsored by the Merchants’ Athletic Association. Forbes was ruled the victor on points.

Near the end of his title defense run, Forbes made his home in Bloomington. While here he was closely associated with James C. “Doc” Carroll, one of the more colorful characters in Twin City history. Described at the time of his death as “prince of sportsmen, bon vivant [and] all around good fellow,” Carroll spent his whole life in Bloomington. Slight-of-build, he first earned a name for himself as a jockey, though in the 1890s his sporting life was put on hold while he spent two years in the state prison in Joliet for burglary.

“Doc” (who was decidedly not a physician) was a Bloomington saloonkeeper for two some decades, operating an establishment on the 200 block of West Washington Street with William Radbourn, brother of National Baseball Hall of Fame hurler Charles “Old Hoss” Radbourn. In 1914, Carroll opened a billiards hall at the same location, decorating the walls with a pair of Forbes’ boxing gloves and other sporting mementoes.

It appears that Carroll served as Forbes’ manager or trainer while the fighter lived in Bloomington. “The routine of each day in training is not always the same,” noted The Pantagraph in a lengthy 1903 interview with the bantamweight champ, “but there is a lot of hard work with the pulley weights, dumbbells, vaulting horse, wrestling, sparring with a training partner, etc., and plenty of walking and running.” His workouts often ended with a cold shower or bath, and then a rubdown.

During his time in Bloomington, Forbes lived at 811 E. Olive St. (the house is still standing.) The Bloomington city directory lists his occupation as “physical instructor,” a likely euphuism for boxer or professional athlete.

Bloomington’s very own bantamweight champion lost his title on Aug. 13, 1903 to Frankie Neil, who knocked him out in the second round at the Mechanics Pavilion in San Francisco.

In 1909, Forbes and his brother Clarence were implicated in a spectacular confidence scheme orchestrated by the John C. Mabray gang out of Council Bluff, IA. This group, known as the “Millionaires’ Club, falsely promised to fix boxing matches, among other sporting events. More than 80 members of the gang were indicted and 14 convicted of “extensive swindling and

fraudulent use of the mails,” the latter group including Harry Forbes and his brother Clarence, a well-regarded fighter in his own right.

The Forbes brothers were sentenced to two years in the Fort Leavenworth federal penitentiary. President William Howard Taft, though, commuted Harry’s sentence and reduced his \$10,000 fine, partly for his cooperation with federal officials. Taft, it must be noted, was also a fine boxer in his day and remained a fan of the sport during his White House years.

Two years before his conviction, Forbes walked away from boxing, only to reenter the “squared circle” (as the ring is known) in 1910, appearing in more than 20 fights over the next several years. After suffering a second round knockout at the hands of Paddy Meehan in Glen Cove, NY, on Sept, 22, 1913, the former champ retired a second time, though he did return nine years later for a single bout, losing to Jimmy Katz in Chillicothe, OH by points.

After hanging up the gloves for good, Forbes settled in Chicago, working various jobs, including boxing trainer and court bailiff. The old fighter died on Dec. 19, 1946, at the Illinois Masonic Hospital (now Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center) at the age of 67.

“Four decades ago, pound for pound, he was probably as tough, rugged and as game a scrapper as ever stepped into the ring,” eulogized Pantagraph sports editor Fred Young. “Forbes fought too in an era when the fistic world was jammed with good fighters. But none of them were as clever as Harry, and any old-timer will tell you that there has never been a niftier boy than Forbes.”