

# BIOGRAPHY

## Willie Pep: Last Sport Hero of Hartford's “Little Italy”

Carmelo Bazzano  
University of Massachusetts, Boston

Sport heroes may serve as role-models for growing boys and girls, but, in some cases, they may even influence the community in which they perform their excellent deeds. Such was the case for Willie Pep, the former featherweight champion of the world from 1942 to 1951.

Willie grew-up in Hartford's Little Italy which was a close-knit community of people who shared the same ethnic roots. This community had felt the sting of prejudice and discrimination by the larger community. In fact, Little Italy was an euphemism for ghetto. It was in Hartford's Little Italy where Willie Pep showcased his skills as a boxer.

In his sport, Willie was a peerless performer. After winning the championship of the world at the age of 20, he put together a string of 62 victories which was broken by the loss to the heavier lightweight champion of the world, Sammy Angott. This defeat was followed by another long streak of 72 victories which was stopped by the loss to Sandy Saddler who gained the championship with this

victory. Instead of retiring after 12 years of successful professional boxing, Willie was able to mount an impressive comeback which brought him back the world title. This exceptional performance confirmed Willie Pep's greatness as a boxer.

This paper doesn't describe Willie's career as a boxer. It points out that Willie's effort provided Little Italy with a powerful example that the American dream was within reach even to a small man who was not particularly strong. Willie, in fact, won his matches because of his superior craftsmanship in the ring.

Discussions with old-timers who had lived in Hartford's Little Italy has confirmed my observation that Willie's performance affected the Italian community positively. In other words, Pep empowered people who had been conditioned to believe that they were grease-balls, guinea, etc..., not capable of making it in America.

After Willie's glory days were over, there was an exodus from Hartford's Little Italy for a better quality of life. Indeed there were many reasons for the exodus, but Willie's example played a substantial role in raising the people's estimation of themselves.