

BY ANNE CASSIDY

EDDIE'S BOYS

REMEMBERING THE HEYDAY OF COLLEGIATE BOXING



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The men wore suits and ties, not trunks and boxing gloves. Some were stooped slightly but most looked younger than their ages, which ranged from 70 to 85. The men had returned to their alma mater to pay tribute to a man, a team and an era. The man was longtime Catholic University boxing coach and athletic director Eddie LaFond, B.A. 1927. The team was the Cardinals boxing team, which flourished from 1931 to 1955, produced two national champions and, in those years, never had a losing season. The era was the golden age of intercollegiate boxing, which ended 45 years ago but came alive for a few hours last November at the CUA boxing reunion held in Caldwell Hall.

"Eddie LaFond was first a teacher, then a coach and always a father," said Joe Incarnato, B.A.E. 1952, a former lightweight boxer who donned his old Cardinals letter sweater before making some remarks to his fellow pugilist alumni. "On several occasions when introduced to someone, I was greeted with, 'Oh, you're one of Eddie's

boys.' I took this as a badge of honor. To be one of Eddie's boys set you a little apart from other athletes."

The boxing reunion was eagerly awaited and long overdue. Sixteen boxers attended, but more than 50 were listed on the program under the heading *Requiescat in Pace*. The former boxers attending the reunion — like many of those who have died — graduated and went on to distinguished careers in business, law, architecture, engineering and other fields. As one after another rose to share stories about LaFond, who retired in 1969 and died in 1982, a picture emerged of an old-fashioned gentleman and of a sport that has changed dramatically in the last half century.

"We're here to celebrate the great tradition of boxing at Catholic University. It was a source of pride and school spirit," said former athletic director Robert Talbot, B.A. 1959, who helped plan and host the reunion. When the Cardinals went undefeated during LaFond's

At top: 1950 boxing team members Tom Cronin, Jack Redmond, Jim Doherty, Joe Incarnato, William Ennis, Bill Maher, Babe Greenburg, Cliff Sisler and Gene Higgins. Inset: Boxing alumni from 1942 to 1955 gather in Caldwell Hall last November.

first official season as boxing coach in 1931, "that ushered in a whole new era at Catholic," Talbot said. For the next 24 years — until the intercollegiate sport began dying in the eastern United States — LaFond was boxing at The Catholic University of America.

HOSPITALITY AND TUXEDOS

To understand what the sport meant on campus, dismiss today's professional or Olympic boxing matches from your thoughts and imagine the "squared circle" of the 1930s, '40s and '50s. At Catholic University, fights were held in the old gym, the building that today houses the Edward M. Crough Center for Architectural Studies.

Catholic University's boxers regularly fought and bested teams from such schools as the University of Virginia, West Point and the University of Maryland, and the matches were big athletic and social events.

"The fights would start at 8 but you couldn't even get in there at 6," says Francis Murray, B.A. 1950, boxing manager under LaFond and now athletic equipment manager at CUA. Students packed the place to the rafters. It wasn't uncommon for thousands to attend a match. Afterward, the boxers would socialize with their opponents. "We always went out with them after the fights, maybe to a party," Murray says. "It wasn't like other sports where you'd walk off the field cussing them."

There was hospitality before the matches, too, sometimes with unfortunate consequences. In his book *The Six-Minute Fraternity: The Rise and Fall of NCAA Tournament Boxing, 1932-60*, E.C. Wallenfeldt relates a story that CUA bantamweight Dave Bernstein, B. Arch. 1940, told him about a match at West Point in 1937. The Cardinals were met on the train platform by the West Point team, and each Cardinal was assigned a cadet boxer as tour guide and host for the weekend. It wasn't easy to fight the men who'd squired them around all weekend. The favored treatment "completely overwhelmed

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the Cardinals," Wallenfeldt reports. "They experienced a severe drubbing in the ring."

"I remember my father telling me that boxing was a special event at Catholic," said Michael Stanges, who came to the reunion to represent his father, Julius Stanges, B.S. 1941, who was unable to attend. "A boxing

match was an elegant affair. Women dressed up and men wore black tie."

So formal were some college boxing matches that at the U.S. Naval Academy even the referee wore a tuxedo, Wallenfeldt writes.

Formal attire wasn't the only thing that separated collegiate boxing from professional fights. Spectators at university matches could not applaud during rounds and those who did could be admonished by the referee. Most important, writes Wallenfeldt, "From the beginning the official emphasis was on skill rather than brute strength, and the safety of the contestants was foremost in the minds of coaches and officials."

Although the sport is a violent one, safety was certainly on LaFond's mind. Strat Laios, B.E.E. 1955, was about to box his first match when LaFond warned him about his opponent, a Southern and Eastern collegiate champion, while wrapping Laios' hands. "Stay as far away from him as you can," Laios remembers LaFond saying. "And whatever you do, don't hit him with your left hook. That might make him mad."

Cliff Sisler, B.A. 1951, described something similar at the reunion: "I was in the dressing room at a University of Maryland match and looked around. 'Where's Eddie?' I asked. I found out that Eddie was in the men's room, throwing up. He thought we'd get killed and he was nervous."

But the Cardinals boxers never got killed because LaFond was a taskmaster. "Eddie's one aim was to impart to his boys all the knowledge and skills necessary to make them victorious. He was fierce in this pursuit," Incarnato says. "You had to be in top physical shape. If you weren't, your opponent would thump you to a fare-thee-well."

A SON OF MAINE

Born in Madison, Maine, Edmund LaFond was of French Canadian ancestry and spoke only French until he entered primary school. A star high school fullback, he was on his way to a Dartmouth football scholarship when he stepped out of a car and was hit by a motorcycle. He suffered a compound fracture in his right leg and spent four months in the hospital. Doctors said he would never play sports again.

"That was the turning point for me," LaFond recalled in a newspaper article years later. His high school football coach had gone to CUA and suggested LaFond go there too. He did, taking a job mixing cement on campus for 50 cents an hour to help pay his tuition. He soon proved his doctors wrong by playing football and baseball. He also became an outstanding boxer,



Catholic University boxer Cliff Sisler warms up with a punching bag before a fight.



Eddie LaFond in 1956

serving as team captain for the Cardinals' inaugural boxing season in 1926 — which meant he sparred in the first intercollegiate boxing match ever held in the District of Columbia. The 1927 *Cardinal* yearbook praised the graduating LaFond as “a great boxer, a great football man, a fine student and an excellent fellow.”

After graduation, LaFond taught physical education at CUA and worked with the boxing team, getting the formal nod as coach in 1931. He produced two individual national champions: Dave Bernstein, who won an NCAA championship in the 115-pound weight class in 1938; and Frederick “Bingo” Stant (nicknamed for his powerful right hand that could end a bout in an instant), the 165-pound NCAA champ in 1939. CUA also tied for the national team championship in 1938.

THE 3-KNOCKOUT BOUT

The Cardinals also made it into the record books with one of the more bizarre happenings in intercollegiate boxing history. According to Wallenfeldt, Dave Bernstein remembered it this way: “At the start of the second round of his bout [welterweight Joe] Bunsa moved rapidly across the ring and landed a hard right that made his opponent start to fall to the floor. Referee Mugsy Morris, in a hurry to stop the bout and prevent further injury to the falling man, moved in on Bunsa's blind side and was struck by the Catholic University boxer's follow-up left hook. Both the referee and Bunsa's opponent ended up on the canvas in states of unconsciousness. Bunsa dropped to his knees beside the fallen referee and kept repeating that he was sorry and had not meant to hit him.”

After 10 minutes of chaos with the coaches huddling and the timekeeper frantically ringing the bell, the referee was propped up in a corner, the clock restarted (with one minute left) and the University of Pennsylvania boxer (now conscious) was pushed back into the ring. Bunsa then knocked his opponent to the floor again, “where he was counted out by Morris, who never moved

from his propped-up position in the neutral corner,” Wallenfeldt writes. “Bernstein claims that this three-knockout bout is recorded in Ripley's ‘Believe It or Not.’” And indeed, other CUA boxers like to mention that fight and its immortalization in Ripley's as they reminisce.

A SHAPER OF MEN

During the heyday of intercollegiate pugilism, CUA athletes were fighting the boxing teams of schools that were much bigger than Catholic University. Even so, there were times when the Cardinals were so good that it was hard to find teams willing to compete with them. LaFond kept the boxing program alive through the war years and emerged with strong teams in the early '50s. Along the way he also served as the freshman football coach, which allowed

him to keep an eye out for boxing talent. LaFond became CUA athletic director in 1940, a post he held for 29 years.

As a coach, he had a way of getting the best out of his boys. “I didn't box except for my senior year, but during that year Eddie taught me things about what a man had to be,” remembers Joe Della Ratta, B.A. 1953. “He was the first guy who sat me down and said, ‘Look, Della Ratta, I know you. I know what you can do. And I know you're not giving it your all in boxing. If you don't want to do it all, you can get out of here.’ He didn't have another light heavyweight around then. I was his only choice. But Eddie stood by his principles: ‘You do it the right way, which is my way, and then you'll work out.’ That lesson served me all my life, served me well in the business world. Do your best; that's all you can do. And for all of us, it's a wonderful lesson. It's something we learned from Eddie.”

Casimir “Sneeze” Ksycewski, B.A.E. 1942, was a sophomore when LaFond talked him into boxing. “I'd never had a pair of gloves on until then,” he said by phone from his home in California. (He was unable to attend the reunion.) Ksycewski describes being knocked out by a fighter named Lou Campbell who went on to become a collegiate champ. “I was a novice,” he says. “I could punch, but I was very poor at the science of ducking.”

Ksycewski remembers LaFond as a feisty sparring partner: “He reminded me of a bantam rooster. He'd put his gloves on and he'd mix it up with you.”

The coach's stature in boxing was not limited to CUA. He served in various leadership roles in the NCAA boxing committees. He wrote a how-to book entitled *Better Boxing*, which contains such advice as, “Strength is not needed for a parry; it is simply a matter of timing.” He was a sought-after referee as well. According to Murray, LaFond even officiated at some championships, including a match between world heavyweight champ Joe Louis and Buddy Baer.

After World War II the CUA coach set up boxing clinics at U.S. military bases in Europe, Africa, South America and Asia. In a 1969 interview with *The Tower*, CUA's student newspaper, LaFond said he was proud that some of the great African-American boxers of the postwar years emerged from G.I. training programs such as his.

THE END OF THE GAME

Despite efforts to make college boxing respectable, however, the sport was dogged by controversies, injuries and deaths. Even on the Catholic University campus, boxing had its critics. One was Very Rev. Francis J. Connell, C.S.S.R., a CUA professor and dean of the School of Theology, who has been called one of the most influential moral theologians of the mid-20th century. He wrote that boxing violated the Fifth Commandment ("Thou shalt not kill").

"For, undoubtedly, the purpose of the fighters is to deal each other severe blows, and if possible to score a 'knock-out,'" Connell opined in the January 1950 issue of *The American Ecclesiastical Review*. "The fact that both contestants willingly submit to the probability of being severely pummeled does not alter the case, since a man has no right to allow another to beat him, apart from justifiable punishment."

Eddie LaFond knew Father Connell because the priest used to swim at the athletic center in the old gym. When the coach heard about the anti-boxing pronouncement, he was surprised to learn that it came from the cherubic, white-haired fellow who did laps in the college pool. "To Eddie LaFond, Father Connell was just this little priest who used to go swimming. He never thought of him as a great moral theologian," remembers Monsignor Robert Paul Mohan, professor emeritus of philosophy, who knew both men.

The difference of opinion didn't come between the two men, though. "They were friends," Monsignor Mohan says.

LaFond, for his part, always defended collegiate boxing. "They've been saying there's too much mismatching in college fights but offhand I can't think of another sport where things are equalized as well," he told *The Washington Evening Star*. "The boys all have to be the same weight.

Shucks, in football little teams are pitted against powerful hefty outfits."

But despite LaFond's beliefs and the care he took to assure safe technique, tragedy struck CUA boxing in 1946 when the Cardinals' Gus Gersin knocked out a University of Maryland fighter named Dixon Walker. Walker left the ring, collapsed in the dressing room and died a few days later of a cerebral hemorrhage.

"Everybody was brokenhearted. We had a big memorial Mass in the Shrine," remembers Monsignor Mohan.

Sixteen years later a similar incident sounded the death knell for collegiate boxing. At the 1960 NCAA finals, University of Wisconsin boxer Charlie Mohr lost his 165-pound individual championship bout to San Jose State's Stu Bartell, walked out of the ring

and suffered a cerebral hemorrhage. Mohr died eight days later, on Easter Sunday.

According to Wallenfeldt, boxing had first come to universities because faculty and administrators familiar with its recreational value in World War I training

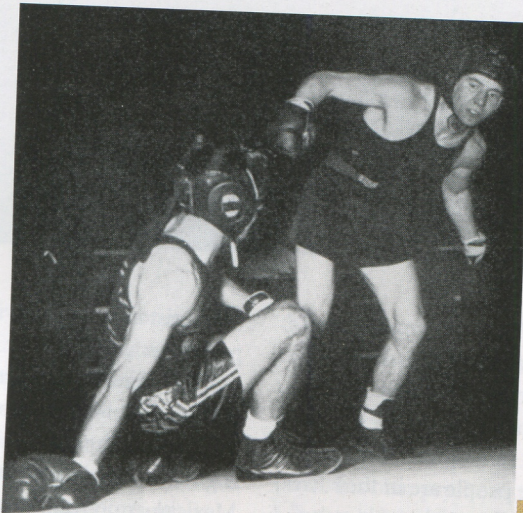
camps encouraged it on their campuses after the war. By 1961, however, the injuries and deaths caught up with the sport and the NCAA disbanded its college boxing program.

Since then, boxing has become more of a professional sport than an amateur one, although Olympic boxing (with its protective headgear and shock-absorbing gloves) remains popular.

In recent years some schools have attempted to resuscitate intercollegiate boxing under the umbrella of USA Boxing (the governing body for amateur boxing in this country). But many college administrators and professors oppose the sport because its major intent is to pound an opponent or knock him out. Several years ago CUA denied a request for a student boxing club.

But there are still those for whom boxing holds value. In an August 2004 essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Gordon Marino, professor of philosophy at St. Olaf College and amateur boxing coach, wrote that the sport instills courage and fosters self-control: "There can be no doubt that boxing throws you up against yourself in revealing ways. Take a left hook to the body or a trip to the canvas, and you soon find out whether you are the kind of person who will ever get up."

The aging athletes at the boxers' reunion learned many years ago that they are the kind of people who get up. It's a lesson they have never forgotten.



Joe Incarnato (left) and Cliff Sisler (right) pretend to spar at the CUA boxing reunion, keeping fellow boxing alumnus Jim Kerrigan entertained. Above left: A younger Incarnato watches as his University of Maryland opponent hits the floor.