

Boxing great Conlon was all heart

By John Hartsock

There was some disagreement about the outcome of one of the late Dick Conlon's most significant fights.

But about one central issue, there is no dispute.

"I've heard some say that he was the greatest athlete to come out of this city," John Conlon said of his father, who died of cancer in 1980, at the age of 78.

In his heyday, Dick Conlon was certainly one of America's most respected lightweight boxers. Conlon posted a composite record of 187-64-6 in a 10-year boxing career that began in 1918, when he was just 16 years old.

He was also gutsy, rebounding gamely from a drubbing in one of his first professional fights.

"Dad didn't talk too much about his boxing career, but he did talk a lot about that fight," remembered John. "It was in Harrisburg, against a man named Jackie Wolford, and Dad said he got the crap kicked out of him. He took an awful beating, and most other people, after something like that, would have quit boxing. But my dad was a tough man – very tough."

Dick Conlon went on to battle Jimmy Goodrich tooth-and-nail in a controversial scrap before Goodrich temporarily claimed the nation's lightweight title in 1925.

"On May 22, 1922, Dad fought Jimmy Goodrich in Erie," said Tom Conlon – another of Dick and Address Conlon's four children. "In those days, the press determined the winners of fights on the day after the fight. Only the Erie paper and the Altoona Tribune called Dad's fight with Goodrich a draw. All the other papers that covered the fight gave the decision to Dad.

"Benny Leonard, the nation's lightweight champion, had retired that year, leaving the title vacant," added Tom Conlon. "Dad told me that after Leonard retired, a tournament was held featuring the six leading lightweights in the country, and Dad was invited. But Dad suffered a chipped bone in his hand, and he had to withdraw from the tournament, which Goodrich eventually won."

Dick Conlon, who stood only 5-9 and weighed 136 pounds, fought in such diverse locations as the Mishler Theater and Frohsinn Hall in Altoona, the Motor Square Garden in Pittsburgh, and at sites in Chicago and Milwaukee, as well as New York's Madison Square Garden.

"Dad made only one actual appearance at Madison Square Garden, on February 26, 1926," said Dick Conlon's oldest son,

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Dick Conlon thrived on heart in establishing the standard for local boxers.

Jerry. "His opponent was to be Ruby Goldstein, who would later become a noted referee who would officiate many of Joe Louis's fights. Goldstein couldn't make it that night, however, and another fighter, Joey Kauffman, took his place. Dad beat Kauffman rather badly in a six-rounder that served as a preliminary bout to the middleweight championship fight between Harry Greb and Tiger Flowers. Dad made \$1,500 dollars from his fight with Kauffman. That was his highest gate from any fight, and it was big money then. Flowers also became the first Negro to win the world middleweight championship that night."

Conlon fought on the same card with many of the nation's premier boxers.

"One year, Dad fought two or three times a month," said John Conlon. "It seemed as if he was fighting all the time. Dad fought on the same card with Gene Tunney, who beat Jack Dempsey for the heavyweight championship of the world. Dad was a good friend of Dempsey's. Dad knew somebody in every town."

But despite a short stay in Newark, N.J. in 1925, Dick Conlon apparently could never acclimate himself to any other town but Altoona. In fact, homesickness appeared to have been his Achilles heel.

"A man named Johnny Kilbane had a stable of fighters that included a boxer by the name of Alex Hart, who Dick fought," said Address Conlon. "Johnny Kilbane was impressed with Dick, and wanted him to join his stable and fight overseas in Australia."

But Altoona was Dick's hometown, and he had very strong ties here.

"He'd fight in Milwaukee, then schedule a trip back here the same night," laughed Address, who married Dick in 1921. "He wouldn't have wanted to stay overnight in Johnstown, let alone Australia."

Jerry, now retired and living in Martinsburg, concurred.

"Dad was a homebody," said Jerry, who was just an infant when his parents were living in Newark. "He didn't like to get too far away from Altoona. Had he been content to live in Newark, he would have been in the center of the boxing community. But then again, he might have stayed in boxing too long. Dad was a very strongly-oriented family person, and Altoona was where his family was."



Address and Dick Conlon.

A sense of family loyalty was a recurrent theme that ran through Dick Conlon's life.

"Dad had 13 brothers and sisters," said John Conlon, who pointed out that his father left school after the sixth grade in order to bring in money for his family. "He never drove a car in his life. He had a brother who fell under a train coming back from World War I, and lost both his legs. Dad's brother lived in the Green Avenue Towers, and Dad would walk to the Towers every day to take care of his brother."

Jerry Conlon further substantiated his father's devotion to family.

"He was a good father, and a good provider," said Jerry. "He went to work and took care of his family. He lived the kind of life I would expect of any father."

Dick Conlon, whose brother, Steve, was an outstanding flyweight boxer who died of influenza in 1922, went to work for a dime an hour as a messenger boy for the Pennsylvania Railroad at the age of 15. After his fight career closed, he opened his own gym in 1929.

"He opened a gym on 11th Avenue after retiring, and he ran it for a year," said John.

"Then the Great Depression came, and the gym failed. Fighters used to get rubbed down during the old days, and Dad picked up this technique from his involvement in athletics. So when he opened his gym, he included a steambox, and area businessmen stopped by for Dad to give them massages. When the gym closed, Dad reserved a room in the old Colonial Hotel for that purpose. But the Depression became so bad that the Colonial Hotel closed, and Dad ended up using a room in our home. He made his living through the Depression as a masseur."

Following the Depression, Dick Conlon hired on with the Pennsylvania Railroad as a steam engine fireman. He worked there until his retirement at the age of 65, in 1967.

But the boxing arena was where Dick Conlon made his greatest claim to fame.

"He trained like a demon, and when he went into the ring, he never stopped," said John Conlon, who was born in 1930, two years after his father retired from boxing. "He was as strong in the 10th round as he was in the first. He just had unbelievable conditioning and heart."