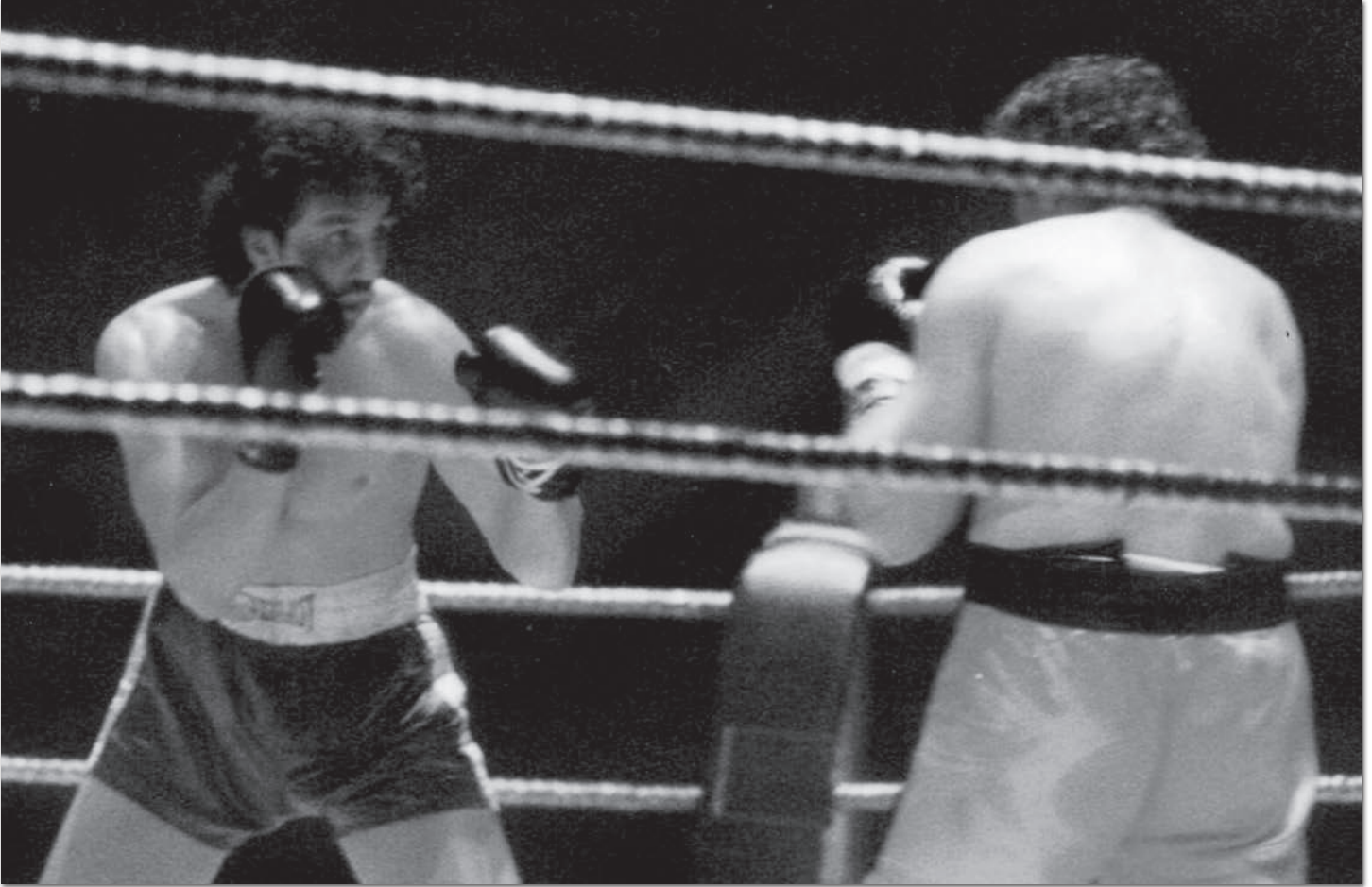


## INDUCTEE PROFILE



After winning three national championships at Penn State, Jim made his professional debut in 1982.

# Championship mentality

## Three-time NCBA king, boxing elevated Restauri

**By Neil Rudel**  
*Altoona Mirror*

Penn State football player John “Mother” Dunn remembers reading *The Daily Collegian* and noticing an article about one of his teammates, Jim Restauri, who had just won his second National Collegiate Boxing Association heavyweight championship.

Dunn was an offensive lineman and one of the team leaders. He knew Restauri, a walk-on linebacker, but not well.

His curiosity, though, was piqued so he approached Restauri to learn more

about him and his passion for boxing.

“We started talking, and he never mentioned it,” Dunn said of his 1978 encounter. “He’s a pretty humble guy. I said, ‘You’re a boxing champ? You didn’t say nothin’.”

A friendship began to form, and Dunn asked if he could work out with Restauri, so the two started a routine at Rec Hall.

“He showed me stuff, but I’m staying out of the way,” Dunn said. “One day, he says, ‘Do you want to spar?’”

They started with one-minute rounds.

“I hit him for 45 seconds, and then he would hit me back for 15 seconds,” Dunn said. “I couldn’t hardly get a glove on him, and when the timer gets to 15 (seconds), out of nowhere, he hit me with a right and broke my jaw.”

Dunn, who spent 27 years as an NFL strength coach, laughs at the memory. “I learned enough to know that I don’t know boxing,” he said.

Dunn accompanied Restauri to the Eastern regionals, held at Lehigh during Restauri’s senior year in the

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spring of 1979. Dunn helped in Restauri's corner with longtime PSU trainer and boxing coach Eddie Sulkowski.

The regional final was stopped in the second round, and Dunn told Restauri, "Jim, every time you hit him, my face hurt."

That match was a springboard to Restauri's third NCBA championship, which he won by defeating Neal McClelland of Nevada-Reno University to become PSU's only three-time national boxing champion. (Penn State sponsored boxing as a varsity sport until 1954. Rec Hall opened in 1929 by hosting an intercollegiate boxing tournament and matches drew capacity crowds. After 1954, fighters competed in the National Collegiate Boxing Association.)

Even though he went on to have 11 professional fights, as he ponders his journey en route to the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame, Restauri considers his national achievements at Penn State to be his proudest moments.

The third title fight was televised by HBO with legendary Larry Merchant on the call.

"My opponent was a solid individual from Reno, undefeated," Restauri, now retired and living in Florida after a career in police work, said. "That didn't faze me. My mind was all figured out what I was going to do — and that was to win. There was no way I was going to lose."

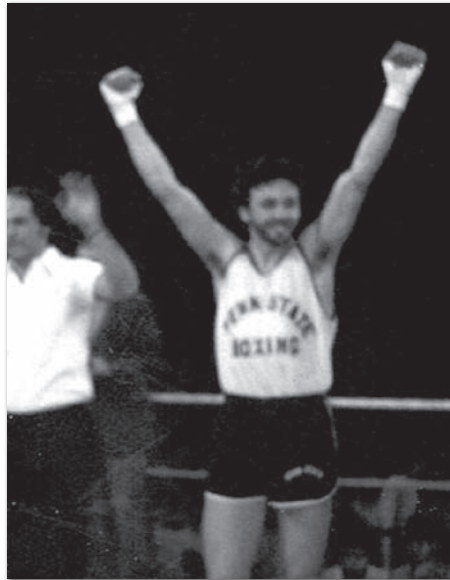
Title three "put the icing on the cake for me," Restauri said.

Sulkowski, PSU's trainer in all sports and an assistant boxing coach for the United States in the 1972 and '76 Olympics, described Restauri's style to Tom Verducci in a 1979 Collegian article:

"He's a boxer-puncher. He boxes well, and he punches well. In his bouts, we try to get him into right spot. We do not try to get him to knock out his opponent, but rather to outclass him. Jim is ring-wise, and he can simply outbox the other guy."

Restauri's record at Penn State was 23-2 with six knockouts.

"In amateur boxing, you had to



**Jim celebrates after winning his third title in 1979.**

throw a lot of punches and not stand back and play defense," Restauri said. "I was more like Apollo Creed. The knockout would come through combinations, but it has to overpower your opponent and be confident within yourself. You have to have mental toughness."

Like many from Altoona, Restauri got his start at the Altoona Boxing Club under the tutelage of John Robertson, who has trained local fighters for nearly 50 years.

"I was around 16 years old, and I was kind of an introvert, and my father (Dennis) said, 'You need to come out of that and you need to grow up,'" Restauri remembered. "I was pretty scrawny back then, and he thought it would help me gain muscle and help me with my football."

Robertson remembers Restauri for reliability and work ethic.

"I'm happy for him," Robertson said. "He was a hard worker, showed up all

the time and was eager to learn."

Restauri stayed in touch over the years with Robertson, attending a 2016 ceremony when the city of Altoona named a park after Robertson at 7th Street and 7th Avenue.

"Johnny was a really knowledgeable instructor, but he was not only an instructor, he was also a friend," Restauri said. "I looked forward to going to the gym every night. He was most influential in my boxing career. He was really an influence on a lot of kids."

As an Altoona Area High School senior in 1973, Restauri won the Cohen Blanket award as the Mountain Lions' outstanding football player.

"My grades weren't up to par, and they said I needed to go to a small college and then continue to a major college after that," he said, adding his mother decided attending Penn State Altoona would be his best option. "I built up credits and then transferred to main campus and got on the football team."

Restauri credited Mountain Lions' coach Ron Rickens and state senator Bob Jubelirer, who wrote a letter on Restauri's behalf to Joe Paterno.

Restauri was mainly a foreign team player and a backup on special teams, earning a scholarship and lettering in his final season — 1978, when the Lions went unbeaten before losing to Alabama in the Sugar Bowl for the national title.

"When we would run our mile and a half to qualify with the team, I would



## Restauri bio

**Sport:** Boxing

**High school:** Altoona

**College:** Penn State

**Hall of Fame achievement:** Jim was Penn

State's only three-time National Collegiate Boxing Association champion, winning his titles from 1977-79, which accorded him All-American status. He posted collegiate record of 23-2, including six knockouts. He also recorded an 8-2-1 record as a professional heavyweight boxer. In addition to his boxing prowess, Jim was a walk-on to the PSU football team, lettering in 1978.

**Current residence:** Altoona

run with combat boots on," he said.

One of Restauri's teammates was fellow Altoonan Mike Conforto, who was a backup linebacker to Paul Suhey and was used in goal-line situations in 1977-78.

"I had never seen him box, but my memories of football was just like being a boxer — hard-nosed, tough guy on the field and really good work ethic," Conforto said. "He had those long skinny arms with two sledgehammer heads at the end of them. He had big hands for the rest of his body, and you can see where he'd be a good boxer."

"I remember Paterno liked Jimmy and his toughness," Conforto added.

Though he was a walk-on who didn't play much, Restauri found that his success in boxing raised his profile with his football teammates.

"That gave me the most respect," he said. "Winning the title each year added on to their evaluation of who I was. It helped me be accepted."

As president of the Penn State Boxing Club alumni, Restauri returns to Happy Valley annually, and when he shows up at a football tailgate, his reputation precedes him.

"I go to Chuck Fusina's tailgate," he said. "To this day, they still call me 'Champ.' I don't even think they know my name."

After Penn State and the disappointment that the U.S. would be boycotting the 1980 Olympics, denying that tryout possibility, Restauri trained in New Jersey with Lou Duva.

"He got the HBO tape and liked it," Restauri said. "He put me up with a bunch of other fighters" who would bus into New York City, then take the subway to Gleason's Gym, where many big-name fighters, including Jake LaMotta, Roberto Duran and Jerry Quarry, trained.

Restauri endured the lifestyle for 11 fights, nine of which he won.

"I had a couple fights in Scranton that helped the professional status of where I was heading, but I stopped," he said. "I wasn't a contender, but I was getting up in the ranks to where I could have made some money. But I didn't have it in my heart to fight. I didn't have it anymore."

He got into law enforcement, eventually moving to Florida and serving 18 years in the field before spending the latter part of career as a special education teacher in Virginia.

Restauri credits his wife, Betty — "she's been a motivator and influence in anything I do" — and feels he's always had strong family support.

"My mom and dad approved of anything I did," he said. "They were always proud, and they wanted me to be successful."

His induction has him bobbing and weaving and eager to come out of his corner to accept the recognition. He's the Hall's fourth boxer to be inducted, following Dick Conlon, Dave Stoop and Tom Wilt.

"It's the cherry on the sundae," Restauri said. "It's like putting a fourth national championship on my record. That's a knockout."



**Jim won the prestigious Cohen Blanket for Altoona in 1973. Here he's joined by his parents, Jane and Dennis.**



**Jim considers Johnny Robertson (right) one of his mentors.**