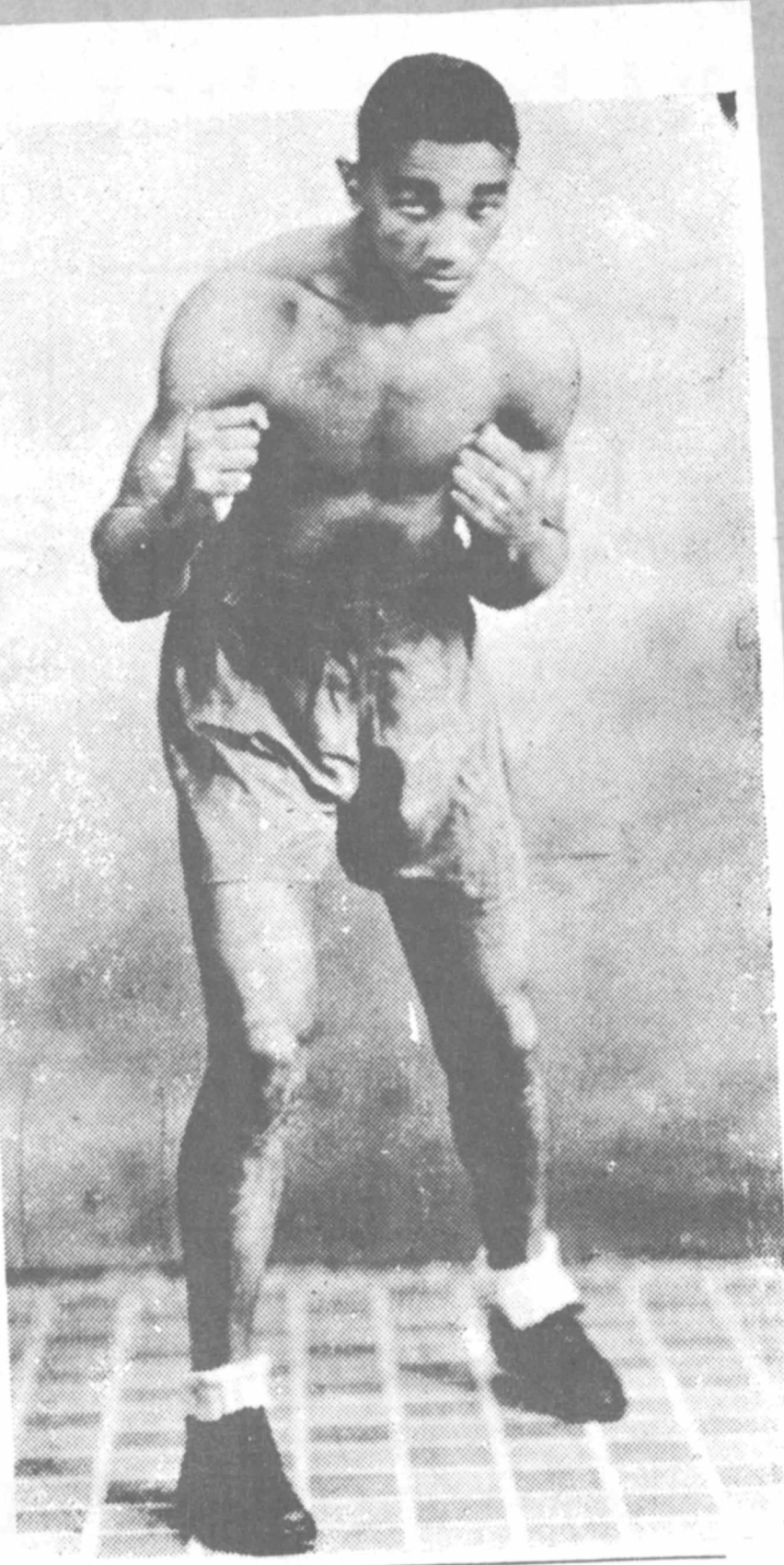
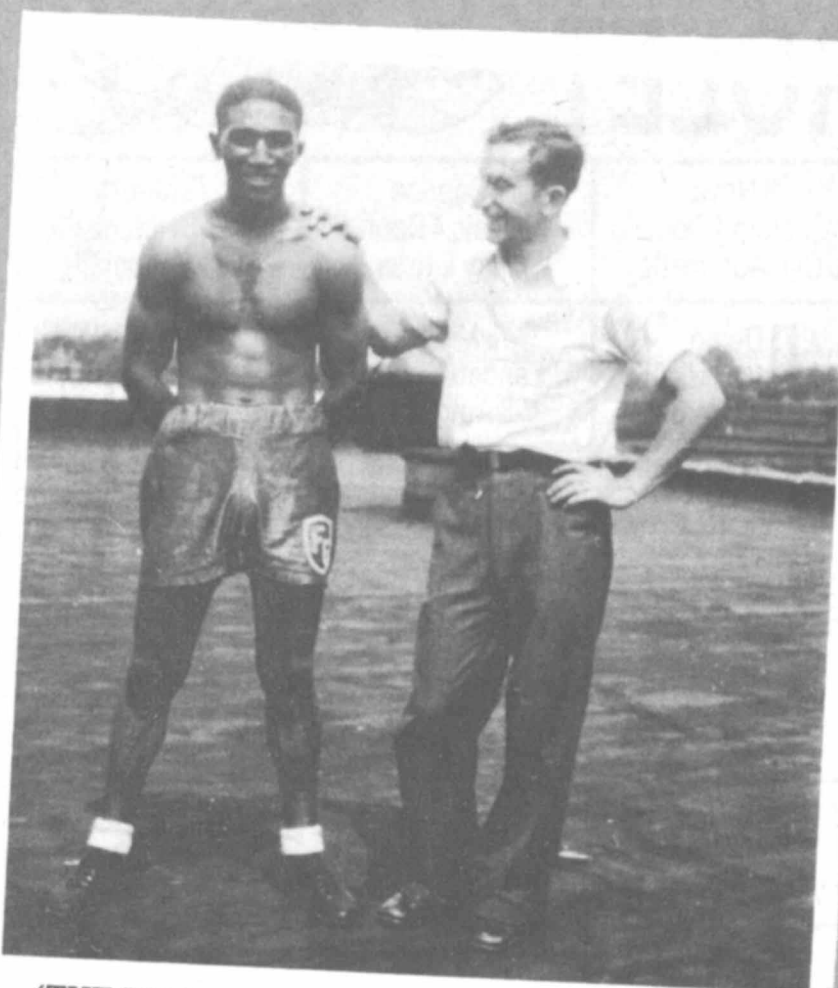


A SPORTS ALBUM OF THE PAST

1925-1950



ALABAMA KID



'THE KID' AND MANAGER JOHN CAPOZELLA

What a PUNCH!!

'Alabama' put area on map in boxing world

By CHRIS WAGNER

His left hook was known as the "Sleep Producer." His right hand was equally potent. He knocked down Archie Moore with one punch in the first round, clobbered top-ranked light heavyweight George Nichols and nearly killed a Kentucky middleweight champion with a single blow.

Called the "greatest boxing machine that ever lived" by his one-time manager-trainer John Capozella, he was Tuscarawas County's middleweight version of former heavyweight champion, Smokin' Joe Frazier.

He was the Alabama Kid.

Undoubtedly the best known and most successful professional boxer from this area, "Alabama," as he was commonly called, helped this sport flourish as a weekly fixture of entertainment in Dover throughout the late 1920's and early 1930's.

Sources estimate that he had about 200 fights between 1931 and 1948, and he won the vast majority of them. In the two years he fought under Capozella, who now resides at 403 W. 5th st., Dover, he won 44 of 49 bouts with one draw against some of the best middleweights in the country.

In 1932, Alabama gained his first piece of glory when he squared off against Jimmy "Boomer" Belmont, a 22-year-old slugger from Pittsburgh who had fought welterweight king Jackie Fields to a 10-round draw in 1931. Belmont, a top contender for the middleweight crown and a heavy favorite against the local lefty, confidently boasted a pre-fight claim that he had never been knocked out in his career.

After the sixth round, that boast could no longer be made. Alabama knocked him to the canvas for a 10-count—a 10-minute-count!

ACCORDING TO the Daily Reporter's account of the American Legion Hall (now Memorial Hall) fight, Belmont was still glassy-eyed and groggy 10 minutes after the devastating punch, and it took quite an effort from his managers to revive him. "After this showing, the Alabama Kid is well on his way to the top of his division."

And despite a setback in his next big fight against 25-year-old southpaw Henry Firpo, rated ninth among ranking middleweights, the "Bamer" was "on his way."

The loss to Firpo was blamed on his being a left-handed boxer—the first that Dover's "Black Panther of the prize ring" had ever faced. But a month later, on Feb. 13, 1933,

Alabama fathomed Firpo's "odd" stance and right-handed lead and won a 10-round split-decision in Legion Hall.

In the next 12 months, the Alabama Kid fought "some of the best" middleweights in the country, according to Capozella, before embarking on a world tour under a new manager.

But before leaving the country, the 5-foot-10, 155-pounder banged out a 10-round draw with Bucky Lawless, a Syracuse middleweight who had beaten three recognized champions in one year (Gorilla Jones, National Boxing Assn. middleweight champ from 1931-32, and welterweight champs Jack Thompson and Tommy Freeman).

Alabama also fought Freeman June 12, 1933, in Pittsburgh, and lost a close, controversial decision. Freeman, by then, had become a middleweight and was a top contender for that crown.

Alabama also fought and beat Gorilla Jones, not once, but twice. The first win was via a unanimous 10-round decision in Springfield, Ohio, in 1937. In the rematch, held seven months later in American Legion Hall before 1500 local fans, Alabama duplicated his initial feat, again winning a unanimous decision.

A fight that carries fond memories for Capozella was when Alabama fought in the same ring with Jack Dempsey, who refereed his bout, and former heavyweight champion Max Schmeling, who fought an exhibition against another heavyweight. Alabama's clash was against Carl Montebano, a fighter who trained under Dempsey's guidance, and who had been knocked out only once—by Alabama.

This outcome was no different. Alabama kayoed Montebano in the second round, and Capozella aptly explained the rematch result: "Dempsey and his fighter simply couldn't believe it the first time."

Capozella said Dempsey praised Alabama after the fight, calling him one of the hardest punchers he had ever seen. Coming from one of the reknowned wallopers in the history of boxing, it was quite a compliment.

But Alabama's reputation was based on more than just a compliment. On Oct. 16, 1933, he slammed Sammy Slaughter, the third or fourth ranking middleweight at the time, to the canvas four times in six rounds, before injuring his powerful left hand and jabbing his way through the final rounds to unanimous victory.

Early in 1934, after avenging losses to Paul Pirrone, a Clevelander who

was one of Ohio's best middleweights, and Frankie O'Brien, a Hartford, Conn., boxer, Alabama set out on a world tour with new manager-trainer, the late Mike McKinney of Canton.

Little is known about this tour, except that Alabama allegedly fought many of Europe's top middleweights and light heavyweights. But one fight does stand out.

In 1936 in Melbourne, Australia, the Dover slugger kayoed George Nichols, former light heavyweight champion, in the fifth round of a scheduled 10-rounder. The victory, which gave Alabama the light heavyweight crown of Australia, was viewed by 10,000 stadium spectators.

Alabama planned on staying in Australia only a few more years, according to Capozella, but when World War II started, "it was almost impossible to find a ride home." So he didn't return to the United States until 1945.

HIS LAST known "big" fight was in Chicago in 1947 against soon-to-be light heavyweight champion, Archie Moore.

Capozella gave this account of the short-lived fight: "As always, Alabama leaped out of his corner at the bell. He landed a solid left hook on Archie's jaw and Archie dropped to the canvas. Alabama, thinking that the fight was over, turned his back and walked to his corner, but Moore got up almost immediately and clobbered Alabama on the backside of the head. It almost killed him."

Born in Columbus in 1914, Clarence "Bama" Reeves left his home at the age of 16 because his mother didn't have the money to feed all 11 children.

He hitch-hiked to Cambridge where he worked and boxed for a few months, until promoter Albert "Dutch" Senhauser, a former Dover resident who owned Senhauser Clothing Store, heard about his slugging skills and signed him to a contract.

Training at the old YMCA on Tuscarawas av. under the direction Capozella, Reeves not only received a new name, but developed into a well-conditioned boxer.

It was not uncommon for him to fight a couple eight to 10-round battles in one week, and he usually fought every 12-16 days—a feat that cannot be matched by many contemporary boxers.

His superb physical condition was reached through strenuous daily workouts that included running bet-

ween 7-11 miles and sparring 10, four-minute rounds (regulation rounds are three minutes long) with various local boxers. Capozella said Alabama wore a "special girdle" while working out that helped to keep his waist trim and his buttocks firm.

"The girdle was a tire intertube from a bike of a small car, that was split length-wise and tied around Alabama's midsection. You had to put powder inside it or you'd develop a terrific rash; and the odor was something else, so he had to take baths quite often.

"But what the rubber girdle did was draw all the water out of Alabama's pores while he was running. So all that was left was muscle. And believe me, Alabama's stomach was as hard as a rock—solid muscle.

"Alabama also used to run up Red Hill (Township Rd. 384) backwards to strengthen his legs and improve his balance; and we kept him on a very strict high-protein diet. He was very dedicated to his sport and a very hard worker."

UNDER THE sponsorship of Senhauser and the East End Athletic Club (an organization which used fight proceeds to finance softball and basketball teams), Alabama and other area boxers fought their bouts at Legion Hall, Crater Arena (where East Elementary School now stands) and the Tuscarawas County Fairgrounds. Prices for most of the fights were 40 cents for general admission and 75 cents for ringside reserved.

Crater Arena was an outdoor facility that held between 400 and 500 spectators, and during the summer it seemed to have as many rainouts as fights. Legion Hall held upwards of 2,000 fans. It was seldom filled for most boxing matches, but the Belmont fight brought in a full house of wagering rowdy rooters.

The Fairgrounds, a popular site for fights, featured such locals as featherweight Tony Leone of Dover, lightweight Zeke Jones of New Philadelphia and repeated "grudge" matches between Tuscarawas County's welterweight champion, Frankie Fabiano of Roswell, and Dover's James "Red" Dusenberry.

Jones and Leone gained some statewide notoriety when they were matched against some of Ohio's best lower weight-class fighters.

In July, 1933, Jones beat Bat Lenon, a Cincinnati fighter who was the lightweight champion of Southern Ohio. This victory led him to sign to fight Rosy "Tiger" Grier, a Massillon boxer who was recognized as the best lightweight in the state.

However, before the fight, the 135-pound Jones injured his hand and was replaced by Leone, who weighed a mere 126 pounds. Capozella said Alabama was surprised everyone in Tuscarawas and Stark Counties, as he danced and jabbed his way to an unanimous eight-round decision.

Leone was then scheduled to fight the Pennsylvania featherweight champ, Moss Butch, and the Daily Reporter said, "if he gets by Butch, he's headed for the top." But the fight never materialized as both boxers repeatedly postponed the battle because of previous commitments.

ANOTHER entertainment attraction in the area in the 1930's was professional wrestling, which featured a bear, a strongman and a world championship match.

Big Ben, a 600-pound wrestling bear, and Jean Mazzan, the Canton Strongman, frequently displayed their talents to sparse crowds at Crater Arena. The owners of Ben offered \$100 to any county wrestler who could stay unpinned by Ben for 30 minutes. There is no record of anyone accomplishing that feat.

Mazzan, before grappling with arch-rival Hans Bauer, the Flying Dutchman from Chicago, would display his "awesome" strength by pulling two chained-together cars.

Aside from these gimmicks, the wrestling was legitimate, and after scheduling repeated matches between Rough House Ritz, of Canton, and Bill Martin, promoter E. B. Beans, formerly of Strasburg, signed the world light heavyweight champion and a challenger to fight for the championship in Dover.

On June 1, 1933, Columbus-born Joe Banaski, light heavyweight champion of the world, battled Jack "Red" Malloy of Canton in a sanctioned title bout at Crater Arena. The fight was a rematch, and in the first battle, Malloy had taken 31 minutes to be pinned. According to newspaper accounts, the Canton man felt confident he could dethrone the champion this time.

How wrong he was. In only 13 minutes, Banaski pinned his foe, and championship wrestling in Dover and the county became part of the past.

But the big story in fighting remains with the Alabama Kid. This powerful puncher who, according to Capozella, knocked out as many fighters with devastating body punches as with shots to the head, fought some of the best middleweights of his era and helped to put Dover on the fighting circle's world map—at least for a time.