
The International Boxing Hall of Fame Museum

Daniel A. Nathan
AMERICAN STUDIES PROGRAM
MIAMI UNIVERSITY OF OHIO

The International Boxing Hall of Fame Museum, 1 Hall of Fame Dr., P.O. Box 425, Canastota, New York 13032. Wheelchair accessible. Open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. General admission: adults \$4, senior citizens and youths 9-15 years old \$3, 8 years old and younger, free. Research library available on request. Telephone: 315-697-7095. Fax: 697-5356. Website: www.ibhof.com

Given that many prizefighters are from tough urban environments, it may come as a surprise that the International Boxing Hall of Fame Museum (IBHOF) is located in Canastota, New York, a rural town of 5,000 in New York's Finger Lakes region, just east of Syracuse. New York City or Las Vegas, the sites of hundreds of championship bouts, might seem like more appropriate venues for such an institution. Indeed, organizers in those cities proposed building lavish boxing museums in the 1980s, but those projects came to naught. In Canastota, however, less extravagant plans for a boxing shrine were realized, thanks in part to widespread community interest in the project and to the leadership of Edward Brophy, who would become (and remains) the executive director of the IBHOF. Still, considering that boxing, unlike other sports, has not historical (or even mythic) place of origin, the question remains: Why Canastota?

The simple answer is civic pride and boosterism. In the early 1980s, Canastotians decided to honor two local prizefighters, former welterweight (1955-56) and middleweight champion (1957-58) Carmen Basilio (who beat the legendary Sugar Ray Robinson in 1957), and his nephew, Billy Backus, who held the world welterweight title (1970-71). The village erected a showcase for their gloves, championship belts, posters, and photographs of their most notable fights, and commissioned life-size bronze statues of the former champions. The local enthusiasm generated for those endeavors was the impetus for the hall of fame, according to Jeff Brophy, the IBHOF's media relations director. A steering committee was formed soon thereafter, and in March of 1985 an extensive

feasibility study was conducted. Eventually ten acres of land off exit 34 of the New York State Thruway were purchased and a 2,000-square-foot building was raised. In the meantime, all kinds of boxing memorabilia—world championship belts, boxing gloves, robes, trunks, shoes, photographs, ticket stubs, posters—were collected. After a great deal of hard work, the IBHOF opened in June of 1989 and enshrined its first class of inductees a year later, some of whom—Basilio, Archie Moore, Jersey Joe Walcott, Joe Frazier, and Muhammad Ali—attended the ceremonies. In the years since, the IBHOF has grown (a wing was added to the original building in 1992) and has held annual induction ceremonies every June. This past year, approximately 15,000 people attended the eighth annual Hall of Fame Induction Weekend, which featured a fist casting ceremony and the Parade of Champions.¹

When visitors enter the IBHOF, a modest, ranch-style building, they encounter a sign that proclaims: “Our mission is to honor and preserve boxing’s rich heritage, chronicle the achievements of those who excelled, and provide an educational experience for our many visitors.” The IBHOF certainly accomplishes its first two objectives; whether it fulfills the third is subject for debate.

The IBHOF houses an impressive collection of material artifacts. Basilio’s and Willie Pep’s championship belts, Joe Louis’s trunks, Marvelous Marvin Hagler’s robe, and Sandy Sadler’s and Jake LaMotta’s gloves are all prominently displayed. Visitors can also inspect other kinds of boxing paraphernalia: speed and heavy bags; jump ropes; protective equipment like mouthpieces, head gear, and athletic supporters; and the tools used by corner men to care for cuts. Also on exhibit are a noteworthy collection of fight tickets, posters, programs, newspaper accounts of historic bouts, and photographs from the annual “Fight of the Year.” Several evocative blowup photographs of Jack Dempsey, Rocky Marciano, Sonny Liston, Muhammad Ali, and Mike Tyson, among others, are on display. The IBHOF maintains three audio stations that feature interviews with boxers conducted during their visits to Canastota, and a video station, which was playing an instructional film hosted by the noted trainer Angelo Dundee when I visited the IBHOF in May of 1997. Perhaps the most impressive display at the IBHOF is a collection of bronze fist castings taken by Dr. Walter Jacobs. A boxing fan and (somewhat incongruously) a dentist, Dr. Jacobs has made numerous fist replicas of prominent boxers, such as Jack Johnson, Benny Leonard, and Primo Carnera, whose massive fist had a circumference of fifteen inches. Finally, the “Wall of Fame” displays small plaques containing a photograph and brief biography for every IBHOF inductee.

Collectively, the IBHOF’s exhibits and displays are well maintained and organized, and they present the subjects (and objects) under consideration with clarity and deep respect. The exhibits are attractive and pleasant for both die-hard boxing fans and those unfamiliar with the darker side of the sweet science. On the other hand, considering the tremendous breadth of boxing’s history—it predates virtually all other modern sports and is a truly international activity—the IBHOF seems startlingly small, especially when compared with the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum sixty miles to the southeast in Cooperstown,

New York, the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, and the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts. Those institutions are all considerably older than the IBHOF and the sports they venerate are far more “respectable” to most Americans. Thus perhaps comparing and contrasting other halls of fame with the IBHOF is not particularly fair or meaningful; after all, lightweights do not usually compete against heavyweights. Given time and increased patronage, the IBHOF will almost certainly continue to grow. In fact, there are plans to construct an outdoor pavilion to serve as a training facility for amateur and professional fighters with seating for spectators.

A more legitimate criticism for the IBHOF concerns the manner in which it sanitizes boxing’s sordid past. For instance, IBHOF visitors learn next to nothing about “fixed” fights or how gambling has consistently plagued the sport. Moreover, the IBHOF ignores the persistent (and sometimes successful) efforts of boxing abolitionists to pass legislature intended to rid society of pugilism. And not surprisingly, the IBHOF elides the sport’s obvious brutality—both physical and economic, for virtually all professional boxers are victims of financial exploitation. (Indeed, by inducting boxing promoters like Tex Rickard and Don King, the IBHOF implicitly condones such practices.) In other words, while the IBHOF does an admirable job of communicating the heroic and noble aspects of the sport and of paying homage to legendary fighters and fights, it provides a very limited perspective on a social institution that has long fascinated and repelled onlookers. All of which is to suggest that, like many such institutions, the IBHOF is more nostalgic and celebratory than primarily “educational.”

Despite this appraisal of the IBHOF’s displays and exhibits, in terms of its research opportunities, the IBHOF is an underused and potentially valuable resource for sport scholars. It has an extensive boxing library and archives, which are available to the public by appointment. In addition to more than 500 boxing-related books, the IBHOF’s research facility includes numerous boxing photographs, programs, and periodicals. For example, the IBHOF has one of only four known complete sets of *The Ring* magazine, which dates back to 1922. It also had a complete set of the meeting minutes of the New York State Athletic Commission from the 1920s to the 1970s. Furthermore, the IBHOF maintains “clip” files on scores of fighters. And last but not least, Jeff Brophy and the IBHOF’s staff are extremely helpful to anyone interesting in studying boxing history.

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1. See Richard O’Brien, “A Shrine for the Sweet Science,” *Sports Illustrated*, 2 April 1990, 10-11; Mark Allen Baker, *The Complete Guide of Boxing Collectibles* (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 1995), 30-38.