

**For Blood or for Glory:
A History of Cuban Boxing, 1898-1962**

by

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2009

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A History of Cuban Boxing, 1898-1962

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Michele B. Reid

To Billy Geoghegan,

my cornerman

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by

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2009

Acknowledgments

This project had its origins in January 2001, when – during a two-week trip to Havana and Matanzas as part of a U.S.-Cuba writers’ conference – I was in training for a series of amateur boxing tournaments back home. Without access to a boxing gym and unwilling to subject myself to catcalls by running in the street, I chose to train by the hotel pools, where – as my fellow writers worked on their tans or cavorted in the water – I assiduously jumped rope, did sit-ups and push-ups, and shadowboxed. My regimen, all the more unusual for its having been carried out by a woman, came to the attention of a Havana sports journalist, Martín Hachoun, and led to his invitation to profile me for some of the national newspapers. Wary of being used for propaganda of whatever sort, I nonetheless was too curious not to accept. No native girls or women were boxing in Cuba at the time (or at present, to my knowledge), despite the state’s pursuit of international excellence in male amateur boxing. Although I was told that a few foreign (non-U.S.) women had recently come to Havana to train, none, apparently, blended the pursuits of literary and fistic excellence, which was what Martín and many other Cubans found so fascinating.¹

As part of our interviews, Martín invited me to visit the historic Arena Trejo gymnasium with him in old Havana. There, I met 1972 Olympic bantamweight champion Orlando Martínez, who was training a group of talented youngsters. I was amazed at the

¹ In the U.S., such distinctions had little bearing in female amateur boxing; many of us pioneers in the late 1990s and early 2000s were viewed as being too “smart” to volunteer our heads as targets for others’ fists. Here, what made me most unusual in the sport was not my Ivy League education or professional credentials, but my being Indian American. Despite having lived on my own for several years, I was frequently asked (particularly by journalists) how my parents felt about my boxing.

ingenuity with which, lacking even a full roof, much less adequate equipment, the Cubans managed to train. Most of all, I was thrilled by the boys' fluid performances, especially while sparring; I had heard of the Cubans' stellar ring skills but had never paid much attention to them, as few were then active in the professional ranks. Not long afterwards, while strolling on the Malecón, the boulevard that abuts the sea wall in Havana, I discussed my excitement at having met Orlando and his charges with my friend Michele Reid, who was in Havana researching her dissertation and had accompanied me to the Arena Trejo. Whether it was her suggestion or mine (I remember it as the former, she as the latter), the idea emerged for me to tackle the history of Cuban boxing as my dissertation topic. Upon my return to the U.S., further investigations revealed that Cuba's pugilistic history had never been addressed in any comprehensive manner in the scholarly literature, and that the few mainstream works on the subject left much to be said. There were hardly any guideposts at all for how to begin, never mind complete, such a daunting task. I didn't know whether I could be the one to do it, but I was determined to try.

Begun amorphously as the collection of any and all materials related to amateur and professional Cuban boxing, on the island and abroad – a project that could well have taken up the rest of my life –, my doctoral dissertation committee members encouraged me to place much-needed temporal and thematic limits on what I proposed to do. Frank Guridy, my co-advisor, suggested that I put aside most of my Castro-era materials and instead focus on the Republic years, whose cultural historiography was undergoing a renaissance. Virginia Garrard Burnett suggested that I leave aside a serious study of colonial-era boxing and instead begin my narrative with the Spanish-American-Cuban War, allowing me to focus more extensively on the emerging U.S.-Cuba relationship. Frank further encouraged me to

explore the Johnson-Willard bout as it pertained to the development of Cuban boxing and as it reflected the deepening of U.S.-Cuban ties.

The research of this work took me to several states within the U.S., where I was grateful to secure the assistance of many wonderful archivists, librarians, and directors. Ed Brophy and Jeff Brophy at the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, New York, literally made me feel at home while examining the hall's archives, setting up an impromptu work station for me amidst the museum collections. At the University of Notre Dame's Joyce Sports Research Collection, Curator George Rugg and his able staff were always exceedingly helpful and gracious. I particularly appreciate George's insights on early boxing and wrestling culture in the U.S. and his assistance in locating materials for me that had not yet been catalogued. At the Kautz Family YMCA Archives at the University of Minnesota, Curator Dagmar Getz and her staff, particularly Reference and Outreach Archivist Ryan Bean, offered tremendous assistance in every way possible as I explored that organization's presence in Cuba. I truly enjoyed my conversations with Dagmar about the YMCA's history and much else; I wish her well in retirement. In Coral Gables, Florida, the aid of the Cuban Heritage Collection and main library staff at the University of Miami was much appreciated. David A. Smith at The New York Public Library's midtown Manhattan branch has been particularly enthusiastic about my project and willing to share ideas and assistance whenever I made it to the city. And at my home institution, the University of Texas at Austin, Jorge Salinas and other staff members of the Benson Latin American Collection were always ready and willing to assist me in whatever ways possible.

In Havana, Cuba, many people were generous with their time and eager to extend their good will. Four couples in particular helped make me feel at home. Martín Hacthoun

and Sonia Rodríguez Febles were my first anchors in Havana, offering me assistance with my project in whatever ways they could. Their worldly sophistication, love of sports and culture, and perfect English skills made our rare evenings together so much fun. Nidia García and her husband Alberto warmly opened their home to me and, conscious of my desire to stay in shape, even rigged up a mini boxing gym on their balcony to give me a quasi-private space to work out; I deeply appreciate their kindness. Katia González León and Maikel Cardoso Vázquez taught me much about bowling (at which they both excel), Cuban baseball, and life in contemporary Havana. Katia became my indispensable companion and friend, with whom I spent hours roaming the city; without her, I would have been lost in more ways than one. Suddenly and quite by accident, Dr. Alejandro Larrinaga (who I met at the national library, where he was trying to learn English), his wife Leo, and their daughters, Yahima and Yeika, became my second family, inviting me over on Sundays for home-cooked Cuban meals, entertaining discussions, televised episodes of *Monk*, and Cuban radio broadcasts of *Murder She Wrote*. My thanks as well for the friendship and hospitality of Jacqueline Moreira Sosa and her family, María de Lourdes Drets Barrasa and her family, and Miriam Nacer.

My research at the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí (BNJM), Instituto de Literatura y Lingüística (ILL), and Museo Nacional de Deporte (MND) in Havana was critical in developing this project. I extend my gratitude to the directors and staff members of those institutions, particularly to Jacqueline Moreira Sosa at BNJM, Dania Vázquez Matos at ILL, and Martha Pérez Viñales, Maikel Cardoso Vázquez, and Katia González León at MND. My conversations with Carlos Reig Romero, while few and far between, were nevertheless exceedingly helpful in understanding the history of pre-revolutionary Cuban boxing. I am

especially indebted to him for providing me with a copy of his book on the YMCA in early twentieth-century Havana.

In the U.S., I have been extremely fortunate to have as dissertation committee members five individuals who serve as inspirations to me. Frank Guridy was enthusiastic about this project from the moment he signed on; his guidance in matters both academic and practical has been indispensable. Most of all, I appreciate his wise counsel in guiding the shape of this narrative, sharpening its focus, and questioning my interventions in the dominant historiography. I never walked away from a conversation with him without having learned something new. The brilliant cultural historian and my co-supervisor, Mauricio Tenorio Trillo, now at the University of Chicago, was tremendously influential in my own decision to engage in cultural history. More than anyone else I have known, he has been able to read my academic mind, knowing where I might be cutting corners and where I truly shined. I will always appreciate his masterful insights. Virginia Garrard Burnett never failed to offer criticisms tempered with humor and kindness; her insights on religion, especially, were essential to my understanding of Muscular Christianity. My graduate school education and experience would have been much the poorer without her. Madeline Y. Hsu gave the gift of an outsider's perspective; as a nonspecialist in both sports and Caribbean/Latin American history, she articulated precisely where I needed to offer additional exposition and where I had offered too much. I am grateful for her razor-sharp analysis and editorial abilities, but, most of all, for her willingness to embrace this project. Michele Reid's many observations on race, masculinity, and nationhood spurred me to strengthen the theoretical bases of this project. Her practical assistance and enthusiasm were always forthcoming, and always welcomed. She has been a close friend, forceful advocate, and discerning critic.

In addition to committee members, I must thank Aline Helg, for the critical training she provided me on Cuban history and for jointly overseeing my research before her move to the University of Geneva; Judith Coffin, for furthering my understanding of gender studies and for her willingness to aid in this project; and Marilyn Lehman, History Department Graduate Program Coordinator, who was a vital intermediary in navigating the doctoral bureaucracy. My gratitude also goes to the University of Texas-Austin History Department for research monies to complete this project: a Departmental Fellowship, the Carlos E. Castañeda Prize, the Mary Helen Quinn Cooperative Fellowship, and the Dora Bonham Award. Additionally, I am grateful for the Centennial Fund grants I received while at UT-Austin that enabled me to present my research at various conferences.

My close friends, scattered throughout the country, have long been a strong source of personal support and comfort to me, in this project and in so much else. I shall not attempt to list them all for fear of leaving one out; instead, I ask forgiveness for using the “you know who you are” shorthand. I must, however, single out Jessica Vets; a tough love advocate if ever there was one, she refused to indulge any fits of self-pity and always sought to keep my eye on the prize. I treasure our friendship deeply.

In Austin, the encouragement of current and former grad school pals, among them Frances Ramos, Roy Doron, Norwood Andrews, Kerry Webb, Andrew Paxman, Shereen Ilahi, Heather Peterson, Jackie Zahn, Emily Berquist, John Gronbeck-Tedesco, and Marian Barber, though we saw each other rarely, was always welcomed. My thanks to Larry Gutman for sharing some of his dissertation research on Cuban social clubs with me. Heather Hardy never hesitated to offer assistance when needed; I appreciate her many acts of kindness. Richard and Lori Lord gave me a home away from home at their one-of-a-kind boxing gym,

where I spent many happy hours. Jennifer Lazar literally helped to keep me together. And I am grateful for the many other wonderful people – friends, coworkers, neighbors, faculty, staff, and peers – who have shared the days with me here.

Lastly but most importantly, my family has been my strongest base of support over the years. My mother, Bharati Reejhsinghani, M.D., never failed to serve as an example to me of what women can achieve when ambition, talent, and will converge. Her emotional and financial support – and most of all, her friendship – has been critical to me as I pursued my dream of becoming a professor. My father, Nandlal Reejhsinghani, Ph.D. – in his own idiosyncratic ways – spurred on my love for history and desire to earn a doctorate. While our degrees are in very different fields and were earned in very different contexts, I am proud to share those initials with him. My grandfather, Chetan Shahani, who passed away while I was an undergraduate, was especially influential in my decision to become a historian; as a child, I was fascinated by his many evocative stories of life in colonial and early nationalist India. My brothers, Sanjiv and Alok Reejhsinghani, deserve thanks for their generosity and friendship, and for helping to maintain my ties to the region where we grew up.

Asha and Kali, have – affectionately, if not always patiently – taught me how much I still have to learn. Their relentless optimism serves as an ever-present reminder that dreams deferred are not always dreams denied. My love to them, and to Bug, who has given us all something to look forward to.

Finally, Billy Geoghegan has seen me through this project from the very first day, and continues to be my staunchest friend, truest advocate, and most perceptive critic. His love, patience, advice, sense of humor, and cooking have sustained me over the years. I hope that he is proud of this achievement, because it would not have been possible without him.

**For Blood or for Glory:
A History of Cuban Boxing, 1898-1962**

Anju Nandlal Reejhsinghani, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2009

Supervisors: Frank Guridy and Mauricio Tenorio Trillo

“For Blood or for Glory” examines boxing’s political, social, and cultural impacts in Cuba from the U.S. military intervention in 1898 to the Castro regime’s prohibition on professional sports in 1962. It argues that, although boxing’s early development was strongly influenced by the U.S. presence on the island, over time the sport became “Cubanized” in distinct ways. The establishment of a national commission, the practice of interracial bouts, and the creation of a national academy served to develop Cuban talent. Yet in contrast to baseball, boxing was incompletely integrated into the nationalist project; by midcentury, it was valued more as a source of state revenue than national pride. The lack of opportunities for Cuban fighters at home led to their exodus abroad, as they formed a transnational citizenry ranging from world champions and contenders to lowly journeymen. After the onset of the Cuban Revolution, the state sought to sustain prizefighting and other professional sports, but ultimately opted to ban them as Cuba’s tourist industry fell apart.

Chapter 1 addresses different facets of early pugilism, including the rise of a boxing subculture in late colonial and early republic Cuba, the Havana YMCA's efforts to encourage amateur boxing among middle-class Cubans and U.S. expatriates, and the construction of new infrastructure for public spectacles. Jack Johnson's heavyweight title fight with Jess Willard in Havana in April 1915, and Cuban receptions to it, forms the subject of Chapter 2. Chapter 3 details the processes by which boxing spectacles were legalized and regulated and describes the rise of Cuba's first world champion, Kid Chocolate. Chapter 4 considers the conflicting role of the state in both spurring and limiting boxing's growth throughout the country during the 1930s and 1940s. Chapter 5 tackles the 1950s, including the impact of television on boxing in the U.S. and Cuba and the career of Kid Gavilán. Chapter 6 explores the decline of prizefighting in revolutionary Cuba and the concurrent establishment of an exiled community of prizefighters in the U.S. The Conclusion analyzes developments in post-1962 amateur boxing in Cuba and speculates as to the sport's future on the island.

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Introduction:

The Meanings of the Boxing Ring in Pre-Revolutionary Cuba

The Arena Cerveza Cristal, located at the intersection of Infanta and San Martín in the capital city of Havana, was the site of many important amateur and professional boxing bouts from 1933 to 1943. On the night of Saturday, June 21, 1941, a large crowd had gathered inside the arena to witness a much-anticipated fight.¹ As was becoming increasingly common in Havana rings by mid-century, only one of the two feature opponents was of Cuban origin. His name was Lorenzo Safora, and he had emerged from the ranks of the Cuban Golden Gloves, the amateur tournament that had been developed a few years earlier as a feeding system for new boxers to enter the professional ranks. By fight night, Safora was, at only twenty years old, already the island's bantamweight champion. The other man was a 28-year-old boxer who went by the name Small Montana. Born Benjamin Gan in Negros, the Philippines, his *nom-de-guerre* was a mixture of English and Spanish and evoked the image of a tiny mountain. Montana's record was more impressive than Safora's and spoke to his international success. He had held the New York State Athletic Commission's version of the world flyweight championship from September 1935, when he defeated Midget Wolgast, to January 1937, when he lost it to Benny Lynch.² Eladio Secades, a

¹ Peter, "Fue anulado el fallo emitido sobre la pelea de anoche entre Lorenzo Safora y el filipino Small Montana," *Diario de la Marina*, 22 June 1941, p. 19. Unless otherwise attributed, the historical details I provide for this bout are taken from this source.

² For background on Small Montana, see *The Great Pinoy Boxing Era: Three Decades of Filipino-American Boxers*, directed by Corky Pasquil and Agrafino Edralin, 1994, and Linda España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila: Working-Class Filipinos and Popular Culture, 1920s-1950s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 77-78, 85, and 94-95. NYSAC was not the only sanctioning body at the time to issue titles. Because Montana did not unify the other versions of the flyweight title, his victory against Wolgast in September 1935 is usually described as having been for the American flyweight title.

sportswriter for *Diario de la Marina*, the major Havana daily, considered Montana to be the best fighter among the smaller weight classes to have emerged since Cuba's Black Bill (Eladio Valdés) and Kid Chocolate (Eligio Sardiñas Montalvo) over a decade earlier.³

Three prizefights were scheduled in addition to the Safora-Montana "star bout": the semi-final, as it was known, between Miguel Acevedo and Enrique Rodea, and preliminary events featuring Rogelio "Kid" Oliver versus Roberto Martínez and Soldado (Soldier) Serrano versus Ramón Crespo.⁴ As was not unusual in boxing shows at the time, particularly in Cuba, the night opened with an amateur match-up featuring Miguel Pena and Dámaso Collazo. (Semi-professionals, who were paid less for their ring services than professionals but were generally more experienced than amateurs, also at times performed on professional cards). All but Rodea, imported from Mexico by the national Cuban sports directorship for his debut in Havana rings, were native fighters. The preliminary fights were shorter, lasting four or six three-minute rounds (each round was separated by a one-minute rest period), versus ten for the main event and eight for the semi-final. The experience of the athletes involved was usually in direct proportion to the scheduled length of their bouts; before the advent of television, prizefighters were often groomed for years, fighting no more than six or eight rounds, before making the jump to main-event status.⁵

Fighting at the bantamweight limit of 118 pounds, Safora and Montana were fairly representative members of their countries' prizefight ranks; the Cubans and Filipinos were

³ Eladio Secades, "Montana vs. Safora: La ciencia del filipino," *Diario de la Marina*, 21 June 1941, p. 14.

⁴ Acevedo, who became featherweight champion of Cuba and a world-rated featherweight contender later in the decade, was a last-minute opponent for the lightweight Rodea; see "Montana reaparecerá ante los fans cubanos el sábado, enfrentándose a Lorenzo Safora, en diez rounds," *Diario de la Marina*, 17 June 1941, p. 14.

⁵ Television accelerated this process, particularly in the U.S., because it led to the closure of small clubs where younger boxers developed their skills and created a demand for new, clean-cut, mostly white faces (made-for-TV boxers, as some called them) to win over suburban audiences. See Chapter 5 for more on TV's impact on prizefighting in Cuba and the U.S.

renowned for producing “small men.” (Indeed, Montana was being tested above his weight; he was truly a flyweight, who fought – and rarely lost – at that division’s 112-pound limit.) Above the flyweight and bantamweight divisions were six other weight classes: featherweight (126 pounds), lightweight (135 pounds), welterweight (147 pounds), middleweight (160 pounds), light heavyweight (175 pounds), and heavyweight (above 175 pounds).⁶ Other than the Serrano-Crespo middleweight match-up, the remaining bouts on the card that night were contested at the lightweight limit or below.

Safora began the first few rounds of their ten-round non-title bout by attempting to “box” the Filipino, to outmaneuver him with speed and reflexes rather than overwhelming him with power.⁷ Montana’s style was slower, more cautious, defensive, and by the second round the crowd urged him on. In the fourth, Montana hit Safora with a solid shot to the belly followed by one to the jaw, knocking out Safora’s mouthpiece. Upon returning to his

⁶ In more recent times, there has been an explosion of weight classes from the original eight to seventeen, as tracked by *The Ring* magazine; these range from strawweight (105 pounds) to heavyweight (above 200 pounds). For the influential magazine’s updated rankings for each weight class, see “The Ring Ratings,” *The Ring*, <http://www.ringtv.com/ratings/> (accessed July 16, 2009).

⁷ Since the end of the bare-knuckle era, most right-handed boxers have approached their opponents at an angle, with the left foot about shoulder-width in front of the right, and the left hand leading several inches in front of the right (the opposite holds for most left-handed fighters, known as southpaws). Other than the jab, which is thrown with the leading hand on a straight line from a fighter’s head level to his opponent’s head or body and which sets up a series of punches, all punches are “power punches” because they require torquing by the lower body – hips, knees, and ankles. Power punches include the straight right or cross (called the straight left or cross for southpaws, it is when a fighter throws on a straight line with his rear hand, at the same time dropping his center of gravity and thrusting his back hip forward); the uppercut (thrown by either hand at an underhand angle from close to one’s body in an upward thrust to the other’s head or body); the hook (thrown with the left or right hand to the side of the opponent’s head or body as the front hip drops and turns inward); the overhand right or left (thrown from an overhand position at a downward angle, it is the inverse of the uppercut and usually thrown to the opponent’s head), and the bolo punch (an exaggerated uppercut using extraneous arm movement, thrown more for psychological effect or as a crowd-pleaser than for pure power). The bolo became the signature punch of Cuba’s Kid Gavilán, as discussed in Chapter 5. It should be noted that not all modern fighters follow the traditional style. Several world champions achieved their titles using unorthodox styles, often sacrificing a defensive posture for a more aggressive offense: Floyd Patterson and Mike Tyson stood squarely in front of opponents and used a crab-like crouch developed by their trainer, Cus D’Amato, and Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali was notorious for throwing punches from his waist rather than his chin. Fighters who succeed using unorthodox styles usually have offensive skills that more than compensate for their weaker defenses – hand speed, intricate footwork, tremendous power, a solid “chin” (ability to withstand punishment), psychological command of one’s opponents, or some combination of the above.

corner at the bell signaling the round's conclusion, Safora seemed winded. Montana had the upper hand in the next four rounds, causing the crowd to begin booing the local fighter. In the ninth, the Cuban seemed to recover, lashing Montana with lefts and rights. In the tenth and last round, Montana was more elusive, and the two exchanged punches toe-to-toe.

Former prizefighter Fillo Echevarría, originally from Spain but long a resident of Cuba, had acted as referee; when the last round was over, he called the bout for Montana. The two judges, on the contrary, determined Safora to be the victor. This would have meant that Safora won by split decision, as the result is known when two of the three scorecards go in a fighter's favor. (Had the referee voted for Safora as well, the Cuban would have instead earned a unanimous decision; had he called the bout a draw, Safora would still have won, but by majority decision.) Back then, decisions were rendered by two ringside judges, who remained seated just outside the ropes, and by the referee, who was known as the "third man in the ring"; modern practice uses three judges (up to five in the amateurs) and leaves the referee out of the scoring business altogether. Each scorecard was calculated by totaling the number of rounds won by each opponent; thus, in theory, a fighter leading on two cards by a one-round margin would still defeat an opponent with a nine-round advantage on the third card.⁸ The even number of rounds in many bouts meant that draws were a frequent

⁸ Most sanctioned prizefights nowadays are conducted using a "ten-point must" system as adopted in the Unified Rules of Boxing endorsed by the Association of Boxing Commissions, which represents U.S. and Canadian state and tribal boxing commissions. In this system, each round is calculated with the winner of that round receiving ten points (although points may be deducted for committing fouls) and the loser nine or fewer (an additional point is deducted for a knockdown or if the losing fighter is completely outmatched). In 2000, attorneys general from 18 states suggested that a "consensus scoring system" might eliminate some of the poor decisions that have occurred under the current system. In consensus scoring, all three judges' scores would need to coincide each round or else a new score would be determined. If the three scores were different, then the highest and lowest ones would be tossed out and the median one used; if two judges reached the same score, the third judge's score would be tossed out. This would minimize the influence of a single biased or incompetent judge and, theoretically, result in fairer decisions. The consensus scoring proposal was one of many the attorneys general suggested to make U.S. prizefighting safer and its results less "arbitrary." As with

occurrence. So, unfortunately, were outright cases of fraud, since poorly paid judges and referees could be susceptible to bribes or arm-twisting. (Gambling, then as now, played an important role in prizefight culture.)

At the time of the Safora-Montana bout, the referee was expected to do his job impartially but nonetheless to offer his verdict on whether one fighter defeated the other or whether the competition was equal. By remaining on their feet at the end of the bout, as did Safora and Montana on this occasion, the fighters were demonstrating their ring experience and ability to withstand the other's punishment. Not infrequently, however, the referee imposed another result before the scheduled number of rounds were concluded. Fighters were disqualified for hitting "below the belt," south of a man's natural waistline; for hitting a man who was on his way down to the canvas, or already there; and for a number of other flagrant violations that could potentially harm an opponent – such as biting, elbowing, or punching in the back of the head. Or the referee might prematurely end a bout with a "no decision" verdict, should the fighters not be engaged in a competitive contest, for instance, or should weather (bouts were often held outside) make further fighting impossible. On some occasions, particularly with the advent of television, the referee might shorten one or more preliminary bouts before they had begun to allow for sufficient time to stage the main attraction. The referee's intervention was perhaps most common in the event of a technical knockout (TKO), when he stepped in to ensure that a fighter in trouble would not endure

other such reform efforts in prizefighting, however, this one went nowhere. See James C. McKinley, Jr., "Law Officials in 18 States Seek Widespread Changes," *New York Times*, 11 May 2000. For the original proposal, see "National Association of Attorneys General Boxing Task Force," May 2000, http://www.oag.state.ny.us/media_center/2000/may/report.pdf (accessed July 19, 2009).

further harm. (Knockouts, or KOs, did not directly involve the referee but instead occurred when one man was unable to get up from the canvas upon the end of a ten-second interval.)

Although one might have imagined a hometown crowd to be more partisan, the Havana denizens were furious at the announcement that Safora had won the decision. They made their displeasure known loudly enough that the powerful Director of Sports, Colonel Jaime Mariné – who happened to be in attendance – quickly gathered together with the sportswriters present and his Assessor of Boxing to exchange opinions on the verdict. They must have shared the crowd’s sentiment, for the official ruling was quickly changed to a draw – a result that, as one newspaper account stated, was still favorable to the local pugilist but at least did not mar the visitor’s record.⁹

I begin my exploration of Cuba’s boxing history with this bout not because it was spectacular in its own right – it was not – nor because it had any long-term impact on the sport itself – it did not. I begin here because I could just have easily selected any one of a thousand other bouts in order to provide a window into the pre-television, pre-revolutionary culture of boxing on the island. This bout represents a “typical” mid-century main event fight in Havana. Unlike earlier in the century, when foreign boxers came primarily from the U.S., Canada, and Great Britain, the 1940s witnessed the arrival of opponents from newer boxing centers such as Mexico, Central America, and the Philippines. (U.S. boxers would remain fixtures in Havana’s rings until the early 1960s.) Average Cuban fans were not only passionate about boxing, they were extremely knowledgeable about it, and (with some exceptions) were willing to abandon or at least temper their national, regional, or hometown

⁹ This point was made in Peter, “Fue anulado el fallo emitido sobre la pelea de anoche entre Lorenzo Safora y el filipino Small Montana,” *Diario de la Marina*, 22 June 1941, p. 19. A fighter’s record is typically given as the number of wins, losses, and draws, in that order.

loyalties when won over by an opponent's skills or persistence. The audience at the Arena Cristal would have been intimately familiar not only with their home-grown fighter, but also with the Filipino who had recently fought two thrilling bouts there with Mexican flyweight champion Luis Castillo.¹⁰ Moreover, although it was not exactly a common occurrence for Cuban sports officials to intervene in an official judging result, it was not rare, either. In the U.S. at that time, overturning a verdict in the interests of fairness was not a widespread practice; some flagrant judging violation usually had to be uncovered before a result would change. In republic-era Cuba, where government regulators had much tighter control over prizefighting and where far fewer promoters were active, such official tampering with the scoring happened with greater frequency and was viewed as necessary to keep the sport honest.

Cuban boxing by 1941 had come a long way from its origins in the nineteenth century, when it was practiced to a limited extent in exclusive social clubs and other private domains. Having fitfully emerged in public spaces during the years of U.S. military occupation (1898-1902 and 1906-1909) and in the decade since, boxing remained on the margins of both legality and respectability until 1921, when the state formed a boxing and wrestling commission. In the interwar period, the number of boxing events staged in Havana and the provincial cities exploded as the infrastructure for athletic and recreational facilities developed apace. The creation of amateur tournaments such as the Golden Gloves, the development of semi-professional boxing as a vehicle to introduce the sport among poor youths, and the establishment of Havana as an important site along a regional network of

¹⁰ For a contemporary profile on Castillo, including his ties to Cuban boxing, see Harvey Thorne, "New Faces: The Ring Presents to Its Readers Short Biographical Sketches of Boys Who Are Making Good – Some Are Veterans, Others Novices," *The Ring* 20:6 (July 1941), pp. 28-29, 41 (Castillo profile on p. 28).

prizefighting centers all helped to build both a domestic base of competitors and audiences to watch them. By the time the revolutionary state outlawed professional sports, including boxing, in 1962, the sport had become second only to baseball as Cuba's national pastime.

While the study of twentieth-century baseball, particularly in its professional variant, has recently gained traction among cultural historians and other commentators on Cuba, boxing has remained a curiosity at best, a dated relic of a more innocent time.¹¹ Memoirs, novels, and other works set in the late 1940s or 1950s evoke the bygone nature of Cuban boxing by referencing popular prizefighters, particularly Kid Gavilán (Gerardo González), who entered mainstream (read: middle-class white) U.S. culture via the new medium of television.¹² If Cuban boxing has any relevance at all today, it is as an example of its current practitioners' astonishing athletic prowess, which for the past forty years has been amply demonstrated in amateur rings throughout the world, most notably at the Olympic Games. Outside of Cuba itself, where the revolutionary state has excoriated pre-1959 prizefighting as a dangerous, exploitative vestige of a corrupt capitalist system, as well as a few dwindling circles abroad – such as communities of aging, exiled prizefighters and their descendants in

¹¹ Recent works that explore the history of pre-revolutionary Cuban baseball include Louis A. Pérez, Jr., "Between Baseball and Bullfighting: The Quest for Nationality in Cuba, 1868-1898," *The Journal of American History* (September 1994), pp. 493-517; Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Roberto González Echevarría, *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Jorge S. Figueredo, *Beisbol cubano: A un paso de las Grandes Ligas, 1878-1961* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2005); and Adrian Burgos, Jr., *Playing America's Game: Baseball, Latinos, and the Color Line* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). For examinations of baseball in revolutionary Cuba, see Paula J. Pettavino and GERALYN Pye, *Sport in Cuba: The Diamond in the Rough* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994); S.L. Price, *Pitching around Fidel: A Journey into the Heart of Cuban Sports* (New York: Ecco Press, 2000); Milton S. Jamail, *Full Count: Inside Cuban Baseball* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000); and Thomas F. Carter, *The Quality of Home Runs: The Passion, Politics, and Language of Cuban Baseball* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

¹² For one of many such examples, the first television program witnessed by Carl Reiner – who would become one of the most influential writers, directors, actors, and producers on the big and small screens – was a U.S. boxing match featuring Kid Gavilán. See Ed McMahon and David Fisher, *When Television Was Young: The Inside Story with Memories by Legends of the Small Screen* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), p. 12.

places such as South Florida and New York – there seems to be little current interest either in the history of the island’s boxers or in the manner by which the sport took root on its soil. Other than the Olympics, for instance, the only times that a discussion of Cuban boxing regularly makes it into the mainstream U.S. press is when, sadly, another exiled prizefighter has passed away.¹³ Even the defections of Cuban Olympic gold medalist boxers rarely garner wide attention any longer.

Undoubtedly, this apathy has coincided with a decline in the importance of the sport among North Americans and western Europeans.¹⁴ While baseball, basketball, and soccer are glorified as global sports and football retains its hold on U.S. culture, boxing appears to be dying a slow death in much of the developed world, capturing the attention of the public only when exceptional (or much-hyped) match-ups are made. Although a discussion of why this has occurred is beyond the scope of this dissertation, contributing factors in the United States have been the decline of small clubs since the 1950s due to the rise of televised boxing; the scandals that plagued the sport for much of the twentieth century, including well-publicized associations with organized crime; the rise of Asian martial arts, mixed-martial arts, and other forms of combat-as-entertainment; and the greater hold of basketball in urban environments that typically provided the breeding ground for pugilists. No doubt

¹³ Cuban baseball, on the contrary, in both its current and historical forms, is far more often on the radar, as Major League Baseball’s ranks of Latin American players has increased dramatically and scouts have sometimes gone to great lengths to secure Cuban defectors for U.S. teams. For one recent high-profile defection, that of pitcher Aroldis Chapman, see Jack Curry, “Yankees May Be Among a Cuban Defector’s Suitors,” *New York Times*, 3 July 2009. Every four years, the World Baseball Classic also helps to raise the profile of Cuban baseball in the U.S., though mostly as an elegy to what might have been; see, for example, Alan Schwarz, “Whispering Farwell to Cuba’s Dominant Past,” *New York Times*, 20 March 2009, and Dan Rosenheck, “Cuba’s Pastime: Beating Foreign Competition,” *New York Times*, 13 March 2009.

¹⁴ An exception is Germany, where boxing is widely watched on public television. Yet while demand for professional bouts there remains high, promoters have developed a large portion of their talent pool from eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Cuba. (The Hamburg-based company Arena Box Promotion, in particular, has signed on many of the most high-profile recent Cuban defectors). See Nicholas Kulish, “In Germany, Boxing Finds Appreciation and a Hub,” *New York Times*, 23 February 2008.

rises in the standards of living in the U.S. and western Europe have contributed; poverty and boxing have long gone hand in hand.¹⁵ As a result of these and other factors, boxing in the U.S. has become “a niche sport, abandoned by network television and playing to an enthusiastic following locked in to cable television and pay-per-view championship bouts.”¹⁶ Yet the current level of apathy toward boxing should not color an assessment of its historic importance in the development of many cultures, including Cuba’s.

While boxing has historically been Cuba’s second national sporting pastime, behind baseball, no rigorous historical study of it has been published in any language. The Spanish-language works that exist on the subject are by journalists or amateur historians in Cuba or Miami who concentrate on once well-worn subjects (particularly tales of famous pugilists) rather than the nuances of the sport’s history and development. None has a bibliography or citations, and most lack an index. Although they appear to be based on newspaper accounts, secondary sources, and unpublished or original interviews with former boxers – much of which might otherwise be lost to posterity without these authors’ interventions – it is often difficult if not impossible to retrace their steps to evaluate their methods and conclusions.

Most importantly, all display a strong ideological slant: Cuba-based authors such as Jorge Alfonso, Jesus Domínguez, and José Luis Llano attack the historic racism and exploitation of prizefighting, while expatriates such as Julio Ferreiro Mora, Willy del Pino,

¹⁵ Recent exceptions to this rule include seven-time world champion Marco Antonio Barrera, who trained as a lawyer in Mexico, and Dana Rosenblatt, a competitive Jewish American boxer. In the U.S. and Europe, the link between poverty and boxing has been less evident in the female version of the sport, as many educated, middle-class women joined both the amateur and professional ranks in the 1990s and 2000s. But as the novelty wears off and consumer demand for competitive women’s boxing remains low (if men’s boxing is now a niche sport, then female boxing is a niche within a niche), this trend, too, may be on the wane.

¹⁶ Glenn Collins, “Gem of the Ring, Guarded by a Professor in Boxing Gloves,” *New York Times*, 12 August 2008. This quote is from the author’s interview with Anthony M. Cucchiara, professor of archival management at Brooklyn College. Cucchiara is overseeing the process of cataloguing of the archive of Hank Kaplan, the famed U.S. boxing historian who passed away in 2007.

and Enrique Encinosa condemn how communism prevents athletes from fulfilling their ambitions and lifting themselves from poverty.¹⁷ There are elements of truth to each side, yet in an attempt to discredit the other's polemics, both tend to caricature the complexities of the system they decry and allow ideology to shape the evidence they present.

I aim to produce a very different history of Cuban boxing, one that is deeply grounded in historical study but is multidisciplinary in nature, and one which bridges many of the positions described above. I have several points of departure. First, my dissertation relies chiefly upon primary sources – newspapers, periodicals, interview transcripts, photographs, film footage, government legislation, press releases, and speeches by public officials – and is further enriched by secondary material from various disciplines (e.g., sociology, gender theory, political science). Given the transnational nature of Cuban prizefighting (and, to a lesser extent, pre-1959 amateur boxing), I have not limited myself to Cuban materials but rely as well upon U.S. periodicals and newspapers, particularly those of relevance to the “sweet science.”

Second, my research uses archives in multiple sites – Havana, Cuba; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Coral Gables, Florida; Austin, Texas; Canastota and New York, New York; and South Bend, Indiana – to ensure the broadest range of available materials. At the same time, I realize that there are several areas in my work that could benefit from additional investigation; whenever possible, I try to indicate as much, both in order to express the limits of this project and to encourage future research in this field.

¹⁷ See Jorge Alfonso, *Puños dorados: Apuntes para la historia del boxeo en Cuba* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 1988); Jesus Domínguez and José Luis Llano, *La preparación básica de los boxeadores* (Ciudad de La Habana: Editorial Científico-Técnica, 1987); Julio Ferreiro Mora, *Historia del boxeo cubano*, 1st ed. (Miami: Selecta Enterprises, 1983); Willy del Pino, ed., *Enciclopedia del boxeo cubano: Con los acontecimientos boxísticos más destacados desde 1910 a 1960* (Miami: Continental Printing, 1998); and Enrique Encinosa, *Azúcar y Chocolate: Historia del boxeo cubano* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 2004).

Third, I build upon the previous literature in several ways. With Ferreiro Mora and Encinosa, I believe that the history of Cuban boxing must take into account the trajectories of those who left Cuba to pursue their careers after 1959. The stories of the exiles are as much a part of Cuban boxing history as are the stories of the people who chose (or who were compelled) to stay behind. With Alfonso, Domínguez, and Llano, I do not see amateur boxing as a footnote to prizefighting. How a state, especially a poor one, prioritizes amateur athletics – which sports it favors, whether it makes them available to individuals of all races and classes and to women as well as men, whether athletes are actively recruited and encouraged or left to find their own paths to success – tells us a lot about its priorities for and expectations of its citizenry and its desire for international prestige in ostensibly non-political realms.

Taking these approaches into account, my dissertation aims to begin to alter scholarly opinions on the relevance of boxing to pre-revolutionary Cuban history. In doing so, it makes interventions into the historiography of three interrelated fields: Cuban national history, U.S.-Cuban relations, and sports history. I will describe each intervention one by one – and the trajectory of my own arguments – before detailing the framework of this project.

Historians have increasingly argued for the centrality of culture to the development of nation-states. As George Lipsitz puts it, culturally based studies “provide sophisticated and convincing arguments about the ways in which the commonplace and ordinary practices of everyday life often encode larger social and ideological meaning.”¹⁸ These types of

¹⁸ George Lipsitz, “Con Safos: Can Cultural Studies Read the Writing on the Wall?” (1991 paper), pp. 11-12, quoted in España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles’s Little Manila*, p. 8.

meaning include, but are not limited to, racial, class, and gendered discourse. Although scholars of Cuba have long favored the study of its economic, political, and (to a lesser extent) social changes, they have been slower to embrace the study of cultural transmissions as representative of and impactful upon the underpinnings of social life. In his study of Afro-Cuban music from 1920 to 1940, Robin D. Moore notes that Cuban cultural studies have been hampered by an “abysmal state of research on modern presocialist Cuba,” i.e., the republic period.¹⁹ This imbalance has begun to be addressed in the past decade. In the realm of music, Moore’s earlier work has made a significant impact, as has his chapter on the 1950s in his monograph on music and the Cuban Revolution. Louis A. Pérez, Jr.’s volume on U.S.-Cuban relations in colonial and republic-era Cuba, *On Becoming Cuban*, now serves as an originating point for those seeking to comprehend the linkages between North American and Cuban cultures. Rosalie Schwartz’s history of tourism in Cuba explicitly links the development of cultural industries to the economic and political agendas of the state in both the republic and revolutionary eras.²⁰ And several new works on the history of baseball in Cuba have strengthened the field even further.²¹

While some may question whether boxing is inherently worthy of study (my co-advisor Mauricio Tenorio Trillo once informed me that many academics view it as the equivalent of human cockfighting), I do argue that, one’s personal opinions of the sport aside, its examination does provide critical insights into the development of the Cuban nation from its early years as a republic to its efforts to embrace socialism in the early 1960s.

¹⁹ Robin D. Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), pp. 8-9 (quote on p. 9).

²⁰ Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness*; Moore, *Music and Revolution: Cultural Change in Socialist Cuba* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban*; Rosalie Schwartz, *Pleasure Island: Tourism and Temptation in Cuba* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

²¹ See footnote 11 for a list of works on Cuban baseball in the republic and revolutionary eras.

On the level of gender studies, an exploration of how advocates of amateur and professional boxing (as well as the physical culture movement more generally) made a case for their sport offers perspective on the ways in which ideas of Cuban manhood were formulated and contested. Analyzing why a disproportionate number of Afro-Cubans began entering the prizefight ranks by the 1920s may shed light upon the limited opportunities available to them in other occupations and the ways in which the presence of champions such as Kid Chocolate helped to impact ideas of race and nation. The transformation of official approaches to boxing, from neglect or outright opposition to support and regulation, is worthy of discussion, as it can help to discern the priorities of the republican state and the manner by which it sought to achieve them. Finally, the turn toward socialism and disavowal of prizefighting have too long been viewed as inevitable results of the Cuban Revolution – a conclusion that I argue minimizes the complexity of the Castro regime’s early attempts to balance the interests of foreign tourism with its ambitious social reform agenda.

My second intervention is in the historiography of U.S.-Cuban relations. Although most previous studies examined this relationship in light of politico-economic ties given the island’s former neocolonial status, the recent cultural turn, described above, has complicated the picture somewhat. Whether, how, and to what extent boxing became “Cuban” instead of simply an American import is at the heart of this dissertation. The U.S. contribution to the spread of a culture of prizefighting in Cuba from 1898 on, particularly in geographic areas with greater exposure to its occupying forces, must of course be addressed; but I question Louis A. Pérez, Jr.’s assumption that Cuban boxing is derivative of U.S. boxing because of the role that soldiers and expatriates had in first developing the sport. He quotes Cuban sportswriter (and later national boxing commissioner) Jess Losada’s contention that boxing

did not take root on the island independently of the Americans because of “the Cuban sensitivity – ‘a purely colonial characteristic’ – that ‘if you touch my face I’ll kill you.’”²² In the nineteenth century, Cuba did boast a small number of practitioners of the sport, though little is known about them, and their impact was limited. Yet one may acknowledge the importance of U.S. intervention in the development of boxing in Cuba – as in other locales under its jurisdiction, notably the Philippines – while also taking into account the ways in which the sport grew along national lines.

At the turn of the twentieth century, boxing was an integral weapon in the United States “athletic crusade.” A term coined by Gerald Gems and explored in his writings as well as those of Louis A. Pérez, Jr. and Linda España-Maram, this “athletic crusade” sought to acculturate far-flung, polyglot dominions into a larger imperialist project, one that relied less on force, ideally, than on the creation of cultural affinities as well as economic ties.²³ Gems notes that scholars of U.S. imperialism have long neglected the history of sport in American dominions, while sports historians have avoided the impact of U.S. imperialism upon foreign sporting cultures.²⁴ He posits that, in Cuba, U.S. military representatives, Protestant missionaries, and other middle-class white expatriates were intent on teaching “morality” to the natives via instruction in sport, albeit filtered through the prism of anti-Catholicism and racism. Although baseball was initially the primary athletic vehicle for disseminating virtue,

²² Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban*, p. 175. The quote is from Jess Losada, “30 años de deporte profesional,” *Carteles*, 24 May 1936, pp. 117, 129.

²³ Gerald R. Gems, *The Athletic Crusade: Sport and American Cultural Imperialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); Pérez, Jr., “Between Baseball and Bullfighting”; España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles’s Little Manila*, pp. 84-85.

²⁴ Gems, *The Athletic Crusade*, p. 16. For an exploration of sport and masculinity in the context of British imperialism, see Patrick F. McDevitt, *May the Best Man Win: Sport, Masculinity, and Nationalism in Great Britain and the Empire, 1880-1935* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

basketball, football, track and field, and boxing, among other sports, also served as modes of moral transmission.²⁵

Boxing, in particular, was viewed to be a safe outlet for male aggression, especially for “less civilized” nonwhites or for those whose claim to whiteness was troubled by extended exposure to the tropics and to nonwhite peoples. While many missionaries loathed the environment in which prizefighting took root, amateur boxing was considered to offer useful training for the white middle classes, who might otherwise become “effeminate.” Even so, many U.S. military representatives and other expatriates eagerly supported the development of professional boxing, first in small public spectacles featuring little-known American opponents, but by the 1910s including a growing corpus of Cubans as well as a string of high-profile foreign fighters. Many early-twentieth century U.S. boxing boosters maintained that the sport was critical in advancing Cuban civilization because it could further “whiten” the white race. (Afro-Cuban and Asian Cuban boxers were of course excluded from this formulation.)

This rhetoric was repeated by some middle-class Cubans who supported the new republic’s dependency on its more powerful northern neighbor. In 1915, one Cuban official stated that the public’s excitement over the Jack Johnson-Jess Willard heavyweight bout held in Havana “causes Cuban boys and even men to yearn for skill in the manly art of defending themselves with their fists instead of with knives and pistols.”²⁶ The positioning of boxing as a refined means of settling conflicts and expressing natural male aggression is reminiscent of the nineteenth-century debate in Cuba over the civilizing mission of baseball versus

²⁵ Gems, *The Athletic Crusade*, pp. 82-98.

²⁶ “Willard Victor; Johnson Retires from Prize Ring,” *New York Times*, 6 April 1915, p. 8.

bullfighting, considered by some to be the “most ferocious and cruel of amusements.”²⁷ Not all agreed that traditional Spanish forms of recreation were dangerous to the new nation, however. In response to lobbying by U.S. reform organizations such as the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the U.S. military government under the leadership of General Leonard Wood banned cockfighting and bullfighting in 1899. Yet local protests against the cockfighting ban were forceful enough that the national government reinstated the activity following the 1902 U.S. troop withdrawal.²⁸ It is telling that some of its supporters viewed cockfighting as morally preferable to both pugilism and bullfighting; a petition to re-establish cockfighting stated in its defense, “It is not the spectacle of a bloody fight between a powerful wild beast and man, peon or cabelloro [sic]; nor is it the brutal contest between two athletes who undertake to conquer each other by blows with no other end than that of gaining money.”²⁹ While bullfighting did not receive the same level of public support, there were periodic efforts to revive this form of public spectacle in the decades since its ban.³⁰

Although studies on the U.S. athletic crusade offer a valuable critique of the ideological underpinnings of the growth of boxing and other sports in U.S.-controlled outposts – based in then-current notions of muscular Protestantism as well American exceptionalism – they at times fail to take into account the ways in which these sports and their accompanying ideology were received by native peoples.³¹ By turning to non-U.S.

²⁷ Pérez, “Between Baseball and Bullfighting,” p. 506.

²⁸ Gems, *The Athletic Crusade*, p. 87.

²⁹ “Island Press: On the Demand of the Cockfighters,” *Havana Post*, 13 September 1902, p. 2.

³⁰ For example, see “Bullfight Petition Is Handed to the Senate,” *Havana Post*, 8 April 1915, p. 2. See also Pettavino and Pye, *Sport in Cuba*, p. 50, which notes that another attempt to reintroduce bullfighting in the 1930s also ended in failure.

³¹ For a discussion of Muscular Christianity as expressed in early twentieth-century Cuba, see Chapter 1.

sources where available and looking beyond questions of theory to those of reception and implementation, we may invert U.S.-centered interpretations on the growth of sport and recreation in areas under its political and economic control to examine how peripheries (in this case, Cuba) responded to the U.S. effort to strengthen its hegemonic ties via sport and culture. This project, then, at its root attempts to describe the other side of the athletic crusade – how boxing in Cuba became “Cuban.” In the same vein, it seeks to complicate the historiography of U.S.-Cuban relations by exploring how ideas and practices disseminated by American actors were received and reacted upon by the Cuban masses as well as representatives of the nation-state.

My third intervention is in the realm of sports historiography. Despite efforts by U.S. and Cuban promoters, sponsors, and boosters to build up the sport as both respectable form of mass entertainment and as moral alternative to knife fighting and other types of colonial-era combat, boxing never quite became integrated into the Cuban national project. Here it is instructive to note the distinctions between boxing and baseball in pre-revolutionary Cuba. If, as Pérez states, “baseball has long served to give expression to Cuban nationality, both as a means to nationhood and as a metaphor for nation,” then boxing’s ties to the nation have been somewhat more complex.³²

Pérez posits that nineteenth-century Cubans, attempting to throw off the yoke of Spanish colonization, “celebrated the modernity and progress implied in baseball, associated with the United States, and denounced the inhumanity and backwardness suggested by bullfighting, associated with Spain.” The inclusion of middle-class women at early baseball games was an indicator of “the gentility and refinement of baseball,” while “the blurring of

³² Pérez, Jr., “Between Baseball and Bullfighting,” p. 494.

class lines” meant that baseball offered “a usable paradigm of social order.” The sport offered “both local attachments and national allegiance,” giving audience members the opportunity to cheer on their hometown or neighborhood teams in domestic competition and to express their nationhood in competitions against the U.S. Finally, he argues, baseball evoked the strivings of Cubans for national independence because “defeat was temporary and victory a function of preparation (practice) and unity (teamwork).”³³

All of these characteristics, with the possible exception of the last, were evident in boxing. Although it took several decades longer for boxing to emerge as a Cuban pastime – thus, the national debate over boxing did not coincide with the independence struggle from Spain – by the early 1920s the arguments that it represented a “manly” sport better fitted to the new nation than knife fighting or other types of individual combat had helped to achieve the sport’s legalization and regulation. Middle-class women were, from at least the second decade of the twentieth century, an important (if minority) element of the audience base for boxing, and by the early 1950s, they would constitute a portion of its television viewers. While class lines remained evident at the fights in many ways – the location and quality of one’s seating, one’s dress and comportment – boxing also represented the “blurring of class lines,” as the sport developed a passionate following among middle- as well as working-class whites and Afro-Cubans. Fighters were closely identified with their provinces, cities, and towns, often taking their ring monikers from the geographic region in which they were born or bred. Still, foreign competitors were visible enough, particularly beginning in the 1920s, that there were sufficient opportunities for audience members, at least in Havana, to express nationalist sentiments via opposition to the outsider. (As can be seen in the Lorenzo Safora-

³³ Ibid., pp. 493-517 (quotes on pp. 505, 507, 508, 509, and 508 respectively).

Small Montana example referenced at length above, however, the individual nature of boxing allowed even partisan audiences to shift loyalties when they felt that the local fighter was not performing well enough or that an injustice had been done in the scoring.)

Lastly, and where boxing departs most significantly from baseball, the teamwork needed to ensure victory or stave off harrowing defeat was primarily carried on behind the scenes, during workouts and sparring sessions that had taken place weeks and even months beforehand. Such teamwork was most often visible to observers during the one-minute rest periods when the boxer's cornermen, or seconds, could work their magic – ironing out swelling, staunching blood flows, massaging muscles, hydrating, pestering, imploring, or, when the situation was dire enough, stopping the fight altogether. Nor, as in baseball, was defeat always temporary; ring deaths, permanent injuries, and other damage could work their toll. A dominant fighter – heavier, stronger, more powerful – was too often said to have “ruined” an outmatched opponent, as former world welterweight champion Benny “Kid” Paret, of Santa Clara, Cuba, was ruined by Gene Fullmer in December 1961. The vicious tenth-round knockout administered by Fullmer rendered Paret vulnerable to the kind of beating he received from his next opponent, Emile Griffith, in March 1962 – one that left him in a coma from which he never awoke.³⁴

Given Pérez's explanation for why baseball came to be identified with the nation, we must ask why boxing – despite attempts by the republic-era state to co-opt boxing for its

³⁴ The story of Paret's death is told in Chapter 6. Although safety precautions have been put in place to prevent this type of one-sided beating, which often leads to brain injury or death should the vanquished opponent continue fighting, there have of late been a number of mismatches that ruined a prizefighter's career, or health, or took his (or, more rarely but more controversially, her) life. Each has led to a call for greater boxing safety and at times effected minimal changes, but the financial incentive remains high for damaged boxers to return to the ring. For an instance in which a “ruined” fighter chose to retire rather than risk greater trauma, see “Gamache, 33, Gets Advice, Then Retires,” *New York Times*, 11 March 2000.

own purposes – did not coexist with it as easily. As established as boxing became – and mid-century Saturday night shows in Havana were testimony to the sport’s popularity among the people and acceptance by the state – its relationship to nationalism was always somewhat strained. There are several explanations as to why. One, the sport’s inherent connection to destructive violence – of violence as not only its means, but its end – visibly contradicted the notion that its practice was civilized, an ideal way to shape young manhood and to prepare the nation for actual warfare. Two, the reliance upon judges and referees to determine decisions meant that there was the potential for fraud or, simply, bad decision-making to affect a contest’s outcome. The impact of gambling, later tied to organized crime, increased the likelihood that the results of bouts might be tarnished – making safeguards by the state (including the ability to overturn results) a necessity. Third, the individual nature of the sport made it easier to distinguish between athlete and nation; not all fighters were well-liked or respected by knowledgeable audiences. Fourth, the prevalence of Afro-Cubans in the ring may have led to a further disjunction between (white) observers and (black) competitors. Unlike baseball, which in its infancy remained racially segregated, the color line in early prizefights was rarely enforced. Despite fears that interracial bouts would increase division between the races (or even lead to riots), it was impractical to keep the races apart in the boxing ring – and doing so violated many Cubans’ sense of fair play. Fifth, by the late 1930s, the close relationship that developed between amateur and professional boxing – with the former becoming a feeder system for the latter – meant that regional and international amateur tournaments, which might have brought prestige to the nation, were not a high priority in republic-era Cuba. Rather, boxing in its professional variant was viewed almost from the beginning as a money-making vehicle for the state. From the 1915 tourist bonanza

of the Jack Johnson-Jess Willard bout to the young Castro regime's seemingly incongruous attempt to align prizefighting with its socialist agenda, boxing was often as much about attracting foreign revenue as it was about building a domestic audience base.

As described by anthropologist Heather Levi in her study of *lucha libre* (Mexican professional wrestling), the tragic figure of the boxer as written into Mexican popular culture contributed to his marginalization from the nation: "The boxer was a figure of national pride. But the boxer also came to symbolize instability and the failure of social reproduction in the urban setting." She notes that "the narrative of the boxer – the meteoric rise, the personal turmoil, the crushing setbacks, and sudden fall from grace" contrasted with that of the *luchador*, which "promised a vision of stability, an incorruptible hero immune to the ravages of time."³⁵ In Cuba, the inability of once successful boxers, such as national champions Baby Coullimber (who murdered his manager) and Joe Legón (who was himself murdered), to overcome the poverty, uncertainty, and criminality of their youth contributed to the sense that prizefighting destroyed not only its journeymen, but its champions as well. The brevity of an average boxer's career – until recently, most were considered "washed up" by their early 30s, and many long before that – further emphasized the fragility of a career in the ring and the risks that were involved in embarking upon one. Although I do not here systematically attempt to link popular culture portrayals of boxers in Cuba to their actual trajectories in and out of the ring, this disjuncture between image and reality (particularly in representations of transnational Cuban citizens who spent the most critical years of their careers in the United States) are suggestive of the ways in which other cultural forms – art,

³⁵ Heather Levi, *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 189-190. Although Levi is describing the Mexican context, the narrative of the tragic boxer is one that has wide applicability – most notably, perhaps, in U.S. popular culture.

literature, drama, music, and film, to name a few – are influenced by, and impose their own influences upon, the world of sport.³⁶

Finally, it may help readers to have a clear outline of what this project proposes to do. The central time period under discussion is from 1898 to 1962, i.e., from the U.S. military intervention in the Cuban War of Independence (1895-1898) to the year in which the regime of Fidel Castro prohibited professional sports, including boxing, in Cuba. Chapters are organized chronologically, with sections divided thematically.

Chapter 1 begins with a description of Muscular Christianity, a movement that began in Great Britain and carried over to the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It sought to counter what its advocates feared was the growing effeminacy of Protestant, middle-class, white males through the embrace of “manly” sports and other activities, including entry into the Cuban and Philippine independence struggles. The chapter then moves to a discussion of Cuban amateur and professional boxing from the late nineteenth century to the early 1910s. Though heavily influenced by U.S. and other expatriates, the sport developed in fits and starts due in part to government resistance.

One ambitious if ill-fated foreign intervention was the effort by the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) to establish a foothold in Cuba. Amateur boxing was an important part of its mission, influenced by the Muscular Christianity movement, to boost the virility and self-esteem of white middle-class youth. In its efforts to propagate the sport in Cuba, however, the YMCA reinforced the color line that was already in place at elite

³⁶ For U.S. (and, to a lesser extent, European) cultural representations of prizefighting, particularly its heavyweight division, see Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).

Cuban social clubs and, in so doing, limited the effectiveness of its outreach. Having sent its first secretary to Havana in 1904, the YMCA finally ceased operations there in 1932 and was never active on the island again.

Chapter 2 is a departure from the remainder of this project in that it focuses on a single prizefight involving non-Cuban actors: the April 5, 1915, title fight between Jack Johnson and Jess Willard. It begins with background on Johnson's early years and personal life, including his rise through the heavyweight ranks, assumption of the world championship, unconventional relationships with women, and battles with a racist U.S. government, which prosecuted him on Mann Act violations and forced him into exile in 1913. From there, I describe the processes that took Johnson to Cuba and how the promoter of his fight with Jess Willard, future wrestling impresario Jack Curley, was persuaded to stage it in Havana.

I admittedly say little about the mechanics of the bout, which lasted for twenty-six of forty-five scheduled rounds and which ended in what was not then, but would become, a controversial knockout. This is not because the fight does not have a place among the most important of the century – many boxing commentators would agree with me that it does – but because I wish to maintain a focus upon the reactions of the Cuban press, politicians, promoters, and public to the presence of the fighters (especially Johnson) and to the aftermath of the fight. I argue that, while the bout itself was a high water mark in the development of Cuba's early tourist industry, it did not in itself kick off the country's prizefighting culture, as Louis A. Pérez, Jr., seems to imply.³⁷ Rather, U.S. promoters had already seized upon Havana as the site for potential championship events between foreign

³⁷ See Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban*, pp. 175-177.

fighters, as well as undercards involving up-and-coming or veteran Cuban pros. Yet a backlash against interracial bouts, resentment over how little the bout actually benefited its local boosters, and the Cuban government's and elites' indecision over what to do with boxing – legalize and regulate it, ban it entirely, or allow it to remain in quasi-legal limbo without official state support or funding – helped to kill much of the initial momentum generated by the Johnson-Willard fight. With attempts to stamp out boxing in Havana, the sport was further diffused into the interior, where tolerance for it was greater and pugilistic contests tended to be local affairs generating little outside publicity.

The remaining chapters broaden the focus well beyond a single fight or set of fighters, and also beyond Havana, although it remains at the center of this work for logistical as well as substantial reasons. It is true that most of the important Cuban prizefights – ones that contested national and world championships, for instance – took place in Havana rings. Yet with notable exceptions (such as Kid Chocolate, who grew up in the Havana barrio of Cerro), the best fighters tended to emerge from the interior, recruited to the capital as boys or young men once their talents were discovered. Without the widespread development of boxing in the provinces, Cuba could never have sustained its levels of international success. Nonetheless, most of the primary and secondary material I have consulted (sport and general interest periodicals, newspapers, memoirs, government documents, scholarly works on sport and culture in Cuba, and non-scholarly articles, web sites, and books on Cuban boxing more specifically) does little to flesh out the processes by which boxing first spread to, and then flourished in, provinces such as Camagüey, Oriente, and Matanzas. Whenever possible, I address these and other areas, although with the realization that much more needs to be done to bring them more fully into the story of boxing in Cuba.

Chapter 3 looks at the twenty or so years of Cuban pugilism following the Johnson-Willard bout. It details why and how, by 1921, the Cuban state had created a national boxing commission to legalize and regulate the amateur and professional variants of the sport. With previous bans – including one that lasted from March 1919 to December 1920 – proving unable to stamp out the sport, which counted among its enthusiasts many men of social prominence, the state at first tried a policy of noninterference in the staging of boxing events before moving to regulate and license them. The pent-up public demand for fight cards, particularly in the capital, led to an explosion of public spectacles beginning in 1921 which the state sought to oversee in order to ensure athletes' safety and to obtain revenues from licensing fees. By 1922, the Unión Atlética Amateur de Cuba (Amateur Athletic Union of Cuba, UAAC) offered its first boxing tournament for white athletes, members of the YMCA or exclusive social clubs, to compete against one another. Although prizefighting had long been integrated, the UAAC would continue to exclude Afro-Cubans from its tournaments for several years, forcing them to compete within their own amateur associations or at racially integrated tournaments, or to forgo the amateur ranks altogether to become semi-professionals.

Additionally, this chapter explores how the boxing explosion of the early-to-mid 1920s led to the rise of Kid Chocolate, who won the first world boxing title on behalf of his country in 1931 and elevated foreign perceptions of Cuban boxing. Chocolate, who fought most of his important fights in the United States, went on to become a two-time world champion and idol to millions of Cubans. While his many years of obscurity during the first three decades of the Revolution may have dulled his legacy, he is still admired among many Cubans today for his athletic achievements and the pride that he brought to the island.

Chapter 4 analyzes the role of various state institutions, particularly the national sports headquarters, the Dirección Nacional General de Deportes (later renamed the Dirección General de Deportes, or DGD, as I refer to it throughout) and the Comisión Nacional de Boxeo y Luchas (National Commission of Boxing and Wrestling), in furthering the institutionalization of boxing in the late 1930s and 1940s. By the late 1930s, Cuba led the way in developing a constant pipeline of talented youths from the amateur and semi-professional ranks into the top levels of national and international prizefighting. Two key elements of this approach were the adoption of a Cuban Golden Gloves amateur tournament, modeled on but not initially a part of the U.S. organization of the same name, and the regularization of a semi-professional system that offered pittance to those too poor to compete strictly as amateurs yet seeking an entrée into the professional game. Another was the formation of a national boxing academy in Havana intended to aid talented but impoverished youngsters from the interior. Students were provided room, board, health care, and tutoring in the fundamentals of boxing by the likes of Kid Chocolate and other top former prizefighters.

Some U.S. observers, such as *The Ring* editor Nat Fleischer, saw much to admire in this system, which – though reflecting the state’s disinterest in sending the best young men into international amateur competition – created a self-renewing prizefighting industry. On one level, it was a rudimentary version of what Castro’s regime would later accomplish with the production of amateur athletes, and one that was also, in many ways, as color-blind. Unlike its amateur variant, talent, not race, was the key to success in the Cuban prizefighting arena. Yet the system’s efficacy was limited by extreme corruption from DGD Director Jaime Mariné on down and by the lack of political stability in the neocolonial regime. With

the departure of President Batista from the Presidency in 1944 and the ouster of Mariné, the subsequent Ramón Grau (1944-1948) and Carlos Prío Socarrás (1948-1952) administrations ushered in a deepening of political corruption and the increasing movement of Cuban boxers abroad, driven to a peripatetic existence by lack of opportunities at home.

Chapter 5 explores how the state's increased focus on fostering tourism, both before and during the 1952-1958 Batista dictatorship, helped to fuel the outflow of prizefighters abroad. Later in the decade, the Batista regime attempted to marshal revenues for its new sports commission by staging major athletic events, such as automobile races and world championship prizefights, that could attract national prestige as well as foreign tourists. Yet its efforts to make Cuba an international destination for sports aficionados were hampered by graft, inefficiency, and the intensification of the rebel movement.

This chapter also examines how television changed the audience for and reception of professional boxing in Cuba and the United States from the late 1940s to mid-1950s. In each nation, TV became an important element in the spread of boxing, as it introduced previously unfamiliar audiences – women, children, and residents of outlying areas – to the sport. In the United States, this medium was especially threatening to those who made their living from live boxing shows, particularly at smaller arenas. The “TV debate” there foreshadowed many of the changes that would occur as boxing became big business, including the closure of local clubs, the creation of made-for-TV pugilists, and the de-emphasis on subtle, defensive tactics in favor of a more aggressive style of fighting that played well on television. In Cuba, televised fights tended to focus on major bouts in the capital and did not have the same impact upon the boxing culture, probably because television was introduced there later and because so many of the best Cuban fighters were already living abroad.

Coinciding with the growth of televised prizefighting in both countries, and seeming to embody the TV era, was the rise of Cuba's second world champion, Kid Gavilán. A determined fighter who fought best at welterweight but faced some tough middleweight competition late in his career, he was a veteran of nearly 150 prizefights who was never knocked out and rarely knocked down. Still, Gavilán was renowned less for his grittiness than his flashiness, particularly his innovative use of the bolo punch. His talents went well beyond a single punch, as his long career demonstrated; indeed, he was the cream of the crop of young Cuban boxers in the 1940s and 1950s who gained valuable experience in that country's emerging amateur and semi-pro system. Their success was mirrored by that of Cuba's musicians in the 1950s, who, as Robin D. Moore demonstrates, created forms of cultural production that were consumed alike by tourists and locals in Cuba and by the U.S. market. The top Cuban artists and athletes in the decade or so prior to the Revolution – none more so than Gavilán – could thus inhabit a transnational space that allowed them to operate almost as citizens of two countries.³⁸

Chapter 6 reflects upon the decline of Cuban prizefighting in the revolutionary years of 1959 to 1962. In one sense, the traditional idea – adhered to by proponents as well as opponents of the sweeping changes brought on by the Revolution – that 1962 marked a turning point in the island's boxing and baseball industries is correct. For, in that year, the Castro regime banned professional sports as being incompatible with the socialist project, forcing active athletes into exile or retirement. In another sense, however, this demarcation of a “before” and “after” in modern Cuban sports history neglects the revolutionary state's

³⁸ See Moore, *Music and Revolution*, particularly Chapter 1, “Revelry and Revolution: The Paradox of the 1950s,” pp. 26-55.

early attempts to maintain its foreign tourist base, of which professional boxing was a critical component, while attempting to reform the worst excesses of the sport from within. This chapter examines the gradual transformation of state attitudes towards sport in general and boxing in particular, and the ways in which athletes, trainers, and others intricately linked with professional boxing responded when they were forced to choose between country and career. It also analyzes the use of boxers for propagandistic purposes by revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries before and after 1959.

Fidel Castro and his associates initially sought to maintain professional boxing and baseball in Cuba while mitigating what was felt to be their exploitative aspects. Yet the growing standoff between the U.S. and Cuba, and the latter's move toward the Soviet camp, helped to jettison the tourist market that sustained these industries and the desire of the state to maintain them. In accordance with socialist ideals, the only true sporting agenda was reconceived to be one that involved the masses as participants as well as spectators and that resulted in the glory of individual athletes being mobilized for national prestige rather than individual wealth.

The Conclusion reviews the success that Cuba's national boxing team has sustained on the international amateur stage since 1962 and the perils that it faces as it is increasingly racked by defections among its ranks. It is possible only to speculate how a prospective thawing of the U.S.-Cuba relationship, and democratic and economic reforms in Cuba itself, may affect the likelihood that professional boxing will flourish there again anytime soon. What is likely, given how lucrative pay-per-view revenues have made big-time boxing in the United States and how much Major League Baseball depends upon prospective Latin American stars, is that – with a loosening of travel restrictions on both the Cuban and U.S.

sides – the island’s top tier of boxers, baseball players, and other athletes may someday relive the experiences of their predecessors in the 1940s and 1950s and be able to function as transnational citizens, remaining closely affined with their native country while living and working in another.

A few linguistic addenda are in order. I have used Spanish orthography throughout except in quoting original English-language source material. Although most Cuban boxers active in the U.S. found the spelling (and, at times, pronunciation) of their names simplified for English usage, this distinction is most noticeable in the case of Gavilán, whose name was almost never written in the U.S. press with the diacritic. As a result, the pronunciation of his ring name in the United States tended to favor the first syllable – i.e., Kid GAV-i-lan – rather than the last syllable, as in Spanish. Similarly, Kid Chocolate was generally known as Kid CHOC-late in the United States but as Kid Cho-co-LA-te in Spanish-speaking countries. Cuban heavyweight champion and world contender Geraldo Ramos Ponciano Valdés, a.k.a. “El Niño” (pronounced NEEN-yo) Valdés, was similarly transformed into Nino Valdes in the United States. There are numerous other instances where the spelling and pronunciation of pugilists’ names varied across national and perhaps regional lines, but I use these as examples because, during their peak years, they were some of the most visible Cuban faces in the United States. In contrast to scholars who use the adjective and noun “North American” as a synonym for “U.S.,” I have opted to use the term “American” to describe people, customs, and institutions from or of the United States. I do this for the sake of clarity, as Canadians were (albeit to a much smaller extent than their neighbors to the south) active in twentieth-century fistic circles – including Jack Johnson’s predecessor as heavyweight champion, Tommy Burns. When invoking the Americas more broadly, I make that

distinction clear. Finally, I have capitalized the Cuban Revolution (or, simplified, the Revolution) as a proper noun when discussing the political movement that overthrew the Batista regime and which to this day has maintained a firm grip upon the Cuban populace.³⁹

This project attempts to cast light on a subject that has remained for too long the purview of journalists, amateur historians, and propagandists on both the pro- and anti-Castro sides. By incorporating academic insights with little-known primary and secondary source material, not all of it in the realm of traditional scholarship, I hope that I have succeeded at least in part in providing a glimpse into the processes by which boxing became such an integral part of Cuban cultural identity from the end of the independence struggle to the beginning of the revolutionary regime.

³⁹ For an accessible introduction to the history and impact of the Revolution, which lies largely beyond the scope of this work, see Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Chapter 1: The Rise of Cuban Boxing, 1898-1915

Muscular Christianity in the Cuban Context

The process by which boxing entered Cuban society predated, but certainly accelerated with, the onset of U.S. occupation in the wake of the national independence struggle. By the end of the nineteenth century, public spectacles featuring U.S. as well as native pugilists could be found in various parts of the island; by the early 1910s, prizefighting had begun to take hold among native Cubans as well as foreigners. Shortly after the republic's founding, moreover, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) had initiated amateur boxing classes and exhibitions at its new Havana branch. While the latter's impact upon the shape of Cuban boxing was limited by that organization's relatively brief existence in Havana and its embrace of racial segregation, it nonetheless offered a space in which boys and young men from "good" families became exposed to the sport.

The advent of Muscular Christianity preceded by some decades the onset of the Spanish-Cuban-American War, but it helped to construct ideas of manhood that would fuel the movement to involve the U.S. in that late nineteenth-century conflict – and, eventually, to accelerate and intensify the development of amateur and professional boxing in Cuba. Defined as "a Christian commitment to health and manliness," the ideology of Muscular Christianity can be traced back to the New Testament, but did not become a clearly demarcated philosophy until the second half of the nineteenth century. English writers Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes are credited with first developing this philosophy in

their 1850s novels.¹ Their ideas “fused a hardy physical manliness with ideals of Christian service” and were soon advocated in the U.S. by Thomas Wentworth Higginson in the pages of *Atlantic Monthly*. Higginson and other advocates of this new way of thinking felt that it was necessary “to revitalize the image of Jesus [Christ] and thus remasculinize the Church.”² They lamented the “feminine” ways in which Jesus had been traditionally depicted, the “womanly” bodies and attire of Christian ministers, and the artificial separation of physicality from spirituality. Muscular Christianity played into contemporary fears of the growing influence of women in boys’ and men’s lives – including a notable sex imbalance (skewed toward women) among schoolteachers and missionaries. By leading a “strenuous” as well as upstanding life, its advocates claimed, boys and men could rescue Christianity (read as middle-class, white, Protestantism) as well as their own manliness.

In the late nineteenth century, notions of Muscular Christianity took hold in various realms of U.S. life, from the churches to the White House. Theodore Roosevelt was perhaps its most influential advocate, choosing to embrace a physically challenging lifestyle despite his patrician background. Although not all supporters of Muscular Christianity supported U.S. military intervention in foreign wars, there was quite a bit of verbal slippage between Muscular Christianity and calls for building an American empire in other lands.

In her provocative thesis on the Spanish-Cuban-American War and its counterpart in the Philippines, Kristin L. Hoganson argues that “gender beliefs contributed to the jingoist clamor for war.” By examining the ways in which males and females were gendered in late

¹ For ideological background of the movement as it was conceived in Great Britain, see Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), Chapter 1: “The Birth of a Movement,” pp. 11-44.

² Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 117. Higginson’s articles ran from 1858 to 1861.

nineteenth-century U.S. life, Hoganson links anxieties over gender to the processes by which a political case was made for military intervention in Cuba and the Philippines. In the 1890s, American jingoists (whom she defines as a diverse group of men united by their common desire for war) feared that women's increased levels of activism, including involvement in domestic and international affairs, would undermine the "manly basis of politics, if not manhood itself." Advocates such as Theodore Roosevelt and Alfred Thayer Mahan based their jingoist sentiments upon the idea that only military service could ensure the manliness of American men and provide a secure basis for democracy. During the last years of the Cuban independence struggle, jingoists sought to defend the "honor" of white Cuban women against the villainous Spanish colonizers and adroitly manipulated the February 1898 sinking of the U.S. battleship *Maine* in Havana harbor (which was attributed as an attack by Spain, although this was never proved) as an affront to American manhood. Indeed, Hoganson notes, the honor of Cuban women took a back seat to that of American men following the sinking of the *Maine*. Jingoists effectively depicted those who were reluctant to enter the Cuban war with Spain as effeminate cowards, equating them with women if they failed to support a military intervention. Even President McKinley was not exempt from public snickers about his manhood. Although it seems he had reservations about entering the Spanish-Cuban conflict, he undoubtedly felt pressure from journalists, congressmen, and military leaders who were clamoring for blood. Ultimately, Hoganson writes, "McKinley reached the logical conclusion that war was politically imperative."³

³ Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) (quotes on pp. 11, 35, and 106, respectively).

Building upon Hoganson's work, Paul Kramer reminds us that "imperial race-making was a fundamentally gendered process" that allowed "imperial nationalists" to find manly qualities lacking in both domestic critics of imperialism and in the colonized other.⁴ A strong patriarchal strain was clearly evident in the U.S. imperialist projects in the Philippines, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and other territories at the turn of the twentieth century. American ideologies emasculated native men politically as being incapable of self-government. In the case of the Philippines, as in Cuba, these views – that the weakness and cowardliness of its native men contributed to its being a colony – were completely at odds with their actual contributions to the anti-Spanish war effort and with the ways in which their martial traditions reflected a continuing resistance to outside control. Why, for instance, did boxing become so much more a part of Filipino cultural life than baseball despite extensive efforts by U.S. colonial administrators to foster the latter's development? A deeper analysis of boxing's rise in the Philippines in the early twentieth century would need to include an understanding of pre-Spanish Filipino martial arts, such as Kali, which had their origin in India and were used, with European adaptations, against both Spanish and U.S. colonizers as a form of community self-defense.⁵

The popularity of Muscular Christianity in the fin-de-siècle United States led to an enthusiastic embrace of sports and recreation, both as means (a mode for moral education) and end (to build hardy bodies that could work for Christian salvation). Although Linda España-Maram's assertion that – following the incorporation of the Philippines into the U.S.

⁴ Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p. 23.

⁵ I am grateful to my husband, Billy Geoghegan, a practitioner of Kali-based Filipino martial arts, for first introducing me to this topic. This point is also made in *The Great Pinoy Boxing Era*, 1994, which notes that early twentieth-century Filipino boxers introduced a "crouching" style into modern boxing that was based upon their training in Filipino martial arts.

empire – “[i]nstruction in American sports, including boxing and baseball, became part of the indoctrination of Filipinos into ‘good’ colonials” is a bit overstated, it is true that U.S. military, civil, and religious leaders viewed instruction in such sports as critical to the development of modern colonial and neocolonial subjects.⁶ In the Philippine context, the fact that these subjects were nonwhite bodies who had already amply demonstrated their martial spirit through years of armed resistance to U.S. intervention complicated the ways in which these athletic traditions were conveyed. Gerald Gems posits that, in the Philippines, Americans’ advocacy of sport was an effort to “redirect” native nationalist sentiment.⁷ In the Cuban context, as we explore in the next two sections, sport was not so much intended to redirect nationalism as it was to co-opt white, Catholic, middle- and upper-class men into the neocolonial project, one that sought to rigidify race and class divides and to strengthen the existing U.S. hegemony.

Yet there was no consensus as to how best to achieve the growth of U.S.-favored sports within the new empire. Nowhere was this more evident than with boxing in Cuba. While YMCA leaders and other evangelical missionaries generally disavowed the pursuit of prizefighting for its associations with the lower classes, gambling, and interracial competition, other U.S. expatriates supported the commercial possibilities that prizefighting afforded and avidly sought out boxing spectacles as entertainment. Among these boosters, however, were disagreements as to whether interracial competition was problematic or not –

⁶ España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles’s Little Manila*, p. 75. Modern boxing, of course, was not an American invention but was developed in Great Britain.

⁷ For background on U.S. efforts to “redirect” Filipino nationalism through sport, see Gerald R. Gems, “Anthropology Days, the Construction of Whiteness, and American Imperialism in the Philippines,” in *The 1904 Anthropology Days and Olympic Games: Sport, Race, and American Imperialism*, ed. Susan Brownell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), pp. 189-216, and Gems, *The Athletic Crusade*, Chapter 4: “Sport and Colonialism in the Philippines,” pp. 45-66.

an issue that came to the fore as a substantial number of nonwhite foreign competitors, particularly African Americans, were recruited to display their skills in Havana rings.

The first section below explores the growth of early forms of Cuban boxing, especially prizefighting, in the late colonial and early republic periods. The second section analyzes the role of the Havana YMCA in offering an outlet for white boys and men who wished to learn how to box. What follows last is an exploration of the growth of athletic infrastructure in Havana, which played a critical role in the city's landing the most important prizefight in the world at that time – the April 1915 world heavyweight title contest between champion Jack Johnson and challenger Jess Willard. The story of their bout is told in the next chapter.

Cuban Boxing in the Colonial and Early Republic Periods

In Cuba, although public boxing spectacles first appeared with regularity only during the first U.S. military occupation (1898-1902), earlier martial traditions held sway, particularly among the upper classes. Fencing was a popular pastime inherited from the Spanish, and French-style kickboxing (savate) as well as English-style boxing may have existed as far back as the mid-1800s. Using newspapers from the mid-to-late nineteenth century, Cuban sports historian Carlos Reig Romero has documented accounts of boxing classes on the island as early as 1843, presumably in Santiago de Cuba; the presence in 1886 of a North American boxing instructor at the Club Gimnástico, located on Havana's Prado Street; and the first-

known English-style boxing match held in Cuba, an exhibition staged by two visiting baseball players from the United States, in December 1892.⁸

Late colonial Cuba was also floated as the possible host of a high-profile heavyweight title fight. In January 1894, James J. “Gentleman Jim” Corbett – who had got his start during the bare-knuckle days and had recently defeated John L. Sullivan in 1892 in the first world heavyweight boxing championship bout to use gloves – was rumored to be fighting Charley Mitchell in Cuba (presumably Havana) after the Duval Athletic Club of Jacksonville, Florida, fell behind in constructing an arena for their bout. The opposition to holding the event there by Florida’s governor, Henry L. Mitchell (no relation to Corbett’s opponent), was a primary stumbling block despite his state’s prior legalization of “scientific boxing exhibitions” and the Jacksonville City Council’s approval of gloved contests. Despite the logistical delays, threats of intervention, and staunch political opposition, the bout was held on January 25 in Jacksonville, with Corbett easily winning by third-round knockout.⁹

While these glimpses of early boxing culture in Cuba are tantalizing, much more work remains to be done on the origins of boxing in the Spanish colonial period and the ways in which both U.S. and European norms may have influenced them. For instance, Reig Romero has unearthed evidence that savate was practiced in some mid-nineteenth century

⁸ Carlos E. Reig Romero, *YMCA de la Habana: Memorias deportivas 1905-1910* (Quito, Ecuador: Imprenta Hojas y Signos Vasco de Contreras, 2003), pp. 137-138. Reig Romero identifies the ballplayers as “Earle” and “York.”

⁹ Whether or not the fight would be held was closely scrutinized in the *New York Times* for several months. See, for instance, “To Fight at Jacksonville,” *New York Times*, 16 November 1893, p. 2; “Gov. Mitchell Thwarted,” *New York Times*, 6 December 1893, p. 2; “Will Try to Stop the Fight,” *New York Times*, 23 December 1893, p. 2; “Sure of Stopping the Fight,” *New York Times*, 30 December 1893, p. 6; “Fighters Are Discouraged,” *New York Times*, 7 January 1894, p. 3; and “Corbett Wins the Fight,” *New York Times*, 26 January 1894, p. 6.

social clubs, as gentlemen of the era were expected to engage in strength training techniques and strategies of self-defense, such as fencing.¹⁰

From the beginning of the first U.S. military occupation to the end of the second (1906-1909), boxing spectacles began to be seen on the island with more regularity. On March 18, 1899, in the city of Matanzas, six U.S. soldiers from the 12th Regiment of Volunteers took part in what may have been the first fight card staged in Cuba. Three ten-minute bouts were held there at the Teatro Sausto. It is likely that more bouts took place that year. By September, the Secretary of State and Government recommended that the civil and provincial governors not grant permission to hold boxing shows and to punish those who did. This ban was ineffective at preventing underground boxing, as other, later prohibitions would be. In January 1902, for instance, a fight card was held at the Teatro de Marianao at which over 500 people attended.¹¹

In February 1902, the *New York Sun* reported that, contrary to reports of a ban on the island, boxing was not illegal there and that, “An attempt will shortly be made to introduce boxing in Cuba.” It stated that Alvie King, a representative of former heavyweight contender Tom Sharkey, and Fred Block, a former trainer of ex-heavyweight champion James J. Corbett, were planning to go to Havana “within a week to have a talk with a well-known Cuban capitalist who is to furnish the backing for the venture.” Block described their plans thusly:

We have been given to understand that boxing is not illegal in Cuba and if everything pans out a clubhouse on similar lines to the New York A. C. [Athletic Club] and the Knickerbocker A. C. in this city will be built. Our

¹⁰ Personal communication with Carlos E. Reig Romero, April 1, 2006, Havana, Cuba.

¹¹ Reig Romero, *YMCA de la Habana*, pp. 138-139.

idea is to further athletics of all kinds, with boxing, of course, the feature. Several shrewd and well-versed lawyers have assured us that there is no law against pugilism in Cuba. When our club is launched we intend to arrange several important fistic events between the best pugilists obtainable.

King had even secured a commitment from “Gentleman Jim” to come down to Cuba “to box there in the near future.” He was to be the first of many “heavyweights and champions” to be invited to fight there.¹² This ambitious plan appears to have come to naught, for nothing else about it appears in the pages of the *Sun* or the *New York Times*, and Corbett retired from the ring following his August 1903 technical knockout loss to then-heavyweight champion James J. Jeffries. Nonetheless, the second U.S. occupation and the years after it witnessed the increasing frequency of public boxing events, often driven by or involving U.S. or other foreign actors.

One of these was John Budinich Taborga, a Chilean born circa 1881, who had begun boxing in amateur smokers in Valparaiso at the turn of the nineteenth century. The ex-naval cadet opened his own boxing academy in Santiago, Chile, in 1902 and participated in what boxing historian Enrique Encinosa calls the first professional boxing card in Chile in 1903. After attending Columbia University in New York and living for a time in Panama, where he also engaged in prizefighting, Budinich moved to Cuba in 1910.¹³ There, he became one of two well-known boxing instructors in the capital, even teaching the son of President José Miguel Gómez how to box. The other instructor was Jack Connell, boxing and jiu-jitsu professor at the Cuban Athletic Club. In 1910, Secretary of the Government Gerardo Machado issued a decree banning public boxing spectacles in Havana because the garments

¹² “Boxing in Cuba,” *New York Sun*, 9 February 1902.

¹³ Enrique Encinosa, “The Life and Times of a Boxing Pioneer,” *Wail! The CBZ Journal*, July 2007. <http://www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/w0707-encinosa.htm> (accessed June 5, 2008).

worn by competitors were “sicalípticos” (pornographic). At least one commentator wondered why, if the athletes’ dress was too outrageous for “nuestras damas”(our ladies), the state didn’t authorize boxing “in places where it can be seen by the strong sex,” i.e., men.¹⁴ The notion of banning boxing due to its competitors’ skimpy attire seemed ironic at best, given that Havana had “seven theaters, and three of them dedicated exclusively to pornography.” And since boxers dressed similarly to circus artists, another argument went, why forbid the former from performing while entire families could watch the latter? Budinich requested President Gómez’s intervention to secure a repeal of the decree, but the matter was tabled for a time.¹⁵

Although that ban appears to have been lifted, the state once again instituted a ban on prizefighting spectacles, but permitting the exhibition of fight films, under Secretary of the Government Francisco López Leyva, and signed by President Gómez, in November 1911.¹⁶ This was well before the so-called “race war,” when the Partido Independiente de Color (Independent Party of Color), led by Afro-Cuban leaders Evaristo Estenoz and Pedro Ivonnet, launched an armed protest to attempt to persuade the president and Congress to legalize their party once more and allow it to take part in the upcoming November election. Although their aims were moderate and their protest was limited to Oriente province, as Aline Helg explains in her groundbreaking work on this topic, the use of arms en masse by

¹⁴ “Crónica Teatral,” *El Atlético* 1:1 (December 4, 1910), p. 11; R. de Nello, “Algo sobre boxeo,” *El Atlético* 1:2 (December 11, 1910), pp. 6-7 (quote on p. 6). The original phrase is “en lugares donde pueda ser visto por el sexo fuerte.”

¹⁵ “En Pro del Boxeo,” *El Atlético* 2:5 (January 8, 1911), p. 9. The original phrase is “siete teatros y tres de ellos dedicados exclusivamente á la sicalípsis.”

¹⁶ “Decreto N° 1067 de 25 de noviembre de 1911,” *Gaceta oficial de la República de Cuba*, Habana (November 30, 1911), C.L. Tomo 34, p. 342.

Afro-Cubans “prompted an outburst of racism that swept the entire country... white repression was nationwide, indiscriminate, and almost unopposed.”¹⁷

The ramifications of the race war went well beyond sports, of course, leading to delayed political, economic, and social equality for Afro-Cubans at least (and then not in full measure) until the Cuban Revolution. Yet for decades, the notion that the 1911 boxing ban was tied to the Oriente rebellion and its repression has been repeated in Cuban histories on boxing. In the first such work, co-written with Vicente Cubillas, *El arte de los puños* (The Art of the Fists, 1922), Bernardino San Martín stated that the ban was actually issued in 1912 in response to the government’s fear that the race war and its aftermath would lead to public disorder should bouts be held between white and black men. As someone who felt the color line had no place in boxing, San Martín attributed the decree to ignorance on the part of the elderly men running the government, for with the passing of the “guerra racista” (racist war), as he called it, none of them seemed interested in its repeal.¹⁸ Drawing from San Martín’s and Cubillas’s work, many other secondary materials have repeated the myth that the boxing prohibition was tied to the race war.¹⁹ Since the date of the ban clearly precedes the onset of the Oriente repression, however, it can easily be disproved. In that case, we may ask what purpose this myth may have served the Cuban state and the U.S. neocolonial administration in the years following the quashing of the Partido Independiente de Color. As the U.S. collaborated in the party’s repression and advocated for and perpetuated a much harsher

¹⁷ Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p. 194. For a detailed treatment of the “race war,” see Chapter 7: “The Racist Massacre of 1912,” pp. 193-226.

¹⁸ Bernardino San Martín and Vicente Cubillas, *El arte de los puños: Historia del boxeo en Cuba* (Habana: Impr. La Prueba, 1922), p. 30.

¹⁹ See, for example, Peter, “Casi cincuenta años de boxeo en Cuba,” *Diario de la Marina*, Siglo y Cuarto: número extraordinario (September 15, 1957), pp. 211-212, 214, and Alfonso, *Puños dorados*, p. 20.

color line than had been customary in Cuba, the role of U.S. elites in sending the message that interracial bouts would foment political and social unrest – as was the conventional wisdom among whites in most parts of the U.S. where legal boxing events were then permitted – needs to be assessed.²⁰

Despite its presidential signature, the 1911 ban – as was its earlier incarnation – was ineffective, as “fiestas de boxeo” continued with regularity and enforcement was sporadic. As journalists were invited to attend, the results of these events were reported in the press. While the decree was in place, San Martín notes, bouts had to be held behind closed doors, “hidden from the authorities, as if we were committing some sin.” Officially, the ban was observed until the building of George Bradt’s Great Havana Stadium at the entrance to the Vedado neighborhood. Opening in 1915, the Stadium showcased foreign boxers in Havana and offered preliminary bouts to the small cadre of Cuban boxers who, along with sportswriters, trainers, managers, and promoters, as San Martín pointed out, had made “tantos sacrificios” (so many sacrifices) to keep boxing alive in their country.²¹

Amidst the Cubans making sacrifices were foreigners like American Frank Fowler, a YMCA boxing instructor who, as discussed below, spent over twenty years of his life promoting Havana’s boxing culture, and Chilean-born Budinich, who left the country by World War I but had an outsized impact early on. In Havana, as he had in Chile, Budinich

²⁰ Helg reprints a fascinating yet repugnant cartoon from the June 8, 1912, issue of *La Discusión*, captioned “Deporte de Actualidad” (Sport in Fashion), which shows a Cuban soldier and U.S. marine kicking back and forth the “footballs” of Evaristo Estenoz’s and Pedro Ivonnet’s severed heads. Both men were shot and killed within weeks of the cartoon’s publication, Estenoz on June 27 and Ivonnet on July 18. That such violent racial repression would be linked to sports, even in an attempt at humor, is a telling indicator of how deeply U.S.-influenced racist ideas permeated early twentieth-century sport in Cuba. Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, pp. 224, 233.

²¹ San Martín and Cubillas, *El arte de los puños*, pp. 31-32. The original phrase is “escondida de las autoridades, como si comitiéramos algún delito.” As is discussed in the next chapter, a 1915 challenge to boxing’s legality following the Johnson-Willard bout was rebuffed by the Cuban Supreme Court, yet the sport was periodically repressed until March 1922.

became a gym proprietor, where he taught “longshoremen, construction workers, blacksmiths and a considerable group of well-bred university students” how to box. He also joined the prestigious Vedado Tennis Club as its boxing instructor. Although Budinich’s own pro career in Havana was short-lived, he became well known as a promoter, initially holding small amateur shows in private homes, dance halls, and theaters before moving on to larger professional cards. He proved successful in training native and transplanted fighters, among them Anastasio Peñalver, who was named the first heavyweight champion of Cuba.²² Another top pupil of his was Mexican-born Miguel (“Mike”) Febles, who became a noted local boxer and jiu-jitsu practitioner before moving back to Mexico, where he became the lead instructor of the national army’s boxing team. Bernardino San Martín was another member of Budinich’s academy, although he admits that the Chilean took him in out of generosity. Despite his ardent desire to box – he devoted three years of his life to its practice – San Martín lacked both the disposition and the physique to succeed at it. Nevertheless, he was named flyweight champion of Cuba from 1911 to 1913, an indicator of the sparse competition he must have faced (San Martín claimed not to be able to recall how many fights he had), before losing the title by knockout to Víctor Achán at the American Club. After retiring briefly and then attempting a comeback to regain his title, San Martín was quickly shown up by then-champion Oscar García, “who gave me the most tremendous knockout that I have received in my life.”²³

Professional boxing, as limited as it was, was not the only variant of the sport that took hold in the republic’s first two decades. Amateur boxing also took its first tentative

²² Encinosa, “The Life and Times of a Boxing Pioneer.”

²³ San Martín and Cubillas, *El arte de los puños*, pp. 27-28 (quote on p. 28). The original phrase is “quien me dió el knock out más tremendo que he recibido en mi vida.”

steps under the auspices of the YMCA and other organizations. We turn next to an investigation of the YMCA's origins in Cuba and the ways in which its physical education programs there sought to introduce and propagate amateur boxing among its members.

The YMCA in Havana

The YMCA was a pervasive presence in U.S. life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and a guiding force behind the emerging Muscular Christianity movement. Founded in England in 1844 as a means of bringing young men into the evangelical Protestant fold, the YMCA's first branch in the U.S. was established in Boston in 1851. Within a decade, 205 chapters had opened throughout the country. By 1912, with a membership comprised primarily of middle-class men under age forty, an astonishing 1 in 181 Americans had joined. Distinct membership levels indicated whether one had accepted the YMCA's Christian teachings (active members) or had merely been considered to be of "good character" (associate members).²⁴

Although athletics were not initially a focus of the organization, by 1869 the New York City branch had hit upon the use of gym equipment as a way of attracting young men to join. By the end of the nineteenth century, athletics had become a far more critical part of the YMCA mission. Initially, its swimming pools, gyms, and athletic clubs were viewed as a means of keeping "de-natured" city men away from the "conscienceless" masses who predominated at other sports facilities. Within a few years, however, the YMCA was at the

²⁴ Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, pp. 64-66 (quote on p. 66). Putney notes on p. 153 that the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the YMCA's sister organization, was founded in England in 1855, began its New York branch as a prayer circle in 1858, and opened its first branded U.S. chapter in Boston in 1866. For a fuller treatment of the twentieth-century YWCA, see Nancy Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906-46* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

forefront of a worldwide movement to better men's souls by improving their bodies – the Muscular Christian movement. In 1887, the YMCA's training school in Springfield, Massachusetts – soon renamed Springfield College – recruited Luther H. Gulick to direct its physical education staff. Under Gulick's aegis, the YMCA not only oversaw the creation of the sports of basketball (1891) and volleyball (1896), but also embraced as its logo an inverted red triangle developed by him to represent the unity of body, mind, and spirit.²⁵

Boxing was one of many sports that the YMCA initially embraced. Advocates such as Theodore Roosevelt (who himself had been taught to fight by a former prizefighter) maintained that the sport offered its practitioners a means to engage in the “strenuous life” necessary to produce a “manly race.”²⁶ While Roosevelt and others felt that boxing, among other athletic endeavors, could help to mold a race of men suited for actual combat, disillusion with both the Spanish-Cuban-American War and World War I led to very different notions of boxing among pacifist ministers and theorists. Rather than serve as preparation for war, the latter maintained, the sport might better serve as a “moral equivalent of war” which – in place of battlefield experience – might best transform effeminate boys into men.²⁷ Whether pursued as preparation for or in place of war, however, an important point needs to be made about the YMCA's institutionalization of boxing. As conducted by the YMCA and other athletic associations at the turn of the nineteenth century, the amateur

²⁵ Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, pp. 68-70 (quotes on p. 68). According to Putney (p. 70), Gulick's coinage of the phrase, “body, mind, spirit,” was inspired by Deuteronomy 6:5: “And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (wording based on the King James Bible). The inverted triangle and “body, mind, spirit” phrasing remain central parts of Springfield College's seal, and the college maintains its historic partnership with the YMCA, even offering a “YMCA Professional Studies Program.” For more on the Springfield College-YMCA connection, see <http://www.spfldcol.edu/homepage/dept.nsf/ymca> (accessed July 12, 2009).

²⁶ Among other “manly” sports approved by Roosevelt were wrestling, football, rowing, baseball, and shooting. See Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 2nd ed., p. 123.

²⁷ Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, pp. 163, 170 (quote on p. 163).

variant of the sport was pursued by middle- and upper-class boys and men as a form of recreation and self-betterment. Few who engaged in bag punching, boxing calisthenics, and sparring had any intention of joining the ranks of the bare-knuckle fighters, who, as Michael T. Isenberg writes, represented “the dregs of sporting society, a cut below baseball players and completely out of the class of horse-racing fanciers.” In addition to strict penalties against fighting for pay as public entertainment – which in Massachusetts, at that time, ostensibly included death – most “respectable” Americans viewed prizefighting as a morally degenerate activity. As Isenberg concludes, “A friendly bout between gentlemen was one thing; the degrading spectacle of two brawny hoodlums mauling each other for a purse, quite another.”²⁸

The YMCA’s efforts to embrace men of character, regardless of religion, class, and citizenship status, did not prevent the organization from discriminating against potential members on racial lines. African American members were subsumed into their own chapters under the aegis of the Colored Men’s Association. By the end of World War II, however, there was a growing unease within the organization about keeping the races apart. While some northern branches voluntarily opted to desegregate earlier, not until 1946 did the National Council of YMCAs and YWCAs insist upon desegregation among all of its affiliates. The process of implementation took several years to achieve – not surprisingly, Southern branches were especially resistant – but represented the YMCA/YWCA’s disavowal of the principle of separation of the races at a time when the U.S. government continued to advocate it. As Nina Mjagkij, who documents the history of African American

²⁸ Michael T. Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 32, 58, 60-61 (quotes on pp. 58 and 61, respectively).

YMCAs prior to desegregation, notes, the 1946 national YMCA/YWCA resolution on race discrimination anticipated the desegregation of the U.S. Army (1948) and the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling (1954).²⁹

In early republic Cuba, where color lines held tightly in many social settings but were not as rigidly drawn as in the United States, the YMCA also insisted upon limiting the membership of its Havana branch to white men – although religion and class restrictions were not imposed. Indeed, in both the U.S. and Cuba, a shortage of “respectable” men who could convey the secrets of the manly art led to the hiring of former prizefighters to lead their boxing programs.³⁰

The YMCA's New York-based International Committee oversaw the establishment of foreign branches beginning in 1889, a process that accelerated in the first decades of the twentieth century. In her history of the YMCA in China, Kimberly A. Riserdorph points out that, despite the “full scale bureaucracy” necessary to conduct such worldwide operations, the organization as a whole “stressed local autonomy”; foreign branches needed to secure their own local base of support and, critically, funding, in order to survive.³¹ While this endeavor may have seemed far easier to accomplish in a Havana teeming with U.S. expatriates in the aftermath of the Spanish-Cuban-American War than in far-flung locales

²⁹ Nina Mjagkij, *Light in the Darkness: African Americans and the YMCA, 1852-1946* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), pp. 126-127.

³⁰ This was especially true in the U.S. as the organization established its athletic bona fides in the late nineteenth century; as Clifford Putney notes, somewhat dismissively, “Many early YMCA physical directors were ex-circus men, broken-down pugilists, and the like.” See Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, p. 68.

³¹ Kimberly A. Riserdorph, “Reformers, Athletes and Students: The YMCA in China, 1895-1935” (Ph.D. diss., Washington University, 1994), p. 3.

such as Japan (where the organization is still active today), the Cuban experiment would ultimately result in failure.³²

From 1904 to 1931, the YMCA embarked upon an ambitious attempt to build its Havana branch. The organization's leaders felt that the city could benefit from its recreational, educational, and – to a lesser extent, given the long-term hold of Catholicism on the nation – evangelical religious programs. In this last regard, the YMCA was hardly alone in viewing Cuba as ripe for its Protestant reforms. As Louis A. Pérez, Jr., has demonstrated, missionaries were active throughout the island from 1898, “initially in scattered numbers and subsequently in successive waves.... They staked out spheres of influence in all provinces and in almost all *municipios*.” Within a few years, the competing presence of large numbers of missionaries – representing the Episcopalian, Methodist, Northern and Southern Baptist, Quaker, and several other denominations – led to an agreement among them to divide up the new republic into spheres of influence. In addition to church efforts to conduct relief work, establish schools, and address other community concerns in the wake of the Spanish-Cuban-American War, many U.S.-based, Protestant-influenced charities, fraternal groups, and other organizations soon initiated cultural as well as social reform activities in Cuba. One of the first to do so was the YMCA.³³

In November 1904, the YMCA sent Lyman L. Pierce, the general secretary of its Washington, D.C. headquarters, to Havana. There he met with J.E. Hubbard, a young Harvard man and prospective local secretary already in the city, who had spent the past several months laying the groundwork for the establishment of a YMCA branch in the

³² For a description of the YMCA's early efforts in Japan, see Jon Thares Davidann, *A World of Crisis and Progress: The American YMCA in Japan, 1890-1930* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1998).

³³ Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban*, pp. 243-246, 396 (quote on p. 243).

Cuban capital. As in the U.S., where separate (if unequal) YMCA branches existed for “colored” peoples, the goal was to establish an institution for middle-class white Cuban and American expatriate families while addressing the needs of Afro-Cubans at some future date. Shortly after Pierce’s arrival, the two men met with American and English-speaking Cuban business elites to talk up the new branch. In doing so, they hoped to build upon the YMCA’s smashing international success; not only did it have a million U.S. members and successful branches in Mexico (700 members) and Buenos Aires (800 members), but it had expanded beyond Europe and North America to Japan, China, Korea, India, and Ceylon.³⁴ The men’s arrival was greeted enthusiastically by Cuban politicians, journalists, and businessmen, from President Tomás Estrada Palma to Havana Mayor Juan O’Farrill on down, as well as by many U.S. entrepreneurs and ministers resident in the city. At a November 15 dinner at “Paris” restaurant honoring Pierce and Hubbard, President Estrada Palma gave a speech in Spanish and English in which he thanked the men for offering to oversee “the establishment among us of the association which will afford to the youth of Havana varied means of intellectual, moral and physical diversion.”³⁵ Postmaster General Fernando Figueredo used the occasion to reminisce in English on his own experiences with the YMCA while a student in Troy, New York, and pledged his support to the new branch. Pierce read a personal letter of support from U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt and asked the men present to assist Hubbard in his work, since “[i]n his work in Havana he will be, in a measure, alone.” Despite

³⁴ “Y. M. C. A.: Large and Enthusiastic Gathering Last night at the Paris Restaurant,” *La Lucha*, 16 November 1904, and “Los Jóvenes Cristianos,” *La Discusión*, 16 November 1904, in “Articles n.d. and 1904-1922” file in “Cuba – Print Materials/Cubans in Exile” box, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota (hereafter abbreviated to C-PM/CIE box, KFA, UMN).

³⁵ *La Discusión* noted (see *ibid.*) that neither wine nor liquor was served at the dinner, in accordance with the YMCA’s teetotaling agenda. “Y. M. C. A. Dinner at the Paris This Evening,” *Havana Post*, 15 November 1904, and “Palma on Y. M. C. A.,” *Havana Post*, 20 November 1904, in C-PM/CIE box, KFA, UMN.

a lack of manpower, he predicted that the new branch's success was, "to use a Presbyterian expression... foreordained to succeed."³⁶ In this Pierce would be proven wrong, but the YMCA's experiment in Havana lasted for a time and helped, in a small way, to promote boxing in the capital and among U.S. military men stationed there.

The following night, at a meeting at the Hotel Telégrafo focused on enrolling the city's young men, the YMCA succeeded in securing eighty applicants. The number grew to three hundred by week's end and ultimately exceeded five hundred before the branch was finally opened. The annual inscription was eight pesos per year for charter members but was slated to increase for those who joined later. Membership fees were anticipated to cover one-third of the branch's expenditures, with the remainder coming from local merchants and the central YMCA office in the U.S.³⁷ Despite the auspicious start, the new branch was facing several major hurdles, among them the lack of a brick-and-mortar establishment. The budget to construct a new facility was 300,000 pesos. In the meantime, for athletic activities, the association borrowed the basement of the Club Ateneo. The offices were temporarily located at the Colonial Loan and Deposit Co. at Prado and Neptuno, where Hubbard was available for 90 minutes each morning. Mr. Pierce did not stay long in Havana but departed on November 18 for Tampa, leaving the day-to-day work in Hubbard's able hands.³⁸

Although the latter had only recently graduated university, the D.C. headquarters had sent him to Cuba in January 1904 to begin mastering Spanish with the intention of naming him

³⁶ "Y. M. C. A. Dinner a Great Success," *Havana Post*, 16 November 1904, p. 1, in "Articles n.d. and 1904-1922" file in C-PM/CIE box, KFA, UMN.

³⁷ "Y. M. C. A. to Have Good Membership," *Havana Post*, 18 November 1904, p. 1, and C.A. Nichols, "The First Y. M. C. A. in Cuba," *The National Magazine of Cuba*, September 1905, pp. 10-13, in "Articles n.d. and 1904-1922" file in C-PM/CIE box, KFA, UMN.

³⁸ "Los Jóvenes Cristianos," source unknown, n.d. (probably 17 November 1904); "Los Jóvenes Cristianos," *La Discusión*, 16 November 1904, and "Y. M. C. A. Headquarters," *Havana Post*, 22 November 1904, in "Articles n.d. and 1904-1922" file in C-PM/CIE box, KFA, UMN.

the founding secretary of a Havana branch. Given the large membership pool, Hubbard found it necessary to rent a sizeable building on Prado formerly known as Belot Baths; as a year's rent – \$6,000 – was due in advance, the local branch's board of directors, led by president T.H. Harris, stepped in to secure it.³⁹

In an interview with *La Discusión* shortly after his arrival in Havana, Price emphasized that, despite the Protestant origins of the international YMCA, the local branch would not ascribe to a particular religious creed or religious sect but would be welcoming to Roman Catholics, which most Cubans, despite disenchantment with some aspects of prior Church rule, were. The organization would be neither Roman Catholic, nor Episcopal, nor Methodist, the newspaper assured its readers, but Christian. As all good Christians “aspired to their own perfection, or that of their children,” the Havana branch would truly be “by all and for all.” That boxing was a central part of the YMCA mission in Havana was evident from the outset, as the plans for the new facility included a dedicated boxing room, as well as a weapons room (presumably for fencing) and spaces for calisthenics and other physical exercise.⁴⁰

Shortly after its opening, the Havana YMCA offered boxing classes three days a week, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 5:15 to 9:30 p.m. By 1909, boxing was offered every day at 5:15 p.m. and four nights a week – Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays – at 8 p.m. The director of boxing instruction was Frank A. Fowler, who was advertised as having had many years of boxing experience. Classes cost a small fee, in

³⁹ C.A. Nichols, “The First Y. M. C. A. in Cuba,” *The National Magazine of Cuba*, September 1905, pp. 10-13. A Spanish translation of this article appears in the same publication as “La Primera A. de J. C. en Cuba,” pp. 24, 26-27. In “Articles n.d. and 1904-1922” file in C-PM/CIE box, KFA, UMN.

⁴⁰ “Los Jóvenes Cristianos,” *La Discusión*, n.d. (probably November 1904), in “Articles n.d. and 1904-1922” file in C-PM/CIE box, KFA, UMN. The original Spanish phrases read, “asipran á su perfeccionamiento, ó el de sus hijos” and “por todos y para todos,” respectively.

addition to the basic membership. The YMCA also offered regular instruction in gymnastics, basketball, swimming, and fencing, in addition to anatomy, physiology, and Bible classes.⁴¹ On February 4, 1910, it held a “fiesta atlética” that included a 220-yard dash, round of fencing, boys’ hockey game, basketball contest, and a “boxing demonstration”; the entry fee was one peseta.⁴² Several weeks later, an article in the *Havana Post* recognized Fowler’s achievement in stirring up local interest in the sport of boxing.⁴³ In addition to Fowler’s work with the boxing team, which may have begun as early as 1908 as he was by then affiliated with the Havana branch, he was captain of the baseball team, played basketball and volleyball (sports that had been invented less than two decades earlier by YMCA physical education professors in Massachusetts), and helped to coach the 1908-1909 college football team to an undefeated record.⁴⁴

That Fowler continued to be part of the Havana boxing scene for many years afterward is evidenced by the fact that, following the establishment of the Cuban National Boxing and Wrestling Commission in 1921, he was appointed an official referee at boxing events.⁴⁵ In 1927, Fowler – who had by then trained four Cuban champions as well as several up-and-coming fighters such as José “Kid” Sotolongo – was appointed by the boxing commissioner as a “professor” to teach youths in Havana to box.⁴⁶ His “Fowler’s Academy” also employed as one of its directors Fernando Rios, a former prizefighter who had become

⁴¹ “Calendario,” *Boletín de la Havana Young Men’s Christian Association* 1:4 (February 15, 1910), p. 2; “Departamento de Cultura Física, Habana, Cuba, Periodo 1909-1910,” in “Pamphlets, 1906-1919” file in C-PM/CIE box, KFA, UMN. Fowler is described but not mentioned by name in “El Joven Habanero,” Annual Prospectus, 1909-1910, Habana, Cuba,” p. 4, in the same file box.

⁴² “Fiesta Atlética,” *Boletín de la Havana Young Men’s Christian Association* 1:3 (February 1, 1910), p. 2.

⁴³ “YMCA Banquet,” *Havana Post*, 22 March 1910, p. 5, quoted in Reig Romero, *YMCA de la Habana*, p. 140.

⁴⁴ Reig Romero, *YMCA de la Habana*, pp. 139-140.

⁴⁵ Fernando Gil, “Cuba and Its Athletes,” *The Ring* 2:11 (December 1923), pp. 8-9.

⁴⁶ Milton Baron, “Boxing in Cuba,” *The Ring* 6:6 (July 1927), p. 33.

the city's top boxing referee in the years since the commission's founding.⁴⁷ By 1928, Fowler was promoting fights in Havana with José Coucé under the aegis of the Latin American Sporting Club, which held weekly semi-professional shows at the Miramar Garden.⁴⁸

While advocating recreational and amateur boxing and even employing former prizefighters at times, the YMCA, through the influential voice of Hubbard – who led the Havana branch until 1918, when he accepted an appointment in Italy – made clear its opposition to prizefighting. During the lead-up to the Johnson-Willard bout in April 1915, Hubbard was one of a group of ministers who sent a letter to the *Havana Post* protesting its staging, and that of all other professional fights in Cuba. While the Havana YMCA fielded entrants in Cuban national amateur tournaments and employed active and former pugilists, no prominent Cuban prizefighter appears to have emerged from within its ranks. Instead, it mostly catered to middle-class youngsters who went on to more “respectable” careers.

For a time, the YMCA had limited success in Havana, though never on the scale its founders had hoped in keeping with plans to develop additional branches throughout the interior. The Havana branch was hampered in many ways – its own distrust of Catholicism and the Catholic Church's distrust, in turn, of its aims; political instability, infighting, and corruption; the U.S. government's heavy hand toward domestic matters and Cuban resentment of it; and Americans' gambling, whoring, and other illicit activities, which inhibited the YMCA's attempts to put forth a more upstanding image of its expatriate brethren. There would also be conflicts between the mostly U.S. leadership and Cuban

⁴⁷ Milton Baron, “Boxing in Cuba,” *The Ring* 6:8 (September 1927), p. 32; Milton Baron, “Boxing in Havana,” *The Ring* 6:10 (November 1927), p. 23.

⁴⁸ Milton Baron, “Boxing in Cuba,” *The Ring* 7:5 (June 1928), p. 33; Milton Baron, “Boxing in Cuba,” *The Ring* 7:6 (July 1928), p. 37; Milton Baron, “Boxing in Cuba,” *The Ring* 6:9 (October 1927), p. 34; Milton Baron, “Boxing in Havana,” *The Ring* 6:10 (November 1927), p. 23. José Coucé had formerly been a member of the United Promoters Corporation.

members who sought a more active role. Most serious of all, particularly after 1920, was the constant lack of funds.⁴⁹ Undeterred by these challenges, in June 1920, the Cuban YMCA opened a second location in the capital, on Compostela Street, for U.S. Merchant Marines. That establishment housed approximately 1,600 men and was dedicated to assisting “the English speaking young men.”⁵⁰ Around the same time, at the request of Col. Montes, supervisor of the Cuban Military School at Morro Castle, two YMCA instructors, known as Mr. McDonald and Mr. Thayer, began offering instruction to the school’s students in indoor basketball, calisthenics, tumbling, boxing, and other physical activities. Other organizations around the island also began seeking out the YMCA for “suggestions relative to Physical Education, Welfare and playground work.”⁵¹ By 1928, the Havana branch had recruited active prizefighter Johnny Cruz – whose first defeat at the hands of then little-known semi-pro Kid Chocolate in December 1927 had helped propel the latter into a spectacular career – to teach boxing to amateurs who wished to compete in the Amateur Athletic Union’s tournament that April. Cruz’s program had attracted 26 students and brought in receipts of \$240.00, which was equal to the boxing program’s disbursements.⁵²

Despite this limited success, however, the Havana YMCA was unable to recruit the wealthiest Cuban families, which instead opted to join more exclusive social clubs. Its early innovations in physical education and infrastructure could not keep pace with what the social clubs could offer, a fact that local branch leaders acknowledged but lacked the resources to

⁴⁹ For an excellent discussion of why the Havana YMCA ultimately failed, see Diane Van Weele, “An Exceedingly Difficult Field’: The YMCA in Havana,” unpublished paper, 1992, in “Foreign Work” file of the Kautz Family YMCA Archive, University of Minnesota.

⁵⁰ “Merchant Marine Branch,” *Things Doing at the Havana Y. M. C. A.* 1:1 (February 1, 1921), pp. 2-3 (quote on p. 3).

⁵¹ “Morro Castle,” *Things Doing at the Havana Y. M. C. A.* 1:1 (February 1, 1921), pp. 3-4 (quote on p. 4).

⁵² “For the Men & Boys of Habana,” *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report of the Young Men’s Christian Association, Havana, Cuba, 1928*, pp. 5, 12, 20-21.

overcome. Shortly before the closure of the Havana branch, the *International Survey of the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations* offered a prescient post-mortem on its inability to attract sufficient financial support:

There is only one Christian Association in Cuba, namely the YMCA of Havana, which was founded in 1905. It has developed the regular four-fold program, with especial emphasis on physical education, and has been in the past reasonably successful. At the present time, however, it is in serious trouble. While mistakes in management account to some extent for this condition, the chief trouble is competition by the big social clubs. The building and equipment are not only old-fashioned and in poor repair but they suffer very much by comparison with the magnificent clubs that have been developed recently in Havana. These undertakings, of which the Club Asturias is the most outstanding example, have superb equipment and nominal entrance fees. They promote physical and social activities on a considerable scale, offering free medical service and health examinations. They set material standards with which the YMCA can never hope to compete, especially since it has never been able to secure the interest of the wealthy Cuban families.⁵³

By December 1931, the International Committee – faced with the Havana branch's insurmountable financial troubles – decided to close it down. The building was shuttered that February. An elderly J.E. Hubbard attempted in 1949 to have the organization's leaders reopen a Havana branch, but there was no institutional support for his proposal.⁵⁴

In regard to its boxing program, three conclusions are in order. The first is that, although the YMCA catered to young, white amateur boxers who most likely would not become professionals, it did serve as a steady source of employment and as a means to acquire practical experience for white U.S. and Cuban boxers such as Frank Fowler and

⁵³ *International Survey of the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations* (New York: The International Survey Committee, 1932), pp. 329-330. Although published in 1932, the survey incorporated reports on the YMCA's and YWCA's foreign branches that were collected between April 1929 and July 1931.

⁵⁴ Van Weele, "An Exceedingly Difficult Field," pp. 20-21.

Johnny Cruz. Fowler went on to be a top trainer and promoter, while Cruz became one of the most respected referees in Cuba. Because the YMCA was not racially integrated, however, these opportunities were off-limits to Afro-Cuban fighters, who made up a significant proportion of Cuba's boxing population. As a second point, then, we should note that the organization helped to exacerbate the class and racial schism – which would grow wider as the decades wore on – between middle-class or wealthy white amateurs and poor white and black semi-pros and pros. Although the exclusivity and racism of the social clubs as well as the segregation of amateur athletic bodies were far more central to this process, the YMCA reinforced the existing tendency to push poor whites and blacks into the semi-pro or pro ranks with little or no prior amateur experience. Third, and more positively, by fostering the notion that boxing was a respectable pastime suitable for the children of U.S. expatriates and Cuban business and political elites, the YMCA helped to legitimize it as a sport and thus indirectly assisted in its ultimate legalization and regulation.

The Growth of Athletic Facilities and Their Impact on Early Prizefighting in Cuba

While foreigners were certainly critical in the introduction and development of Cuban pugilism, their voices tend to predominate in the few works on the subject (popular histories written by Cubans or Cuban exiles) in this early period. Similarly, up to now, most U.S. historians have examined the Jack Johnson-Jess Willard bout – the subject of the next chapter – from a U.S.-centric perspective. Given the influence of the U.S. government in driving Johnson to live a transnational life – thus exposing the ideology of American race relations to countries that, for the most part, had more fluid hierarchies in place – one must understand the U.S. context of the bout before being able to translate its significance to

Cuba. Yet these studies have mostly left unanswered the question of the bout's impact upon, and interaction with, the island's boxing culture, and on society more generally. Using Cuban sources, however, particularly the Havana-based English-language press – which, as we shall see, had a financial incentive to promote prizefighting on the island – scholars may better begin to understand how the U.S. “athletic crusade” (recalling Gems's terminology) was translated on the ground, and with what results.

Without the establishment of sports facilities for its public consumption, boxing's growth in Cuba would have been severely retarded, relegated to small theaters and private homes. Americans were critical in the erection of new public infrastructure after the end of the Spanish-Cuban-American War, but the process had begun earlier. The construction of athletic facilities had originated in the late nineteenth century with baseball parks, such as that in 1890 of a ten-thousand person park for the Habana Baseball Club.⁵⁵ In republic-era Cuba, thoroughbred racetracks were one of the earliest public recreation facilities built. The Oriental Park track, where the Johnson-Willard fight took place, was inaugurated in Marianao. This municipality, located west of Havana in an area that had been “relatively underdeveloped” as late as 1910, was prized for its sea breezes, hot springs, and high elevation. In the nineteenth century, it had served as a summer home to wealthy Spanish administrators and landowners, who were replaced at the turn of the century by their U.S. counterparts. Because of its elevation, Marianao also became the site for U.S. occupation headquarters at Camp Columbia. With its population expanding rapidly – including a doubling of residents from 18,000 in 1907 to 37,000 in 1919 – it is no surprise that Marianao quickly went from being a wealthy suburb of Havana to a site for tourist development. While

⁵⁵ Pérez, “Between Baseball and Bullfighting,” p. 503.

central Havana experienced a hotel boom in the first two decades of the twentieth century, Marianao increasingly became the place where many tourists went to spend their leisure time.⁵⁶

In that vein, an American entrepreneur, Harry D. “Curly” Brown, opened Oriental Park in January 1915 to cater to visiting Americans and elite Cubans with money to spend on thoroughbred racing. President Menocal, his cabinet, several prominent senators, and the U.S. and British foreign ministers all had designated seats in the boxes near the finish line. Nearby, the Cuban-American Jockey Club had a clubhouse for its members and their guests.⁵⁷ Real estate agents Juan Kirksey and Frank K. Harvey, whose firm oversaw the sale of lands adjoining the race track, advertised relentlessly to speculators and investors seeking to get rich quick: “No man can make a mistake in selecting any of these properties as they will more than triple in value within the next twelve months and now is the time to buy as we positively will not hold them at their present prices for any specified time.”⁵⁸ Although not constructed with boxing in mind – it was popularly known as the “Hippodrome” – Oriental Park’s seating capacity was far larger than that of the Great Havana Stadium, which was inaugurated the following month and built specifically for boxing, wrestling, and similar spectacles. For the Johnson-Willard fight, for instance, the racetrack’s grandstand alone was said to accommodate between 20,000 and 30,000 people.⁵⁹

As the finishing touches were being applied to Oriental Park, U.S.-born boxing promoters were rushing to obtain contracts to hold bouts in the capital. Billy Gibson of New

⁵⁶ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, pp. 23-25.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30; “Race Track Is Nearly Ready,” *Havana Post*, 13 January 1915, p. 2.

⁵⁸ For one of many such advertisements, see “All About the New Race Track at Marianao,” *Havana Post*, 6 January 1915, p. 8.

⁵⁹ “Johnson Agrees on Welch as Referee,” *New York Times*, 26 March 1915, p. 11.

York secured a concession to hold prizefights in Havana “with only star performers,” since, in his hometown, decision bouts were then prohibited (which resulted in the matches being decided by sportswriters, leading to the term “newspaper decisions”). In early February 1915, he even suggested hosting the Johnson-Willard bout should it be moved from Juarez, Mexico, where it was originally scheduled to go on the following month.⁶⁰ Shortly after Gibson’s announcement, *Havana Post* publisher Bradt, who had apparently been granted a similar concession several months earlier, applied to construct a temporary 20,000-person amphitheater in an abandoned city lot near the Malecón called Maceo Park. On January 11, 1915, the Havana city council had granted him the concession to build the amphitheater and to hold athletic events there up to June 1. On January 19, fight promoters Richard Klegin and George Lawrence, who had recently come to Havana and were working in concert with Bradt, left together for New York City to sign contracts with U.S. and foreign boxers – among them, leading African American heavyweights Sam Langford, Sam McVea, Joe Jeanette, and Battling Jim Johnson, as well as top-notch smaller men such as lightweight champion Freddie Welsh of England – to appear at the Maceo Park facility. The following day, however, President Menocal cancelled Bradt’s concession at the request of the House of Representatives and the Interior Department. It turned out that the land belonged to the national government, not the city of Havana, and that even should the former allow the concession, the amphitheater could interfere with a new statue of General Antonio Maceo that would soon be erected. To conciliate Bradt, the following week the Cuban government,

⁶⁰ “The Fight in Cuba,” *New York Times*, 3 February 1915, p. 12.

with President Menocal's approval, granted him use of government land on the Malecón extension near the Santa Clara Battery, where he soon began building a permanent facility.⁶¹

Before the new Havana Stadium went up, boxing shows were staged at irregular intervals in various theaters and private clubs around town, catering primarily to locals and, in the case of clubs, to members and guests. On January 23, for instance, the American Club held a "smoker" that featured three bouts with some of the best local fighters, including national flyweight champion Oscar García.⁶² The event was so successful that it held another smoker on March 5 featuring an exhibition by famed Danish ex-champion boxer "Battling" Nelson.⁶³ Yet Bradt made no secret of his intention to turn his establishment into a regular venue for prizefighting (and, to a lesser extent, wrestling) that attracted tourists as well as locals. In that vein, the *Havana Post* both cultivated new audiences for prizefighting among women, expatriate and visiting Americans, and bilingual Cuban elites through continuous reporting on and advertising of the Stadium, and thrived off the advertising revenue brought in by other businesses – such as hotels, restaurants, rail and steamship companies, and souvenir establishments – hoping to cash in on the tourist boom.

Not all were pleased by the plan. Some objected to Bradt's decision to publicize the Stadium's location – near the monument to the USS *Maine* – as "Maine Park." "[T]he use of the name in connection with the opening of prizefighting on or about the anniversary of the

⁶¹ "Maceo Park for Athletics," *Havana Post*, 8 January 1915, p. 3; "City Council Votes to Let Maceo Park for Athletic Meets," *Havana Post*, 12 January 1915, p. 1; "Boxing Men Leave to Bring Fine Talent to Meet in Havana Stadium," *Havana Post*, 19 January 1915, p. 2; "President Gives Park for Stadium Site," *Havana Post*, 28 January 1915, p. 2; "Cuban News Review Day by Day," *The Times of Cuba* 3:2 (February 1915), pp. 30-35.

⁶² In this context, the term "smoker" refers to a private event, sometimes of questionable legality, that mixed boxing and other forms of entertainment. The term is still used today in U.S. boxing circles to describe informal boxing events, often amateur, where the results may or may not go on a fighter's record. Since audience members (usually all or predominantly males) typically smoked while watching these events, they likely came to be known as "smokers" for the haze that permeated the area around the ring.

⁶³ "Some Smoker at Am. Club," *Havana Post*, 24 January 1915, p. 2; "A. C. Smoker All to Good," *Havana Post*, 6 March 1915, p. 2.

sinking of the Maine was distinctly bad taste,” fumed *The Times of Cuba*.⁶⁴ Not surprisingly, there was opposition to prizefighting from certain Protestant circles, although they did not make their voices widely heard until shortly before the Johnson-Willard bout. And at the January 23 American Club smoker, Theodore Terry sang E.F. O’Brien’s lyrics lampooning the new Stadium:

My friend George Bradt has got a scheme
 To bring folks here in flocks;
He’s going to lure them down to see
 Some “culled pussons” box.
And Mayor Fairy Ann agrees
 It’s going to be a lark!
(In fact he has agreed that George
 May use a city park.)⁶⁵

Despite the criticism, the Stadium went up in an astonishing ten days. Far from the 20,000 seats that Bradt had planned for his Maceo Park amphitheater, the Stadium was limited to 12,000 bleacher seats, plus an additional 1,600 cushioned seats at ringside and in boxes. Prices ranged from \$2 to \$5 in the grandstand and from \$10 to \$25 for ringside and box viewing. The arena’s smaller size was marketed as an advantage, since “there is not a seat in it that does not give as good a view of the ring side as the seat farthest away.” The inaugural event, on February 13, featured Young Ahearn, the middleweight champion of Europe, and Willie Lewis, from New York City; Ahearn won by knockout. Featured on the semi-final bout were Frankie Howard and Young Donahoe, lightweights from the U.S.

⁶⁴ “They Say,” *The Times of Cuba* 3:3 (March 1915), pp. 50-54 (quote on p. 50). The *Maine* went down in the Havana harbor on February 15, 1898.

⁶⁵ “Some Smoker at Am. Club,” *Havana Post*, 24 January 1915, p. 2; “That Isn’t All,” *The Times of Cuba* 3:2 (February 1915), pp. 28-29. O’Brien’s lyrics also gently lampooned the Havana golf course, where women sought the right to play, and the Oriental Park racetrack: “Now Curly Brown has got a track/Where horses run about,/And bookies egg you on to bet,/And sundry persons tout./I rode out there the other day/Without my fingers crossed,/And as I slowly walked back home/My cheerfulness I’d lost.”

South. The undercard events were Frank (Kid) Howard vs. Kid Santello and Walter Cousins, the U.S.-born lightweight champion of Cuba, vs. native Cuban A. Arango. The Cousins-Arango bout proved to be the most disappointing, as referee Sam Lewis tossed both fighters out for stalling. Only 2,500 people attended the inaugural events, later prompting the Stadium to reduce its prices.⁶⁶ The low turnout was despite the offer by railway companies to offer discounted fares to out-of-town visitors coming into Havana for the fights.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, the Stadium continued to attract foreign boxers, even though veteran fight observers were skeptical of some of the heavily hyped match-ups. The *Brooklyn Eagle* and other U.S. newspapers, for instance, scorned Willie Lewis as a “has-been.”⁶⁸ In the Stadium’s second boxing card, held on February 20, an all-African American feature bout – Sam McVea versus Battling Jim Johnson – was contracted to last up to twenty rounds. As Bradt did not favor mixed-race bouts except, apparently, when a title might be changing hands, both fighters were touted as “smoky giants,” one of whom – either McVea, “the cool, calculating, clever boxer,” or Johnson, with his “giant strength” – would not likely last the duration. But they did last twenty rounds, and when referee Sam Lewis called their fight a draw and demanded that they box five more rounds so that he could make a decision, Johnson balked, claiming he was only paid for twenty. Amidst a “shower of cushions and [a] jeering audience,” Lewis gave the victory to McVea by disqualification.⁶⁹ Moreover, the

⁶⁶ “Young Ahearn vs. Willie Lewis at Havana Stadium Feb. 13th,” *Havana Post*, 6 February 1915, p. 1; “Noted Boxers Arrive for Match Saturday,” *Havana Post*, 10 February 1915, p. 2; “Stadium Is Real Marvel,” *Havana Post*, 13 February 1915, p. 1; “Young Ahearn Scores Clean K. O. over Lewis,” *Havana Post*, 14 February 1915, p. 1.

⁶⁷ “Reduced Week-end Rate Issued by Railroads,” *Havana Post*, 10 February 1915, p. 6.

⁶⁸ “They Say,” *The Times of Cuba* 3:3 (March 1915), pp. 50-54.

⁶⁹ “McVea and Jim Johnson to Clash on Saturday,” *Havana Post*, 16 February 1915, p. 2; “McVea Wins over Jim Johnson in 20 Rounds,” *Havana Post*, 21 February 1915, pp. 1-2; “Cuban News Review Day by Day,” *The Times of Cuba* 3:3 (March 1915), pp. 18-22. Not surprisingly, the *Havana Post* left out the crowd reaction to Jim

Stadium at times promised more than it could deliver. Disregarding Jack Curley's contract for the Johnson-Willard bout and the fact that the promoter had not yet given his blessing to relocating it from Juarez to Havana, the Stadium announced that the winner of the McVea-Jim Johnson bout would face Jack Johnson for his heavyweight title. An advertisement to that effect ran in the *Havana Post* the morning of the McVea-Jim Johnson fight. It featured a stunningly racist illustration of "The Four Black Gladiators," four bald, vaguely ape-like, ebony-skinned boxers with huge white lips and eyes standing close together. Representing Jim Johnson, Sam McVea, Joe Jeanette, and Jack Johnson – whose caricatured figure held a certificate that read "Champion Del Mundo" –, the ad touted, "Winner to Fight Jack Johnson."⁷⁰ It thus came as something of a shock to Bradt and the Stadium management when Curley ultimately selected the Oriental Park racetrack over the Stadium for staging the Johnson-Willard affair.

While not all bouts at the Stadium, then, were close or even well-matched affairs, three points should be made. First, although foreigners tended to receive the most publicity, the undercards offered opportunities for young, inexperienced Cuban fighters to appear in front of much larger audiences than they might otherwise have done. Although Cubans initially were featured as *preliminaristas*, within a few months, as the tourist season wound down and the Stadium began offering twice-weekly shows, a few local pugilists as Mike Febles and Anastasio Peñalver were elevated to main-event status. Yet the promoters focused far less upon developing local boxing talent – which would have built up audience

Johnson's disqualification; the salient detail about an angry audience flinging seat cushions came from the *Times of Cuba* article, p. 21. Bradt's views on mixed-race bouts are in "Curley Signs Misstatement," *Havana Post*, 13 March 1915, p. 2.

⁷⁰ "To-Night at the Stadium" (advertisement), *Havana Post*, 20 February 1915, p. 2. Interestingly, despite Jim Johnson's protestations of only being paid to box twenty rounds, this ad clearly states, "20 Rounds Referee May Order an Additional 5 Rounds for a Decision."

loyalty and developed Cuba's nascent prizefighting industry – than upon bringing in foreign boxers who were well-known abroad but had little connection to Cuba. As a result, when the government later instituted bans on boxing in the capital, Cuban boxers, trainers, referees, and judges were forced to maintain their beloved sport underground – while foreign boxers simply competed elsewhere.

Second, without advertising the bouts in this manner, the Stadium hued closely to the rigid color lines fixed in most U.S. boxing circles at that time. White American, European, and Cuban boxers were matched against one another, while Afro-Cuban and African-Americans were similarly matched. This rigidity undoubtedly affected the caliber of the matches, as it was more important, at least initially, for fighters to be of the same weight class and skin hue than for them to complement each other's ring experience, abilities, and shortcomings. Moreover, the Stadium management's support of American-style white supremacy in a Cuban setting influenced its decision to introduce one of the most notoriously racist elements of the boxing game: the battle royal.

A form of mass boxing show that featured nonwhite (usually black) boys or men who often possessed only the most rudimentary of boxing skills – and a rite of initiation for many top African American boxers of the early-to-mid-twentieth century – the battle royal had begun primarily as a Southern U.S. phenomenon attended by moneyed white spectators. That it soon spread to Cuba encouraged by U.S. promoters was not surprising, as they did little to hide their desire to replicate patterns of their own nation's white supremacy on a Cuban stage (particularly the rigid demarcation of color lines in athletic and social events). The sight of five, six, or as many as a dozen young men going at one another violently within the confines of the ring – usually as the preliminary event on a boxing card – was amusing

for whites in attendance. The youths' degradation – in addition to the beatings received by their peers, they were subject to all manner of racial epithet – was intended to uphold the tenets of white supremacy. Yet as Andrew Kaye points out, black audiences at times found pleasure in attending battles royal (segregated or not) because they could appreciate their slapstick quality without accepting their racist overtones. To add to the intended hilarity, promoters would sometimes hire one-legged boys, require participants to fight naked (thus invoking erotic notions of African American male genitalia), or hamstring them in other ways, such as tying one hand behind their backs. Miniscule purses often went to the “winner,” which was whoever appeared to be the least battered – or the last man standing. In other instances, participants would scramble to collect the small change tossed by spectators into the ring. While fighters at times colluded with one another to “fake” a spectacle, or paired up with one another to gang up on a particular opponent, there were African American boxers – including, notably, three-time world champion Henry Armstrong – who refused to engage in such bouts out of pride. Many more, however, did take part, particularly in the South. In addition to Jack Johnson, who engaged in battles royal prior to (as well as after) establishing himself as a young prizefighter in Chicago, Beau Jack (lightweight champion of the early 1940s) got his start by taking part in such engagements in his native Augusta, Georgia.⁷¹

The Havana Stadium held its first battle royal on March 24, 1915, involving “eight husky colored fighters.” Although Theresa Runstedtler states that “the promotion of black-

⁷¹ Andrew M. Kaye, “Battle Blind?: Atlanta’s Taste for Black Boxing in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Sport History* 28:2 (Summer 2001), pp. 217-232. As Kaye notes, the most famous battle royal depicted in American literature remains that portrayed by Ralph Ellison in his novel *Invisible Man* (1952). Another veteran of battles royal was Joe Gans, the “Old Master” from Baltimore. For background on Gans, whose ring style influenced Cuban world champion Kid Chocolate, see Chapter 3.

on-black matches and battle royals [sic] certainly suggest that an element of white racial voyeurism was at work in the Cuban boxing scene,” it is important to differentiate between the two types of pugilistic affairs in their purposes as well as methods. The battle royal was not intended to display genuine boxing skills; rather, it was viewed as a social Darwinian battle of the fittest, one that ideally left several victims in its wake and at least one survivor. As G.W. Krick, the Stadium publicity agent and *Havana Post* contributor, promised for the March 24 battle royal, “negroes will be the victims and some hot stuff is assured. Ambulances have been engaged to carry away the victims after the bout.”⁷² Black-on-black boxing matches, on the other hand, while evoking whites’ racialist fantasies – as can be seen in the advertisement for the McVea-Jim Johnson bout, which depicted the participants as more primate than human – nonetheless drew fans who viewed the participants as individuals, with specific ring talents and limitations. No matter how poorly a black boxer might perform in a fight or exhibition against either a black or white opponent, he was not, at least, an undistinguishable being, as often hapless participants in battles royal were depicted. As just one indicator of their lack of individuality, battle royal contestants were not advertised by name, only by number and body type – e.g., “eight husky colored fighters.” Yet because battles royal proved so popular among Stadium fans, many of whom were presumably from the U.S., the management continued to include them among its preliminary programs at many semi-weekly boxing events. That securing the correct race of “victims”

⁷² G.W. Krick, “Stadium Stabs,” *Havana Post*, 23 March 1915, p. 6; G.W. Krick, “Stadium Stabs,” *Havana Post*, 24 March 1915, p. 6; Theresa E. Runstedtler, “Journeymen: Race, Boxing, and the Transnational World of Jack Johnson” (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2007), pp. 378-379 (quote on p. 379).

was more important than nationality is evident from the March 27, 1915, fight card, which included “[f]our American and four Cuban colored glove-wielders” in its battle royal.⁷³

Third, the Stadium bouts and the *Havana Post's* relentless promotion of them offered Cuban and American fans – including many women – an introduction to the culture of prizefighting, however vicarious. (As Louis A. Pérez, Jr., notes, Cuban women had similarly begun flocking to baseball games two decades earlier, thereby helping to legitimize the new sport as one of “gentility and refinement.”⁷⁴) In March and April 1915, the *Havana Post* hired a visiting English vaudeville actress, Cecilia Wright, to write columns deciphering the rules and idiosyncrasies of prizefighting for a female audience. Despite being billed as a “boxing expert,” her credentials as boxing reporter were lean; prior to her writing assignment, her main experience with boxing had been attending two world championship bouts, including the Jack Johnson-Frank Moran bout in Paris the year before, “and a number of minor matches.” Nonetheless, she sought to increase the “red-blooded” (i.e., elite white) female presence at prizefights by assuring her peers that boxing was not nearly as violent as other sports, such as football, and that lady fans would be treated with the utmost gentility (that is, so long as they purchased seats at ringside and in boxes.)⁷⁵ Furthermore, instead of toiling away in anonymity in gyms, out-of-town boxers held daily public workouts at the Stadium,

⁷³ G.W. Krick, “Stadium Stabs,” *Havana Post*, 27 March 1915, p. 5.

⁷⁴ Pérez, Jr., “Between Baseball and Bullfighting,” pp. 507-508.

⁷⁵ See, for instance, “English Girl to Write Story of Stadium Boxing Match for the Post,” *Havana Post*, 9 March 1915, p. 1; “Fair Woman on Manly Boxing,” *Havana Post*, 9 March 1915, p. 2; “Ladies Dont’s [sic] at the Fight,” *Havana Post*, 10 March 1915, p. 1; Cecilia Wright, “‘Kid’ Lewis Clearly Outpoints Mack in Twenty Fast Rounds,” *Havana Post*, 11 March 1915, p. 2. As Geoffrey Ward notes in his biography of Jack Johnson, Wright was a stringer for United Press and a “protégé” of Captain Cushman Rice, the influential ranch owner who was opposed to the staging of mixed-race bouts in Cuba. Because of her association with Rice, Jack Johnson objected to her presence at ringside on the day of his bout with Willard and demanded that she be seated farther away. Though she acquiesced, she attempted to “hoodoo” Johnson by waving her seat number, 13, at him. In *Chicago Evening American*, 6 April 1915, quoted in Geoffrey C. Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), p. 373.

which gave women leery of attending evening prizefights the opportunity to observe fighters (and their physiques) in more controlled settings – as they went a few rounds with a sparring partner, performed calisthenics, or hit punching bags. If there were bad blood between the fighters or between their respective management and retinues, one would train at the Stadium and the other at an alternate facility.

That was the arrangement made when Sam McVea fought Battling Jim Johnson in February 1915, when training facilities were improvised for the latter at Marianao.⁷⁶ And a similar arrangement would be made when Jess Willard finally arrived in Havana in March 1915 to challenge Jack Johnson for his heavyweight throne. After weeks of uncertainty over the status, date, and location of the fight, the “Pottawatomie Giant” (so-named for the Kansas county of his birth) was finally summoned to Cuba by Jack Curley, who – shortly after arriving on the island himself – had reached the same conclusion as had Jack Johnson: that the championship bout would have to take place there. How and why it came to Cuba is the story we turn to next.

By 1915, boxing was neither widely embraced in Cuban society nor considered a respectable career path for young native males. Yet, in the capital, at least, it had developed into a form of public entertainment suitable for the *gente decente* (“decent people,” i.e., middle classes) – and at which they became increasingly visible as the 1910s wore on. The inclusion of middle-class women as spectators contradicted the beliefs held by prominent clergymen and government officials that the sport (at least in its professional variant) was unabashedly brutal and unworthy of state sanction. Moreover, its semi-tolerated status in Cuba and the

⁷⁶ “McVea and Jim Johnson to Clash on Saturday,” *Havana Post*, 16 February 1915, p. 2.

U.S. (where it remained illegal in many states) ensured boxing's ongoing liminal condition. It was in these circumstances that the Johnson-Willard bout came, quite unexpectedly, to Havana – raising the city's pugilistic profile at a time when the few Cuban males actively partaking in the sport were doing so largely in anonymity.

Chapter 2: The Johnson-Willard Fight and Its Aftermath, 1915

Filtering an American Bout Through a Cuban Prism

The most famous boxing match in Cuban history occurred in Havana on April 5, 1915, at the dawn of the island's love affair with the sport, and involved two American boxers. Much has been written about the world heavyweight title bout between champion Jack Johnson and challenger Jess Willard – deservedly so, for this meeting of the world's first black heavyweight king and the little-known “white hope” who would ultimately take his title was notable on a number of levels far beyond boxing or sports history. The bout represented the culmination of a racist campaign against Johnson, a flamboyant but gifted pugilist from Galveston, Texas, who was hated and feared for his ability to toy with white opponents in the ring and his unapologetic desire for white women (and theirs for him) outside of it. Fleeing prosecution from the United States, where he was convicted of violating the Mann Act, and forced into exile in Europe, Johnson's Havana sojourn came at the end of his seven-year title reign but would remain central to his athletic saga ever after.

In this chapter, I filter the bout through a Cuban prism. Prior commentators have perceived its Havana locale to be little more than a colorful, exotic backdrop to one of the most important – and, given the racial anxieties that served as its impetus, most *American* – boxing matches of the twentieth century. In doing so, I will analyze the impact that this event had upon the development of boxing on the island in the short- and medium-term. In particular, I wish to shed light on the processes by which the U.S. government and elites attempted to foster an “athletic crusade” (using Gerald Gems's terminology) to pursue political aims through the advocacy of pugilism and other “manly” sports. The previous

chapter considered how, in the two decades before the fight, recreational boxing and prizefighting had both gained a foothold in Cuba. In this chapter, I examine how the intense and prolonged worldwide scrutiny fostered by the Johnson-Willard fight, combined with the influx of visitors and press men (and a few women) to Havana to witness it, increased Cuba's status as a site for major boxing events. Yet a variety of factors – a backlash against Johnson-Willard promoter Jack Curley for leaving behind him a slew of unpaid debts; a growing unease among U.S. promoters about staging interracial bouts; and the government's vacillating approaches as to whether, and how, to regulate prizefighting – led to an inability to sustain the bout's momentum.

The celebrated bout of April 5, 1915, that took place at Oriental Park was more anomaly than foundational moment for boxing in Cuba. This is in contrast to the picture drawn by Louis A. Pérez, Jr., in his wide-ranging cultural history of pre-Castro Cuba, *On Becoming Cuban*. In his brief summary of early Cuban boxing, Pérez argues that its practice was limited primarily to Americans, particularly soldiers of the 1898-1902 and 1906-1909 occupations. While noting that boxing spectacles featuring foreign (mostly U.S.) pugilists became more frequent in Havana beginning in 1914, he seems to imply that the sport became popular among native Cubans only in the years following the Johnson-Willard fight.¹ This chapter and the previous one demonstrate, rather, that – while Johnson's personal notoriety and the hype surrounding the bout no doubt helped to fuel local interest in prizefighting, there was already a developing audience for prizefighting in the capital city (and to a lesser extent in the interior), as well as a growing pool of young native pugilists who were seeking to develop their craft.

¹ Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban*, pp. 175-177.

This chapter opens with a discussion of the personal history and pugilistic career of Jack Johnson. This is because his singular story – perhaps no other sports figure before or since has been the subject of such intense public scrutiny, disdain, and hope – is critical to telling the story of the bout itself. There were no doubt racial elements of the struggle between the black champion and “white hope” that resonated as much, perhaps, in 1915 Havana as they did in 1915 Chicago. Nonetheless, Johnson’s popularity on the island and the growing presence of a multiracial, multinational body of prizefighters mitigated some of that racism and allowed Johnson to go about his daily business in Havana with a degree of racial equality that was not then available in his own country, or to most Afro-Cubans. His celebrity status in Havana – even President Menocal expressed his admiration for Johnson and was rumored to have wagered on him to defeat Willard – helped to pave the way for Afro-Cuban athletic and artistic visionaries in the next two decades. Moreover, despite his lack of training and the fact that some of his fistic skills were by then in decline, Johnson was widely respected for his boxing talents and undoubtedly served to inspire many of the young men who were at the time coming up in Cuban rings.

Thus, in order to understand the context by which the bout came to Havana and the heightened racial environment in which it took place, it is necessary to review some of the salient details about Johnson’s life and boxing career, in particular his long pursuit and tenacious hold of the world heavyweight championship; his controversial relationships with white women as they impacted his reception by white and black American audiences; the U.S. government’s campaign to prosecute him for violating the Mann Act, which prohibited the interstate and international transportation of females for “immoral” purposes; and the peripatetic exile that led him to Cuba. The chapter then turns to an exploration of the

processes by which the fight came to Havana and the particularities of Johnson's sojourn there – including his broader impact upon local society. Finally, it analyzes how Cuba's serving as host nation for this bout impacted the development of prizefighting there.

For many of his critics, though they often claimed to admire his courage, talent, and sportsmanship, Johnson's comeuppance on a hot Havana day had been too long in the making. Yet once he lost what made him so feared – the heavyweight championship of the world – he appeared to become almost an avuncular figure in Cuban life, one whose name was frequently floated as potential citizen, gymnasium owner, and politician. By the time he departed for Spain fifteen days after his defeat at Oriental Park, Johnson had succeeded in shifting the meanings of “white” and “black” among at least a segment of Havana society, even as his powerful example appeared to have little sway over how most whites viewed their Afro-Cuban counterparts. As in the United States, Johnson's singularity did little to alter the nature of race relations between whites and blacks on the Ever Faithful Isle.

The Making of a Champion and the Road to Exile

Jack Johnson remains the most reviled heavyweight professional boxing champion in history. Even the travails of Muhammad Ali, formerly Cassius Clay (who was stripped of his title for objecting on religious and moral grounds to military service in Vietnam), or Mike Tyson (still the youngest heavyweight champion at age twenty, who was convicted on rape charges after losing his title and arrested several times since) cannot compare to the fervent desire felt by countless whites of his era that Johnson be dethroned by one of their own, a “white hope” who could return this coveted mantle to the race. Johnson's rise and fall in the first two decades of the twentieth century coincided with the worst period for race relations

in the United States since the end of the Civil War. Having broken the infamous color line that had pervaded prizefighting (particularly in the heavyweight division) since the end of its bare-knuckle days, Johnson steadfastly refused to allow race prejudice to impact the other facets of his life. He dressed elegantly, even ostentatiously; was married three times to white women and publicly associated with many more, including prostitutes; drove expensive cars recklessly and rapidly; owned a black-and-tan joint in Chicago called the Café de Champion; and made no attempt to hide his desire for fame, or notoriety, as well as wealth. His was a truly international celebrity, one that resonated as much in Latin America or the Caribbean as it did in Europe or the United States. To call him a larger-than-life figure is a vast understatement; in the modern era, no other sports figure before or since has conveyed such disregard for the norms of his times, with such disastrous results to himself and others (race riots, censorship, his own conviction and imprisonment), and yet been so favorably reclaimed by history.

Since his death in 1946, Johnson's influence in sports and African American history has been writ large. Because his story is now so familiar to modern fans and scholars – in addition to the champion's own voluminous works, a corpus of scholarship has developed around him that includes film documentaries directed by Jim Jacobs and Ken Burns and biographies by Randy Roberts, Al-Tony Gilmore, and Geoffrey C. Ward – I will provide a very brief description here.² Although Johnson often changed the facts of his biography to

² For full-length documentaries, see *Jack Johnson*, directed by Jim Jacobs, Big Fights, Inc., 1970, and *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, directed by Ken Burns, Florentine Films, 2004. For full-length biographies, see Al-Tony Gilmore, *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1975); Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: The Free Press, 1983); and Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, which was written to accompany the Ken Burns documentary of the same name, also written by Ward. Johnson's published autobiographies include *My Life and Battles*, edited and translated from the French by Christopher Rivers (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007 [1914]) and based upon

suit his storytelling purposes, a good deal is known about his early life. Born in Galveston on March 31, 1878, Arthur John Johnson was the third of nine children, six of whom survived infancy, of illiterate former slaves Henry and Tina (“Tiny”) Johnson. His close-knit family life and attachment to his mother – after her death, he eulogized her by celebrating the idea she implanted in him as a youngster that “there is nothing you can’t accomplish” – and upbringing in racially mixed Galveston – though schools were segregated, neighborhoods were not – were formative in his early refusal to accept an innate racial inferiority or to bend to white demands that he display it. Yet despite the voluminous amount of research devoted to Johnson, his seeming lack of concern with the racial norms of his time remains, as his biographer Ward puts it, “the essential mystery of his life,” one that “[n]o amount of sleuthing will ever fully solve.”³

Johnson’s exploits (however exaggerated) as detailed in his memoirs and interviews detail a man who, from a very early age, learned to fend for himself – running away from home, stowing aboard ships, and taking on all manner of dangerous, low-paid, manual work.

eighteen serialized articles Johnson published in Paris in 1911; and *Jack Johnson – in the Ring – and out* (New York: Citadel Press, 1992 [1927]), written with Bill Sims and reprinted with a new preface and introduction as *Jack Johnson Is a Dandy: An Autobiography* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, [1969]). As Ward notes in *Unforgivable Blackness*, p. 4, starred footnote, Johnson penned a so-called Prison Memoir while incarcerated at Leavenworth from 1920-1921; this remains unpublished. Johnson also wrote, cowrote, or collaborated on numerous articles. In addition, Johnson is a central figure in analyzing the nexus between sport, race, gender, and masculinity in the early twentieth century in work by recent social, cultural, and transnational historians including Jeffrey Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), Chapter 2; Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), Chapter 1; Thomas R. Hietala, *The Fight of the Century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), Chapters 1-4; Gerald Horne, *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), Introduction and Chapter 2; Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007), Introduction and Chapters 3 and 6; and Runstedtler, “Journemen.”

³ Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, pp. 5-9; Johnson’s eulogy quote on p. 7, author’s quote on p. 5. Johnson later changed the order of his first and middle names, going by John Arthur Johnson. Apparently only five Johnson children survived to adulthood, but Johnson states in his autobiography that he was required to begin working in childhood to help support his parents, as “[t]here were six children at home to be fed and clothed.” Three others died before he was born. See Johnson, *My Life and Battles*, p. 2.

As an adolescent, he began practicing fisticuffs as a means of self-defense, turning to the sport of boxing around age fifteen when apprenticing in Dallas with the owner of a carriage painting shop named Walter Lewis. Under the supervision of Lewis, “an amateur boxer of local prominence,” Johnson began to think seriously of entering the ring professionally. He returned to Galveston, where he had his first pro bout in 1895 with John Lee, a dockworker. He won that bout, earning a net purse of a dollar twenty-five cents, and continued to fight for pittances in Galveston rings until 1899, when he decided to look for more promising venues to display his pugilistic skills.⁴ This was the start of his nomadic ring career, which eventually took him across the U.S. and to Australia, Europe, and Latin America.

Not long after departing Galveston, after jumping trains to Springfield, Illinois, Johnson – over six feet tall and an imposing physical presence, despite being malnourished – was invited to take part in a five-man battle royal. When his opponents, apparently as part of a prearranged plan to knock him out and fake the rest of the performance so they could choose a winner amongst themselves, rushed at him, Johnson knocked out three of the men and dropped the fourth with a body blow. His stunning performance resulted in an invitation for Johnson (“the big coon with the great left hand,” as referee George Siler called him) to fight on a P.J. “Paddy” Carroll-promoted card in Chicago, where he met a young Jack Curley, then Carroll’s assistant.⁵ Curley would become famous in the first decades of the next century for popularizing professional wrestling. He would also try his hand at promoting boxing shows, including the Johnson-Willard title fight in Havana sixteen years later. That Johnson was able to make such an impression on big-city fight watchers in the

⁴ Johnson, *The Autobiography of Jack Johnson*, pp. 34-35 (quote on p. 34); Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, pp. 10, 13-14, 22, 24-25.

⁵ Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, pp. 24-29; quote on p. 27.

chaotic circumstances of a battle royal speaks highly of his early defensive as well as offensive skills.

The association Johnson formed with Curley at his Chicago debut in May 1899 – when, on an empty stomach, he knocked out an up-and-coming black heavyweight who went by the name Klondike – became an important one throughout his fistic career. After leaving Carroll’s employment, Curley continued to promote fighters on his own, at times matching them with Johnson – as he did with George Gardner in November 1902 and Fireman Jim Flynn in September 1907, both in San Francisco. While most black prizefighters of the early twentieth century labored under white managers – who tightly controlled the purse strings, hired the seconds, handled matchmaking, and (should it be necessary) fixed fights – Johnson continued to serve as his own man, using whatever agents and seconds he felt advantageous to him and making his own decisions inside as well as outside the ring.⁶ His ability to frazzle opponents through taunts, smiles, and a demonstrated mastery of boxing skill as well as power soon attracted the attention of sportswriters and the boxing public. Although his rise was not unmarred by poor performance or defeat, he accomplished some notable victories on his way to the world title. On May 1902, Johnson knocked out Jack Jeffries, brother of then-heavyweight champion Jim Jeffries, in five rounds. The following February, he earned the “colored heavyweight championship of the world” by decisioning Denver Ed Martin. As Jim Jeffries continued to enforce the color line that had been put in place by the first American world heavyweight champion, John L. Sullivan, and maintained by his successors, the colored title was as high an honor as most black heavyweights could then achieve. (Once Johnson became undisputed world champion, the

⁶ Ibid., pp. 27-29, 34, 49-50, 52, 100-101.

colored title, ironically, was replaced by the establishment of a “white heavyweight championship” belt devoted to the creation of white hopes.) Johnson would defend the colored title thirteen times.

Following his defeat of respected white boxer Fireman Jim Flynn in 1907 on a Curley-promoted card, Johnson set his sights on the new world champion, Tommy Burns. The title had already changed hands twice in two years, and Burns – at five foot seven – did not seem physically imposing enough to break that pattern. His elevation was preceded by the retirement in May 1905 of Jim Jeffries, then undefeated and at the peak of his powers. Jeffries’s decision caught many people off guard; never before had a heavyweight champion voluntarily stepped away from his title. With the sport still illegal in most U.S. states, there were no boxing commissions to guide the ranking or succession process; hence, there was no path in place to replace Jeffries. The next champion was thus decided through an elimination bout in Reno, Nevada, between two white heavyweights – Jack Root and Marvin Hart. Refereeing the bout was Jim Jeffries himself. Hart’s substantial weight advantage – he outweighed his opponent by forty pounds – resulted in his twelfth-round knockout victory and assumption of the title. His reign was short and uninspired; the following year, he lost his first title defense to the much smaller Burns, a Canadian, who inherited the heavyweight crown when public opinion of its value was at its nadir.⁷

Unlike his predecessors, Burns was more concerned about gaining what he could financially from the title than about maintaining a rigid color line. Consequently, he declared that – for the right price – he would fight Jack Johnson, who was increasingly being viewed by fight fans and journalists, regardless of race politics, as the best man left to beat. Some

⁷ Roberts, *Papa Jack*, pp. 38, 42, 47.

white sportswriters openly called for Johnson to have a chance at the title in the interests of “fair play.” When Burns left the U.S. seeking a larger pool of white opponents in England, Johnson followed, hoping to be able to fight him there. The failure of promoters to establish terms to each man’s liking (Burns demanded a \$30,000 guarantee) caused Burns to depart for Australia in the summer of 1908, invited by Australian promoter Hugh D. McIntosh. To accommodate fans – including sailors from the Great White Fleet of the United States, then anchored in Australia –, McIntosh hurriedly built an open-air stadium at Rushcutters Bay, near Sydney, and another in Melbourne, where Burns defeated two local challengers for over \$20,000 per fight. By the time Johnson arrived in Australia that October, McIntosh had already reached terms with Burns to accept him as his next title challenger. Burns’ purse was to be \$30,000, as he had all along been seeking; Johnson would receive just \$5,000. The fight was to be held on Boxing Day, December 26, 1908, at Rushcutters Bay.⁸

Johnson’s methodical, humiliating demolition of Burns – the bout was stopped by police in the fourteenth round rather than have the audience witness the white man being counted out – fueled disappointment and even outrage in Australia, the United States, and much of the white world. Interestingly, too, it fueled a worldwide rise in the prestige and visibility of prizefighting, which had reached a low since Jim Jeffries’s retirement in 1905. As new champion Johnson defeated a string of white challengers in exhibition and title defenses – most notably Stanley Ketchel, the great middleweight, who put Johnson on the canvas in the twelfth round of their October 1909 bout, only to be knocked out decisively moments later – pressure was mounting in the English-speaking press for Jim Jeffries to emerge from retirement and save the “white race” from the horror of a black heavyweight champion.

⁸ Johnson, *The Autobiography of Jack Johnson*, pp. 56-58; Roberts, *Papa Jack*, pp. 50-56, 67.

Gail Bederman attempts to answer the question – which seems incomprehensible to most people now, accustomed to a world in which nonwhite athletes excel in all variety of sports – of why a black man’s possessing the world heavyweight title (versus that of a lighter weight class, for instance) was so objectionable to so many in the first two decades of the twentieth century. She argues that, “Jack Johnson’s racial and sexual challenge so upset the ideology of middle-class manhood that both the white press and the United States government were willing to take extraordinary measures in order to completely and utterly annihilate him.” At the turn of the nineteenth century, middle-class white men felt that their dominance was being actively challenged by immigrant men, men of color, and middle-class women. To reclaim what they believed to be their rightful place in American society, she maintains, the white male bourgeoisie turned away from gendered formulations of masculinity toward ones predicated upon race.⁹ Although Bederman accurately uses the word “hysteria” to describe hegemonic responses to Johnson, she does not sufficiently analyze why he possessed such outsized influence – and ignominy – as the face of a sport that was, after all, illegal in much of the country during the years he held the heavyweight title. One may arrive at a clearer understanding of the furious anti-Johnson sentiment by examining Michael S. Kimmel’s comments on boxing in the U.S. at century’s end:

As were other sports, boxing was defended as a counter to the “mere womanishness” of modern, overcivilized society. But boxing was more than mere manhood; it heralded the triumphant return of the Heroic Artisan as mythic hero. No sooner had he virtually disappeared into enormous, impersonal factories than he staged his triumphant return in the boxing ring. If the workaday world undermined working-class manhood – requiring obedience to rules and docility toward managers – then boxing celebrated his traditional virtues: toughness, prowess, ferocity. If men could not make

⁹ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, pp. 5, 13-14, 20 (quote on p. 5).

things with the skill of their hands, they could at least destroy things, or others, with them.¹⁰

Thus, although Johnson's success represented the culmination of white fears about the impending racial domination of blacks – who, after all, were considered to be inherently inferior – it was significant that it occurred in the boxing ring, an arena that should have been the purview of formerly independent, working-class whites: a profane site used for a sacred purpose, the reclamation of manhood. If blacks had any place there, it was fighting one another as a type of blood sport for whites' pleasure (as seen most brazenly in the staging of battles royal); notions of "fair play" were put aside in the interests of the white race, which had developed a set of eugenic theories around why its dominance was essential for the continued progression of world civilization.¹¹

White fears of black domination as symbolized by their success in the boxing ring do explain much of the vitriolic white response to Johnson's winning of the heavyweight title, but so does his complicated relationship with the wider African American community. It has been argued, for instance, that Johnson's decision to forgo respectable black women as companions in favor of white women, usually of ill repute, cost him the sympathies of many

¹⁰ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, pp. 93-94.

¹¹ Eugenics comprised quasi-scientific notions of anthropomorphic difference and better breeding practices. Although pioneered in Europe and most damagingly applied in the Nazi Germany of the 1930s and 1940s, eugenics became increasingly influential in public policy and educational institutions in early twentieth-century racially mixed societies, particularly the U.S. as well as Latin American countries such as Brazil, Peru, and Mexico. In addition to campaigns against drinking, venereal disease, squalid living conditions, and other banes of the working class, concerns that they shared with their counterparts in many other countries, U.S. eugenicists upheld notions of Muscular Christianity that had been popularized by the YMCA and other reformist organizations since the late nineteenth century. For a discussion of Muscular Christianity, see Chapter 1. On white notions of black inferiority inside and outside the boxing ring during Johnson's career, see Denise C. Morgan, "Jack Johnson Versus the American Racial Hierarchy," in *Race on Trial: Law and Justice in American History*, ed. Annette Gordon-Reed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 77-102. On the eugenics movement in Latin America, see Nancy Leys Stepan, *"The Hour of Eugenics": Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

African Americans as well as whites and further entrenched racist notions that upheld white females as the ultimate symbol of male desire.¹² There is no doubt that certain middle-class black leaders such as Ida B. Wells and Booker T. Washington found much to which to object in Johnson's choice of mates. Yet in his study of Chicago's black culture in the early twentieth century, Davarian Baldwin notes that "discussions about Johnson's controversies and their violent aftermath focus primarily on what his ascendancy meant for white anxieties about race, manhood, and civilization in the 'Progressive Era,'" but that "[w]e rarely invert the lens" to inquire about his status among African Americans.¹³

In that context, Johnson's "appropriation" of desirable white females – along with all of the material trappings usually accorded to the world heavyweight champion – was met with varied responses by middle- and working-class blacks. While some were embarrassed by his public liaisons with white women even before he was brought up on Mann Act charges, others viewed him as a folk hero for his steadfast refusal to be pigeonholed as a black man rather than recognized as an individual.¹⁴ Johnson further inflamed middle-class black opinion by flouting notions of how best to use his wealth and celebrity for the black

¹² Morgan, "Race on Trial," pp. 84-87.

¹³ Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111. Johnson himself attributed his supposed "forswearing" of black women to having his heart broken by two of them, Mary Austin and Clara Kerr (Johnson, *The Autobiography of Jack Johnson*, p. 76) and maintained that white women treated him better, since "I never had a colored girl that didn't two-time me" (John Lardner, "The Passing of the White Hopes," *Negro Digest* (October 1949), pp. 20-31; quote on pp. 28-29). Randy Roberts argues that a preference for white women was part of Johnson's intrinsic rebellion against racist norms, and that his favoring of white women went hand-in-hand with his rise to prominence and was similar to other black leaders' preference for light-skinned African American wives (Roberts, *Papa Jack*, pp. 46-47). Geoffrey Ward, on the contrary, maintains that Johnson "forsook nobody" and "would pursue black as well as white women all his life," but that he simply chose to travel with white ones (Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, p. 99). As the singer Ethel Waters – who rebuffed one of Johnson's advances – quoted him saying, "I like colored women, I could love a colored women... But they never give me anything. Colored women just won't play up to a man the way the white girls do... No matter how colored women feel toward a man, they don't spoil him and pamper him and build up his ego." (Ethel Waters with Charles Samuels, *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1951), quoted in Hietala, *The Fight of the Century*, p. 52.)

community's benefit. Wells, for instance, urged Johnson to use his winnings to open a gym on the South Side of Chicago for poor black youth; instead, he founded a black-and-tan joint, the Café de Champion, in the same neighborhood.¹⁵ It is thus fair to ask whether this lack of racial solidarity that coalesced around Johnson, his very unwillingness to follow the rigid racial norms to which most blacks of the time were forced to adhere, made him more vulnerable to white persecution. At the same time, the shame which some African Americans felt upon learning of the fighter's exploits was not always shared by African diaspora peoples elsewhere; upon arriving in Cuba, for instance, Johnson's name was floated along with those of renowned Afro-Cuban politicians as a potential leader for Cuba's blacks.

On July 4, 1910, Johnson cemented his position as a target for race hatred when he dismantled the most illustrious white hope to get into the ring with him, former undefeated champion Jim Jeffries. Many of his critics refused to accept Johnson as the "true" champion, since the succession path from Jeffries to Hart, and by extension from Hart to Burns and Burns to Johnson, was predicated upon Jeffries's retirement rather than defeat. While Hart and Burns inspired only apathy, the elevation of a black man – particularly this black man – to the most coveted position in sports led many racists to declare that he could only become champion by beating Jeffries. As champion, Jeffries had famously refused to defend his title against a black opponent. Now that Johnson held the title, Jeffries initially displayed little interest in returning to the ring. Months of flattering entreaties in the white press – which hyped him as the savior of the white race, the one true champion who would wipe the trademark smile off Johnson's face – helped to coax him out of retirement from his alfalfa farm, now thirty-five years of age and over a hundred pounds heavier than his fighting

¹⁵ Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History*, p. 186.

prime. Under Tex Rickard's promotion, which emphasized the nature of the bout as nothing short of a race war, Jeffries and Johnson signed their fight articles in October 1909. They agreed to engage in a 45-round bout the following July in Reno. Rickard himself would referee, and the fighters would receive a total purse of \$101,000. Although initially planned as a winner-take-all bout, the split turned out to be fairly even, with 60 percent going to the winner and 40 percent to the loser.¹⁶

From a pugilistic perspective, the "Fight of the Century" was a terrible mismatch, one that proved the old adage that the toughest opponent a great boxer ever has to face is the passage of time. The training of the past several months, which had returned Jeffries to something resembling his old physique; the encouragement of prior champions Jim Corbett and John L. Sullivan; and the near-unanimous support of the crowd were unable to provide Jeffries with any real chance against the champion at the peak of his abilities. To avoid the unthinkable – Jeffries being counted out – the battering stopped at the end of the fifteenth round with Jeffries's corner throwing in the towel. As the Associated Press reported,

The great Jeffries was like a log. The reviled Johnson was like a black panther, beautiful in his alertness and defensive tactics.

Jeffries fought by instinct, it seemed, showing his gameness and his great fighting heart in every round, but he was only a shell of his old self. The old power to take a terrible beating and bore in until he landed the knockout blow was gone.¹⁷

Jeffries, who had expressed dislike for Johnson and blacks in general prior to the fight, was more gracious in defeat. The day after the fight, he said, "I guess it's all my own fault... I

¹⁶ Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, pp. 44, 46, 166-168. Johnson, *The Autobiography of Jack Johnson*, p. 61, gives the signing date as February 1910.

¹⁷ "Sad Crowd at Ringside," *New York Times*, 5 July 1910, p. 2.

was getting along nicely and peacefully on my alfalfa farm, but when they started calling for me, and mentioning me as the white man's hope, I guess my pride got the better of my good judgment." Though some asserted he could have defeated Johnson had he, too, been at his prime, Jeffries shook his head and remarked, "I don't think I could have beaten Jack Johnson at my best. I don't think I could have beaten him in a thousand years."¹⁸

Sadly for Johnson and his supporters, the win over Jeffries would prove to be both the high point of his prizefighting career and the beginning of his very public downfall. The scandals began shortly after the suicide of his first wife, Etta Terry Duryea. Johnson met Duryea, a Long Island "sporting lady" who was separated from her East coast gambler husband, in 1910. After her divorce went through, they wed in Pittsburgh in January 1911, an event that went largely unnoticed by the public. The marriage was short-lived and tragic. Rejected by both the white and black communities in Chicago and by her family, Etta frequently fell victim to depression. In September 1912, not long after her husband had opened the Café de Champion, where she lived with him in an upstairs apartment, Etta shot herself with his revolver. Johnson was fortunate not to have been present in the building at the time; if he had, he might have been charged with murder. A coroner's inquest ruled the death a suicide, but this did not serve to end the speculation. Although there was no evidence that Johnson had been involved in her death in any way, and some mainstream news outlets – including the *New York Times* – even applauded Johnson for his display of

¹⁸ Graeme Kent, *The Great White Hopes: The Quest to Defeat Jack Johnson* (Stroud, U.K.: Sutton Publishing, 2005), p. 86.

what appeared to be genuine grief, many in the white press argued that her death was the only foreseeable result of her interracial marriage.¹⁹

Thomas Hietala argues that “[t]his white obsession with mixed marriages might have ebbed had Johnson acted discreetly after his wife’s death.” Indeed, a case can be made that Johnson’s refusal to play the role of grieving widower, or at least to maintain an interracial love life outside of the public eye, inadvertently fueled the rise of anti-miscegenation hysteria. Just a few weeks after Etta’s death, Johnson once more became the subject of scandal with his open relationship with eighteen-year-old Lucille Cameron. When her outraged mother, Mrs. Cameron-Falconet, traveled to Chicago to “rescue” her daughter, an unrepentant Lucille was incarcerated; her mother even tried to have her declared insane. An incendiary press campaign instigated by Cameron-Falconet’s attorney soon led to an arrest warrant for Johnson on the charge of abduction. His arrest in October 1912, for which he promptly paid bond, did not satisfy the many whites who, infuriated by his “insult” to Cameron (and, by extension, the deceased Etta), called for his lynching. While Johnson sought Lucille’s freedom, the authorities attempted to use her testimony to build a Mann Act case against him. Yet Lucille revealed that she had come to Chicago on her own volition and had been there prior to meeting him. The case collapsed. In retribution, the mayor of Chicago ordered a cessation of entertainment at Johnson’s café, which also lost its liquor license. On November 1, the police nailed the doors and windows shut.²⁰

¹⁹ There are many accounts of Etta Johnson’s suicide, but one of the more detailed is in Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, pp. 289-295.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 299-311; Hietala, *The Fight of the Century*, pp. 60-62 (quote on p. 60); Morgan, “Jack Johnson Versus the American Racial Hierarchy,” p. 88.

That month, while the city of Chicago continued to harass Johnson, the federal government unleashed a far more powerful weapon by reviving the Mann Act charges to bring him to heel. Sponsored by U.S. Representative James Mann of Illinois, the United States White Slave Traffic Act of 1910 – better known by its namesake nickname – had its roots in the decision by the Theodore Roosevelt administration to sign a 1908 international treaty to end “white slavery,” the trafficking of white women as prostitutes and sex slaves. The act’s vague wording – it prohibited the transportation of females across state or national borders “for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose” – allowed a wide scope of enforcement far beyond prostitution, abduction, and teenage sex. It had become a felony to cross state lines for any reason that might be perceived immoral by arbiters of the period, i.e., federal agents and courts. Particularly vulnerable were consenting, heterosexual unmarried or adulterous adult couples traveling together or separately with the intended aim of pursuing their physical relationship in another state. (Until 1932, women were subject to arrest under the Mann Act for acquiescing in their own corruption.)²¹

Jack Johnson eluded Mann Act prosecution in the case of Lucille Cameron, but he could not evade it on another count – having violated the law in respect to a white prostitute named Belle Schreiber. His romantic involvement with her mostly pre-dated the June 1910 passage of the Mann Act. Yet the critical component to the Mann Act – that interstate transportation as well as “debauchery” or prostitution be involved – was the fact that

²¹ David J. Langum, *Crossing over the Line: Legislating Morality and the Mann Act* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 1-6. A full text of the Mann Act is available at the very informative PBS web site devoted to the documentary and book *Unforgettable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*. See http://www.pbs.org/unforgivableblackness/knockout/mannact_text.html (accessed March 30, 2009). For a copy of Johnson’s declassified FBI file, see <http://www.pbs.org/unforgivableblackness/knockout/fbifile.html> (accessed March 30, 2009).

Johnson had paid Schreiber's Pittsburgh-to-Chicago rail fare in late 1910 and had subsequently set her up as a madam. Johnson was immediately arrested and indicted on seven counts of encouraging prostitution.²² Following Lucille's release from custody and Johnson's release on bail, the two married on December 3 at his mother's Chicago home. Lucille had apparently requested the marriage because her mother's campaign to remove her from Johnson's influence had instead "ruined [her] in the eyes of the world."²³ In acceding to her request, however, Johnson only made his legal and personal situation worse. Coming as it did so closely after Etta's suicide, Lucille's incarceration, and repeated federal attempts to indict him on Mann Act violations, his union with Lucille caused shock and revulsion among much of white society, as well as dismay and anger among many in the black community. His impassioned defense of his right to pursue love outside of his own race, given at a middle-class black club when he was facing allegations of abducting Lucille, did little to improve his situation:

I do want to say that I am not a slave and that I have the right to choose who my mate shall be without the dictation of any man. I have eyes and I have a heart and when they fail to tell me who I shall have as mine I want to be put away in a lunatic asylum.

So long as I do not interfere with any other man's wife, I shall claim the right to select the woman of my own choice. Nobody else can do that for me. That is where the trouble lies.²⁴

The "trouble" with his former companion, Schreiber, did not end with a slap on the wrist, as Johnson had expected it to. As his lawyers fought those charges on the basis that

²² Roberts, *Papa Jack*, pp. 150-154, 161. As noted below, Johnson was later indicted on four additional counts of "crimes against nature."

²³ Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, pp. 312-320 (quote on p. 319).

²⁴ *Chicago Defender*, 26 October 1912, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 310.

the Mann Act was unconstitutional, the champion and his new wife had to contend with numerous other challenges. In addition to losing the Café de Champion, Johnson learned that his two upcoming Australian bouts with Sam Langford and Sam McVea were canceled. The promoter, Hugh D. McIntosh – who had staged the lucrative show four years earlier at which Johnson had won his world title –, was forced to scratch the bouts after local white sentiment against Johnson had grown too strong. When the Supreme Court refused to hear his case, Johnson’s trial went ahead, after several delays – and with four additional indictments for “crimes against nature” (defined as “unnatural and perverted practices”) – on May 5, 1913. At the end of the trial, the defense motion to toss out the four “crimes against nature” indictments was accepted, but the all-male, all-white jury quickly reached agreement on the remaining seven counts: guilty. The sentence, declared on June 4, was for Johnson to pay a \$1,000 fine and to serve a year and a day in federal prison. Before the month was out, however, Johnson, Lucille, and his nephew, Gus Rhodes, had fled to Canada, from where they were soon en route to Europe.²⁵

²⁵ Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, pp. 306-349 (quote on p. 336). Rhodes was his sister Jennie’s son; Johnson had no children of his own. In September 2008, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution calling on then-President George W. Bush to pardon Johnson posthumously for his 1913 Mann Act convictions. Despite the support of many Republican leaders, such as Senators Orrin Hatch and John McCain, Bush never acted on the resolution. (See “Johnson Could Receive Pardon,” *New York Times*, 27 September 2008.) In late July 2009, Congress passed another resolution, sponsored by Senator McCain and New York Representative Peter King, calling for Johnson’s presidential pardon. As of this writing, President Barack Obama has not indicated whether he will issue one. Should the Obama administration fail to see the former champion’s historic significance, however, an AP reporter covering the story noted that, “Johnson became the first black heavyweight champion 100 years before the nation elected Obama its first black president.” See “Lawmakers Urge Pardon for First Black Boxing Champ,” *New York Times*, 3 August 2009.

The Prelude to the Fight

Johnson's years in exile abroad, from 1913 to 1920, remain some of the least studied of his much-documented life.²⁶ In the past decade or so, a growing corpus of scholarship has sought to right this imbalance. Christopher Rivers has edited and translated Johnson's French autobiographical writings into English; Richard V. McGehee and Gerald Horne have shed light on his time in Mexico; and Theresa E. Runstedtler has explored Johnson and other black boxers of the era as transnational figures.²⁷ While this chapter cannot do justice to his global peregrinations, which prior to his arrival in Cuba included sojourns in France, Great Britain, Hungary, Russia, Argentina, Barbados, and other far-flung locales, it aims to shed light on the weeks leading up to his arrival in Havana and the nearly two months he resided there. Although the capital was already developing a nascent prizefight industry, the tremendous amount of publicity surrounding the Johnson-Willard fight unquestionably, if briefly, put it at "the center of the pugilistic map."²⁸ Yet the bout's heightened racial atmosphere, which fueled so much excitement among the American journalists and tourists who made the trek to Havana, differentiated it from previous or subsequent prizefights there and did little to promote boxing's long-term health on the island. Indeed, the reverberations from the bout were in many ways negative for local fight boosters, leading to efforts to stamp out boxing spectacles, prevent interracial matches, and discourage foreign promoters

²⁶ Even Geoffrey C. Ward's exceedingly thorough *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, which now stands as the definitive biography of Jack Johnson, devotes just over 50 pages to his exile and about the same amount to the former champion's last 26 years; the first 350 pages cover Johnson's youth, rise to the championship title, and prosecution by the U.S. government. Similarly, Randy Roberts's groundbreaking *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* spends 184 of 230 pages of its narrative text on the years leading up to Johnson's exile from the United States and the remaining pages on Johnson's life and legacy after 1913.

²⁷ See Johnson, *My Life and Battles*, ed. Christopher Rivers; Richard V. McGehee, "The Dandy and the Mauler in Mexico: Johnson, Dempsey, et al., and the Mexico City Press, 1919-1927," *Journal of Sport History* 23:1 (Spring 1996), pp. 20-33; Horne, *Black and Brown*; Runstedtler, "Journeymen."

²⁸ "Havana Is on Sport Map Now," *Havana Post*, 22 February 1915, p. 2.

(who, like Curley, might abscond without paying their debts) from staging such major attractions.

That the fight took place in Havana at all was quite by accident. In late 1914, after two successful title defenses against fellow Americans in Paris – the first a ten-round draw in December 1913 against Battling Jim Johnson in what was the first heavyweight title fight featuring two black opponents,²⁹ the second a twenty-round decision win in June 1914 against white hope Frank Moran, “The Pittsburgh Dentist” – Jack Johnson and his retinue moved frantically around Europe searching for somewhere to avoid the impending war. As he made plans to move to Buenos Aires, the fighter received a telegram from old friend Jack Curley, proposing to see him in person. With fearful American expatriates sailing back home across the Atlantic, Curley sailed the opposite way, toward England, meeting the champion in his Paddington flat. There they began to work out the details for Johnson’s next title defense, which would be against a giant but little-known Kansas heavyweight named Jess Willard.

“Giant” was a word often tossed around in the early twentieth century to describe heavyweights, the one boxing division that lacked a maximum weight requirement; it was frequently used to characterize men who today might compete in the cruiserweight or even light heavyweight category. But the nickname was accurate in Willard’s case. He stood about six foot six-and-a-half inches in stature, trimmed down to a fight weight of roughly 230 to 240 pounds, and had an 84-inch reach, which in boxing is measured from fingertip to

²⁹ The myth persists today that, once he became world champion, Jack Johnson refused to defend his title against black challengers. The evidence appears to be that, once champion, he avoided the more difficult “black hopes” he had earlier faced, such as Sam Langford and Joe Jeannette, in part because it was more lucrative to fight white opponents. Jim Johnson made for an easier target. See Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, pp. 353-354. Following this bout, the next time two black fighters met to contest the heavyweight throne was champion Joe Louis’s first-round knockout of John Henry Lewis in January 1939.

fingertip in a straight line across the breast with arms outstretched. Curley – backed financially by theater magnate Harry Frazee (who would become notorious, at least in New England, as the Boston Red Sox owner who sold Babe Ruth’s contract to the New York Yankees in 1919) – had already worked out the details with Willard and his manager, Tom Jones. For an agreed sum of \$30,000 and training expenses, Johnson agreed to a 45-round bout against Willard to be held in northern Mexico near the U.S. border to provide ease of access for U.S. tourists, whom Curley anticipated would make up a majority of the audience. Later, he and Curley would offer vastly contrasting accounts as to whether the substantial purse – which equaled that offered to Tommy Burns for having given Johnson a title shot – was only the first of many inducements to Johnson to “lay down” to Willard.³⁰

Eventually, the bout was scheduled to occur in Juarez, across the U.S.-Mexico border from El Paso, Texas, on March 6, 1915. That it was shifted to Havana the following month owed to a confluence of several near-simultaneous events: the violence, upheaval, and factionalism of the Mexican Revolution which led to specific threats on Johnson’s personal safety and liberty; the determination by some U.S. government officials to extradite him from Mexico; Johnson’s continued physical rootlessness, which made the decision to settle temporarily in Cuba an easier one; his determination to fulfill the terms of his contract with Jack Curley without undue delay; the long tourist season in Cuba which attracted thousands of wealthy Americans each winter; and the capital’s recent surge in the construction of sports facilities and the staging of boxing shows, which made the possibility of relocating a title fight there a more realistic one.

³⁰ Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, pp. 365-370; Runstedtler, “Journeymen,” pp. 358-359.

In early 1915, Johnson and his stalwarts left Europe for Buenos Aires, from where they planned to reach Tampico, Mexico, via Barbados and Cuba. As they made their way closer to Mexico, that country's revolutionary ferment reached a high pitch. By the fall of 1914, following their successful ouster of dictatorial President Victoriano Huerta, the anti-Huerta factions led by Generals Francisco "Pancho" Villa and Emiliano Zapata declared their split from their former allies, Generals Venustiano Carranza and Álvaro Obregón, in the Convention of Aguascaliente. While Carranza, supported by Obregón, declared himself President (and was recognized in that role by the Wilson Administration in 1916), Villa and Zapata carried on their rebellion. After briefly holding the capital, Mexico City, Villa's Army of the North and Zapata's Army of the South retreated to their respective regions to foment local unrest. By 1920, a level of political stability had returned to Mexico, but at great cost to the country and its former leaders; Carranza and Zapata had been murdered, Villa had retired from revolution (only to be assassinated himself in 1923), and Obregón had become president.³¹

Prior to Johnson's arrival in Cuba, Curley had greased the way for the fight to occur in Mexico by securing Carranza's cooperation in allowing the champion to land at the port of Veracruz (which was controlled by Carranza's Constitutionals) and Villa's in staging it in Juarez (under the Conventionist aegis) in return for a portion of the receipts. Yet as Johnson made his way to Havana, Carranza's attitude toward the bout – and toward the exiled fighter himself – visibly changed. The president's about-face appears to have been based at least in part upon considerations of continued Wilson Administration support

³¹ For an accessible introduction to the complexities of the Mexican Revolution, see Michael J. Gonzales, *The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1940* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002).

against Villa and Zapata. The U.S. Bureau of Investigation, hoping to secure Johnson's deportation from Mexico as an "undesirable citizen," offered a financial reward to those assisting with his expulsion.³² As early as mid-January, Carranza contacted the Constitutionalist consul in El Paso, Texas, asking for details of the upcoming Johnson-Willard bout and stating that, should the champion attempt to travel there, "he will be arrested for aiding the convention cause, as it is thought that Villa will make his own profit out of any event that comes off at Juarez."³³

In early February, rumors had it that Carranza's men had arrested Johnson in Veracruz "on the ground that he was a friend or ally of Villa, and also because the first chief does not intend to allow the projected prize fight at Juarez take place if he can prevent it."³⁴ Although Johnson had not yet departed Barbados and was nowhere near Veracruz, the rumor was accurate about Carranza's intentions. By February 10, Johnson sailed from Barbados on a schooner for Cienfuegos, Cuba, "apparently unaware that Carran[z]a has announced that he will arrest him on sight as a friend of Pancho Villa."³⁵ He reached Havana by train on February 22, accompanied by his wife, nephew, and three others.³⁶

Once in the capital, Johnson quickly learned of Carranza's plans to arrest and deport him. He still wished to depart for Mexico the following day, but he was forced to modify his original plans, which had been to take the Morro Castle steamer to Veracruz on the

³² Roberts, *Papa Jack*, p. 198.

³³ "Don't Want Jack Johnson," *Havana Post*, 15 January 1915, p. 2; "Carranza Orders Arrest of 'Champ' Jack Johnson," *Havana Post*, 27 January 1915, p. 1.

³⁴ "Reported Jack Johnson Arrested at Vera Cruz," *Havana Post*, 9 February 1915, p. 1.

³⁵ "Jack Johnson on a Schooner," *Havana Post*, 12 February 1915, p. 1. In his autobiography, Johnson recalls that he had initially planned to sail directly from Barbados to Veracruz or Tampico, but that "owners of vessels and crews [in Barbados] were dubious about venturing far out to sea because of the submarine danger which they believe existed, because of Germany's threats to carry on 'ruthless sea warfare.'" See Johnson, *Jack Johnson Is a Dandy*, p. 199.

³⁶ "Jack Johnson Is in Havana," *Havana Post*, 22 February 1915, p. 1.

afternoon of Tuesday, February 23. He approached the Ward Line about taking him directly to Tampico in return for naming “their own price,” but the steamer turned down the offer as “impracticable.” The only option was to charter a steamer, but most were already engaged in exporting sugar. Finally, Johnson arranged for a tramp steamer to take him and his party to Tampico – but when approached by the Havana Stadium management to appear in a boxing exhibition there on Wednesday night, February 24, he agreed to move his departure date to February 25.³⁷ Curley, in El Paso, continued to hold out hope that the fight would be held in Juarez, but acknowledged that, given the delay in getting Johnson there, the March 6 date would need to be pushed back.³⁸ By the following day, however, Johnson – who was attracting large crowds throughout Havana – was refusing to leave for Mexico at all. New information about Carranza’s betrayal and the extent of his reach in Mexico appear to have been the motivating factors; the *Havana Post* reported that, “Persons who are well acquainted with conditions as they are now in Mexico showed the champion beyond any question that he would be running a grave risk to take any chances with Carranza.” Whether these “persons” were the same ones who hoped to benefit by Johnson’s continued association with the Stadium – its matchmaker and manager, B.F. Farris, who had been recruited from the Seminole Athletic Club of Jacksonville, Florida, shortly after the Stadium’s opening, and owner, George M. Bradt – who, not coincidentally, also owned the *Havana Post*, the English-language daily newspaper written for and by the U.S. expatriate community – is not known. As word reached Curley – who had been secretly, if unsuccessfully, negotiating with federal officials in Chicago to try to secure Johnson’s return to the States after the bout – of

³⁷ “Johnson Is Popular,” *Havana Post*, 23 February 1915, p. 2.

³⁸ “Curley Admits Fight Must Be Postponed,” *Havana Post*, 23 February 1915, p. 2.

Johnson's refusal to leave Cuba, he twice cabled the champion urging him "to charter a steamer for Tampico and assuring him that everything was all right." Johnson, eager to meet his contract obligations, responded that he would still battle Willard for the championship – but in Havana, not Juarez. Havana, he told Curley, was an "ideal spot for it."³⁹

That night, as Johnson fought two short exhibition bouts at the Stadium against his nephew and another sparring partner, Frank Hagney of Australia, Curley made immediate plans to depart for Havana. In the meantime, Johnson – ensconced with Lucille at a "Spanish" establishment, the Hotel Estrella (which had not drawn the color line against them, unlike many other hotels in the capital) – appeared to be enjoying his Havana sojourn, apparently finding that city "the nearest to Paris of any that he has visited yet." The idea was even floated for him to remain in Havana, become a Cuban citizen, and run for political office; as a naturalized citizen, he "would be eligible to any office in Cuba except that of senator or president and his popularity would be such that he could command the entire colored vote in any part of Cuba and would soon put such colored leaders as Congressman [Generoso] Campos Marquetti and [Manuel] Escoto Carrion into the shade."⁴⁰ When in early March Johnson purchased from famed Obispo Street tailor Larry Spero "ten suits varying from a pair of the whitest linen to match his eyeballs to the blackest full dress to match his complexion," as the *Havana Post* crudely noted, the crowds were so great that police were called in to facilitate traffic. Apparently, local politicians viewed this latest Johnson

³⁹ "McVea and Jim Johnson to Clash on Saturday," *Havana Post*, 16 February 1915, p. 2; "Jack Johnson to Stay Here," *Havana Post*, 24 February 1915, p. 1; Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, pp. 370-372 ("ideal spot" quote on p. 372).

⁴⁰ "Havana Fans See Champion," *Havana Post*, 25 February 1915, pp. 1-2; "Curley Comes to Cuba Now," *Havana Post*, 25 February 1915, p. 1; "Cuban News Review Day by Day," *The Times of Cuba* 3:3 (March 1915), pp. 18-22. According to another item in this issue of *The Times of Cuba*, "Johnson looked to a local hotel clerk like a "distinguished negro"... [but] he had to change his quarters just the same." See "They Say," *The Times of Cuba* 3:3 (March 1915), pp. 50-54.

development with interest, as such an exorbitant purchase seemed to indicate that he was contemplating remaining in Havana, pursuing Cuban citizenship, and “entering the arena to wrest leadership honors from Campos Marquetti, [Juan Felipe] Risquet and Juan Gualberto Gomez.”⁴¹

Despite the welcoming attitude of many, the Johnsons’ stay in Havana was not unmarred by vicious racism – as when, in late March, a white manicurist refused to serve Lucille because she “had married a negro,” and then got into a physical altercation with her. Although the proprietor apologized to Johnson, the manicurist refused to do so, insulting the champion and throwing a wet towel in her (presumably former) boss’s face as she stormed out.⁴² Moreover, not all Americans welcomed the possibility of such a high-profile mixed-race bout, especially one that appeared to be a lock for Johnson. Captain Cushman A. Rice declared that he and his fellow ranch owners were “unalterably opposed to having [Johnson] beat up a white man,” fearing the “inter-racial feeling” that would be stirred up.⁴³ The editors of the *Times of Cuba*, a monthly English-language expatriate publication, split the difference. While arguing against the principle of mixed bouts of minor significance, due to the “very well defined color line here” and the violent suppression of the Partido Independiente de Color partisans in Oriente in 1912, one that left 5,000 Afro-Cubans dead, it called the Johnson-Willard bout “the exception that proves the rule”:

For this battle is not between Cubans (Johnson hasn’t declared his citizenship intentions as yet), and it is an event in the sporting world. It is doubtful if the contest, no matter how it results, will have the slightest political effect in Cuba. On the other hand, it should have a stimulating effect

⁴¹ “J. Johnson Replenishes Depleted Wardrobe,” *Havana Post*, 7 March 1915, p. 2.

⁴² *Milwaukee Free Press*, 26 March 1915, quoted in Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, p. 375.

⁴³ *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, 26 February 1915, quoted in Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, p. 373.

on the business interests of the city and especially the hotels and transportation lines, as it should bring several thousand visitors here and will place considerable money in circulation. The contest for the heavyweight championship of the world is exceptional per se.⁴⁴

Thus, while some observers initially found the likelihood of a Johnson-Willard bout in Havana to be undesirable or unlikely – even Stadium publicity agent and prizefighting booster G.W. Krick, in his daily column for the *Havana Post*, held it to be a “ten-to-one shot... that Curley will be the dictator and Johnson will do what he says,” i.e., travel to Juarez – others understood the benefits of wooing the champion.⁴⁵ The American expatriate community in Havana, particularly, saw endless financial possibilities in boosting nearly year-round U.S. tourism with Europe and nearby Mexico at war, and the bout fit perfectly into that agenda. Even before Johnson’s arrival on the island, the *Havana Post* featured screaming headlines attesting to the bloodshed occurring in Mexico, particularly at the hands of Pancho Villa and his associates, and to the political, economic, and social instability that led to protracted civil war.⁴⁶ With World War I raging in Europe and debates over what the U.S. should do with the Philippines after years of fighting insurgents there, it is no wonder that the Cuban-based U.S. community, which was closely tied to native government and business elites, chose to emphasize the island’s relative peace and stability, its open access to U.S. investors, and its willingness to hue to American foreign policy imperatives. Any hint that

⁴⁴ “Discourse the Twenty-Eighth,” *The Times of Cuba* 3:4 (April 1915), pp. 3-13 (quote on p. 7). As Aline Helg notes, the number of dead in the Oriente massacre remains unknown. The Cuban government estimated the rebel death toll at over 2,000, while other contemporary sources claimed it was between 5,000 and 6,000. The figure of 5,000 was given in the *Times of Cuba* article. See Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, p. 225.

⁴⁵ G.W. Krick, “Stadium Stabs,” *Havana Post*, 2 March 1915, p. 3.

⁴⁶ See, for example, “Executions Are Cause of More Mexican Friction; Americans Warned by State Department That It Is Better Not to Go Into Mexico Now,” *Havana Post*, 2 January 1915, pp. 1-2; “Villa Killing Off Enemies,” *Havana Post*, 3 January 1915, p. 2; “Tampico Is Fearful of an Attack from Pancho Villa at Any Time; Secretary of State Bryan Hears that American Women Are Having to Flee for Fear of Villa,” *Havana Post*, 10 January 1915, p. 1; and “Barbarous Mexico,” *Havana Post*, 11 January 1915, p. 4.

Cuba – and particularly Havana – was more quasi-colonial backwater than comfortable U.S. enclave was fiercely rebuffed, as when an editorial in the *Minneapolis Journal* argued against Philippine independence on the grounds that, “We have learned our lesson in Cuba, where, since self-government was granted, two interventions have been necessary to preserve peace and order.” As the editors of the *Havana Post* corrected,

If The Journal will brush up a little on its history it will learn that there has only been one intervention in Cuba since the Cubans were declared free and independent. If it will investigate a little further it will also find that it drew a very poor comparison when it mentioned Cuba and the Cubans in the same connection with the Philippines and the Filipinos. Cuba is not a model of self-government just as Minneapolis is not a model of city government. But there is no similarity with conditions here and those obtaining in the Philippines, and Cuba, considering that the United States left the island sooner than it should have done, with the exception of the little trouble in August, 1906, has done quite as well as big countries many times older, and has given the United States practically no trouble.⁴⁷

Having already been exploited by U.S. concerns for its agricultural crops, Cuba now beckoned to ambitious Americans as a burgeoning tourist haven. As Rosalie Schwartz notes in her work on the history of tourism on the island, “Cuba carved its tourist niche according to the appeals that Cuban entrepreneurs, foreign investors, and its tourist commission thought the U.S. market would buy.”⁴⁸ While Schwartz and other cultural historians of pre-1959 Cuba have focused primarily on the growth of travel options (steamship, ferry, airplanes), luxury hotels, casinos, music and dance venues, movie theaters, and the sex trade, less commented upon has been the boom in the construction of athletic facilities in Havana

⁴⁷ “Misstatement of Facts,” *Havana Post*, 7 January 1915, p. 4. The “little trouble in August, 1906,” refers to the successful Liberal revolt against President Tomás Estrada Palma, which led to the start of the second U.S. occupation of Cuba. See Hugh Thomas, *Cuba or the Pursuit of Freedom* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998 [1971]), pp. 471-480.

⁴⁸ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, p. 15.

and smaller municipalities. Coming as it did – along with the island’s tourist boom more generally – with the disruption of travel to Europe and the rapid development of southern Florida at the onset of World War I, the building of arenas, gymnasiums, and racetracks also coincided with the worldwide rise of pugilism in areas under heavy British or U.S. influence: notably, Australia, the Philippines, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. Prizefighting thus had its earliest heyday in Cuba at a time when it was first being marketed to North Americans as a tourist haven. And the biggest tourist event of Cuba’s first two decades would coincide with the potential for a return to white supremacy at the highest pinnacle of sports achievement for that age: the heavyweight championship of the world.

The World Comes to Havana

While Jack Curley had initially hoped to talk Jack Johnson into going to Juarez, it quickly became apparent that there was no safe way for the champion to get there. Carranza’s control of the main Gulf of Mexico ports and Mexico City made it impossible to enter via the Caribbean or overland through Central America. There was no way to enter Juarez overland from across the U.S. border, since officials there were waiting to arrest Johnson for Mann Act violations. The only two possible means of entry were impracticable and expensive – chartering an airplane, or sailing via Cape Horn and around Mexico’s Atlantic coastline.⁴⁹ In late February, although he issued statements from El Paso that, “There will be no fight unless it is held in Juarez,” Curley seemed more concerned about competing Havana promoters who might attempt to “steal” his fight. He ordered his

⁴⁹ “Plight of Jack Johnson,” *New York Times*, 3 February 1915, p. 12; Roberts, *Papa Jack*, p. 198.

secretary, Bill Frawley, to pack up his office equipment for shipment abroad.⁵⁰ In particular, he was determined to stop Johnson's ongoing negotiations with the Stadium's promoters to hold the bout there, wiring him to cease such efforts until Curley landed in Havana.⁵¹ Curley arrived in the capital on March 2, visiting both Oriental Park and the Havana Stadium on his first day there. His initial feeling was that the Stadium – with its 12,000-person seating capacity – was too small for a world championship fight of such significance, but that the Hippodrome might work.⁵² At the same time, he cabled the treasurer of the Johnson-Willard syndicate, one A. Weil, in El Paso that Johnson was being “misled” by local promoters, and optimistically concluded, “Everything favorable for Juarez.”⁵³

Privately, however, Curley confided to friends that he despaired of persuading Johnson to accept the original fight terms, as “the sporting men in Havana had filled the black man full of lies about his treatment if he went to Mexico, how negroes were especially hated there and how unsafe it would be for him to undertake the trip.” Adding to Curley's woes, Tex Rickard – who had promoted the famous Johnson-Jeffries bout on July 4, 1910, and had since retired to Buenos Aires – was exploring the possibility of staging the bout in Argentina. With Rickard proposing to match Curley's guarantee and Havana promoters seemingly conspiring to steal the championship bout from under his nose, Curley was forced

⁵⁰ Untitled article, *New York Times*, 26 February 1915, p. 10.

⁵¹ “Johnson Changes Plans,” *New York Times*, 27 February 1915, p. 9. Bradt claimed that Johnson had offered him fifteen percent of the gross receipts (ten percent of receipts above \$50,000) if the bout were held at the Stadium. See “Curley Signs Misstatement,” *Havana Post*, 13 March 1915, p. 2. An anonymous item in the March 1915 issue of *The Times of Cuba* states that, shortly after arriving in Havana, Johnson approached Curly Brown, developer of the Oriental Park racetrack, about promoting the bout, but “[t]hat Brown gave him some good advice but declined to enter into the promotion lists.” See “They Say,” *The Times of Cuba* 3:3 (March 1915), p. 53.

⁵² “Jack Curley Is on the Ground,” *Havana Post*, 3 March 1915, p. 1.

⁵³ “Johnson May Go to Juarez for Fight,” *New York Times*, 3 March 1915, p. 12.

to act quickly to maintain control of both the fighters and the fight.⁵⁴ By March 7, Curley confirmed that the Johnson-Willard bout would indeed take place in Havana, during the first week of April. The next day, as Willard cabled his acceptance of the terms, Curley firmed up plans to hold the event at the Marianao racetrack – no doubt a bitter disappointment to George Bradt, who disputed Curley’s story to the local newspaper, *La Noche*, that Bradt had sought \$7,500 for renting the Stadium on the day of the bout only.⁵⁵ Willard – having recently broken training camp against the advice of his manager, Tom Jones, in frustration over the delays keeping Johnson from landing in Juarez –, after further negotiations with Curley over travel and other costs, departed for Cuba via New Orleans and Key West on March 11, accompanied by Jones and Weil. The trio arrived in Havana five days later, to a raucous local welcome from about 7,000 onlookers.⁵⁶

With their match-up scheduled for Sunday, April 4, the government quickly acted to demonstrate its support for serving as host to the most important athletic event ever held in Cuba. On March 15, President Menocal and his two sons – as well as Secretary of the Government Hevia, Postmaster General Hernández, Governor Rodríguez, and two aides – arrived at Jack Johnson’s public workout to express his administration’s support for the title fight. Hevia, impressed by Johnson, offered to wager \$100 on him – a bet that the president was said to have matched, although he later vociferously denied it, even threatening to end future boxing contests in Cuba should such rumors persist. At the Johnson workout,

⁵⁴ “Fight Likely in Havana,” *New York Times*, 4 March 1915, p. 10.

⁵⁵ “Willard Fights Here in April,” *Havana Post*, 8 March 1915, p. 1; “Johnson-Willard Fight Occurs Here April 3rd,” *Havana Post*, 9 March 1915, p. 2; “Curley Signs Misstatement,” *Havana Post*, 13 March 1915, p. 2.

⁵⁶ “Now It’s Willard’s Turn,” *New York Times*, 24 February 1915, p. 10; “Willard on Way Here,” *Havana Post*, 10 March 1915, p. 1; “Willard Off for Havana,” *New York Times*, 12 March 1915, p. 12; untitled article, *New York Times*, 14 March 1915, p. 14; “Willard Arrives in Cuba,” *New York Times*, 17 March 1915, p. 12; “‘Cowboy’ Jess Now in Havana,” *Havana Post*, 17 March 1915, p. 2.

Menocal told Curley that his visit was aimed, in part, to assure the public that, despite rumors to the contrary, he was in favor of holding the bout in Havana. Two weeks later, Menocal visited Willard's camp in Miramar.⁵⁷

Once all of the principals – Johnson, Willard, and Curley – were in the capital, local fight fever grew more heated. Johnson made frequent appearances at the Hippodrome races, while Willard was invited to various social functions around the city. Each fighter had daily scheduled workouts open to the public for a small fee – Johnson at the Stadium, Willard at Miramar Garden.⁵⁸ These offered many Havana denizens and tourists the opportunity to view the fighters in person for the first time. The fight not only drew boatloads of new tourists to Havana, particularly from the U.S., but it also served to extend the current season, which normally would have ended by late March or early April due to encroaching heat.

With the fight scheduled to go 45 rounds – by 1915, an increasingly rare occurrence even in championship disputes – the conditioning of both fighters, but particularly Johnson at 37 years of age, was of the utmost importance in determining who might be able to last the distance. Johnson himself later claimed, “Preceding the fight with Willard, I did no serious training. I engaged in a few boxing exhibitions and did a few ‘strong man’ stunts, such as pulling against horses and permitting a horse to stand on my stomach. This was about the extent of my training.” This claim was critical to establishing, as his autobiography and numerous post-fight interviews sought to do, that he and Curley had agreed during the initial planning in London that Johnson would “lay down” to Willard in return for financial

⁵⁷ “Menocal Sees Jack Johnson,” *Havana Post*, 16 March 1915, p. 2; “Cuban President at Ring,” *New York Times*, 16 March 1915, p. 12; “Crowds Watch Fighters,” *New York Times*, 29 March 1915, p. 10; “Menocal Rebukes Fight Gamblers,” *New York Times*, 3 April 1915, p. 10; “President Did Not Place Bet,” *Havana Post*, 3 April 1915, p. 2. One report stated that Police Commissioner Duque Estrada also bet \$500 on Johnson.

⁵⁸ “The World’s Greatest Battle” (advertisement), *Havana Post*, 21 March 1915, p. 2.

remuneration and so that Curley could expedite Johnson's return to the United States to see his ailing mother. As Johnson recalled, his indifference to training raised alarm bells among "Mrs. Johnson, my nephew Gus, my sparring partners and friends," but that he was able to fool more experienced observers: "I boxed occasionally with Bob Armstrong, Sam McVey and some other American boxers whom I had previously fought in America, but as I always had been able to box rings around all of them, they never knew whether or not I was in shape."⁵⁹

Although most contemporary and later commentators have discounted Johnson's claims of throwing the fight, as will be discussed below, some Havana observers corroborated that he did not train as might be expected of an aging world champion facing a slightly younger, taller, heavier opponent who – albeit far less skilled – possessed dangerous punching power and "the steam of a locomotive."⁶⁰ As his biographers demonstrate, Johnson had a long tradition of slacking in training, instead relying on natural defensive instincts and ability to evade the rushes and haymakers of less able opponents, and on a willingness to fight in the clinches when fatigue overtook him. On several occasions, audiences had jeered him for "carrying" fighters the distance rather than knock them out early, as he clearly might have done. Yet whether he underestimated Willard, who, in greener days, had once hidden behind a referee to avoid taking a beating; whether his stamina or desire to train, or even to retain the championship, had deserted him after two years in exile;

⁵⁹ Johnson, *Jack Johnson Is a Dandy*, pp. 197-203 (quotes on p. 201-202). Tellingly, this chapter of Johnson's autobiography is entitled, "The Frame-Up for Freedom."

⁶⁰ G.W. Krick, "Stadium Stabs," *Havana Post*, 25 March 1915, p. 2. Although Willard was only three years younger than Johnson (who was only two years younger than Curley), at the time of the fight he had a cleaner lifestyle than did the hard-partying Johnson. Many journalists also believed Willard to have been substantially younger than Johnson and referred to the fighters' perceived ages repeatedly in articles dated before and after the bout.

whether he feared overworking himself in the hot Havana climate; or whether, as he claimed throughout the last decades of his life, he simply chose not to train for a fixed fight are questions that cannot definitively be answered.⁶¹ Nonetheless, G.W. Krick noted ominously of the champion's training regimen two weeks before the bout, "Johnson has failed to show his old time steam and appears to be taking things easily. A great question now in the minds of the critics is whether or not the champion can go the route."⁶²

Willard, on the contrary, was gaining admirers – quite a few who were willing, literally, to bet on his victory. Not only was he a gigantic, fit specimen of "white hope," but he also showed marked improvement in his public workouts, including a surprising addition to his arsenal: clever footwork.⁶³ His left jab was coming along, and he had a strong chin. While his supporters admitted he was "far from a finished boxer," Willard appeared to be a quick study. He was, of course, the sentimental favorite owing to his position as potential savior of the white race; even those white men who liked or sympathized with Johnson (as many claimed to do after his loss) showed little compunction in rooting for their race ally. Interestingly, a significant number of "Cowboy" Jess's fans were women; at a workout he held in late March at Miramar Garden, about a third of the 500 spectators were female. While American betting began in favor of Johnson, 11 to 5, the *Havana Post* early on placed a

⁶¹ Johnson did shorten his workouts in late March because he feared he was losing too much weight in the searing Havana heat. See "Johnson Agrees on Welch as Referee," *New York Times*, 26 March 1915, p. 11, and "Johnson Fears Climate," *New York Times*, 27 March 1915, p. 12.

⁶² G.W. Krick, "Stadium Stabs," *Havana Post*, 20 March 1915, p. 3.

⁶³ G.W. Krick, "Stadium Stabs," *Havana Post*, 26 March 1915, p. 5; "Johnson Agrees on Welch as Referee," *New York Times*, 26 March 1915, p. 11.

\$500 bet on Willard “against the Johnson money offering the best odds.”⁶⁴ Within a few days, the betting odds had dropped to between 2 and 2 ½ to 1 in favor of Johnson.⁶⁵

Just over a week before the fight, a controversy involving U.S. government officials and religious ministers briefly threatened to overtake the entire event. William E. Gonzales, the U.S. Minister to Cuba, sent a letter to *Havana Post* publisher Bradt on March 26 protesting to the fight’s scheduled date of April 4 – which he had recently discovered was Easter Sunday. Gonzales felt that, should the event be held on that sacred day, second in importance only to Christmas in the Christian tradition, “it will inevitably produce a storm of protests from the United States against this country.” Although he left the matter up to the promoters, he closed by warning, “I feel that these millions [in the U.S.] will resent this contest being held on Easter Sunday and their resentment will fall not upon the participators in the contest but upon the country in which it is held. I think that this would not only be an injustice but very unfortunate for Cuba.” Bradt supported changing the date but claimed that his paper had not publicly commented upon the issue because of what might be perceived as sour grapes over the Stadium’s losing the bout to Oriental Park.⁶⁶ The Secretary of the Government, under Menocal’s authorization, quickly moved to alter the date. In addition to

⁶⁴ “Women Flock to Willard’s Camp,” *New York Times*, 25 March 1915, p. 9; “Havana Post Has \$500 Willard Bet,” *Havana Post*, 24 March 1915, p. 4.

⁶⁵ “Johnson Agrees on Welch as Referee,” *New York Times*, 26 March 1915, p. 11.

⁶⁶ “The American Minister’s Appeal to Suspend Fight Planned for Easter Morn,” *Havana Post*, 28 March 1915, p. 1; “American Envoy Has Fight Put Over,” *New York Times*, 28 March 1915, p. 11; “A Desecration Avoided,” *Havana Post*, 28 March 1915, p. 4. Sports journalist Lester Bromberg, who wrote for the *New York World-Telegram* and *New York Sun*, wrote of the incident years later that “an American, of doubtful reputation, publishing an English-language paper in Havana” (obviously Bradt) had tried to shake down Jack Curley in return for not making a fuss over the Easter date; Curley refused to pay and the story went public. Of Bradt, without mentioning names, Bromberg goes on, “The story was he’d fled Chattanooga under charges of arson and homicide, because his haberdashery had burned mysteriously, the night watchman losing his life. Now this character had turned ultra pious.” Bromberg also claims that Curley sought the intervention of U.S. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, whom he had once met, to get U.S. Minister Gonzales to back down, but that Bryan “couldn’t have cared less to help him.” Lester Bromberg, *Boxing’s Unforgettable Fights* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1962), pp. 86-87.

pressure from the U.S. Minister, the Cuban president had received about 600 telegrams and cable dispatches opposing the Easter date. Even the fighters claimed to support the change. Willard said he did not wish to box on a Sunday at all, and both men had received letters from fight fans asking them to refuse to box on Easter. Despite grumblings from merchants who feared a weekday bout would hurt sales, Curley quickly gave into these entreaties and moved it to the afternoon of Monday, April 5. Ticket holders were informed that their Sunday passes would be valid for the following day.⁶⁷

The Cuban government reciprocated the gesture by naming the hours of April 5 after 10 a.m. a national holiday, which enabled all government employees who had purchased tickets for Sunday to be able to attend the 12:30 p.m. bout. After initially opting to close its session early, the Cuban Congress declared it would not convene at all on April 5, saving both its members and Menocal the trouble of attending his scheduled address. At least twenty large private businesses followed the government's lead by shutting their doors at 10 a.m. the day of the fight.⁶⁸ One sector that did not receive the day off was the police force; a double force was slated to line the racetrack, the ring, and parts of the electric car line between Havana and Marianao. Military forces were also kept in reserve.⁶⁹

While the postponement satisfied the U.S. and Cuban governments, and the national holiday was welcome news to many ordinary Cubans, a binational group of ministers used

⁶⁷ "Championship Fight April 5," *Havana Post*, 28 March 1915, p. 2; "A Desecration Avoided," *Havana Post*, 28 March 1915, p. 4; "Havana's Fight Holiday," *New York Times*, 28 March 1915, p. 11.

⁶⁸ "Havana's Fight Holiday," *New York Times*, 28 March 1915, p. 11; untitled article, *New York Times*, 30 March 1915, p. 12; "President of Cuba to See Big Fight," *New York Times*, 2 April 1915, p. 12; "Notice" [advertisement from The American Grocery on its early closing on fight day], *Havana Post*, 4 April 1915, p. 2.

⁶⁹ "Willard Confident That He Will Win," *New York Times*, 1 April 1915, p. 13. The day after the fight, provincial governor Pedro Bustillo sent a letter of thanks to the chief of the national police for the order that his forces had maintained during the bout, noting with approval that no major incidents had occurred under their watch. See "Carta de felicitación," *El Mundo*, 7 April 1915, p. 3.

the Johnson-Willard fight to call for a complete ban on prizefighting on the island. They addressed their call to President Menocal, Governor Bustillo, and Havana mayor Acosta.⁷⁰ Eleven U.S. ministers and one bishop resident in Havana, among them J.E. Hubbard, General Secretary of the local Young Men Christian's Association branch, echoed their sentiment in the following letter to the *Havana Post* only days before the fight:

To the American Residents or Sojourning in Cuba:

The Cuban Ministry, representing the various Evangelical Missions centered in Havana, have presented to the President, the Governor of the Province of Havana and the Alcalde of Marianao a protest against the prize fight, advertised to take place in the Oriental Park on Monday, April 5th.

We, the undersigned, citizens of the United States, ministers of the Gospel, residing in Cuba, while not joining directly in said protest because we have no desire to complain of the action of the authorities of the Republic of Cuba nor to interfere in the internal affairs of the Island, desire nevertheless to call the attention of the Cuban Government to the fact that prize fighting is prohibited by the laws of the United States; that it is favored only by the baser elements of the population and that if it is permitted in Cuba, it will have the effect to draw hither those who desire to gratify their lower instincts in ways prohibited by the laws of their country.⁷¹

Rather than engaging the religious leaders on the issue of whether prizefighting in Cuba should be banned, the *Post's* editorial writers initiated a battle of semantics, noting that, "there is no United States' law against" the sport and that many states did allow it in some form, albeit usually with restrictions. Nor did the implication that only "baser elements" favored professional boxing appear to impact ticket sales, local fascination with the fighters (Willard was by then attracting 5,000 paid visitors to his training camp, Johnson over 3,000), or the determination of most Cuban and American elites in Havana to be in attendance. As

⁷⁰ "Ministers Protest Over Prize Fight," *Havana Post*, 30 March 1915, p. 2; "Ministers in Cuba Protest Big Fight," *New York Times*, 30 March 1915, p. 12.

⁷¹ "Ministers Protest Over Prize Fight," *Havana Post*, 30 March 1915, p. 2. The other signers were J. Milton Green, M.N. McCall, V.B. Clark, E.E. Clements, R.L. Whitehead, George B. Myers, W.W. Steel, H.R. Hulse (bishop), H.B. Bardwell, H.B. Gibbons, and R.B. Rauf.

if to emphasize how out of touch the ministers were with local public and political sentiment, the promoters had arranged for President Menocal, his cabinet members and friends, the provincial governor, the Havana mayor, the army's commanding general, and the American minister to be present in special ringside seats. In the end, the Christian ministers' protest had little or no effect upon the U.S. government's tacit support, and the Cuban government and public's overt support, of the bout. With the Easter issue satisfactorily resolved and without further U.S. intervention in Cuban affairs forthcoming, the debate over prizefighting on the island had died for the time being. Moreover, the futility of the ministers' gesture reflected the limited impact of the evangelical Christian church on Cuban society – which would be demonstrated by the YMCA's failure to gain more than a marginal foothold in Havana during its brief tenure there.⁷²

Johnson-Willard ticket sales continued to be brisk as the fight drew closer. Exclusive athletic clubs and social organizations snapped up the best seats: eight boxes costing \$2,000 to the Cuban-American Jockey Club; \$3,700 worth of seats to the Vedado Tennis Club; \$2,500 to the Union Club. Relatives of prominent politicians also sought to make their presence known; the brothers of current President Menocal and of former President Tomás Estrada Palma each bought two boxes, as did Postmaster General Hernández. Large parties from the U.S. – including a group of 85 people from New Orleans – made reservations from abroad. And once again demonstrating the interest of women in this fight, and in prizefighting in Havana more generally, several Cuban society women purchased seats at

⁷² “The Protest of the Ministers,” *Havana Post*, 30 March 1915, p. 4; “The Protest of the Ministers,” *Havana Post*, 31 March 1915, p. 4; “Ministers Write Again,” *Havana Post*, 31 March 1915, p. 8; “Crowds Watch Fighters,” *New York Times*, 29 March 1915, p. 10; “Ministers in Cuba Protest Big Fight,” *New York Times*, 30 March 1915, p. 12; “President of Cuba to See Big Fight,” *New York Times*, 2 April 1915, p. 12. For the YMCA's impact upon Havana sports and society, see Chapter 1.

ringside – presumably, close enough to hear and feel the exertions of the fighters. One wonders whether the high-status women and men who occupied those seats realized ahead of time that the transfer of sweat, saliva, and blood was a hazard of sitting at ringside.⁷³ While the *New York Times* reported that most women in attendance at the Johnson-Willard fight were American, “many other women, members of Cuba’s aristocracy, from the seclusion of the racetrack clubhouse trained their glasses on the battling gladiators.”⁷⁴

To accommodate the large numbers of people who were expected to see the fight, the Marianao Railway added additional electric rail cars to its regular Havana-Marianao service. Since it was anticipated that most in attendance would be traveling from Havana, the railway was prepared to handle the transport of as many as 25,000 people on a direct route from central Havana to the Hippodrome, about twelve miles away. After 8 a.m. on the morning of the fight, it scheduled electric cars to run every few minutes for a fare of five cents.⁷⁵ In the days leading up to the fight, rail service from the interior of the country to Havana was similarly in demand. In addition, increased bookings of passage to Havana on steamers from Key West, Florida, were causing a “big jam in that American city, hundreds being unable to get to Cuba.” San Francisco-based Jack Welch, who had previously worked as third man during Johnson’s bouts with Sandy Ferguson and Stanley Ketchel and was selected to referee in Havana after negotiations among the boxers and their managers had eliminated all other possibilities, had been unable to make it to Cuba on a regular Key West

⁷³ “Havana’s Fight Holiday,” *New York Times*, 28 March 1915, p. 11. While occupying ringside floor seats at major prizefights continues to be a mark of an individual’s wealth and status – as pay-per-view audiences can attest when spotting celebrity faces arrayed around a ring – serious boxing fans often choose to purchase seats a few rows back, such as in the first row or two of tiered seats, to avoid being too “up close” to the action.

⁷⁴ “Willard Victor; Johnson Retires from Prize Ring,” *New York Times*, 6 April 1915, p. 1.

⁷⁵ “Willard-Johnson Match” (advertisement), *Havana Post*, 2 April 1915, p. 8; “Havana’s Fight Holiday,” *New York Times*, 28 March 1915, p. 11; “Willard Confident That He Will Win,” *New York Times*, 1 April 1915, p. 13.

steamer, and instead had to charter his own. He finally landed in Havana late on April 2.⁷⁶ That Cubans would make up such a large portion of the fight goers appeared to surprise many late American arrivals; those showing up at the ticket booth a day or two beforehand without reservations were disappointed to learn that most of the best seats were already taken.⁷⁷ Yet the bout was far from sold out; the fight would ultimately attract 16,000 ticket holders (plus as many as 5,000 who watched for free on the hills behind the racetrack), a respectable number considering the relative newness of big-time prizefighting to Havana, but far less than had been anticipated.⁷⁸

Although they had lost their chance to host the world heavyweight championship to Oriental Park, the promoters of the Great Havana Stadium were banking that the excitement over that event might spill over into a desire by the public to see many lesser bouts as well. The *Havana Post* therefore sponsored a “fistic carnival” to take place in the evenings leading up to April 5, as well as the night of the fight itself.⁷⁹ While the main events were to be “name” fighters, most from abroad, Cuban fighters were invited to try out for some of the undercard spots. As the carnival got underway, an Associated Press reporter described a changed environment in which prizefighting had, at least temporarily, become a sport of all classes and races in Havana:

Havana is fight mad. Nothing else but pugilism is being discussed in clubs, hotels, and homes by the men and women of the city. The American pigilists [sic] here are treated as popular heroes, and all the bouts that are held are being well attended. The only thing that the Cuban fails to grasp in the fight game is the clinching.

⁷⁶ Untitled article, *New York Times*, 3 April 1915, p. 10; “Jack Welsh [sic] Arrives But Does Not Land,” *Havana Post*, 3 April 1915, p. 2.

⁷⁷ “Big Heavyweights in Cuba Sized Up,” *New York Times*, 4 April 1915, p. S1.

⁷⁸ Kent, *The Great White Hopes*, p. 212; “Story of the Battle,” *New York Times*, 6 April 1915, p. 8.

⁷⁹ G.W. Krick, “Stadium Stabs,” *Havana Post*, 18 March 1915, p. 6.

The task of educating the Cuban people to an understanding of boxing is now under full headway. Boxers are gathering here from all parts of the United States, and bouts are scheduled for every night of this week. Windows and billboards are filled with cards and posters announcing the fights. Pugilists of all classes are in training here, and as they parade the streets, clad in flannels or linens, they are followed, like popular heroes, by crowds of boys and men. About the training camp groups of negro youths spend all day at sparring, many of them cleverly.⁸⁰

While U.S. outsiders may have viewed Cubans as a passive but “educable” part of the imperial project to promote American values, Cubans were developing their own unique relationship to the sport and its practitioners. True, most were unfamiliar with Marquis of Queensberry boxing rules – which had first been adopted in England in 1866 and marked the emergence of gloved, timed prizefights over bare-knuckle brawls – but so were most of their American peers; after all, the sport remained illegal in most U.S. states.⁸¹ Because there had been no tradition of bare knuckle boxing in Cuba, the gloved variant could enter the Havana sporting arena as a “respectable” sport, more akin to baseball than to the frequent street brawling that was reported in the city’s press, and thus one that attracted the presence of women from the start. Yet by the very selection of Havana as the world capital of

⁸⁰ Untitled article, *New York Times*, 30 March 1915, p. 12.

⁸¹ Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 202-206, offers an insightful discussion of the impact of the Queensberry rules on the development of prizefighting. Prior to the adoption of these rules, the number and length of bouts were unspecified, fighters generally did not wear gloves, opponents could grapple and hit one another in the back of the head (so-called “rabbit punches”) or as they were falling to or rising from the canvas, and boxers had thirty seconds to recover from a knockdown. In addition to requiring gloves and ten-second knockdown counts, the Queensberry rules mandated three-minute rounds followed by one-minute rest periods but did not specify a ceiling on number of rounds; this was continually reduced over the twentieth century to a current widely accepted maximum of twelve three-minute rounds for male professionals and ten two-minute rounds for females. (The Johnson-Willard bout was one of the last major bouts to be scheduled for up to 45 rounds.) After the Queensberry rules were popularized, grappling and hitting a man while down were prohibited, and a fighter was required to wait in a neutral corner (i.e., not the opposite corners of the ring where he and his opponent were seconded during rest periods) while the referee conducted the count over his fallen opponent. Although these and other innovations were designed to make boxing safer as well as “more scientific,” Gorn concludes that “the Queensberry rules merely pasted a thin veneer of respectability over the brutality; they did not obviate the bloody, confrontational nature of boxing.” (Gorn, *The Manly Art*, p. 205.)

pugilism, at least for one day, *habaneros* responded with pride as well as curiosity about this new sport and came out in force to experience it. Cuban newspapers and periodicals sought to educate their readers about the nuances of prizefighting, publishing numerous articles on the history of the sport and its peculiar customs. Shortly before the Johnson-Willard fight, for instance, the Havana daily newspaper *El Mundo* ran articles summarizing the Marquis of Queensberry rules and a list of some of the more notable bouts – the latter including figures on how much revenue each one garnered, no doubt of interest to those hoping to benefit first-hand from the Johnson-Willard tourist boom.⁸²

Although Jack Johnson had been driven out of the United States for sordid reasons, and although U.S. and Cuban officials insisted that Johnson-Willard was the interracial bout that would prove the exception rather than the rule, in Havana Johnson cut a dashing figure and was indeed something of a folk hero. Outside of training camp, he attracted bigger crowds than Willard, was exceedingly well dressed, and flaunted his wealth by driving luxurious cars through town and reportedly buying a \$5,000 diamond in a Havana shop. Despite the fact that sportswriters interpreted Willard's chances more favorably as the fight grew near, local betting remained partial to Johnson; for many, his loss to the little-known Kansan seemed a long shot at best. Retirement seemed likelier; Sam McVey hoped that, following his victory over Willard, Johnson would move to Paris, retire, and pass the title to

⁸² “Reglas del Marqués de Queensberry para el pugilismo,” *El Mundo*, 4 April 1915, p. 12; “El producto de las grandes luchas de boxeo,” *El Mundo*, 5 April 1915, pp. 1, 10. The latter article detailed Johnson's earnings at his July 1910 defeat of Jim Jeffries to have been \$60,600 (60 percent of the \$101,000 purse) plus \$10,000 more as a bonus – stunning figures for most contemporary Cubans to contemplate, particularly when paid to a man of African descent. Such specifics about Johnson's personal wealth were a common feature of articles about him in the Havana press, which included details about his and his wife's wardrobes and jewelry, the quantity of their luggage, the location and condition of their local lodging, and the like. For one of many examples, see “Willard peleará con el que se le presente,” *El Mundo*, 4 April 1915, p. 12.

him, as Jim Jeffries had done (indirectly) for Marvin Hart.⁸³ Sam Langford had bolder hopes; on April 3, he sent a cablegram to the editors of *El Mundo* offering challenges to Willard and Johnson that the victor should meet Langford in his next defense “in accordance with [the] American public[']s demand.” When reporters of the paper brought the cable to Willard’s attention at the Hotel Plaza, his somewhat bewildered response was, “It is foolish; it has no importance.” Willard’s manager, Tom Jones, replied more diplomatically that his man would fight whoever was put in front of him; no mention was apparently made of drawing the race line, though both would have known that Langford was African American. At the Johnson residence, an intermediary informed the reporters in response to the cable that the champion would take on any challenger to his title for a purse of \$30,000, but that Johnson felt Langford was “soft meat for him.”⁸⁴

Johnson was apparently not aware of it at the time, but the U.S. District Attorney in Chicago, Charles F. Cline, claimed to have assigned U.S. Secret Service agents to watch the Havana bout from ringside in order to observe “every move Johnson makes.” It was said that they would attempt to arrest him after the fight, although the Cuban government stated that it had not received an extradition request. If these agents were indeed present, no such arrest was forthcoming.⁸⁵ To ensure that race riots or other breaches of the peace did not occur, the Cuban government stationed both infantry and cavalry on the scene. Despite the

⁸³ “Cuban News Review Day by Day: A Chronological, Non-Partisan Report of the Month,” *The Times of Cuba* 3:4 (April 1915), pp. 16-19; untitled article, *New York Times*, 3 April 1915, p. 10. Perhaps because of his outsized reception, Johnson may have had mostly pleasant memories of his stay in Havana and seemed to have made some lifelong friends there. In his 1926 autobiography, he noted that he had been to Cuba three times since the Willard fight. (During his 1923 visit to Havana, he took part in two non-title bouts.) See Johnson, *Jack Johnson Is a Dandy*, p. 202.

⁸⁴ “Cablegrama,” *El Mundo*, 4 April 1915, p. 12; “Willard peleará con el que se le presente,” *El Mundo*, 4 April 1915, p. 12.

⁸⁵ “Secret Service After Johnson,” *Havana Post*, 6 April 1915, p. 1; “Hope to Arrest Johnson,” *New York Times*, 6 April 1915, p. 8.

electric railway's plans to ease the crush of people heading to Oriental Park, the cars were unable to handle the traffic, and some fight-goers had to walk the entire twelve miles from central Havana to Marianao. Some men had spent all night waiting in line to purchase the \$3.00 general admission seats, which were not sold in advance.⁸⁶

Although scheduled to begin at 12:30 p.m., Johnson and Willard did not enter the ring until 1:15 p.m. and 1:20 p.m., respectively. The first round began shortly afterward.⁸⁷ A couple of hours later, despite McVea's hopes of succession, there would be a new world heavyweight champion, one who was initially greeted by most of the white world with tremendous enthusiasm and gratitude. As quite a few sportswriters had predicted, if Johnson could not win by knockout in the early rounds, he would lose to one in the later rounds. Had there been a twenty-round limit, Johnson would have retained his title by decision, as he clearly outperformed his opponent for the first seventeen rounds. But Willard, though outboxed, did not drop. Although it was later said that Johnson had broken Willard's jaw and ribs, the Kansan's corner urged him to conserve his energy for the stretch. The tide began to turn in Willard's favor by the start of the eighteenth, although Johnson was still inflicting punishment into the twenty-first. After that, Willard's punches came quicker, and Johnson's fatigue became worse. By the twenty-fifth, legs tiring, Johnson took a hard hit to the abdomen but did not fall down. According to Curley, Johnson sent word to him to usher Lucille Johnson, who was sitting ringside, out of the stadium rather than see her husband be knocked out. In the twenty-sixth, Willard, having weakened his opponent, came at him more forcefully, knocking him into the ropes before ultimately dropping him with an overhand

⁸⁶ "Little Betting on Fight," *New York Times*, 6 April 1915, p. 8.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

right. As Johnson slowly fell, grabbing hold of Willard, the big man tried to push him away. Johnson hit the canvas and rolled partway onto his back, with his feet pointed toward a corner post and his head slightly under the ropes. With Johnson's eyes staring straight into the hot afternoon sun, he pulled his right arm, still gloved, in front of his face, presumably to shield them. He remained that way as Curley called out the full ten seconds, while a United Press International (UPI) photographer snapped one of the most famous poses in boxing history – one that, as Al-Tony Gilmore noted, would be “a standard wall decoration in saloon and speakeasies” for years afterward.⁸⁸

The image became proof of one of two things, depending on one's perspective: that a white man had bested the world's first black heavyweight champion, or that Johnson had thrown the fight. Although at first gracious in defeat, acknowledging in an official statement shortly after the fight that Willard had been the better man that day, within a few months the former champion claimed to have been a willing participant in a fix. On June 1, the *Havana Post* reported that, “A London despatch to a New York newspaper quotes Jack Johnson as saying that the fight in Havana with Willard was faked. We are disposed to believe that the despatch was faked but not the fight.”⁸⁹ The following year, Johnson sent a lengthy “Confession” to his friend Nat Fleischer explaining the arrangement. According to this statement, which he reiterated ten years later in his autobiography, Johnson had worked out

⁸⁸ Al-Tony Gilmore, “Towards an Understanding of the Jack Johnson Confession,” *Negro History Bulletin* 36:5 (May 1973), pp. 108-109 (quote on p. 108). In addition to numerous contemporary news accounts of the bout, there are secondary accounts in Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, pp. 377-380; Roberts, *Papa Jack*, pp. 201-202; Fleischer, *50 Years at Ringside*, pp. 86-89; and Bromberg, *Boxing's Unforgettable Fights*, pp. 88-90. Johnson himself has little to say about the fight in his autobiography but describes the incident with his wife; see Johnson, *Jack Johnson Is a Dandy*, pp. 202-203. Footage of the knockout punch is available on <http://www.youtube.com>. While the UPI photograph of Johnson being counted out was used for decades to embrace white supremacy and was reprinted on picture postcards, newspapers, magazines, and various other outlets, it is now simply viewed as one of the most important artifacts of 20th-century sport.

⁸⁹ Untitled editorial column, *Havana Post*, 1 June 1915, p. 4.

a deal with Curley and Frazee: He would allow Willard to win by knockout in return for a large monetary payment and amnesty for his Mann Act prosecution, thereby allowing him to return to the United States (and to see his sick mother) without having to serve a prison sentence. He insisted that he had not shared the plot with anyone else until the morning of the fight, when he informed his wife so that she could assist in its implementation. She was escorted out of Oriental Park only after she had flashed him a signal to indicate that she had received payment in \$500 bills of the agreed-upon amount, which had been delayed by the counting of gate receipts; shortly afterward, he took a dive. According to Johnson biographer Gilmore, this alternate version of events at Oriental Park was “one that most blacks [of the era] chose to believe.”⁹⁰

Undoubtedly, because of the popularity of gambling on prizefights, and later, the involvement of organized crime, outright fixes and other fraudulent practices were common to the sport for much of the twentieth century (and, some would have it, continue on a more subtle but insidious level today, now that pay-per-view revenues have made it more lucrative to create “bankable” fighters). Even when boxers were not asked to take a fall, they at times had to prop up their opponents and win (or lose) by decision; this was particularly true of black heavyweight prizefighters prior to the rise of Joe Louis, when their road to achieving a world title was almost completely blocked.

Yet there is little reason to believe Johnson’s story. His lack of training, surplus weight, advanced boxing age, dissolution, size disadvantage, and other consequences of two strenuous years in exile were insurmountable odds in a 45-round fight against an opponent

⁹⁰ Gilmore, “Towards an Understanding of the Jack Johnson Confession,” pp. 108-109; Johnson, *Jack Johnson Is a Dandy*, pp. 202-203.

of Willard's caliber at his peak, particularly in an unforgiving climate where endurance counted as much, if not more, than ability. Nor can one discount the effort that Johnson showed until he finally hit the canvas. Unlike other suspected fixes, such as Sonny Liston's shocking losses in February 1964 and May 1965 to Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali, Johnson's and Willard's bodies both bore signs of a long and arduous battle.⁹¹ As Nat Fleischer, who covered Johnson in Reno and Havana and considered him to be the best heavyweight in boxing history, noted years after receiving his "Confession": "When a fight is 'arranged,' the man who is taking the dive doesn't fight for twenty-six rounds and break his rival's ribs and jaw in the bargain, as Johnson had done to Willard!"⁹²

Johnson's efforts to shape his legacy aside – and to justify the rematch he requested with Willard but was never granted –, his loss after six and a half years as heavyweight champion was celebrated as a race victory by whites in Cuba as well as the United States. Newspapers in both Cuba and the U.S. emphasized the jubilation of those in attendance. They had waved white flags (in honor of the white race), shouted epithets such as "Kill the black bear" to Johnson, and otherwise made their partisanship for Willard quite obvious. For instance, women who had "groaned" as Willard was being beaten in the first half of the bout "grew wildly excited" as his performance improved, "and [they] vied with the men in striving to make their shouts of cheer reach the man who was battling for the pugilistic supremacy of their race." Following the bout, several thousand people blocked the Plaza Hotel, where Willard was staying, forcing police to have to clear passage to the entrance to allow the new

⁹¹ For an argument that Liston purposely threw the Clay/Ali title fights, see Nick Tosches, *The Devil and Sonny Liston* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2000).

⁹² Fleischer, *50 Years at Ringside*, p. 89. Bucking conventional wisdom, Michael T. Isenberg, in his biography of bare-knuckle champion John L. Sullivan, maintains that Johnson's loss to Willard was "probably a setup." Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, p. 367.

champion through. White Cubans celebrated into the night.⁹³ Although there are fewer testimonies as to reactions by Afro-Cubans, a group of black children met Johnson after the fight by waving black flags – an incident which a contemporary Associated Press reporter considered to be due to ignorance as to the fight result, but which Theresa Runstedtler convincingly argues was more likely an expression of black pride in Johnson and defiance of white Cubans’ unapologetic racism.⁹⁴

Yet by the next day, the tenor of whites’ celebration was somewhat muted. While Willard was praised in all corners for bringing “the supremacy back to the white race,” Johnson was likewise honored for his good sportsmanship in the wake of defeat. The evening after the fight, a group of Havana residents – presumably including many Americans – hosted a reception in Willard’s honor at the Stadium. Johnson, also in attendance, easily upstaged the new champion as the most charismatic figure at the banquet. He and Willard, as well as Curley, were presented with gold watches and were invited to give remarks to the crowd. With “notable” speechmaking ability and to much applause, Johnson used his time to congratulate Willard – to whom he said he had lost honorably – and to express gratitude to the Cuban people for their warm hospitality. He also announced plans to sail soon for Europe. Willard’s training camp in turn presented the former champion with “a beautiful silver loving cup.” Following the presentations, the honorees and guests were treated to an eight-man battle royal (presumably featuring nonwhite participants) and a ten-round bout between Eddie Hanlon and Kid Alberts, of Atlanta and New York, respectively.⁹⁵

⁹³ “Willard Victor; Johnson Retires from Prize Ring,” *New York Times*, 6 April 1915, p. 8; “Story of the Battle,” *New York Times*, 6 April 1915, p. 8; Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, p. 377.

⁹⁴ Runstedtler, “Journeymen,” p. 395.

⁹⁵ “Havana Residents Will Honor Willard Tonight at Reception in Stadium,” *Havana Post*, 6 April 1915, p. 3; “Citizens Honor Champ Willard,” *Havana Post*, 7 April 1915, p. 2; “Johnson declaró anoche que había perdido

Some Havana residents would have occasion to regret the gold watch given to Curley, who – with his publicity agent, expatriate American John R. Robinson, and Jack Johnson himself – had been arrested and detained by police the morning after the reception for failure to pay debts related to staging the bout.⁹⁶ Curley apparently had not yet paid the many laborers who had constructed the seats at Oriental Park, nor had he reimbursed the driver that Robinson had hired under Curley’s authorization for a forty-day period. Three men – two chauffeurs and a man who had helped to build the ring – had made the initial complaint to police, but some sixty others were owed unpaid wages. In his defense, the promoter claimed that gate receipts had been far less than anticipated – \$60,000 versus \$110,000 – and that, as a result, there was no money remaining to pay them. (Jack Johnson had wisely collected the remaining \$29,000 balance of his \$30,000 purse the morning of the fight, while Willard ultimately received \$13,000 as a percentage of fight receipts.) After making bail, Curley managed to outwit his many creditors – and a hapless Robinson, left with many “IOUs” with his signature on them – by sailing immediately for the United States.⁹⁷ Willard, too, made a quick getaway from the island, departing two days after the fight. Unlike Curley’s, his departure was met with a crowd of well-wishers at the wharf, including Jack Johnson, who “told Willard that he wished him all the luck in the world, and also advised him to save his money.” Jackson’s equanimity is noteworthy considering that Curley had already predicted (correctly, as it turned out) that the new champion would “draw

el champion con honor,” *El Mundo*, 7 April 1915, p. 7. The *El Mundo* article mentions the battle royal but does not specify the names, nationalities, or racial backgrounds of the participants, only their number.

⁹⁶ As one columnist wrote, “Jack Curley will long be remembered by his unpaid bills. Too bad, the watch tendered him at the Stadium was not applied to some of his accounts.” See “Echoes of the Fight,” *Havana Post*, 9 April 1915, p. 6.

⁹⁷ “Los empresarios de la lucha Willard-Johnson no han pagado sus deudas,” *El Mundo*, 7 April 1915, p. 1; “Police Arrest ‘Jack’ Curley,” *Havana Post*, 7 April 1915, p. 7; “Curley Jumps Many Accounts,” *Havana Post*, 8 April 1915, p. 2; “Jess Willard Got \$13,000,” *New York Times*, 23 April 1915, p. 11.

the color line tightly.”⁹⁸ No black aspirants for the heavyweight crown, including Sam Langford, need apply.

Johnson took a few more days to bid farewell to Havana, caught up in legal and diplomatic matters. His films of the fight – which he had anticipated bringing him an additional source of income – had been pirated, and he was seeking a judge’s injunction against various Havana theaters’ display of them. The fighter estimated that, as part of a foreign syndicate owning the moving picture rights to his bout with Willard, he would lose half a million dollars in royalties should the pirated films be allowed to continue showing in Havana. Frustrated by the judge’s delay in issuing the injunction, Johnson ultimately sold the Cuban and Puerto Rican film rights to Captain Walter Fletcher Smith, owner of Havana’s Plaza Hotel, for a sum of several thousand dollars. The negatives were expected to be in Havana by early May.⁹⁹

In addition, although Johnson was initially granted a U.S. passport by Ambassador Page in London, he found himself at the center of a diplomatic storm when he attempted to obtain another one after the Willard fight. When the secretary of the U.S. legation in Havana approved his new passport request, William Gonzales – the U.S. Minister to Cuba who had earlier protested the initial Easter date of the his bout with Willard – intervened, bringing the matter to the attention of U.S. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan. Bryan held that Johnson, as a fugitive from American law, should not be granted a passport. The legation

⁹⁸ “Curley Makes a Statement,” *Havana Post*, 6 April 1915, p. 4; “Willard Leaves Cuba,” *Havana Post*, 8 April 1915, p. 1.

⁹⁹ “Johnson Races for His Films,” *Havana Post*, 9 April 1915, p. 8 “Jack Johnson Is a Manana Victim,” *Havana Post*, 10 April 1915, p. 2; “Johnson Put Off Again,” *New York Times*, 10 April 1915, p. 9; “Captain Smith Gets Willard-Johnson Film,” *Havana Post*, 12 April 1915, p. 8. The story of what happened to the Johnson-Willard fight films is a complicated one that is ably covered by Dan Streible, *Fight Pictures: A History of Boxing and Early Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), Chapter 7.

contacted the Johnson residence in Havana to notify the couple that their passports were invalid and needed to be returned. Over the protests of his wife Lucille, Johnson reluctantly returned his passport to the Cuban legation. It was reported that the incident had encouraged Johnson to consider taking up Cuban citizenship, “if for no other reason, so that he can get something like a passport.” With Cuban papers, it was said, Johnson could travel back to Paris, where he had kept a chicken farm.¹⁰⁰

While waiting for his fortunes to change, Johnson agreed to referee a twenty-round light heavyweight bout at the Stadium between Steamboat Bill Scott, who had recently completed a tour of Panama, and Fred Ellis of Milwaukee. Scheduled for Sunday, April 18, the fight card included an eight-round preliminary bout featuring Cuba’s Young Gavilán as well as a battle royal with six black participants. Ladies with escorts would not be charged admission.¹⁰¹ The event was called off when, in a separate prizefight the night before the fight, John Lester Johnson, an African American, was alleged to have fouled Scott, a white man, in the second round. When Scott complained of the illegal hit, the referee, John R. Robinson (who had been involved in the Johnson-Willard fight promotion) called in the ringside physician to substantiate it. Despite many witnesses claiming not to have seen the foul – one commentator later stated that “Scott... was just saying good night when Johnson accidentally hit him below the belt as he was going down” – the doctor agreed that Scott was injured. Consequently, the fight was stopped and John Lester Johnson disqualified. The sudden end to the bout caused a “near riot,” with enraged Cubans attempting to storm the

¹⁰⁰ “Jack Johnson Is a Manana Victim,” *Havana Post*, 10 April 1915, p. 2; “No Passport for Johnson,” *New York Times*, 10 April 1915, p. 9.

¹⁰¹ “Sunday Night at the Stadium,” *Havana Post*, 15 April 1915, p. 3; “Jack Johnson to Be Referee,” *Havana Post*, 16 April 1915, p. 1; “Ellis Arrives for Stadium,” *Havana Post*, 17 April 1915, p. 2.

ring. As the police moved to protect Johnson, some in the audience demanded that “Mr. Robinson be taken to the precinct too on the unheard of charge of failure to stop the match when he saw the negro outclassed the white man.” At the precinct, Congressman Pepe Estrampes – apparently a defender both of mixed-race fights and the manly art itself – “gave an eloquent discourse on the ethics of boxing” and testified that, “if anybody had made trouble it was the men who had charged the ring and had done so much yelling.” As a result, Robinson was released as a witness, while others present (presumably the Cubans involved in the fracas) were charged with “escándalo.” The boxers were sent to the hospital, where neither one was shown to have any serious injuries.¹⁰²

Less than two weeks removed from the Jack Johnson-Jess Willard bout, a seeming triumph for white supremacy, this incident would appear to indicate that a segment of Cuban society did not feel interracial bouts were a wise idea given the damage that could be done to the white opponent, and, by extension, to the pride of white spectators. Although some influential promoters and others in the boxing business in Cuba raised their voices against “mixed” bouts, they were unable to enforce a rigid color line. Fred Ellis, left waiting in Havana for two weeks after his bout with Scott was canceled, wrote in desperation that he would be willing to take on the “Jap wrestler” (Taro Miyake) who had arrived in the city that May, “winner taking all except expenses.”¹⁰³ Ellis instead secured a bout at the Stadium with John Lester Johnson as part of Cuba’s Independence Day festivities on May 20 – an interracial match-up that Stadium owner (and *Havana Post* publisher) Bradt, upon returning

¹⁰² “Stadium Fight Tonight Is Off,” *Havana Post*, 18 April 1915, p. 2; “Fred Ellis to Meet Johnson,” *Havana Post*, 13 May 1915, p. 2.

¹⁰³ “Fred Ellis Wants to Meet Wily Jap,” *Havana Post*, 5 May 1915, p. 3; “Jiu Jitsu Wrestler Here Will Meet All Comers,” *Havana Post*, 6 May 1915, p. 2. Presumably, a Japanese opponent, even one who was trained in a different fighting discipline, would not have upset a rigid black-white color line in Cuba.

from a family trip to the U.S. and possibly learning of it for the first time, disavowed for its having violated his racial norms.¹⁰⁴

Despite the personal setbacks that kept him in the city longer than he might have wished, Johnson remained a popular figure among many *habaneros*. The rumor of his becoming a Cuban citizen was frequently reported in the local press; it was further stated that he would open a gymnasium in the capital.¹⁰⁵ Shortly after the departures of Willard and Curley, the *Havana Post* ran a short article commending Johnson (in pointed contrast to the white men involved in promoting the bout) for the way he had carried himself in the days since losing his title:

A sermon in black and white exists in the comparison of the difference in the way in which Jack Johnson, the former champion of the world, is leaving Havana, and the way some of his white colleagues left, who came here in the same connection. With the white men, or better stated, with the men with white skins, creditors had to rush down to the dock and with policemen to get their bills paid. The ones who got there late were left in the cold. Jack Johnson, on the other hand, has stayed behind and paid every bill that he owed and also out of his own private funds he has liquidated the bills of men who were left stranded because of the double dealing of others. Every obligation he contracted has been settled and when he leaves next week for Europe there will not be any one who can say that he ran away without paying his debts or that he ever tried in any way to obtain wrongfully the possession of another. There is some contrast!¹⁰⁶

That he had finally approached “white” status in some men’s minds only by conceding a white man’s victory over him is an irony that the Galveston Giant must have well appreciated. He may have further cemented his popularity in Havana with a gracious

¹⁰⁴ “Social Happenings,” *Havana Post*, 2 May 1915, p. 2; “Fred Ellis to Meet Johnson,” *Havana Post*, 13 May 1915, p. 2; “Ellis and Johnson Put up a Side Bet,” *Havana Post*, 18 May 1915, p. 3; “Social Happenings,” *Havana Post*, 19 May 1915, p. 2; “Notice,” *Havana Post*, 20 May 1915, p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Untitled editorial item, *Havana Post*, 17 April 1915, p. 4.

¹⁰⁶ “A Sermon in Black and White,” *Havana Post*, 14 April 1915, p. 4.

“farewell” that was published in the *Havana Post* two days before his departure, in which he gave credence to the rumors about his plans to make Cuba his home. Addressed “To the people of the City of Havana and Cuba,” it stated:

I want to thank each and every one for the kindness they have shown and the splendid manner in which they have received me in every way. The Cubans have won my heart. Cuba is blessed by two great things, a great climate and splendid people. I have been to every civilized country in the world, but never have I been in a country that I love so well as this one, Cuba. I have never met such polite people as the people in this country. When I first came to Cuba a few months ago, I liked it very well, but today I love it.

I am sailing for Europe on Tuesday the 20th, and if it wasn't for business of importance Jack Johnson would never leave the beautiful Isle of Cuba. My stay in Europe will be very short. I will return here again in June of this year and I then expect to open a gymnasium to teach boxing and other athletics. I have been studying for the past three years the nature of insomnia, and I really believe that I have an absolute cure for it, and in my gymnasium I expect to build up men who are a nervous wreck and have broken down constitutions.

I hope that I have proven to the Cubans and foreigners that I am not the Jack Johnson that they have read so much about in some of the American newspapers and I hope on my return in June that I will find my Cuban friends with the same warm feeling they have for me now.

Thanking you once and again, I am, sincerely,

JACK JOHNSON.¹⁰⁷

As promised, Johnson finally left Cuba on April 20, departing with his wife for Spain on “the most luxurious suite aboard the steamer” *Reina Maria Cristina*.¹⁰⁸ The following month, he informed the press that, “I have been invited to be athletic director for a gentleman’s club in Havana. I might go there and open a cafe as a side line. It certainly is one of the last good towns.” How seriously Johnson considered this offer is questionable given

¹⁰⁷ “Jack Johnson Bids Farewell,” *Havana Post*, 18 April 1915, p. 2.

¹⁰⁸ “Jack Johnson to Sail for Europe Today,” *Havana Post*, 20 April 1915, p. 2.

that he told the same interviewer that he was also contemplating going to Spain to become a bullfighter.¹⁰⁹

While Johnson never got a chance to reclaim his world title, he was no longer viewed as a threat to white supremacy, either in Cuba or in the United States. Upon his long-delayed return to his home country in 1920, he served his full prison term of a year and a day, then continued his prizefighting career upon his release. While he never honored his plans to move to Havana to open a gymnasium, he did return there for bouts against Farmer Lodge and Jack Thompson in May 1923. He remained active, fighting in exhibitions and prizefights well past the normal age of retirement. It is said that he fought for the last time in 1938, at the age of sixty; at the time, the world heavyweight champion was a young Joe Louis, the second African American to earn that distinction, who had rebuffed Johnson's presence in his training camp in an effort to disassociate himself from the controversial ex-champion. In 1946, Johnson died as he lived, crashing his automobile after driving too fast. He left a widow, his third white wife, Irene Pineau Johnson, although by then his romantic foibles had ceased to be shocking.

Willard fought infrequently after Havana, defending his championship only twice in four years, and strictly upholding the color line, as he had promised. It was little secret that he preferred working the vaudeville circuit to boxing, for it allowed him an easier means to profit off his brief but extraordinary popularity in the U.S. after the Johnson bout. His first and only successful defense was in March 1916 against Frank Moran, who had unsuccessfully challenged Johnson for the championship two years earlier; Willard won the ten-round bout by newspaper decision, since it was held in New York. Then, at the end of

¹⁰⁹ Chum Bob, "Sport Talk," *Havana Post*, 29 May 1915, p. 3.

World War I, Willard faced Jack Dempsey in a scheduled twenty-round title fight. Dempsey, outweighed by nearly 60 pounds, managed to knock Willard down seven times in the first round and finally succeeded in knocking him out in the third. The Kansan mounted a comeback, but by 1923, after losing by knockout to Argentina's "Wild Bull of the Pampas," Luis Ángel Firpo, he finally quit fighting. He later became a businessman and boxing referee, passing away in 1968.

As for Jack Curley, with Tex Rickard's re-emergence after years in Argentina, he soon moved away from prizefighting and into the field for which he became truly renowned: wrestling. The Johnson-Willard bout – what Curley had once called "the greatest and the happiest day of my life" – was his crowning achievement in boxing, particularly since it had brought the result he had desired: the return of the heavyweight crown to the white race.¹¹⁰ "For sportswriters who derided his favorite sport," noted his obituary in *Time* magazine, "Promoter Curley... had an unvarying answer: 'I have never promoted a wrestling match that was not absolutely honest'." Curley died in 1937 of a heart attack at the age of 61.¹¹¹

The Aftermath of the Fight

The short-term impact of the Johnson-Willard fight in Cuba was somewhat mixed. Although there was pride in having hosted the most important boxing event since the 1910 Johnson-Jeffries bout – and, more explicitly, for being the site where white supremacy in the sporting world was regained – there were also grumblings over whether prizefighting really fit into the culture of the new nation. Those who rejected any form of professional boxing

¹¹⁰ "Curley Makes a Statement," *Havana Post*, 6 April 1915, p. 4.

¹¹¹ *Time*, 19 July 1937; "Jack Curley Dies," *New York Times*, 12 July 1937, p. 17.

spectacle, such as the ministers who had expressed their opposition to the Johnson-Willard bout, were likely buoyed by an official attempt to eradicate the practice. The day after the fight, Senator Erasmo Regüieferos proposed a bill in the Cuban Senate calling for “the suppression of boxing” on the island – specifically, “the holding of any boxing contest at which admission money is charged.” He asserted that there was “nothing as inhumane and cruel as the poorly named sport of boxing,” and, as evidence, argued that it had been repudiated by a majority of the U.S. public. The senator railed against allowing boxers to injure or kill one another with impunity, charged that the sport accustomed the public to blood spectacles, and disdained the prevalence of gambling at prizefights. Accordingly, he proposed that promoters and pugilists found guilty of violating the proposed law be subject to jail time, as well as fines; the former would receive up to one year in prison and a fine of \$5,000, the latter a 15 day-sentence and a fine of \$500. Moreover, any public official attending such an event would be subject to a fine of \$500 and the loss of his office for one year. The bill passed in the Senate on April 10 and was moved to the lower house for consideration.¹¹²

Not everyone agreed with the reasons for ending prizefighting just as it seemed to be flourishing in Cuba. Over the next few weeks, a debate ensued in the pages of the *Havana Post* regarding the merits of the Senate’s measure. In a series of vehement editorials, the editors lambasted the congressman for wasting time on a matter of such inconsequence when so many other important matters – the elimination of obsolete legislation, excess

¹¹² “Bill Against Boxing,” *Havana Post*, 7 April 1915, p. 2; “Contra el boxeo,” *El Mundo*, 8 April 1915, p. 2; “Antiboxing Bill Is Approved by Senate,” *Havana Post*, 11 April 1915, p. 2; “Cuban Senate Bars Boxing,” *New York Times*, 11 April 1915, p. 1. *El Mundo*’s article includes the text of Senator Regüieferos’s report to the Senate on his anti-boxing bill.

budgetary spending, even prostitution and pornographic shows – cried out for attention. Not only was the practice of boxing liable to produce healthy young men rather than “mollycoddles,” but it would lead to a reduction in knife violence should young men learn less destructive techniques of self-defense. While the proposed bill did not abolish amateur boxing, the editors felt that the two variants of the sport went hand in hand: “Amateur boxing needs the display of science and skill of the game which can only be developed professionally.”¹¹³ To those who protested that prizefighting attracted “undesirable” elements, the editors extolled the fitness and virtue of most boxers, who avoided alcohol, tobacco, and other temptations, and noted the high status of those who attended the Johnson-Willard bout:

From Cuba the match attracted red-blooded men from the president of the republic down. Opponents to the boxing game are said to have tried to induce President Menocal to refrain from attending the match. He is said to have answered frankly that he was not a hypocrite and he would go in the same way as if he were a private individual to see the display of skill and strength on exhibition there.¹¹⁴

Other opponents of the bill noted that the congress should be more concerned with the risks that prostitutes and other dangerous women posed to the virtuous people of the city, as well as the rampant cruelty to animals (through abuse of horses, cockfighting, and other practices) that was visible in Cuban society. Regarding the latter, one R. Koerner, dismissing the need to protect two big, strong, pugilists from one another, wrote, “When will this ‘civilized’ country start to protect the dumb animals? The prizefighter can take care of

¹¹³ “The Bill Against Boxing,” *Havana Post*, 12 April 1915, p. 4; “Boxing,” *Havana Post*, 13 April 1915, p. 4.

¹¹⁴ “Letters to the Post,” *Havana Post*, 14 April 1915, p. 4; “The Boxing Game,” *Havana Post*, 14 April 1915, p. 4.

himself.”¹¹⁵ Perhaps the most eloquent testimony to boxing’s growing popularity in Havana was the fact that, when two underage youths, José Unanuno y Alfonso and Lutgardo Benítez Barranco, were pulled into a local police precinct for fighting days after the Johnson-Willard bout, they stated that they had no quarrel with one another but were simply practicing boxing; the policeman had surprised them during the first “round.” Apparently, they did not have access to an actual gymnasium but were forced to use the corner of Consulado and Colón streets for their exercises. The would-be pugilists were treated for injuries at a first aid station.¹¹⁶

One month later, on May 12, the debate was rendered temporarily moot when the Cuban Supreme Court ruled that boxing was indeed legal. The case, which the court dismissed, concerned whether provincial governor Bustillo had violated the law by attending the Johnson-Willard bout in person. The complainant, Dr. Horacio Martínez, had denounced the governor “because he [Bustillo] had seen Jess Willard hit Jack Johnson a blow so hard that it deprived the said Johnson temporarily of consciousness.” The court’s ruling conceded that, while Decree 1067 of November 1911 – which had banned live boxing spectacles but permitted the showing of fight films – would appear to have made the Johnson-Willard bout an illegal activity, “it is a fact that neither before nor after the said decree has there been any legal action to sustain such prohibition or that would cause the provincial government to be obliged to impede the holding of such an exhibition.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ “Letters to the Post,” *Havana Post*, 17 April 1915, p. 4; “Letters to the Post,” *Havana Post*, 18 April 1915, p. 4.

¹¹⁶ “Brillante match de boxeo,” *El Mundo*, 9 April 1915, p. 10.

¹¹⁷ “Complains of Governor Attending Prize Fight,” *Havana Post*, 21 April 1915, p. 2; “Boxing in Cuba Legal,” *New York Times*, 13 May 1915, p. 13; “Boxing Legal Says Supreme,” *Havana Post*, 13 May 1915, p. 2. In June, the *Havana Post* reported that Martínez had emerged as the “champion denouncer of the age” by making a “sport” out of accusing people (110 at the time of writing), “including most of the best known figures in

Although Curley had burned many bridges in fleeing the country without paying all of his debts, U.S. promoters, trainers, managers, and boxers continued to operate on the island for some months afterward. Their Cuban counterparts quickly began to replace them, however, once the new Havana *alcalde* (mayor), Manuel Varona Suárez, clamped down on boxing in the capital in 1919, forcing it to go underground. Not for many more years would Havana become the “the center of the pugilistic map,” but if its next decades lacked another blockbuster event like the Johnson-Willard affair, it would, beginning in the early 1920s, serve as host to a number of important national, regional, and world title prizefights, as well as amateur contests of some renown. As discussed in the next chapter, the creation of a national boxing commission, the promulgation of new rules and standards, and the dissemination of the sport into the interior helped to forge a genuine boxing culture on the island that was less predicated upon U.S. norms and values than upon Cuban ones.

The Johnson-Willard fight arrived at a propitious moment for the government, press, and businesspeople of Cuba. On the one hand, it raised the young country’s profile at a moment when domestic tourism remained a nascent industry, one that was monopolized by a small subset of North Americans seeking warm-weather entertainment. On the other, its advancement was tied to a spectacle that many people viewed as dangerous, primitive, and – given the interracial nature of the competition – downright immoral. Moreover, although Willard – who was little more than a cipher before he was tapped to fight Johnson – was depicted in the U.S. and Cuban press prior to and just after the fight as the consummate family man, modest and humble, most people were only too aware of the sources of

contemporary life,” of various improprieties. See “Champion Denouncer Invents New Sport,” *Havana Post*, 13 June 1915, p. 2.

Johnson's notoriety. After all, only two years previously he had been convicted of violating the Mann Act and had fled the U.S. before he could serve out the resulting prison sentence. Yet not only did the Johnson-Willard fight win the approval of the national and provincial governments in Cuba, but it also emerged as a moment of perceived national unity, when the entire country, and particularly the residents of Havana, could unite around its celebration. This moment did not result in the widespread embrace of either prizefighting or mixed-race bouts; nor did it translate into greater social freedoms for the vast majority of Afro-Cubans. For what unified most of the country, both before and after the fight, was a celebration of the defeat of a notorious, larger-than-life black man and the reimposition of white supremacy in the sporting world.

In his brief stay on the island, Johnson's transformation into a popular figure who might someday become appropriated into the rhetoric of the Cuban nation (even if that moment never came) was the completion of the circle that began on December 26, 1908, when he wrested the world heavyweight title from a beleaguered Tommy Burns. His presence on the island could not change the fortunes of Afro-Cubans battling with discrimination and poverty, though they likely found him to be an inspirational figure who had attained heights previously inconceivable to them. Nor could his bout with Willard, storied as it was, sustain the fragile culture of prizefighting that had emerged on the island in the wake of the Spanish-American-Cuban War. Indeed, a few years after Johnson's departure from Havana, the sport – driven underground by unsympathetic officials, fear of interracial conflict, and general public apathy – appeared to have reached its nadir.

Within two decades of the Johnson-Willard bout, however, the situation was markedly different. While still influenced by U.S. cultural practices, in boxing as in so many other facets of everyday life, Cuba was instituting its own methods for developing successful pugilists – and would continue to eschew the drawing of the color line in its prize rings. As the state moved in the late 1910s and early 1920s from a position of alternately tolerating and suppressing boxing to legalizing and regulating it, a new national system emerged that sought to increase the sport’s reach into the interior and to build up a cadre of professionals who performed in weekly shows for the pleasure of locals. By the early 1930s, it had already nurtured one world champion – the incomparable Kid Chocolate – and seemed to have several more in the pipeline. How this rapid transition came to pass is the focus of our next chapter.

Chapter 3: The Legalization and Regulation of Boxing and the Era of Kid Chocolate, 1916-1930s

Between Illegality and Respectability

The Cuban Supreme Court's May 1915 ruling, following the Johnson-Willard bout, that boxing spectacles were indeed legal on the island did not come close to resolving the ongoing dispute over the sport's role in a civilized society. Without the excitement of a history-making bout to sustain it, public interest in boxing inevitably waned somewhat in the second half of the 1910s. At the same time, a growing corpus of young Cuban fighters, most of them little known outside of their own small circles, began to hone their skills at gymnasiums, parks, athletic clubs, and private homes. But it was the institution of a nearly two-year ban on boxing exhibitions in the capital that forced aficionados, practitioners, and correspondents, many of them middle-class whites from "good" Cuban families, to navigate the spaces between illegality and respectability – and to find effective ways to make public their plea for the relevance of pugilism to a modern nation.

By the early 1920s, with the state's decision to legalize boxing once and for all, a new set of challenges arose as to how best to regulate it. The Cuban government went farther than most countries at the time, and much farther than the United States, in establishing a system of rules that applied to fighters, seconds, managers, promoters, referees, timekeepers, and judges. Although some influential promoters (mainly hailing from the U.S.) disdained interracial bouts, there was little effort to keep the races apart in the prize ring. Nor were fights restricted in practice to impoverished, mostly Afro-Cuban young men; in these early years, middle-class whites figured predominantly among the growing pool of professionals,

as did foreign-born men such as Mexico's Miguel ("Mike") Febles. While the newly established boxing commission sought to develop a system by which to select national champions and recognize up-and-comers, the dearth of solid competition in the early 1920s meant that most Cuban competitors were easily disposed of when they met with serious foreign competition. Only with the success of a few top contenders, such as Kid Charol and Black Bill, did Cuban boxing begin to win respectability abroad. And only with the meteoric rise of a charismatic young star known as Kid Chocolate (Eligio Sardiñas Montalvo) would Cuban boxing definitively become a force to be reckoned with on the world stage.

More than any other fighter in Cuban history, Chocolate was able to translate his personal glory into a source of national and even transnational pride, one that transcended racial barriers and undoubtedly inspired a generation of young athletes in the U.S. as well as Cuba. His ring style, itself influenced by pioneering African American fighters as well as his stable mate, Black Bill, would become associated with Cuban boxing for years to come, even if few of his peers could match it. Embodying hand speed and lightness on one's feet as well as a sly, methodical defense, Chocolate and those who emulated him might look as pretty after a bout as they had before it. For a time, at least, no one was as pretty as Kid Chocolate.

This chapter explores the transition of boxing in Cuba from its tenuous position in the months and years after the Johnson-Willard bout to its triumphant explosion upon the world stage, culminating with the achievements of Chocolate. While societal and official acceptance of the sport proceeded in fits and starts, the state finally embraced its legalization in the early 1920s and moved rapidly to regulate its practice. Government intervention would hereafter remain a hallmark of Cuban prizefighting (and, by the late 1930s, of amateur boxing), although private promoters remained critical in staging events and bringing in

outside talent when necessary. The newly formed boxing commission acted both as government regulator and sanctioning body – naming divisional champions (and stripping them, if need be), licensing participants, and monitoring the safety and fairness of the proceedings. This degree of control, unusual for its time, mitigated some of the more exploitative aspects of prizefighting in this era. Though few boxers became rich off their endeavors, the best of them found regular employment in Havana or provincial rings. And as native trainers and managers emerged to develop the country’s pool of talent, local fight cards no longer featured Cubans mainly in preliminary bouts but on bona fide main events.

The Legalization and Regulation of Boxing

The years immediately after the Willard-Johnson bouts were mostly bleak ones for Cuban boxing. With the Stadium having gone bankrupt not long after its opening due to mismanagement by Leo Farris, there was a clamor among boxing enthusiasts to find new places to participate in and watch their beloved sport. In 1918, a group of boxers, trainers, sportswriters, and would-be promoters – including Bernardino San Martín and Vicente Cubillas – formed the “Ring del ‘Cuba,’” named after the newspaper at which many of them worked. The honorable president was Don José María Villaverde, a prominent member of the “Spanish colony” in the capital. The organization held weekly Sunday shows.¹

Shortly afterward, however, the capital had experienced yet another ban on the sport. In March 1919, the boxing-related death of lightweight José “Soldado” Marroquín after his bout with Alex Publes at the “Recreo de Belascoaín” led municipal *alcalde* Manuel Varona Suárez to suspend licenses for further bouts in the capital. As documented by San Martín

¹ San Martín and Cubillas, *El arte de los puños*, pp. 27, 39-41.

and Cubillas, authors of the first full-length book published on Cuban boxing, the *alcalde* believed boxing to be “salvaje” (savage) and “bárbaro” (barbarous) and refused to sanction any bouts involving Cuban fighters while he remained in that office. In his statement, Varona Suárez noted that boxing “is good for foreigners, for the Americans who are ‘made’ for that” – indicating that it was hardly suitable for Cubans.²

As a result, many boxers moved into the interior of the island, where, San Martín and Cubillas ironically noted, the *alcaldes* were not so “religious” as in the capital. The authors, who had met while working for *Cuba* newspaper and had been involved in running the *Cuba* ring, appealed to Varona Suárez that Marroquín’s death was not caused by blows received from Puelles “sino a causas completamente ajenas” (but to completely distinct causes) – namely, having eaten shortly before the bout. Yet Varona Suárez remained adamant that no (legal) boxing take place under his purview. When his term ended, the Cubillas y San Martín promotional group formed by the authors openly held a boxing event featuring the brothers Clodomiro and Mike Castro at Santos y Artigas park on December 19, 1920. Afterward, the men lobbied the Secretary of the Government, Colonel Charles Hernández, to overturn Varona Suárez’s ban. Hernández obliged, instructing the new *alcalde*, José Castillo, to end the prohibition. In his statement to Castillo, Hernández reiterated that the Cuban Supreme Court had already ruled on the sport’s legality following the Johnson-Willard bout, and that there was no law that prohibited the celebration of

² Ibid., pp. 56, 58-59, 60. The original phrase was “está bueno para los extranjeros, para los norteamericanos que son ‘hechos’ para eso.”

boxing matches in the republic.³ With his signature, the suspension was lifted, after more than 21 months.

In 1920, as well, a three-promoter organization named the Havana Boxing Committee was founded to promote major bouts in the capital, including those that were to settle the dispensation of national titles.⁴ Yet government officials were coming around to the idea that the best approach to the sport was regulation rather than noninterference – particularly as Havana was once again becoming relevant to followers of pugilism worldwide. On October 10, 1921, the biggest prizefight on the island since Johnson-Willard, and likewise an interracial bout, took place between two U.S. heavyweights: Harry Wills, the “Black Panther,” and “Gunner” Gunboat Smith. Ten thousand people flooded the new Stadium on Carlos III to watch the bout, leaving five hundred people outside without tickets. There were three preliminary bouts featuring some of Cuba’s best young boxers, including Black Bill (who won a six-round decision over Modesto Morales) and Mike Castro (who defeated Aguedo Herrera in fifteen). The rapidity with which the main event occurred – Wills knocked out Smith in the first round with a kidney punch – must have been disappointing to many in the audience who anticipated a more competitive fight, as Wills himself acknowledged. Still, the Black Panther was gracious in victory, and, most likely, sensitive to the local racial implications of defeating his white opponent so expeditiously. In an interview with the sportswriter for Cuba’s weekly *Bohemia* an hour after the fight, Wills stated that he had received two forceful blows from Smith, one to the face and the other to

³ Ibid., pp. 56, 61, 63-66. San Martín’s and Cubillas account, while extremely informative, is also quite self-serving, so it is difficult to determine how central they were to the overturning of this ban. Yet they were central figures in Cuban boxing during this early period, so it is reasonable to assume they played a large role.

⁴ Hugh Shannon, “Heard in Buffalo,” *The Ring* 1:8 (September 1922), pp. 30-31. The three promoters were “Antoñico” Ruíz, Rafael Posso, and Dr. Rubén López Miranda. See San Martín and Cubillas, *El arte de los puños*, p. 83.

the stomach, which had persuaded him to move the knockout along in order to prevent absorbing future punishment.⁵

On December 13, 1921, the Secretary of the Government signed a decree forming a new agency, the Comisión Nacional de Boxeo y Luchas (National Boxing and Wrestling Commission), to regulate boxing, Greco-Roman wrestling, and similar forms of public spectacles on the island. The first commission members were Colonel Rosendo Collazo, president; Dr. Juan O’Naghten, vice president; and Augusto York, Ramón Fonts, and Mario Mendoza as members. The new commission and the Secretary of the Government apparently did not notice that *alcalde* Marcelino Díaz de Villegas, characterizing pugilism as a brutal sport, shortly afterward issued a prohibitive decree banning boxing in the municipality of Havana. An editorial campaign by brothers José “Pepe” and Rafael Conte, sportswriters for *La Prensa*, helped to persuade the commission members to visit with Díaz de Villegas and to revoke his decree. This would be the last ban on boxing to be instituted in Cuba; the sport resumed in Havana in late March after three months of inactivity.⁶

The commission took the regulation process seriously. In July 1922, it issued a new boxing law containing 26 sections. As Pepe Conte reported in *La Prensa*, “the boxing game and all those actively engaged in it... are regulated to a queen’s taste.” Several of the rules were designed to protect competitors; others sought to encourage legitimate bouts; still others sought to eliminate the influence of gamblers. For instance, no return bouts (i.e., rematches) were permitted before sixty days had passed since the original match-up. The

⁵ Guillermo Pi, “Tratemos de Sports...,” *Bohemia*, 9 October 1921, pp. 14-15; Guillermo Pi, “Tratemos de Sports...,” *Bohemia*, 16 October 1921, pp. 12-13, 18. As Pi had asked Wills to write down his statement, he includes a copy of this (translated into Spanish) in his October 16, 1921, column.

⁶ San Martín and Cubillas, *El arte de los puños*, pp. 85-88.

minimum age for boxers was eighteen, and gambling was “discouraged as much as possible.” Conte stated that, since gambling had been prohibited in boxing clubs, several promoters had stopped holding cards. Boxers, trainers, managers, promoters, referees, timekeepers, and judges had to purchase identification cards displaying their fingerprints and other personal information. Fees for the cards varied from \$10 for boxers to \$300 for promoters. All officials and promoters also needed to put up bond amounts, which were highest (\$5,000) for promoters. The commission also sought to create reciprocal relationships with U.S. state commissions to ensure that their blacklisted fighters, managers, promoters, and officials would not be able to operate in Cuba, and vice versa.⁷ Battling Siki, the Senegalese light heavyweight who had stunned Georges Carpentier with a six-round knockout in September 1922, discovered first-hand how seriously the commission took its licensing requirements when he attempted to serve as cornerman to a preliminary fighter during his 1924 stay in Havana. He was unceremoniously yanked from the ring.⁸

Boxing in Cuba began to flourish shortly after the commission was established, and interest in the sport seemed to soar overnight. *The Ring* reported in its September 1922 issue that the New York-based publication, which had only begun publishing that February, was now being sold in Havana – as well as Paris, London, Canada, and Mexico.⁹ Though boxing arenas were now viewed as suitable spaces for adults, the state sought to ensure that minors aged fifteen and under did not attend or participate in prizefights, out of concern that they

⁷ Pepe Conte, “Fingerprints Required by Cuban Boxing Commission,” *The Ring* 1:8 (September 1922), pp. 16, 22.

⁸ Peter Benson, *Battling Siki: A Tale of Ring Fixes, Race, and Murder in the 1920s* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2006), p. 179. One wonders whether the commission held strictly to licensing requirements for the safety of the competitors or whether it was done out of concern for acquiring licensing fees.

⁹ “Important Notice to Readers of The Ring,” *The Ring* 1:8 (September 1922), p. 7; “National Advertisers, Attention. This Will Interest You,” *The Ring* 1:8 (September 1922), p. 22.

might unconsciously mirror the vices that they witnessed there; it passed a resolution to that effect in June 1923.¹⁰ All of these regulations could not immediately improve the level of local competition, however. Hugh Shannon, a *Ring* correspondent in Buffalo, New York, described the avidity with which Cuban fans embraced the sport and their surprise at realizing that, compared with American boxers, “their vaunted champions were rank amateurs”:

Although one can travel from New York to Cuba in four days, it is a fact that until a year ago the Pearl of the Antilles might as well have been on the other side of the globe so far as its being up to date on boxing matters was concerned. It seems hardly believable that Cuban sporting fans could have held the antiquated ideas regarding boxing that they did until hardly more than twelve months past.

A year earlier, Shannon had witnessed a bout in Havana between Cuba’s light heavyweight champion, Santiago “El Cabo” (Corporal) Esparraguera, and Bronx, New York, welterweight Jimmy Kelly. Despite outweighing his opponent by more than 35 pounds, Esparraguera was knocked out in the fourth, “causing much consternation and a good deal of profit to the American tourists who had bet on the American,” he wrote.¹¹

Despite prior lackluster performances by Cuba’s national champions, by late 1923 boxing judge Fernando Gil felt that matters had improved sufficiently enough to encourage U.S. promoters to come to Havana to stage shows with native fighters. He noted that Cuba had declared champions in each division “by the process of elimination” and, with a little time and additional experience, they would grow “more seasoned” and worthy of top

¹⁰ “Resolución de 22 de junio de 1923,” *Gaceta oficial de la República de Cuba* (25 de junio de 1923), p. 13997.

¹¹ Hugh Shannon, “Heard in Buffalo,” *The Ring* 1:8 (September 1922), pp. 30-31. This bout was held on September 17, 1921.

American opponents. Gil claimed that, since the commission's founding, support for boxing on the island had grown to such an extent that "a number of divorce cases have come up before the courts" where the neglectful husband was spending his time at the fights, or watching boxers train. This increased demand was able to sustain weekly Saturday night cards at central Havana's Stadium Marina, as well as occasional Sunday shows and events at the Arena Colón. Although his article was written to publicize the island to U.S. promoters and others interested in the fight game, Gil reported that the Cuban commission had already licensed eight promoters, the best known of them being Santos y Artigas (which had been a promoter of the circus), Sam Tolón, Santiago Fernández, and Luis F. "Pincho" Gutiérrez, the future manager of Kid Chocolate.¹² Many of the promoters were successful business impresarios. For instance, the Parga and Caicoya group owned the Casa Tarin sporting goods shop on Calle O'Reilly.¹³ The "Parga" of the pair was Luis F. Parga, who would later go on to become boxing commissioner. Although all of these promoters were Cuban, they looked to U.S. boxers for competition against their top local athletes. Santiago Fernández, for instance, employed an American matchmaker named Jimmy Lake, who was using his connections to import U.S. fighters. He secured top lightweight contender Rocky Kansas and lightweight world champion Benny Leonard to appear in Havana in September and November 1923, respectively, although neither fight was carried off.¹⁴ In August 1925, the United Promoters Corp., which billed itself as "the largest organization of its kind in Cuba" and was represented by one J. de Tabibe out of Woodridge, New Jersey, placed an

¹² Fernando Gil, "Cuba and Its Athletes," *The Ring* 2:11 (December 1923), pp. 8-9; Milton Baron, "Boxing in Havana, Cuba," *The Ring* 5:3 (April 1926), p. 32. The others were Clodomiro Castro Romay, Francisco Navas Márquez, José M. Caicoya y Díaz (as part of Parga y Caicoya), and Miguel A. Sordo.

¹³ Charles Pujol, "Hooks and Jabs from Cuba," *The Ring* 3:8 (September 1924), p. 40.

¹⁴ Harold Walsh, "Boxing in Havana," *The Ring* 2:8 (September 1923), p. 36. Kansas eventually became world lightweight champion after Leonard retired from the ring in 1924.

advertisement in *The Ring* which promised boxers seeking work, “Fight in Havana – Earn Good Money.” The group held shows every Saturday night at the Arena Colón.¹⁵

Although the early 1920s saw a dramatic increase in fight cards in the capital and in the larger provincial cities, many fighters had to travel to the southern United States for experience against higher quality opponents. Tampa was a logical first stop, especially since a large Cuban American population there ensured Cuban boxers would earn a solid turnout. Throughout the early to mid-1920s, Aramis del Pino – who had been amateur lightweight champion of Cuba before earning the same distinction in the professional ranks – fought repeatedly in Tampa and Saint Petersburg in between his frequent Havana appearances.¹⁶

By 1925, approximately fifty Cuban prizefighters sought to unionize “to assure themselves of a ‘comfortable old age after fighting days are over.’” A proclamation they signed in support of the union effort declared that promoters held all of the power in their relationships with fighters: “Pugilists are at the mercy of their cruel masters. No provision is made for a lay-off on account of serious injury such as a broken arm or leg, and in case of such injury the friendless boxer is thrown on a cold and unsympathetic world.” *The Ring* editor Nat Fleischer, who repeated much of the proclamation in his monthly column, averred that a boxing commission would serve Cuba’s boxers better than a union – not realizing, apparently, that Cuba (unlike the United States, which to this day does not have a

¹⁵ “Fight in Havana – Earn Good Money,” *The Ring* 4:7 (August 1925), p. 39. The group’s members were Luis F. Parga, José Coucé, and Luis Ferrer, who initially served as its manager. See Milton Baron, “Boxing in Havana,” *The Ring* 5:1 (February 1926), p. 32; Milton Baron, “Boxing in Havana,” *The Ring* 5:2 (March 1926), p. 30; and Milton Baron, “Boxing in Havana, Cuba,” *The Ring* 5:3 (April 1926), p. 32.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Duke Barry, “Florida State Notes,” *The Ring* 5:1 (February 1926), p. 36, and Milton Baron, “Boxing in Havana,” *The Ring* 5:2 (March 1926), p. 30.

national boxing commission) had had such an institution in place for nearly four years.¹⁷ Nothing appears to have come of this union, although the government would attempt to institute additional protections for boxers by the late 1930s. The commission did widen opportunities for poor amateur youths, however, by sanctioning semi-professional bouts in Havana and its suburbs of Marianao, Regla, and Guanabacoa beginning in 1927. The bouts paid competitors a dollar per round in preliminary fights and three dollars per round in “star bouts.” Champions in each weight class would also receive belts.¹⁸

The Secretary of the Government found it necessary to reiterate in a February 1932 resolution that only boxers, promoters, referees, judges, timekeepers, and announcers possessing an identification card provided by the national commission would be eligible to take part in boxing or wrestling matches or exhibitions, which could only be held with commission approval. At every sanctioned event, the commission would also station a delegate to ensure that it held to legal standards. Local *alcaldes* and military delegates were asked to inform the commission president of any anomalies taking place in such spectacles. Those violating these rules were subject to legal penalties. As the resolution’s wording indicated, the government acknowledged that it was having difficulty enforcing its rules in the interior of the island and sought to engage local officials in their enforcement.¹⁹

As visiting fighters often discovered, Cuban fans were enthusiastic about viewing foreign competition, which included by the mid-1920s more boxers from throughout Latin America, such as Chile’s Estanislau Loyaza, and the Philippines, including “Filipino Flash”

¹⁷ Nat Fleischer, “As We See It: Crisp Comment on Current Ring Problems,” *The Ring* 4:8 (September 1925), pp. 23, 25.

¹⁸ Milton Baron, “Boxing in Cuba,” *The Ring* 6:7 (August 1927), p. 33.

¹⁹ “Resolución de 6 de febrero de 1932,” *Gaceta oficial de la República de Cuba*, Habana, Año XXX, Núm. 35, Tomo II (February 12, 1932), pp. 2309-2310.

Pedro Campo.²⁰ Nor were they always partisan to the local man. In February 1924, when southern U.S. champion Jimmy Finley defeated Kid Charol (Estebán Gallard) in Havana on a fifteen-round decision, the American feared “that the fans intended doing him bodily harm.” Instead, the Louisville native found himself “mobbed by thousands of Cubans and carried through the streets of Havana on the shoulders of the fans.” Upon his return to the States, Finley claimed Charol’s Cuban middleweight title, as well as Enrique Ponce de León’s Cuban welterweight title, since he had knocked out the latter in Havana in January 1924. Added to his southern U.S. title, these would certainly have upped Finley’s promotional ante. In Cuba, however, the commission did not recognize him as the holder of two of its national titles, as he was ineligible for them as a foreign boxer.²¹

Spaniards were particularly in evidence in Havana rings in the 1920s and 1930s. Some of the more celebrated included bantamweight “Fillo” Julián Echevarría; lightweight Hilario Martínez; Julian (“Jim”) Moran, who held the Spanish welterweight title; welterweight Justo Vidal; middleweight Ignacio Ara; and Basque heavyweight Isidoro Gastanaga. Spanish fighters were often welcomed into exclusive social clubs as members or visitors, and many of them remained in Cuba for decades. Echevarría, for instance, did not leave Cuba until the onset of the Revolution; he then moved to Miami, where he spent the remainder of his life.

Yet perhaps no foreign boxer since Jack Johnson was greeted with as much curiosity as was Battling Siki, the “Singular Senegalese.” Havana crowds had awaited Siki’s steamer

²⁰ Milton Baron, “Heard in Cuba,” *The Ring* 4:12 (January 1926), p. 40; Milton Baron, “Boxing in Havana,” *The Ring* 5:1 (February 1926), pp. 32-33; Milton Baron, “Boxing in Havana,” *The Ring* 5:1 (February 1926), p. 37.

²¹ “Notes from Florida and Other Points,” *The Ring* 3:3 (April 1924), pp. 29-30 (quotes on p. 30).

from Key West for days before it arrived on February 21, 1924. He was scheduled to fight the winner of the February 23 Santiago Esparraguera-Sergeant Ray Thompson bout, which ended up being a first-round KO for the Corporal. But as it got closer to Siki's March 8 date with Esparraguera, the Senegalese heavyweight found himself too sick with pneumonia to be able to fight. When he recovered sufficiently, he earned money by hosting workouts and sparring exhibitions at the Stadium Marina and Cuban Lawn Tennis Club, for which audiences paid small admission fees. For forty centavos, curious *habaneros* got to witness him spar a six-round session against flyweight Black Bill. Siki left Havana in late April, without having had a single official bout in Cuba.²²

By the mid-1920s, Cuba could boast of at least two potential world championship contenders: Kid Charol at middleweight and Black Bill at flyweight. Both had left the island for promising careers abroad – Charol in South America and Bill in New York, under the aegis of Luis “Pincho” Gutiérrez. Charol, the longtime Cuban middleweight champion, never did win a world title. Black Bill came close – he was the first Cuban to compete for a world title when he lost a fifteen-round decision to Midget Wolgast in March 1930 – but his career was ultimately derailed after he contracted syphilis, which, untreated, led to blindness, fueled his desperation, and drove him to suicide in New York in 1933. Thus, it was not until the rise of Kid Chocolate, who invaded New York in 1928 as Pincho's latest discovery, that a Cuban boxer would fulfill the promise that had been invested in him by the thousands of fans who were weekly attending shows on the island, particularly Havana. In Cuba and New York, Chocolate had become a superstar long before he became a world champion.

²² Benson, *Battling Siki*, pp.175-180.

The Era of Kid Chocolate

For almost six years, Kid Chocolate was among the top competitors in the lighter weight classes in the world. Starting his career as a bantamweight, he moved up to featherweight and junior lightweight. He was the first Cuban to be internationally ranked among the top fighters of his division, and the first, more importantly, to win a world title – in his case, two. He was also the first international Cuban superstar, a larger-than-life figure in his prime who was as renowned for his enormous wardrobe as he was for his numerous ring tricks. Well after he had fought his best fights, Chocolate remained a magnetic figure in both New York and Havana, attracting spectators who hoped to see some of his old flash. When he finally retired, in December 1938, he had amassed an undefeated amateur record as well as 131 professional wins, 50 by knockout; nine losses, including two by knockout; and six draws.²³

Born into a poor Afro-Cuban family in Cerro, Havana, in 1910, the year that Jack Johnson demolished his old nemesis Jim Jeffries in Reno, Eligio Sardiñas Montalvo embarked upon an extensive amateur career at a young age.²⁴ After losing his father at age five, young Eligio had little opportunity for schooling, instead working various manual labor jobs, including shoe shining and working as a “voceador” (newspaper boy). Having become

²³ “Kid Chocolate: The Cuban Bon Bon,” in James B. Roberts and Alexander G. Skutt, *The Boxing Register: International Boxing Hall of Fame Official Record Book*, 4th ed. (Ithaca, NY: McBooks Press, Inc., 2006), pp. 154-155.

²⁴ There appears to have been some confusion over the date of the Kid’s birth. Nat Fleischer reported it in *The Ring Record Book* as being January 6, 1907. Biographer Minito Navarro, recent editions of *The Boxing Register* and *Contemporary Hispanic Biography*, and most other contemporary sources list it as January 6, 1910. Yet Chocolate’s Cuban biographers, Elio Menéndez and Víctor Joaquín Ortega, state that it was really October 28, 1910, and that Chocolate listed his birth date as January 6, 1907, in order to be able to compete in New York rings in 1928 in bouts of over eight rounds (for which boxers had to be at least 21 years of age). See Elio Menéndez and Víctor Joaquín Ortega, *Kid Chocolate: “El boxeo soy yo...”* (Ciudad de la Habana: Editorial Orbe, 1980), p. 10; Minito Navarro, *Biografía de Kid Chocolate* (Miami: Talleres de Pan American, 1979), p. 7; Kelly Winters, “Eligio Sardiñas,” *Contemporary Hispanic Biography*, ed. Ashyia N. Henderson, Vol. 4 (Detroit: Gale, 2004), pp. 203-204; “Kid Chocolate,” in Roberts and Skutt, *The Boxing Register*, 4th ed., pp. 154-155.

a fan of the boxing through the shows held in the capital, he enrolled in an amateur boxing tournament for newsboys sponsored by the daily *La Noche* in 1921, when he was ten or eleven and weighed just 52 pounds. One story has it that he was persuaded to enter the tournament by Luis “Pincho” Gutiérrez, the paper’s young sports editor, who had witnessed the newsboy fend off an older, stronger bully in a street scrap. Despite being smaller and younger than the other competitors, little “Yiyi” – as Eligio was known in childhood – came away with the victory. The nickname he went by, Kid Chocolate, was borrowed from his older brother, Domingo, who had previously tried his hand at boxing.²⁵

After winning the *La Noche* tournament, Chocolate hooked up with Gutiérrez, who agreed to be his future manager. Together, Pincho (as he came to be best known in the boxing world) – himself a novice to the sport – and Chocolate learned the fundamentals of technique by studying old boxing films in Havana cinemas and trying to emulate some of the sport’s greats. The fabled lightweight Joe Gans, known as the “Old Master,” was one of the Cuban fighter’s heroes, and he sought to emulate the former’s clean ring style. (Unlike the brawlers of his day who resorted to “dirty tricks” such as hitting low and relied upon broad swipes and rushing tactics to overwhelm their opponents, Gans – the first African American champion in any weight class – used miniscule defensive movements to avoid unnecessary punishment and targeted his punches precisely and legitimately to areas that could do the most damage.) Chocolate’s manager, meanwhile, early on avoided matching his charge with heavier opponents and prevented him from fighting too frequently – which might have

²⁵ Casper H. Nannes, “Will Kid Chocolate Ever Equal Little Chocolate,” *The Arena* 3:6 (March 1931), pp. 7-9, 38; Menéndez and Ortega, *Kid Chocolate*, pp. 10-15; Navarro, *Biografía de Kid Chocolate*, p. 7, 9; Elio Menéndez and Víctor Ortega, “The Last Great Interview with Kid Chocolate,” 4 July 2006, <http://www.cubanow.net/pages/loader.php?sec=17&t=2&item=1208> (accessed April 27, 2009).

earned both men short-term financial gain but would almost certainly have shortchanged Chocolate's potential.²⁶

Boxing was undergoing great changes in Cuba around the time that Chocolate first took up boxing, as the first commission regulating the sport was formed in late 1921. As more men applied to become promoters, including Gutiérrez, there would soon be an explosion of fight cards in Havana and increasingly, throughout the interior. It is thus surprising, especially given Pincho's cautious approach to his protégé, how quickly Chocolate traveled from semi-professional obscurity to international renown at a time when many other young men were seeking to make their mark in the capital's rings.

The Havana correspondent for *The Ring*, Milton Baron, who reported monthly on all of the island's pugilistic activity, first mentioned Chocolate in print in late 1927 when the Kid earned an unexpected decision over Johnny Cruz, a Cuban who had returned from New York after winning the 1926 metropolitan amateur bantamweight title there. Chocolate, then still a semi-pro, was a last-minute replacement after Cuba's amateur bantamweight champion, Eugenio Molinos, had dropped out. After nearly being knocked out, the Kid rallied to knock down Cruz and pull out a six-round decision.²⁷ When Cruz demanded a rematch, Chocolate obliged – and this time knocked out the former amateur champ in five. A month later, in March 1928, Chocolate had his official pro debut, against Frank Fowler's protégé, Kid Sotolongo. This time Chocolate knocked his opponent out in the first round. He dispatched his next five Cuban opponents, all by knockout.

²⁶ Nannes, "Will Kid Chocolate Ever Equal Little Chocolate," *The Arena* 3:6 (March 1931), p. 9; Winters, "Eligio Sardiñas," *Contemporary Hispanic Biography*, p. 203; "Joe Gans: The Old Master," in Roberts and Skutt, *The Boxing Register*, 4th ed., pp. 124-125. Gans was born Joseph Gaines in Baltimore in 1874 and passed away from tuberculosis in 1910. He held the lightweight crown from 1902 to 1908, when he lost it to Battling Nelson.

²⁷ Milton Baron, "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 6:11 (December 1927), p. 28.

Though his fighter was still very young in both years and professional experience, Pincho Gutiérrez felt Chocolate was ready to conquer American fighters. He brought his charge with him to New York in July 1928. Shortly after Chocolate began an undefeated streak in Mineola and Brooklyn, he graduated to more important cards at St. Nicholas Arena in Manhattan. There, he caught the attention of Nat Fleischer and other important boxing commentators. Legend had it that, in Cuba, Chocolate had had exactly one hundred amateur bouts, all of which he won – 86 by knockout and 14 by decision.²⁸ It seemed as though he would be unstoppable in the professional arena, a well. Fleischer raved:

New York fandom is going wild over a little Cuban negro whose sensational ring work has earned for him thousands of admirers and who at this writing is recognized as one of the leading attractions among the smaller boys in the East. His name is Kid Chocolate and his weight is 122 pounds. He calls himself the bantam champion of Cuba and there is no doubt he is at his best around the bantam limit.

Kid Chocolate is one of the greatest showmen New York has seen in the last decade among the boys below the welter division. He is a little human buzz-saw who possesses everything a good fighter should have. He is shiny black, his skin presenting an appearance of a shined piece of black leather.²⁹

Chocolate's skin color and texture – reinforced by his self-referential nickname, which evoked a satiny, warm brown – was a frequent point of commentary by white U.S. journalists. Additionally, the U.S. press characterized Chocolate, for all of his talents, as more child than man – someone who delighted in his newfound fame but who needed to be

²⁸ Although the web site boxrec.com's Cuban boxing historian, Enrique Encinosa, utilizing original Cuban newspapers, has argued that Chocolate's amateur record was likely a more down-to-earth string of 21 victories, zero defeats, and that the 100-0 legend was invented by Pincho to promote his boxer abroad. Whatever the truth, the legend persists to this day. See Navarro, *Biografía de Kid Chocolate*, p. 11, and Winters, "Eligio Sardiñas," *Contemporary Hispanic Biography*, p. 203. For Encinosa's data, see <http://www.boxrec.com/media/index.php?title=Human:9006> (accessed April 27, 2009).

²⁹ Nat Fleischer, "Nat Fleischer Says: New Boxing Federation in Sight; A Warning to Play Producers; Stribling Heads Towards Title," *The Ring* 7:11 (December 1928), pp. 10-11 (quote on p. 11).

“handled properly.” In fairness, many white boxers were similarly characterized as being pleasant and family-oriented yet simple-minded, unable to function without a wise, older (white) manager. Yet the comparison of boxers with children was often more explicit when discussing young black men. As Caspar Nannes wrote in mid-1929 for *The Arena*, a monthly boxing glossy published in Philadelphia, “[t]hrough all this acclaim and adulation, the kid still remained the same likable, child-like, good natured youngster he had always been.”³⁰

Whether Chocolate claimed his country’s bantamweight crown or not, he certainly had proven by 1929 that he deserved it – something on which all but the Cuban commission members seemed to agree. This fact brought the body up for ridicule among many observers in both Cuba and the United States. Despite the fact that Genaro Pino was still a preliminary fighter in the U.S. while Chocolate was packing them in at St. Nick’s Arena, and that the former had a record “so full of defeats that it resembles a piece of shrapnel-torn Swiss cheese,” as one Philadelphia newspaperman wrote, Pino remained bantam titlist of Cuba. Cubans were also incensed by the commission’s refusal to strip Pedro Canales of his featherweight crown (with its 126-pound limit), despite the fact that he then weighed 143 pounds and was regularly meeting welterweights rather than offering defenses of his title.³¹

The late 1920s was truly a “golden age” of bantamweight prizefighters, when there was a plethora of young men from far-flung areas of the world who seemed capable of winning the title, Chocolate foremost among them. The rise of small men in the ring may have had to do with the fact that many impoverished ethnic Americans, who had grown up poorly nourished in urban slums, as well as boxers from throughout Asia and Latin America,

³⁰ Caspar Nannes, “‘Kid Chocolate,’” *The Arena* 1:7 (June 10, 1929), pp. 20-21, 35-37 (quote on p. 35).

³¹ Leonard Joseph, “Short Jabs,” *The Arena* 1:9 (July 10, 1929), pp. 26-27, 38-39 (quote on p. 26).

were then active in the U.S.³² This period also coincided with the heyday of Jewish American fighters, particularly in New York, who tended to be most successful at the lighter weights.³³ Despite the plethora of bantams, it had been more than two years since champion Charley Phil Rosenberg was stripped of his title, fined, and suspended for a year for coming in significantly over weight for his February 1927 defense with Bushy Graham, yet there still had not been crowned a replacement. In May 1929, the New York State Athletic Commission (NYSAC) refused to sanction a bantamweight championship match between Kid Chocolate and 1924 flyweight Olympic champion Fidel La Barba, who had abandoned his professional flyweight title to study at Stanford University. NYSAC reduced the bout's scheduled fifteen rounds (which, in New York, was then the limit for championship affairs) to ten, but indicated that, "if the competitive calibre of the contest warranted, and the public and press agreed, the winner would merit recognition as champion." That was assuming, of course, that both fighters reached the maximum weight limit of 118 pounds at 2 p.m. on the day of the fight, May 22, which was to be held at the New York Coliseum in the Bronx.³⁴

Yet neither one made weight – Chocolate came in at 121, LaBarba at 120 ½ –, thus obliterating their chances at the bantamweight title. Chocolate defeated LaBarba by majority

³² A few of the many names put forth as potential champions were Bushy Graham (Angelo Geraci), an Italian American from Utica, New York; Italian American Fidel La Barba of Los Angeles; Spain's Vidal Gregorio; "Panama" Al Brown of the Canal Zone; "Spider" Pladner of France, New York's Joey Scalfaro; and Norwegian Pete Sanstol. Of these, Brown would prove himself to be the greatest of the era's bantams, winning the vacant New York State Athletic Commission title in June 1929 by defeating Vidal and subsequently receiving recognition by the National Boxing Association later that year. Brown – the first Latin American to win a professional world boxing title – held several versions of the crown until 1935. He was soon afterward replaced by Sixto Escobar, the Puerto Rican hero, who became the second Latin American world bantamweight champion and whose rise signaled the future dominance by men from that region (and the Philippines) in this and other smaller weight classes.

³³ As Allen Bodner notes, "Jews entered the ranks of American boxing in large numbers and by 1928, were the dominant nationality in professional prizefighting, followed by the Italians and the Irish." See Bodner, *When Boxing Was a Jewish Sport* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997), p. 1.

³⁴ James P. Dawson, "LaBarba to Meet Chocolate Tonight," *New York Times*, 22 May 1929, p. 23.

decision (one judge ruled the bout a draw, while the other judge and the referee scored it for Chocolate), but the result was irrelevant. This was the second time Chocolate had failed to reach the 118-pound limit, and, as *The Arena* boxing magazine noted, “despite the persistence of the Candy Kid and his manager that the Cuban Negro still is a bantam... we do not think he ever could do it without cutting off either a foot or an arm.”³⁵

Unfortunately for Chocolate, who never again fought as a bantam, this would derail his championship ambitions for a year and a half, when – as a full-fledged featherweight – he faced Battling Battalino in December 1930 at Madison Square Garden. The referee and two judges ruled it a unanimous victory for Battalino, although many in the crowd disagreed, booing and littering the arena with torn newspapers and fight programs. James P. Dawson, sportswriter for the *New York Times*, scored the bout as Chocolate’s, nine rounds to six, but noted that the judges rewarded the Hartford fighter for his aggression.³⁶ This loss was particularly disappointing for Chocolate. The year had been a difficult one for his career. In May, he was injured in a car accident and had to spend several weeks convalescing, forcing him to postpone a May 28 rematch with LaBarba. When he returned to the ring in July 1930, he won his next three bouts before losing three fights to top competition in a four-month period. The first, at the New York Polo Grounds on August 7, 1930, was a split-decision win by Jack “Kid” Berg of Great Britain (with Berg, a lightweight, outweighing Chocolate by

³⁵ “Critic,” “Bantam Muddle Still Muddled Up,” *The Arena* 1:10 (July 25, 1910), pp. 20-21, 35 (quote on p. 20).

³⁶ James P. Dawson, “18,000 See Battalino Beat Chocolate and Retain World’s Featherweight Title,” *New York Times*, 13 December 1930, p. 26.

nearly ten pounds) that Chocolate and many observers felt had rightly been his. The second was a ten-round, clear-cut unanimous decision victory by LaBarba in November 1930.³⁷

On the day of the Battalino fight, a *New York Times* sportswriter noted, “There has been a quite a bit of conversation... about Chocolate being through.” He noted that the “good-natured Cuban boy” was “paying the price of perfection”: “He was too good at the outset. It is puzzling and disturbing to think that about a year ago he was considered as certain a thing as Man O’War.”³⁸ If the buzz prior to the Battalino fight was that Chocolate’s career had fizzled, it became stronger after it. As many had predicted, Chocolate was not as invincible at featherweight as he had been at bantam.³⁹

Despite the naysayers, in 1931, Chocolate rebounded well from these losses, putting together four straight victories before meeting Benny Bass on July 15 at the Philadelphia National League Ballpark in front of 15,000 people. The third time was the charm for Chocolate, who was given his third chance at a title – in his third weight division. Bass’s world junior-lightweight title, which he had won a year and a half earlier from Seattle’s Tod Morgan, would be on the line. Bass, who went into the bout aware that his younger sister Anna was dying from spinal meningitis, was outclassed early and often. The referee stopped

³⁷ “Kid Chocolate in Crash,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1930, p. 16; James P. Dawson, “Chocolate Forced to Postpone Bout,” *New York Times*, 20 May 1930, p. 42; James P. Dawson, “Berg Gets Verdict over Kid Chocolate,” 8 August 1930, p. 20; James P. Dawson, “La Barba Triumphs in Chocolate Bout,” *New York Times*, 4 November 1930, p. 38.

³⁸ Robert F. Kelley, “Sports of the Times: The Kid Grows Older,” *New York Times*, 12 December 1930, p. 35.

³⁹ See, for instance, “Critic,” “Bantam Muddle Still Muddled Up,” *The Arena* 1:10 (July 25, 1929), p. 20: “Chocolate will not find it so easy to get to the top of the 126-pound boys as he did in the lighter class. There is no questioning the fact that the ebony boxer is a great little fighter, but we do not believe that he is any greater than a number of other 126-pounders – including LaBarba – and we say this despite the fact that Chocolate is credited with a victory over the fighting student of the West.”

the one-sided affair in the seventh, after Bass had been physically battered. Chocolate appeared to have been unscathed.⁴⁰

The Cuban public was jubilant at having one of their own finally earn a professional world boxing championship. Upon his return to the island, the boxing commission hosted an event in Chocolate's honor on July 23.⁴¹ Shortly afterward, however, the champion found himself in trouble with the Cuban authorities on the charges that he had committed statutory rape of a 17-year-old girl, Rosario (Rosa) Mora Martínez, in Havana. Her father, Pablo Mora Nieto, pressed charges for an offense that was said to have occurred that February.⁴² According to the girl and her father, Chocolate had promised to marry her but had then deserted her. Following a first-round knockout over Max Lanier at St. Nicholas Arena on November 30, 1931, in a benefit show for Black Bill – who by then, ravaged by syphilis, had lost his sight – Chocolate was arrested by the office of U.S. Commissioner Cotter, who held him at a federal penitentiary pending the outcome of an extradition request by Cuban Consul General Augusto Merchán. Facing a one-year prison sentence should he be extradited and convicted, Chocolate stated that he thought he had married Rosario “by proxy.”⁴³ His attorney sought bail for Chocolate to fight Al Singer on a milk fund benefit show December 11, but the request was denied. Instead, his recent opponent, Battling Battalino, was recruited to fill Chocolate's shoes on the card.⁴⁴ Upon the State Department's formal receipt of Cuba's extradition request, Chocolate agreed to waive proceedings and be

⁴⁰ “Chocolate Victor by Knockout in 7th,” *New York Times*, 16 July 1931, 26; “Benny Bass's Sister Dies,” *New York Times*, 18 July 1931, p. 7.

⁴¹ Peter, “Casi Cincuenta Años de Boxeo en Cuba,” *Diario de la Marina*, Siglo y Cuarto: número extraordinario (September 15, 1957), p. 214.

⁴² “Cuba Boxer Held on Girl's Charge,” *Los Angeles Times*, 28 July 1931, p. 5.

⁴³ “Kid Chocolate Is Jailed,” *New York Times*, 2 December 1931, p. 19.

⁴⁴ “Boxer to Be Extradited,” *New York Times*, 4 December 1931, p. 18; “Battalino to Box Singer,” *New York Times*, 4 December 1931, p. 33; “Battalino Bout Approved,” *New York Times*, 5 December 1931, p. 24.

taken directly to Cuba. After two weeks in U.S. federal lockup, he was wed by proxy to Mora Martínez on December 16 – with Pincho Gutiérrez standing in for him at the ceremony (at which the bride and her father were also in attendance) as Chocolate traveled by steamer to Havana. With the wedding having occurred before he touched Cuban soil, the Cuban authorities allowed Chocolate to disembark without further detention.⁴⁵

Now that this trouble was behind him, the newlywed Kid enjoyed his popularity at home and abroad and took advantage of opportunities to augment it. He posed for the Compañía Lechera de Cuba in a light-colored suit and floral tie, holding up a glass of the company’s pasteurized milk, with a caption indicating that it was his favorite drink.⁴⁶ He posed completely nude (with his private parts coyly hidden from view) for photographers who reproduced his image in magazines, newspapers, and postcards. *Nocaut Internacional* ran a photo of Chocolate in profile, right bicep curled, with the caption, “The ebony Apollo, considered by critics worldwide to be the most perfect boxer of the era.”⁴⁷ Naked or clothed, the Kid was always beautiful to look at, almost godlike, like Apollo. The point was made by *Carteles* when, in August 1931, it ran two very contrasting photos of the new world champion. The first was the same image that later ran in *Nocaut Internacional*, with the caption – “El ‘Beau Brummel’ de ebano” (the ebony Beau Brummel).⁴⁸ In the second, the boxer stood squarely at the camera, impeccably adorned in a suit – “Bronce viviente” (living

⁴⁵ “Would Extradite Fighter,” *New York Times*, 9 December 1931, p. 23; “Pugilist Wed by Proxy,” *New York Times*, 17 December 1931, p. 21.

⁴⁶ For instance, see “Tome Solamente Leche Pasteurizada,” *Nocaut* 2:6 (March 1932), p. 3.

⁴⁷ Jess Losada, “Peleará Chocolate con Venezuela?” *Nocaut Internacional* 3:1 (February 1933), p. 31. The original text read, “El Apolo de ébano, considerado por la crítica mundial como el más perfecto púgil de la época.”

⁴⁸ George Bryan “Beau” Brummell was a wealthy young man in turn-of-the-18th century England who was renowned for his extreme fastidiousness in matters of personal fashion. His name became a synonym for “dandy.”

bronze). The text listed Chocolate's current weight (134 pounds), height (5 foot 7 inches), age (20 years old), and details about his amateur and professional career, as well as the details that probably interested its readership the most: that Chocolate had personal, tax-free earnings of \$100,000, and that his future wealth was valued at a quarter-million dollars.⁴⁹

In October 1932, Chocolate added another title to his résumé: the world featherweight championship, which he won from Lew Feldman at Madison Square Garden. But his hold on that started to waver at Madison Square Garden in November 1933, when Tony Canzoneri knocked him out in the second of ten nontitle rounds. Two fights later, on Christmas Day 1933, Chocolate was stopped again – by Frankie Klick in Philadelphia during the seventh of fifteen rounds. Klick won recognition in Pennsylvania as the holder of Chocolate's junior lightweight title.⁵⁰ When Klick challenged Chocolate to a featherweight title fight the following year, the Cuban Bon Bon, citing weight issues – he felt he could no longer get below 130 pounds –, refused to meet him. NYSAC thus stripped Chocolate of his featherweight title on February 19, 1934.⁵¹

His decline was slow but obvious. In 1935 and 1936, Chocolate's fight pace slowed considerably, with bouts every other month or so. With the exception of a jaunt to Venezuela, where he lost a decision to national hero Simón Chávez, he satisfied himself with bouts against top U.S. opposition in Havana. He went back to New York in late 1936 with the aim of trying to make a comeback. Although he lost his first attempt back against Phil

⁴⁹ "Galería deportiva No. 1," *Carteles*, 23 August 1931. That his age at the time is listed at 20 years gives further credence to Menéndez's and Ortega's claim that the Kid's birthday was in October 1910, not January 1910. My thanks to Envir M. Casimir for providing me with a copy of this document.

⁵⁰ "Canzoneri Victor by Knockout in 2d," *New York Times*, 25 November 1933, p. 20; "Klick Wins Title; Stops Chocolate," *New York Times*, 26 December 1933, p. 23.

⁵¹ "Chocolate to Yield Title," *New York Times*, 18 February 1934, p. S7; James P. Dawson, "Chocolate Title Vacated by Board," *New York Times*, 20 February 1934, p. 29.

Baker in December 1936, he won or drew against the remainder of his opponents over the next two years. But his skills had slipped, and, after exerting himself to manage a draw against Nicky Jerome in Havana on December 18, 1938, Chocolate decided to cancel an impending South American tour and instead finally called it quits from ring competition. Much later, Chocolate claimed that it was Pincho Gutiérrez who insisted upon it: “After my bout with Jerome in December 1938, he called me and made me retire. He spoke with truth: I was not the same boxer, fighting was affecting my health and my morale.” When he finally stepped away from the ring, Chocolate was not yet 29 years old.⁵²

Why his career was over so quickly remains a subject of debate, but most experts agree that lack of training and personal dissolution – the bane of many a boxer – had much to do with it. Never all that disciplined in his training, Chocolate also enjoyed a life of women, nightlife, and rum. It was speculated that, like his friend Black Bill, he had contracted syphilis and was never the same.⁵³ The Kid himself unapologetically acknowledged how distracting his women-chasing had been to his prizefighting career; in old age, he told his Cuban interviewers:

...I also wanted to be a champ in bed. Imagine, when I made my debut in New York, they had to drag me off between the legs of a dancer, a tremendous woman I liked a lot. If I had taken the sacred code of boxing literally, I would have lasted longer, nevertheless... I would have little to say except to talk about punches and defense, and perhaps bore you.⁵⁴

⁵² “Kid Chocolate Retires,” *New York Times*, 20 December 1938, p. 34; Menéndez and Ortega, “The Last Great Interview with Kid Chocolate,” 4 July 2006.

⁵³ See, for example, Jonathan Rendall, *This Bloody Mary Is the Last Thing I Own: A Journey to the End of Boxing* (Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press, 1997), p. 38, which claims that Chocolate’s supposed troubles with weight after 1933 were merely a cover-up for dealing with the ravages of syphilis.

⁵⁴ Menéndez and Ortega, “The Last Great Interview with Kid Chocolate,” 4 July 2006.

For the next fifty or so years after retiring from professional boxing, Chocolate remained in Havana, where he raised a family and worked, during the republic years, as a boxing instructor on behalf of the government. As discussed in the next chapter, he was a critical part of the boxing academy founded by the state in the late 1930s to develop young amateur boxers from the interior into first semi-pros and then accomplished professionals. He died in poverty and obscurity on August 8, 1988, in a state-owned house in Havana, the barest details of his death announced on Cuban radio.⁵⁵ The revolutionary regime has maintained his Kid Chocolate Gym in Cerro, and his name is frequently evoked in aficionados' discussions of the greatest Cuban boxers of all time – usually at the top of their lists. But his legacy remains clouded by the sad unraveling of his later years. To the revolutionary government, he quickly became a relic – a living symbol of his own, and an earlier era's, excesses – rather than someone who could speak to the future ahead. He was not involved in any significant way in running the Castro regime's amateur boxing program, perhaps due to his own ambivalence regarding the ban on professional sports. It is true that his health had been failing for some time; according to Nat Fleischer, who had seen him in Havana circa 1959, Chocolate (presumably not yet fifty years old) was already “bent over” and relied on a cane, noting, “It's like he disappeared when Castro came.”⁵⁶ Yet Chocolate's lack of involvement in the Revolution's amateur program, even on a symbolic level, might also have belied an ambivalence toward it. In 1979, though he called Cuba's program “[w]ithin the limits of amateur boxing, the best in the world,” he added,

⁵⁵ “Kid Chocolate, 78, Ex-Boxing Champion,” *New York Times*, 9 August 1988.

⁵⁶ Ira Berkow, “Sports of the Times: The Riddle of Kid Chocolate,” *New York Times*, 21 August 1988.

...I, who fought 10 and 15 rounds, get bored [with amateur boxing] at certain moments. I understand that amateur boxing is more humane, cleaner, and takes better care of the boxer. They are two different sports. Even though it is always tough: in professional boxing the punches are not given with meringue.⁵⁷

Regardless of his feelings toward the Revolution, Chocolate remains a salient icon in Cuba today. By this I mean the Chocolate of 1931 through 1933, the world champion who posed so confidently, and brazenly, for nude photographs and who represented the supreme victory of Cuba – an island that chafed under its obvious neocolonial status and the second-class citizenship of most of its citizenry. As British sociologist John Sugden opined during his ethnographic fieldwork in Cuba in 1990-1991, much of it spent around the small Arena Trejo boxing gym in Old Havana which remains a training ground for future world champions, “The glory days of Kid Chocolate and his contemporaries are retained in the collective folk memory of places like Old Havana and this helps to sustain a subculture which encourages young Cubans to dedicate themselves to the ring.”⁵⁸

Reading the First Decades of Boxing in the Republic

The first three-and-a-half decades of boxing in the Cuban republic testify that the sport was growing – unsteadily, and not always progressively – along several different tracks and in very different venues: the elite social and recreational clubs of Havana; private homes and out-of-the-way theaters where local amateurs, semi-pros,

⁵⁷ Menéndez and Ortega, “The Last Great Interview with Kid Chocolate,” 4 July 2006.

⁵⁸ John Sugden, *Boxing and Society: An International Analysis* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 169. Sugden refers throughout his text to the Arena Trojo gym, but it is the Arena Trejo.

and pros could perform for a close-knit group of aficionados; and grand arenas where renowned foreign prizefighters performed for the pleasure of women as well as men. Poor Afro-Cuban newsboys, like young Kid Chocolate, and middle-class white Cuban and U.S. youngsters could find spaces in which to hone their craft. The state vacillated between tolerating boxing and repressing it, between embracing it as a progressive means by which to build a generation of virile young men and repudiating it as a barbaric relic suited for Americans, perhaps, but not Cubans. The 1921 formation of the national boxing commission and the subsequent establishment of opportunities for professional as well as amateur advancement undoubtedly accelerated the processes by which Cuban fighters found their niches not only at home but also abroad, particularly in the United States. But not until the rise of Kid Chocolate did a native pugilist achieve the type of transcendent fame that would inspire (and continue to inspire) generations of young boxers on the island.

In my first two chapters, I have attempted to indicate the fragmented nature of boxing's growth in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Until 1921, state intervention was used primarily to suppress boxing. After 1921, the state turned to regulation with an eye toward developing yet another arm of Cuba's nascent tourist industry, a goal that would become more important in the next three decades. Looking ahead to the late 1930s, the role of the state in overseeing the sport became far more proactive – leading to a self-sustaining domestic prizefighting industry as well as a constant supply of boxers for export abroad. The Cuban boxing program of the late 1930s and 1940s was far more ambitious than that in practice in most U.S.

states at that time, but its effectiveness was limited by ongoing graft, corruption, and political turmoil that served the latter aim – export of boxers – but not always the former – increasing sports tourism at home. It is this largely forgotten era of Cuban sports and politics to which we now turn.

Chapter 4: The Conflicting Role of the State in Building a National Boxing Program, 1930s-1940s

The Neocolonial State and the Cubanization of Boxing

The late 1930s through late 1940s witnessed a phenomenal growth in amateur, semi-professional, and professional boxing in Cuba. The institutionalization of the sport in various departmental organizations, the construction of new facilities, and the growth of fan bases through the development of local idols and the distribution of sports and physical culture publications were all critical to the effort of building the nation's pugilistic program. Perhaps most salient, however, is that this expansion of boxing was concurrent with the increasingly transnational nature of the sport. Prizefighters had always been wanderers, particularly those in search of elusive titles. Yet the immediate pre- and post-World War II periods were remarkable for how quickly Cuba became both a regional center for boxers seeking work – one that embraced young men from the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Philippines as well as the United States – and a powerhouse in producing them.

The neocolonial state was responsible for much of this growth, as it worked to develop a self-sustaining tourist industry that employed surplus adults (prizefighters, trainers, seconds, referees, doctors) at home while providing a venue of employment abroad for boxers – as well as baseball players, musicians, dancers, and others whose work was central to the tourist machine. Robin D. Moore seeks to answer in his monograph on music in Cuban life since the 1950s “how a country with many social problems, and one eventually in

a state of civil war, could have simultaneously been the site of amazingly vibrant musical development.”¹ These next two chapters ask a similar question, with boxing as their focus.

Yet the world of music varied significantly from that of athletics, particularly prizefighting, where age and experience were more liability than advantage. Through the 1950s, and in some countries into the 1980s, prizefighters fought often. “Ham-and-egggers,” those with little to no chance of reaching the top of the sport, might fight once every two weeks, more often if they were desperate; top contenders and champions could take on opponents once a month (albeit not always for title defenses).² To have amassed over one hundred professional fights – an astonishing feat today – was nothing special in U.S. and Cuban rings at the time. With every fighter only too aware that his time in the ring was limited (many, like Kid Chocolate, retired before age thirty), the Cuban system could only have offered him long-term employment if it established a system by which, after his fighting years were over, he could be adapted to work for which he was already suited. Within limits – for the numbers of ex-prizefighters far outnumbered the potential need for new boxing support staff – the state attempted to do just that. Thus, former boxers were recruited to be boxing instructors at the national academy or at social clubs; managers and trainers who traveled with their charges; referees who might become as well known in Cuba as the boxers themselves; or, for the rare man among them (usually, but not always, from a white middle-class background), sportswriters or government officials.

¹ Moore, *Music and Revolution*, p. 27.

² Boxing has long used several colorful, if derogatory, phrases to describe competitors who are viewed as being mediocre at best, talentless at worse; they include “ham and egg” and “meat and potato” fighters (presumably because their ring wages are sufficient only to pay for a basic livelihood), “tomato cans” (because they are easily knocked down), and “palookas.”

The period described in this chapter reflects a great deal of variety in the methods and approaches to the sport as it was practiced, advocated, and regulated in Cuba during the 1930s and 1940s. It treats semi-professional boxing, the amateur Golden Gloves tournament, the ways that the World War II-era physical culture movement helped to popularize boxing among the middle classes, and prizefighting in both the capital and interior of the island. One of the most obvious ways the sport changed in this period was the institutionalization of semi-professionalism, which, at a time when the social clubs remained segregated by race and class and UAAC tournaments were off-limits to them, gave poor white and Afro-Cuban boys a venue by which to learn how to become fighters without having to face more experienced opponents.

In this era, moreover, the state supervised – although it did not quite control – the growing Cubanization of boxing. Although genuine sports fans such as DGD director Jaime Mariné oversaw boxing’s expansion domestically, the pursuit of tourist and other revenue was an underlying motive in fostering a self-sustaining prizefighting culture. That the state took the institutionalization of boxing seriously is evidenced by the increase in the number of promoters, managers, and trainers it sanctioned as well as by the growth of professional, semi-professional, and amateur boxers. Indeed, the state’s reach went far beyond the capital and even beyond the interior. The creation of a regional network of prizefight centers, stretching from the Southern U.S. to South America, helped to ensure that Havana would not only attract the best foreign competition to its rings, but also that its top native fighters could secure steady work abroad.

The Institutionalization of Semi-Professional Boxing

Instituted in 1927 as a venue by which underprivileged boys and young men could obtain develop pugilistic skills for lower pay – and against less experienced opposition – than in regular prizefights, semi-professionalism filled a space between amateurism and professionalism but was closer to the latter. In the Cuba, it must be noted, amateurism was not truly amateurism, as became clear as the period wore on. Youngsters and college students were accustomed to receiving pittances after each bout, and sometimes more substantial aid from benefactors and fans. Thus, rather than existing in separate spheres, amateur, semi-professional, and professional boxing fit together along a spectrum – one that displayed obvious differences in pay scale, length of bouts, quality and age of opponents, prestige, and national exposure.

The last weeks of 1939 brought with them a new government policy toward semi-professional boxing. Under the leadership of Colonel Jaime Mariné, the Dirección Nacional General de Deportes (DGD) inaugurated a semi-professional boxing championship tournament in early 1940. By recognizing this variant of the sport with titles and other honors, the DGD hoped to ensure a safe path to the pro ranks for impoverished young men who could not afford to spend any length of time in the amateurs. It declared that semi-pros would receive the same per-round rate of pay, but that they would be limited to fighting no more than six three-minute rounds per bout. The minimum age requirement for semi-pros was fifteen, versus eighteen for pros. The new regulations further stated that semi-pros were not allowed to tape their hands, as did their professional counterparts, and would use slightly larger gloves – six and three-quarters versus five ounces for pros. Amateurs generally fought for three or five rounds of three minutes duration, were similarly prevented from taping

their hands, and used eight-ounce gloves. As then-Commissioner of Boxing, Luis “Pincho” Gutierrez, former manager of Kid Chocolate and a strong advocate of semi-professionalism, noted, “This is the first time in [Cuban] boxing, under commission rules, that boys use gloves for regulation contests that are bigger than those required for professional fights and smaller than those used in our amateur contests.” While these distinctions among amateurs, semi-pros, and pros may seem incrementally small, the Commission was striving to differentiate between those who needed more time in the amateurs and those who “are ready to graduate into the tougher group.” As such, only those with at least twelve amateur bouts could pass into the semi-pro ranks.³

Gutierrez – who had been named to his position by DGD Director Mariné – proudly boasted of using an “iron hand” as Boxing Commissioner as a means of preventing “set-ups,” or pre-arranged mismatches, and, more broadly, to ensure the health and safety of Cuba’s boys. All registered boxers received free medical and dental treatment so long as their membership card remained active and they attended regular training sessions. Of 2,758 registered boxers – amateurs, semi-pros, and pros – he estimated that some 200 were “highly experienced professional fighters.” Yet unlike in the United States and other countries, where “the professional promoter rules the sport of boxing, in Cuba every branch of sport is part of a national program under the direct supervision of members of the Athletic Commission.” He elaborated as to how such a system worked to ensure the constant influx of new boxers into the semi-pro and pro ranks:

³ Luis Gutierrez, “Cuba’s Boxing Progress,” *The Ring* 19:1 (February 1940), p. 25. To put the glove weights in contemporary perspective, though this was an improvement in cushioning for the time, today no recognized professional sanctioning body (or national amateur association regulating adult competitors) uses gloves of less than eight ounces in competition; heavier weight classes use ten-ounce gloves. At present, only young children in amateur competition use gloves of less than eight ounces.

Nowhere in the boxing world are the boxers ruled with such an iron hand and yet most kindly by a boxing commission. I use the term “iron hand” because we absolutely forbid any matches here under our control, in the amateur and semi-professional field, in which there are any set-ups. The boys are required to fight an opponent selected for them by me. I make the choice, based wholly on the ability of the rivals, the number of hours they have spent under our jurisdiction in the gymnasium and the period of their activity in other fights.

When I feel that they are ready to become professionals, if they so desire it, then through our boxing commission, we assign a professional manager to handle the boy. Such managers are not permitted to obtain a license from us unless they are men of high character who not only know the sport but upon whom we can depend for proper guidance of the boys released to them.⁴

In short, the boys and young men who formed the corpus of Cuba’s amateur boxers – should they be so gifted – now had financial incentives to enter the semi-pro ranks. This middle level of competition not only served as training ground for future professionals – possible national champions as well as “meat and potato” club fighters – but offered those who could expect little success in the pro ranks a means of supplemental income. Men could stay semi-pro for a number of years, augmenting day wages with irregular evening or weekend earnings that brought intangible benefits, such as local recognition and a sense of personal achievement, while requiring far less training time. Moreover, paid forms of pugilism – whether pro or semi-pro – were quite often a necessary side occupation for boys and men who could not earn sufficient wages by other means. Since ring fees varied dramatically by region, the line between semi-pro and pro fights was not always clear-cut. The majority of Cuba’s registered boxers, after all, labored in obscurity for months or years, gaining recognition only at the local or possibly provincial level. One such fighter who

⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

earned far more attention in death than in life was Kid Chicle, a.k.a. Lino Rodríguez Grenot, whom we discuss below.

Another, if unspoken, argument for semi-professionalism concerned the segregation of amateur facilities in Cuba. The exclusive social clubs were for well-heeled white members, and their athletic competitions – whether internal, such as exhibitions, or external, with other clubs – denied opportunities to people of color and poor whites. While professional boxing in Cuba was not racially segregated as in much of the United States, amateur bouts were a different matter. The Unión Atlética Amateur de Cuba (Amateur Athletic Union of Cuba, UAAC), which encompassed athletes from the University of Havana, discriminated against Afro-Cubans for years after its establishment. Nonwhites were able to participate in boxing and other sports in an integrated association founded in 1931, the Organización Deportiva Amateur de Cuba (Amateur Sport Association of Cuba, ODAC).⁵

In addition to ODAC, there were individual participants from the black social clubs, which had their own sporting calendar separate from the UAAC. White athletes who were not from exclusive families competed for separate clubs that were set up for the white petit-bourgeoisie. Finally, there were “atletas libres” (free athletes) who were not associated with asociaciones deportivos, or who were from small black clubs. These free athletes almost always participated in track and field or preliminary boxing events (eliminitorios), although track and field usually recruited directly from the colleges. Members of non-UAAC leagues and free athletes were allowed to participate in the Cuban Olympic Committee’s public eliminitorios. This is why Afro-Cubans did take part in the 1935 Central American and

⁵ Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 164.

Caribbean Games in events where they might be more heavily represented, such as boxing, baseball, and athleticism (track and field). Of course, outside of the UAAC and the exclusive social clubs, it was difficult if not impossible for athletes to secure access to good trainers, adequate and healthy nutrition, and equipment and facilities – thus giving the UAAC members a tangible if not insurmountable advantage in winning the eliminatory events.⁶

Because of the segregated and uneven nature of amateur competition – outside of the Golden Gloves, which did bring together white and black competitors – it was by no means assured that a talented youth could make his way successfully to the professional ranks by amateur experience alone. Semi-professionalism addressed these structural inequalities in amateur sport by offering an alternate path to prizefighting. Yet it is important to note that semi-professionalism could be as exploitative as prizefighting itself; there were few safeguards in place to ensure the continued long-term health of participants, and paydays were by nature smaller than what might be had in the professional rings.

Although fight cards varied by promoter, city, and venue, the typical arrangement followed closely upon that which was, and still is, common in the United States. This was to open the card with the preliminary bouts (usually four or six rounds in duration), which were followed by one or two “semi-final” events, normally eight rounds apiece, and culminated in a “star-bout” of ten or more rounds. (In the U.S. South, as in Cuba, battles royal were also a popular way to open a fight card in the early twentieth century.) Cuban promoters regularly integrated amateur and semi-professional bouts into the preliminary portion of the card – for instance, opening with one or two amateur bouts, moving to a semi-pro bout, and then

⁶ Conversation with Carols Reig Romero [scholar on the early YMCA in Havana], 1 April 2006, Havana, Cuba.

introducing some (often quite green) professionals. The status of the boxers was usually indicated in some form – either explicitly in the programs that were published beforehand in the press, or implicitly based on number of rounds or other details. For instance, two fighters in a preliminary bout of three rounds would most likely be amateurs.

The term “star-bout” brings up the matter of the use of English in postwar Cuban boxing circles. In Havana periodicals of that period, this term was rarely translated into Spanish (“pelea estrellar”), reflecting the desire of Cuban elites to align themselves culturally as well as politically with the United States. As Louis A. Pérez, Jr., has compellingly demonstrated, English in the mid-to-late 1940s and 1950s was “Havana’s unofficial second language,” one that surpassed Spanish in countless ways small and large. Indeed, as he notes, “the vogue of things North American had passed directly into forms of self-representation.” English words were used to sell consumer goods, such as kitchen and household appliances and cars. Children and pets were given American, and even Hollywood-inspired, names. While it is important to qualify that these affectations did not reflect a saturation of American culture among the lower classes or even among provincial elites, they did allow habaneros of means to differentiate themselves from their less educated, less wealthy, and nonwhite peers. These linguistic shifts were demonstrative of significant lifestyle changes, as U.S. middle-class norms were imbibed by Cuban (and particularly Havana) elites who sought to eat, dress, and associate with each other along American lines.⁷

Mirroring the influence of English in Cuban literature, film, and music, much of the sporting vocabulary of the time was borrowed directly from English, albeit with sometimes modified orthography. Boxing was certainly no exception. “Rounds” were at times spelled

⁷ Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban*, pp. 354-444 (quotes on pp. 384 and 385).

“raunds” and were used interchangeably with the Spanish terms “cantos” or “asaltos.” There seemed no need to translate “knockout,” abbreviated “K.O.,” but a technical knockout was called a “knockout técnicál.” Participants were “boxers” more often than they were “boxeadores,” and the same was true for trainers and managers, whose English terms were far more common than “entrenadores” and “dueños.” The “ring” was still a “ring”; the term “cuadrilátero” referred to a baseball diamond, not the squared circle. Moreover, although the practice began to decline by the late 1940s, boxers continued to use Americanized nicknames, most notably those that suggested youth, such as “Baby,” “Kid,” and “Young.” Perhaps in no other sport of the period in Cuba – with the possible exception of baseball – did English so completely rule the terminology of the game.

Despite the seeming advantages of the semi-pro system for boxers who could not or would not devote themselves to the professional arena, it was dismantled in 1947 by new DGD director Manolo Castro. The decision was part of the Grau administration’s post-Mariné restructuring of the DGD; the reason given for semi-professionalism’s end was because of “no haber cumplido el fin para que fue creado” (not having achieved the end for which it was created). Pincho Gutiérrez – who remained an influential manager and commentator after leaving the Boxing Commission – took strong umbrage at this decision, stating that the loss of semi-professionalism was a “crime” that would destroy the progress that Cuban boxing had achieved (under his tenure, it was implied). He argued that the loss of semi-pro bouts would destroy Cuba’s rising stars before they could be properly introduced

to the pro ranks. Moreover, the amateur game in Cuba was now a “filfa” (fib), and he had no option left except to take his boxers abroad to find suitable competition.⁸

“Todos, todos, todos, absolutamente todos los llamados amateurs” (All, all, all, absolutely all of the so-called amateurs) – declared another commentator – received a pittance per bout. In order to increase participation in amateur events, this money often came directly from the Boxing Commission, no less, which had recipients sign receipts of payment. Regardless of whether they earned one, two, three, or a hundred pesos, he concluded, paid boxers were professionals, not amateurs. He pointed out that the main reason given for creating the semi-pro system – that poor youths could not afford to spend any amount of time in the amateurs – was illogical given the age-old practice of paying amateurs as well. By the late 1940s, its amateur system was so notorious that, when Cuba sent boxers to the United States to take part in its national Golden Gloves championship – for which Cuba was then considered part of its Southern contingent – they were not allowed to compete until they could show proof of amateur status from the local Florida amateur association; UAAC documentation was not sufficient.⁹ These payments were clearly in violation of the 1932 amateur boxing regulations promulgated by the Comisión Nacional de Boxeo y Luchas, which restricted winners of amateur championships (whether interclub, local provincial, national, or international) to medals, certificates, and items that could be used for boxing practice or competition, such as gloves or apparel.¹⁰ While professional boxers, on the contrary, were guaranteed at least 25 pesos per fight, *Cuba Deportiva* columnist

⁸ Pincho Gutiérrez, “¡Qué reorganización! Acabarán con el boxeo,” *Cuba Deportiva* 9:156 (January 5, 1948), pp. 1, 6; “En este mundo traidor nada es verdad ni mentira,” *Sábado Deportivo* 1:8 (June 22, 1947), p. 8.

⁹ “El problema de los pseudo-amateurs y los EE. UU.,” *Cuba Deportiva* 9:157 (January 12, 1948), p. 5.

¹⁰ Comisión Nacional de Boxeo y Luchas, República de Cuba, *Reglamento del Boxeo Amateur* (Marianao: Imp. Mariano Alegre, 1932), pp. 3-4, 6-7.

Don Pito felt that many preliminary fighters after the DGD restructuring were actually semi-pros “disguised” as pros. At one state-run card, he witnessed Commission staffers paying preliminary boxers only four pesos apiece and concluded sarcastically that the law requiring a minimum ring fee must only apply to promoters.¹¹

The Flourishing of the Cuban Golden Gloves

Perhaps in no other decade until the late 1960s would amateur boxing in Cuba offer as many avenues for personal advancement as in the 1940s. Established in 1937 with the backing of Jaime Mariné and Pincho Gutiérrez, the first Cuban Golden Gloves competition took place at the Arena Cerveza Cristal in 1938. By the following year, it had taken on an international flavor when Nat Fleischer, editor of *The Ring*, the “Bible of Boxing,” came to Havana to referee the final bouts.¹² The Golden Gloves tournament lasted for several months, typically beginning in the late summer or fall and concluding with a series of final bouts in the winter. Organized into eight weight classes from flyweight (up to 112 lbs./51 kg) to heavyweight, elimination bouts began at the provincial level and progressed gradually to the national one. Gold and silver medalists were named per weight class each year (no bronze medals were given), but earning the title of Golden Gloves champion was a tremendous boost to a would-be pro. For one, it gave a fighter the opportunity to compete abroad, thus creating a unique transnational space where the winners could expect to receive both class and geographical mobility. The 1937 winners, for instance, were the de facto team chosen to take part in the 1938 Pan American Games. For another, the top Golden Gloves

¹¹ Don Pito, “Chiflidos,” *Cuba Deportiva* 9:159 (January 26, 1948), p. 5.

¹² Milt Baron, “Boxing in Cuba,” *The Ring* 19:2 (March 1940), p. 53.

boxers were able to bypass the semi-pro system and go directly into the pro ranks, since through their amateur engagements they had become familiar with promoters and managers who could help to direct their careers. (A frequent qualifier used to describe an experienced amateur turning pro was that he would do well “if properly handled.”)

By the early 1940s, the best Golden Gloves boxers in Havana became familiar names and faces to fight fans, earning frequent press coverage, opportunities to showcase their skills at the Palacio de los Deportes (Sports Palace), usually as part of the preliminary showcase on a professional card, or smaller venues, including all-amateur shows. It also gave them, should they so choose, the opportunity to take on ring names of their own, emulating their heroes in the pro game. At the Arena Cerveza Cristal in June 1941, Baby Pancho – welterweight champion of the previous year – competed against Emilio Silveira in one of four main Golden Gloves bouts as the tournament wound its way to the finals. (Amateur “star-bouts” were usually five rounds apiece, versus three for preliminary bouts.) Their match-up was considered to be one of the best of the night, since “debe ser a sangre y fuego desde el primer instante” (it should be fire and blood from the first instant). As was customary for amateur shows, admission was priced low enough to allow entry to most who wanted in: thirty centavos for ringside, twenty for preferred seats, and ten for bleachers.¹³

The Cuban Golden Gloves had formed independently of – albeit heavily inspired by – the Chicago and New York tournaments of the same name, which originated in 1927. Nat Fleischer’s involvement in the Cuban tournament, moreover, ensured that there was an ongoing link, at least in the early years, between the Cuban and New York versions. The

¹³ “Cuatro star bouts en el programa de amateurs, mañana,” *Diario de la Marina* 119:143 (June 17, 1941), p. 15; “Once peleas entre amateurs ofrecen hoy en la Cristal,” *Diario de la Marina* 119:144 (June 18, 1941), p. 14.

Golden Gloves had been the brainchild of New York *Daily News* sports editor Paul Gallico, who sought to combine his passion for amateur boxing with a way to advertise his paper. The name appears to have been a play on the Silver Skates Derby, a speed skating contest that the *Daily News* had sponsored annually since 1922. The tournament included a series of eliminations across New York City, culminating in the championship bouts at Madison Square Garden in March 1927. Champions earned a “diamond-studded gold replica of a pair of boxing gloves” – for which Gallico received a waiver from Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) officials for exceeding that amateur organization’s \$35 prize limit. Heavily promoted by the newspaper, the Gloves became a huge success. Later that year, following the removal of a ban on boxing (amateur or professional) in the state of Illinois, the *Chicago Tribune* followed suit with its own amateur boxing competition, which also became known as the Golden Gloves. Most commentators, however, argue that Chicago was the original site of the tournament, since in 1923 *Tribune* sportswriter Arch Ward had organized an amateur tournament to challenge the fight ban; winners received a golden glove. The tournament did not take place again until 1927. These two cities would continue to be – and arguably still are – the main sources of top U.S. amateur boxers, but they soon faced competition from other cities. The Golden Gloves movement, spurred on by the rise of boxing’s popularity during the Great Depression, grew quickly. In 1936, the *Daily News* sponsored a “Tournament of Champions” that brought 8,200 boxers to New York from dozens of U.S. cities and Puerto Rico.¹⁴ Out of the national network of Golden Gloves emerged some of the best prizefighters in the world, among them Joe Louis (1934 Tournament of Champions light

¹⁴ Bill Farrell, *Cradle of Champions: 80 Years of the New York Daily News Golden Gloves* (Champaign, IL: Sports Publishing LLC, 2007), pp. 1-4, 14-15 (quote on p. 2).

heavyweight champion) and Sugar Ray Robinson (1939 featherweight and 1940 lightweight New York Golden Gloves champion).

In the 1950s, the Cuban Golden Gloves finalists were included in the U.S. network as part of the Southern division for eligibility to compete in the U.S. national tournament. For Afro-Cuban boxers who traveled to the U.S. for the first time as part of the competition, it was often humiliating to endure racial segregation and other forms of discrimination. These experiences offer a glimpse into how exposure to U.S. racism would affect perspectives of the Revolution and is a subject we return to in the next chapter.

World War II and the Growth of the Physical Culture Movement in Cuba

In his 1940 defense of the need for a regulated system of amateur and semi-pro boxing, Gutierrez reflected the contemporary anxiety over crime's hold on idle youth: "Our system has done away to a great extent with juvenile delinquency because a boy knows that if he misbehaves, if he is a street loafer, his chances of joining any of the athletic activities are few. Under our supervision, boys who heretofore were general nuisances to police officials are now being built by proper physical development, good nourishment and fine medical attention to healthy men."¹⁵ This call for the improvement of Cuban bodies took on greater urgency with the December 1941 U.S. entry into World War II, which prompted Latin American and Caribbean nations to follow suit. Even before the onset of war in the western hemisphere, however, there had been a growing movement within Cuban elite circles to ensure a greater physical stamina among girls and women – the current and future mothers of the white race – and the boys and men they cared for. In July 1943, the first issue of

¹⁵ Gutierrez, "Cuba's Boxing Progress," *The Ring* 19:1 (February 1940), p. 25.

Gimnasia y Deportes, a monthly magazine devoted to the pursuit of a physically rigorous life, ran an editorial titled, “Decadencia Física de la Raza Cubana” (Physical Decadence of the Cuban Race). In this article, the editors – brothers José (Joe) and Gilberto Becerra, promoters of wrestling shows at Havana’s Palacio de los Deportes – appealed to their countrymen “to collaborate in the enormous enterprise of giving to Cuba more physically fit and capable sons.” A shortage of sturdy workers to exploit the magnificent natural richness of Cuba – its beaches, countryside, seas, and climate – would create “una raza débil” (a weak race). The Becerras blamed both the government and the citizenry for allowing such a situation to come to pass. Rather than solely privileging the intellectual education of their sons, they argued, Cuban (elite) parents needed to foster their physical stamina as well; doing otherwise would create a generation of men with “sórdidos cerebros” (sordid brains) bred solely to exploit the less fortunate.¹⁶ The journal continued to harp on the theme of impending race decline throughout the war.¹⁷

Through articles on gymnastics, weight lifting, wrestling, boxing, and nutrition, the magazine turned typically spectator sports into do-it-yourself fitness manuals. Readers were instructed in the art of wrestling for self-defense, the types of foods that benefited their dispositions, exercises to improve strength and flexibility, and similar types of self-improvement advice.¹⁸ Women, in particular, were singled out for advancement via a regular

¹⁶ “Editorial: Decadencia Física de la Raza Cubana,” *Gimnasia y Deportes* 1:1 (June 1943), pp. 3, 46. The original phrase was “colaborar en la ingente empresa de dar a Cuba hijos físicamente más aptos y capaces.”

¹⁷ For example, see Dr. Alfonso Ruíz Escalona, “Nuestra raza está en decadencia,” *Gimnasia y Deportes* 1:10 (April 1944), pp. 14-15.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Gilberto Becerra, “La lucha como ejercicio y defensa personal,” *Gimnasia y Deportes* 1:1 (June 1943), pp. 24-25, 39; Antonio M. Andreu, “Las vitaminas constituyen las defensas inexpugnables de la salud,” *Gimnasia y Deportes* 1:2 (July-August 1943), pp. 16, 44; Olímpico, “El Plátano: El Pan de los Trópicos,” *Gimnasia y Deportes* 1:4 (October 1943), pp. 14, 28; Aquilino Noguero, “Ejercicios Constructivos: Dorsales: Importancia y Mejores Ejercicios para Desarrollos,” *Gimnasia y Deportes* 1:6 (December 1943), pp. 20, 30.

column authored by Jennie Liederman entitled, “Perfección Física” (Physical Perfection). Liederman’s first such column debated the meaning of physical perfection, noting that Cuban women tended to be curvier than their North American counterparts, but that the former also possessed “una légitima femenina” (a legitimate femininity) which, along with her heart and soul, made up for her “pequeños defectos” (small defects). Nonetheless, Professor Liederman devoted her subsequent columns to attempting to reduce those defects, particularly those – such as poor posture, weak core muscles, and lack of flexibility – caused by years of childbirth and childrearing. All of the women depicting Liederman’s exercises were white, usually fair-haired, as were the male models in accompanying articles.¹⁹

While prizefighters were far less central than weightlifters and wrestlers to the physical culture movement then thriving in Cuba, their ostentatious displays of strong, sleek physiques – unlike fully clothed baseball players, boxers worn only trunks and shoes, sometimes socks, during competition – frequently adorned the sports pages of newspapers and magazines of that era and served as a visual reminder to nonathletes of the benefits of remaining physically fit. As with Kid Chocolate of the early 1930s, the beauty of young, fit, Afro-Cuban male bodies became a central motif around which the Cuban press focused its commentary on the sport of boxing. Unlike in the United States, however, where amateur or recreational boxing in the early-to-mid 1940s was viewed as a critical training component for future and current soldiers, some commentators in Cuba advocated boxing-as-self-defense as a means to ensure respect and peace for the island. Rather than spending thousands of pesos on armaments, argued “Peter,” a writer for the weekly *Sábado Deportivo*, Cuba could cheaply train its young men to box. He lauded the postwar efforts of DGD Director Manolo Castro

¹⁹ Jennie Liederman, “Perfección Física,” *Gimnasia y Deportes* 1:2 (July-August 1943), pp. 34-35.

and Boxing Commissioner Ernesto Azúa to popularize boxing “in secondary schools, in neighborhoods, in towns in the interior of the Republic, in the police force, in the army, and in the Marines.” Making good boxers thus became a means of making good citizens. By recognizing and rewarding the best amateurs in Cuba, the Golden Gloves were an integral part of this strategy to forge a stronger motherland.²⁰

Despite such rhetoric, however, both during and after wartime, Cuban boxing continued to maintain a strong class division between, on the one hand, the impoverished and lower middle classes, who entered the amateur, semi-pro, and professional ranks, and, on the other, those privileged few who engaged in it recreationally within athletic clubs and to a lesser extent in amateur competition. The social clubs did embrace visiting Spanish boxers, however, even hosting exhibitions at times. In 1947, the popular referee Johnny Cruz, by now an instructor at the National Boxing Academy and a member of the Havana Yacht Club, officiated a rare exhibition at the club between visiting pugilists Raúl Luengo and José García Álvarez, Spanish welterweight champion. In addition to Cruz, former boxers Hilario Martínez and Higinio Ruiz – the latter a well-respected trainer – were in attendance.²¹

The “Dictator of Sports”: Jaime Mariné and the Creation of the DGD

Since its inception in 1938 to 1948, the directorship of the Dirección Nacional General de Deportes had been the purview of military men, each of them inextricably tied to

²⁰ Peter, “Haciendo ciudadanos se hace patria,” *Sábado Deportivo*, vol. I (July 13, 1947), p. 17. The original phrase was “[e]n los institutos de segunda enseñanza, en los barrios, en todos los pueblos del interior de la República, en la policía, en el ejército y en la Marina.”

²¹ “Fiesta de puños en Habana Yacht Club,” *Sábado Deportivo*, vol. I (September 25, 1947), p. 9. Although the date for this event was not given, the article stated that it had happened “recently.”

the events of September 1933, and each of them engaged in extra-legal maneuvers whether on behalf of or against the state. Once in office, each also used the sports department as a means to enrich himself and his cronies, often in crude and obvious ways. Thousands of pesos regularly disappeared from DGD accounts with no explanation; huge paydays for star athletes coexisted with huge debts; large sums were paid to foreign promoters, particularly from the U.S., to hold public events that did little or nothing to develop Cuba's athletes. Most of all, the DGD often appeared to be inseparable from the man who was then running it; praise and criticism of the organization was focused upon the director, despite the enormous staffs that served him in the Palacio de los Deportes, because it was viewed as his personal fiefdom. No one more embodied the personalization of this organization than its first and most influential leader; as one commentator noted years after his departure from the office, "La Dirección de Deportes era Jaime Maríné" (The Sports Headquarters was Jaime Maríné).²²

Colonel Jaime Maríné had been a close associate of Fulgencio Batista since they had taken part together in the September 1933 Sergeants' Revolt. As Batista's chief of staff in the 1930s, he became legendary as "the bottleneck through which all individuals desiring to see Colonel Batista must pass."²³ Born in Mungia, Spain, in 1904, he came to Cuba as a child but left no doubts as to where his national sentiments lay. In 1946, while living in self-imposed exile in Fort Lauderdale, Maríné responded to a reporter's query as to whether he kept up on matters in his adopted homeland: "How do you think Cuban matters are unimportant to me when the only thing I lack in terms of feeling as Cuban as anyone else is having been born

²² "Opiniones: Sobre la DGD," *Cuba Deportiva* (9:183), pp. 1, 4 (quote on p. 4).

²³ Frank Argote-Freyre, *Batista: From Revolutionary to Strongman* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), p. 151.

there?”²⁴ It was rumored that Mariné, who had become fabulously wealthy through his association with Batista – acquiring the famed San Souci casino and nightclub as well as two movie theaters – was used “to perform strong-arm tasks that were not of a strictly military nature.” These included maintaining dossiers “on the personal lives of prominent politicians and journalists, the embarrassing particulars of which could be used against them if they proved uncooperative.” If such tactics failed, Mariné and other Batista operatives, including Captain Belisario Hernández, might oversee other forms of coercion by their military underlings, such as forcing victims to castor oil. Although it may seem to be a fairly innocuous form of torture by post-9/11 standards, it was often done – particularly to journalists, the usual target – following other forms of physical abuse, such as beatings. Moreover, the real damage occurred once the victims were freed. For several days afterward, they would suffer from cramps, diarrhea, exhaustion, dehydration, and other ill effects. Despite or perhaps because of the regularity with which these tortures occurred, journalists from rival as well as sympathetic publications continued to publish detailed accounts of the abuse of their colleagues.²⁵

One of the most notorious incidents of this *palmacristi* treatment – so-called because it was the slang term for castor oil – occurred in Havana on December 12, 1934. Jess Losada and five other journalists of the ABC newspaper *Acción* were kidnapped at gunpoint, driven to the Malecón, and forced to drink castor oil before being released. ABC was a middle-class secret society formed in 1931 that had initially opposed Machado and then, after September

²⁴ Ibid., p. 323 n. 70; Alberto Arredondo, “‘No soy un exilado político,’” *Bohemia* 38:18 (May 5, 1946), 16-17, 75, 81 (quote on p. 17.) The original question posed was, “¿Cómo tú crees que a mi me pueden ser indiferentes las cosas cubanas cuando lo único que me falta es haber nacido allí para sentirme tan cubano como el que más...?”

²⁵ Argote-Freyre, *Batista*, pp. 151-152.

1933, opted to oppose Batista, a former ABC member who had offered its leaders a role in the new post-Machado government. Historian Robert Whitney characterizes ABC as “the first mass movement in twentieth-century Cuba” because it harnessed popular anti-Machado sentiment with a tightly woven organization (the name ABC referred to the group’s cells, from A for the top cell on down the alphabet). ABC eschewed the notion of class struggle but instead sought to build a mass movement run by elites that used public protest and more direct forms of insurrection, such as bombings and targeted assassinations of *machadato* higher-ups and rank-and-files, most notably the Senate president and chief of secret police.²⁶

Losada, *Acción*’s sports editor, reflected the young, elite ethos of ABC. Having dabbled as a middleweight prizefighter in the early 1920s, his ring career ended in Havana in April 1922 with a two-round knockout by Nero Chink, a formidable Puerto Rican middleweight of the day.²⁷ Afterward, Losada had become well known in the capital and in fistful circles abroad as a sports journalist, editor, and commentator, as well as boxing manager and occasional referee. He founded the short-lived sports and culture magazine *Nocaut* (Knockout), in the early 1930s, which helped to popularize prizefighting in the capital. *Nocaut* was loosely based upon *The Ring*, whose editor, Nat Fleischer, frequently lauded Losada’s efforts to drum up the island’s interest in pugilism and collaborated with him on staging the finals of the Cuban Golden Gloves in 1941 (Fleischer acted as referee). Losada also tried his hand at managing fighters, among them Venezuelan featherweight Simon Chávez and Spanish heavyweight Claudio “Pancho” Villar, who had fled his native country after being imprisoned by Franco’s forces for fighting on behalf of the loyalists; he

²⁶ Robert Whitney, *State and Revolution in Cuba: Mass Mobilization and Political Change, 1920-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 84-86 (quote on p. 84).

²⁷ Encinosa, *Azúcar y Chocolate*, p. 46.

spent much of the early 1940s in Havana rings. Losada quickly became as familiar to in-the-know Cuban boxing fans as the main event prizefighters themselves; when Joe Louis took part in an exhibition bout in Havana in 1947, it was Losada who served as third man. By late 1941, with the former *Acción* editor's past political transgressions apparently forgiven, Mariné named Losada to be chief of publicity to the DGD.²⁸ He later became Commissioner of Boxing in 1940 under Mariné's successor, Luis Orlando Rodríguez, and Assessor of Boxing during the nascent regime of Fidel Castro.

The *Acción* incident did not occur in a political vacuum, of course, but was the culmination of increasing discord between Batista and his former associates. Six months prior to the *palmaristi* incident in December 1934, Batista's men violently quashed the ABC's 50,000-strong public protest in Havana. Enraged by the deaths of over a dozen people and the wounding of dozens more, the ABC's leader, Martínez Saénz – in exile abroad – urgently condemned Batista's rule and sought U.S. intervention against it. In the intervening months, the ABC's ramped-up anti-Batista rhetoric made it vulnerable to further attacks by the state. Mendieta himself seemed powerless, and indifferent, to protecting the newspaper's staff – in part, notes Batista's biographer, Frank Argote-Freyre, because the government had taken to bribing journalists to stem or curtail their open criticism. That December, in addition to conducting the *palmaristi* attacks, the government shut down the paper for several days. The U.S. State Department tepidly challenged Batista on his regime's need to strong-arm its

²⁸ Nat Fleischer, "Nat Fleischer Says: Eagen, Man of the Hour on N.Y. Boxing; California Boxing Situation Arouses Fans; Heavyweights Back in Spotlight in East," *The Ring* 24:4 (May 1945), pp. 15-17; Milt Baron, "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 19:1 (February 1940), p. 64; Milt Baron, "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 19:7 (August 1940), p. 53; Milt Baron, "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 21:1 (February 1942), p. 51; Milt Baron, "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 26:5 (June 1947), p. 64.

critics using such tactics, but opted for military stability over democratic rule in Cuba in order to ensure U.S. long-term interests in the region.²⁹

Despite Mariné's unsavory reputation (in addition to serving as one of Batista's enforcers, his appetites for women and wealth were perceived to be extraordinary even given the standards of the day³⁰), Batista rewarded his loyalty by naming him, first, president of the Boxing Commission in March 1937, and later the first director of sports in Cuba with the formation by government decree of the DGD in July 1938.³¹ In these positions, Mariné oversaw a tremendous growth of prizefighting and amateur boxing across the island. The colonel was popular in the U.S. sporting press, with his boosters including Nat Fleischer, editor-in-chief of *The Ring*, and its Havana-based correspondent, Milt Baron – for building a well-organized, three-tier, amateur, semi-pro, and professional boxing system.³² But his tenure – along with Batista's – was marked by tremendous corruption. Former associate Pincho Gutiérrez, who owed his tenure as Assessor General of Boxing to Mariné, noted that the colonel was a man who “had chosen sport as a curtain of smoke behind which he could conceal all of the shameless acts he committed.” In a sly play on words, Gutiérrez referred to Mariné not as “Director de Deportes” but as “Dictador de Deportes” (Dictator of Sports).³³ Pincho himself had been subject to Mariné's whims; in late 1940, he was removed from his position, replaced in that role by promoter and sporting goods store owner Luis F. Parga,

²⁹ For a detailed account of these events, albeit one that does not identify the victims by name, see Argote-Freyre, *Batista*, pp. 156-161. The contemporary *New York Times* account offers an identification of the six journalists; see “Castor Oil Forced on Cuban Editors,” *New York Times*, 13 December 1934, p. 4.

³⁰ Argote-Freyre, *Batista*, p. 151.

³¹ “248: Decreto N° 1454 de 9 de julio de 1938,” *Gaceta oficial de la República de Cuba* (July 21, 1938), p. 1257.

³² For a few examples of such high praise, see Milt Baron, “Boxing in Cuba,” *The Ring* 19:1 (February 1940), p. 64; Milt Baron, “Boxing in Cuba,” *The Ring* 19:2 (March 1940), p. 53.

³³ Pincho Gutiérrez, “Jabalinas,” *Cuba Deportiva* 9:163 (June 21, 1948), p. 5. The original phrase was “había escogido el deporte como una cortina de humo detrás de la cual pudiera tapar todas las desvergüenzas que cometía.”

and moved to “another important post” at the lottery office, also under the DGD’s jurisdiction, where *The Ring* reported he was “meeting with marvelous success.”³⁴

The “dictator” analogy had bite not only because Mariné used his position in the sports department to augment his influence and wealth but also because he refused to grant licenses to would-be promoters, instead opting to give the Boxing Commission the ability to make matches and offer boxing cards. Whether this served to develop Cuban boxing, as Willy del Pino asserts, or stunted its growth, as many contemporary critics alleged, is a matter of debate. During the Auténtico regime of President Grau, many sportswriters recollected fondly the Mariné years. In 1947, a writer for *Bohemia* declared that Mariné had been “casi perfecto” as DGD director and did not merit all of the criticism that had been leveled against him.³⁵ The fact that many elites tacitly accepted, or even approved of, strong-arm policies in the realm of sport indicates a high level of tolerance among everyday Cubans of undemocratic practices in the neocolonial state, a point that has been made by many previous scholars in analyzing why it took so long for sustained rebellion to occur in the republic era (and by political scientists questioning why the Revolution has had so little of it in its first fifty years).

Mariné became the top Boxing Commissioner in 1937 after a prolonged campaign by the Cuban press – particularly the sportswriter Pepe Conte – to replace Dr. César Fuentes and Juan Campión, president and treasurer, respectively, named to the commission in June 1936. (The remaining member was Mike Castro, secretary.) By September of that year, the

³⁴ del Pino, *Enciclopedia del Boxeo Cubano*, p. 65; Milt Baron, “Boxing in Cuba,” *The Ring* 20:1 (February 1941), p. 54.

³⁵ del Pino, *Enciclopedia del Boxeo Cubano*, p. 65; “Un mirador en el firmamento de los deportes,” *Bohemia* 39:31 (August 3, 1947), p. 62.

campaign had succeeded in forcing the resignations of Fuentes and Campión, who were replaced with José Manuel Quintana and Tomás Gutiérrez, respectively. The following March, as discontent in boxing circles widened, the commission was reorganized again, this time with Mariné as president, Mike Castro staying on as secretary, and Campión returning as treasurer. Dr. César Sánchez was named the commission's representative to the Secretaría de Gobernación. The new commission – working with Jess Losada and Pedrito Martínez Bauzá – soon undertook the establishment of Cuba's first amateur national championships.³⁶

Up to that point, amateurs had participated in bouts through one of several athletic organizations – most prominent among them, the UAAC – that were organized along rigid race and class lines. Winners of elimination events were selected to participate on the Cuban squad at the III Central American and Caribbean Games held in 1935 in San Salvador, El Salvador. At these Games, which were the first to include boxing, Cuba won two gold medals (for unopposed entrants in the heavyweight and light heavyweight divisions), three silvers, and three bronzes.³⁷

In July 1937, two UAAC boxers – William Othón and Carlos Herrera, Cuban lightweight and bantamweight champions, respectively – traveled to Dallas, Texas, to take part in an amateur ring tournament that was being conducted as part of the Pan-American Exhibition that August. The Cubans were part of a Latin American contingent that included some of the best pugilists from Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, Peru, and Brazil facing off against one another and the best U.S. amateurs (as well as a “few chosen Texans”) from August 12-

³⁶ Peter, “Casi cincuenta años de boxeo en Cuba,” *Diario de la Marina*, edición “Siglo y Cuarto: nuevo extraordinario” (September 15, 1957), pp. 211-212, 214.

³⁷ Enrique Montesinos and Sigfredo Barros, *Centroamericanos y del Caribe: Los más antiguos juegos deportivos regionales del mundo* (Ciudad de La Habana: Editorial Científico-Técnica, 1984 [1983]), pp. 196-209; Jesús Domínguez, *Boxeo cubano en Juegos Deportivos Centro Americanos y del Caribe* (Ciudad de La Habana: Editorial Científico-Técnica, 1985), pp. 67, 83-84.

14. The visitors were slated to face the Americans in the first round of the tourney to ensure that both foreign and domestic fighters would obtain some international ring experience. Othón, who worked as a salesman in a brewery, and Herrera, a customs inspector and “Don Juan of amateur fight arenas,” who boasted a record of 18-2, arrived several weeks before the tournament. They were initially housed and trained at Southern Methodist University but later moved their workouts to the Dallas Athletic Club. Spectators were impressed by their speed and “knockout punches,” and Herrera in particular was predicted to do well. Including the Cubans, thirty-eight boxers from five nations eventually competed in nine weight classes at the tournament, which was held at the Pan-American Amphitheater.³⁸

Herrera and Othón were some of the more privileged Cuban amateur boxers, as evidenced by their UAAC status. They were thus able to achieve opportunities to compete as respected athletes in different national spaces, opportunities that were denied to nearly all other amateurs and most professionals. While their trip to Dallas added prestige to Cuba’s amateur boxing program, more needed to be done to increase the amateur talent pool and level the playing field for the most promising youngsters. In 1937, the same year the government sent these two young men to Texas, it also established a National Boxing Academy. It soon boasted a staff featuring some of the best boxers of Cuba’s recent past. Most notable, of course, was Kid Chocolate, the widely adored Cuban Bon Bon, former two-time world champion and lead instructor. Also on staff were Aramis Del Pino, two-time

³⁸ “Cuban Champion,” *Dallas Morning News*, 23 July 1937, p. 3; “Strong Squad Too [sic] Meet U.S. Amateur Kings,” *Dallas Morning News*, 30 July 1937, p. 3; “Name Official Staff to Hold Fight Tourney,” *Dallas Morning News*, 1 August 1937, p. 3; “Texas Golden Glove Bantam Champ Is Out,” *Dallas Morning News*, 8 August 1937, p. 4; “Best Amateur Mitt Slingers in Nation Coming to Vie with South American, Cuban Rivals,” *Dallas Morning News*, 10 August 1937, p. 2; “Costume Night Brings Throng to Exposition,” *Dallas Morning News*, 12 August 1937, pp. 1, 12; “Boxing and Boosting Go Hand in Hand with Cuban C. of C. Work,” *Dallas Morning News*, 17 August 1937, p. 1.

Cuban amateur champion and professional lightweight of the 1920s; popular former lightweight (and twice opponent of Kid Chocolate) Johnny Cruz, who had become one of the most popular referees in Havana; and former lightweight and welterweight champion Lalo (Abelardo) Domínguez served as instructors at the DGD's National Boxing Academy in Havana and accompanied the amateur titlists to international bouts.³⁹ By late 1945, Boxing Commissioner Pincho Gutiérrez had acquired a space in Cerro that would come to be known as Kid Chocolate's Gym. This became the new site of the National Boxing Academy.⁴⁰

By early 1947, the academy was so well respected abroad that *The Ring's* Nat Fleischer was exhorting the U.S. to follow Cuba's example. His description is worth quoting at length for the insight it offers into the daily regimen of the two hundred or so young boxers who were able to make the cut:

A day at the Kid Chocolate gym, a Government-sponsored project, makes one from the States feel we have much to learn in our supervision of American boxers. At this gym there are paid instructors whose duty it is, from noon to 6:00 p.m. daily, to teach the sport to those who have decided on a professional boxing career. Chocolate himself is the leading instructor.

The gym consists of sleeping quarters, with Navy type cots, double deckers, to care for 36 boys. These quarters are given over to lads from distant cities who come to Havana and are unable to pay for their board. Adjoining the sleeping quarters is a restaurant, where the boys are furnished free meals three times daily. They get anything they want, present their identification tickets, and the meals are charged to the Department of Physical Education.

After breakfast, roadwork is followed by a physical examination. The unfit are weeded out and sent back home at Government expense. The others are drilled until ready to perform as semi-pros. Before he can don the gloves, each boy must submit to a clinical examination before a board of specialists consisting of a general practitioner, and eye, ear, nose, throat, and

³⁹ Milt Baron, "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 21:5 (June 1942), p. 51.

⁴⁰ Milt Baron, "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 24:12 (January 1946), p. 63.

heart experts. Then he receives a blood test, skin examination and a malnutrition and fluoroscope examination, all free. After this, if passed by the board, he receives the green light, and his future in the fight game rests on his own shoulders.

It is the most complete examination on record among world boxing commissions, and speaks highly of the care taken to avoid fatalities.

Nothing of the sort existed in any of the U.S. states, Fleischer hardly needed to tell his readers. If a small island that had only been serious about boxing for a few decades could achieve so much, what might the U.S. do if it put its mind to it? With World War II only recently concluded, many American men of Fleischer's generation continued to believe that boxing training was an essential component in a young man's physical education, one that even had the potential to prevent future world wars. Although the use of atomic weaponry in Japan in 1945 might have reduced the optimistic belief that skill in boxing could help to enforce peace, the sport remained popular in universities, recreational facilities like the YMCA, and other middle-class spaces well into the 1960s. The U.S. therefore owed it to itself to follow Cuba's lead in making boxing such a critical part of its sports program. Fleischer concluded his article with words of congratulations as well as warning: "We salute Cuba for its efficiency in sports supervision. America, wake up!"⁴¹

In addition to the National Boxing Academy, one of the earliest projects for which Mariné assumed responsibility was the construction of a new Palacio de los Deportes. Upon its founding, the DGD had moved its offices into the existing Palacio de los Deportes, which was built at the site of the former "Palacio de las Luces," or Nuevo Frontón (so-called to differentiate it from the Old Frontón, the Frontón El Habana-Madrid at Belascoaín and

⁴¹ Nat Fleischer, "Cuba a Model of Perfection in Supervision of Boxing," *The Ring* 26:2 (March 1947), pp. 30-31, 45 (quote on p. 45).

Sitios). Opened in 1921 primarily as a site for the Basque sport of jai alai, then one of the most popular spectator sports in Cuba, the Nuevo Frontón was shut down by a players' strike shortly afterward. The mayor of Havana, opposed to the gambling that went on at there, sought to keep it closed until betting could be prevented. Though it was opened again in 1924, it once again closed after being seriously damaged in a 1926 cyclone.⁴²

Upon its reopening, this site was renamed the Palacio de los Deportes (although many journalists and amateur sports historians then and now referred to it as the Nuevo Frontón). It was in this building that Kid Chocolate would have the final bout of his illustrious career, earning a ten-round draw against Brooklyn featherweight Nicky Jerome on December 18, 1938. Another Cuban great, the Spanish-born bantamweight Fillo Echevarría, also ended his career in this stadium when, in the last of over a hundred pro bouts, he lost by four-round TKO to Pedro Pablo Medina on April 1, 1949.

When the first Palacio was obtained by the Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba (Confederation of Cuban Workers, CTC) as its new headquarters in 1939, it spurred the creation of a new state-owned facility for sports and entertainment shows, where the DGD offices would be relocated. Ironically, the CTC leaders soon discovered that the building's structure could not support its planned renovations. While occupying that site, it initiated construction on a new headquarters at San Carlos and Peñalver. The completion of this project was delayed due to lack of funds until March 1945, when the Grau regime granted

⁴² Carmelo Urza, "The History of Basque Pelota in the Americas," *Journal of the Society of Basque Studies in America*, vol. XV (1995), pp. 1-16.

the CTC \$750,000 to complete the space, which became known as, and remains today, the Palacio de los Trabajadores (Workers' Palace).⁴³

The 1930s had already witnessed a spurt of privately financed sports construction in the capital. The Arena Cerveza Polar, built at the site of the famed Arena Colón at Zulueta and Dragones, was inaugurated in January 1930. Three years later, in April 1933, the Arena Cerveza Cristal at Infanta and San Martín held its first fight. Arena Cristal would continue to serve as a site of amateur and professional boxing until late 1943, as Mariné had arranged to stage events there with the backing of La Tropical brewery empresario Don Julio Blanco Herrera. Because of frequent cancellations due to rain, a hazard of holding outdoor shows in a tropical climate, Mariné contracted Celestino Joaristi to put a new roof on the Arena Cristal at a cost of 8,059 pesos.⁴⁴

The Palacio de los Deportes y Convenciones (Palace of Sports and Conventions) was inaugurated on April 10, 1944, shortly before the June elections that ushered in the Grau regime. It was located at the intersection of Paseo and Mar streets in the Vedado neighborhood of Havana and had cost 300,000 pesos to build – an enormous sum for the period. Mariné was forced to inaugurate the facility before construction was fully complete, since Batista's candidate in the upcoming elections, Dr. Carlos Saladrigas, had publicly censured Mariné and other high military officials, leading some to tender their resignations. Saladrigas had lost to Ramón Grau San Martín, after whose election many of Batista's men, including Mariné, went into exile abroad. The first boxing event that took place at the new

⁴³ Robert Jackson Alexander, *A History of Organized Labor in Cuba* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002), p. 107; Ciro Bianchi Ross, "Lugares que ya no son," *Barraca Habanera* blog spot, 13 February 2009, <http://wwwcirobianchi.blogia.com/2009/021302-lugares-que-ya-no-son.php> (accessed March 2, 2009). Ross is a columnist for *Juventud Rebelde*. The CTC has since been renamed the Central de Trabajadores de Cuba.

⁴⁴ Peter, "Casi cincuenta años de boxeo en Cuba," *Diario de la Marina*, edición "Siglo y Cuarto: nuevo extraordinario" (September 15, 1957), p. 211.

Palacio occurred on October 1 of that year, nine days before Grau took office. Headlining that card was Kid Gavilán, whose career was on the ascendancy, versus Juan Villalba.

Gavilán won by nine-round TKO. Over the ensuing decade, the Palacio witnessed some of the greatest fights of the period. Despite the enormous cost of construction, the Palacio only existed for a little over a decade; it was eventually demolished to make way for the extension of the Malecón into Vedado, which was becoming a popular area for hotels, restaurants, shops, and upscale homes.⁴⁵ Completed in the late 1950s, the expansive Ciudad Deportiva (Sports City) complex, farther out of the city on Rancho Boyeros Avenue, would replace the Palacio as the last major sports construction project of the pre-revolutionary period.⁴⁶

During its brief existence, the cost of upkeeping the Palacio on Paseo and Mar, including the need to install air-conditioning and proper ventilation, became a constant headache to DGD directors.⁴⁷ By the late 1940s, while the Palacio remained the center of Saturday evening boxing in Havana, the most spectacular boxing shows were held at the new Havana Ball Park Stadium, the largest in Cuba, which offered lighting for night games, a point of pride for *habaneros* since night games were already common in the U.S. Its president, Miguel Suárez, Jr., obtained a license to promote boxing shows.⁴⁸

Following the end of Fulgencio Batista's presidential term in 1944, Mariné found himself politically vulnerable without his longtime ally and protector. The new Cuban

⁴⁵ del Pino, *Enciclopedia del Boxeo Cubano*, p. 66; Pincho Gutiérrez, "Jabalinas," *Cuba Deportiva* 9:163 (June 21, 1948), p. 5; Peter, "Casi cincuenta años de boxeo en Cuba," *Diario de la Marina*, edición "Siglo y Cuarto: nuevo extraordinario" (September 15, 1957), p. 214; Ciro Bianchi Ross, "Al boxeador estadounidense Joe Louis le quitaron los pantalones en La Habana," *Juventud Rebelde*, 24 August 2008.

⁴⁶ R. Hart Phillips, "Cuba Building Big Sports Center," *New York Times*, 7 February 1954, p. X17.

⁴⁷ "El Dr. Grau hombre preocupado por el desarrollo de los deportes." – J. Adan: El Palacio de los Deportes tendrá en breve extractores de aire," *Cuba Deportiva* 9:161 (June 7, 1948), pp. 1, 6.

⁴⁸ Milt Baron, "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 25:12 (January 1947), p. 64; Milt Baron, "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 26:7 (August 1947), p. 63.

president, Ramón Grau San Martín, replaced Mariné as DGD Director with Luis Orlando Rodríguez, who had been an opponent of Batista's regime.⁴⁹ By early 1946, after spending time in Caracas, Venezuela, where he had business connections, Mariné and his wife relocated to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Interviewed there by a *Bohemia* reporter later that year, Mariné denied he was a political exile or that he was secretly plotting a revolt against Grau's regime, as some were alleging in Cuba, since he believed all change needed to happen through political channels. He said he planned to return to the island following the December 1946 Central American and Caribbean Games in Colombia. Dodging political questions, he stated that, although he didn't have much news upon which to base an opinion, the DGD seemed to be doing a good job in his absence.⁵⁰ Although Mariné was publicly holding his tongue about Grau and Orlando Rodríguez, his shadow remained writ large over Cuban sports, particularly in boxing and baseball, well into the 1940s. For all his faults, as Pincho Gutiérrez noted, Mariné was a man who "built sport upon a base of order, seriousness, and respect" and "had the tact to surround himself with capable people, gave enormous power to the sporting press and never mixed politics with sport."⁵¹

The legacy of Mariné in Cuban boxing, and sports more generally, remains a touchy subject for sports historians depending on political orientation and country of residence. Thus, while chronicler Willy del Pino – a former associate of Pincho Gutierrez and a Miami exile – viewed Mariné in a mostly positive light, Jorge Alfonso – a writer for *Bohemia* and author of a book-length work on Cuban boxing – saw Mariné's rule as one of exploitation

⁴⁹ González Echevarría, *The Pride of Havana*, p. 23.

⁵⁰ Alberto Arredondo, "No soy un exilado político," *Bohemia* 38:18 (May 5, 1946), pp. 16-17, 75, 81.

⁵¹ Pincho Gutiérrez, "Jabalinas," *Cuba Deportiva* 9:163 (June 21, 1948), p. 5. The original phrases were "estructuró el deporte bajo una base de orden, seriedad y respeto" and "tuvo el tacto de rodearse de personas de capacidad, se atrajo el enorme poder de la prensa deportiva y jamás mezcló la política con el deporte."

and greed. The truth of the matter lies somewhere in the middle. Clearly, Mariné was a devoted sportsman who did oversee many innovative reforms in Cuban boxing, particularly in the amateur sector. Yet his DGD reign gave him the opportunity to entrench himself further in the Batista regime and thus to ensure a continued windfall for himself and his cronies. Finally, as Pincho Gutiérrez made clear, Mariné continued to permit *palmacristi* attacks on journalists who found themselves in disagreement with Mariné or the regime. His personalization of the office of Director of Sports made it difficult for his successors to entrench themselves as strongly in the role. For several years after Mariné was stripped of his directorship, the turnover rate among DGD Directors and Commissioners of Boxing would occur with growing frequency.

The DGD in the Grau and Prío Eras

Mariné's replacement, Luis Orlando Rodríguez, brought a colorful past with him. His larger-than-life youthful political activities called to mind those of Fidel Castro two decades later. A 1930s revolutionary who had survived being shot six times while a member of the Bonche Universitario, he had escaped to Florida but returned to Cuba once Grau, his ally, had become president.⁵² The Bonche Universitario – literally, “university bunch” – was an anti-Batista organization that “gradually became corrupted and ended in near-gangsterism.” Its leader, Luis Orlando Rodríguez, had initially been anti-Machado prior to the shooting, which took place during an assassination attempt on Havana mayor Arsenio Ortiz. The fortunes of the Bonche began to decline after Batista peacefully ceded power to

⁵² González Echevarría, *The Pride of Havana*, p. 408, n. 5.

Grau San Martín. In 1944, the new president, himself a former revolutionary, chose his associate Rodríguez to become Director of Sports, a position he held until 1947.⁵³

Rodríguez wasted no time in abolishing most of Mariné's policies in regard to boxing. When Parga resigned as Boxing Commissioner to return to managing his sporting goods store on O'Reilly Street, Rodríguez initially disbanded the existing commission and created a new one composed of George Foster, Manolo Serrano, and Dr. Sanguily. Shortly afterward, he dismantled it and named Pincho Gutiérrez as sole Boxing Commissioner. His new role offered Pincho "poderes ilimitados" (unlimited powers), and he used them to carry out some ambitious improvements to Cuban boxing. It was during this period that he helped to inaugurate the Kid Chocolate Gym in the Cerro neighborhood of Havana, which, as discussed above, not only employed the former world champion as lead instructor but also provided a government-run boxing academy and dormitory for promising youth from far-flung parts of the island.⁵⁴

Pincho's reforms ended with the resignation of Luis Orlando Rodríguez, who was replaced in 1947, ironically, with his old rival, Manolo Castro, leader of the struggle against the Bonche during their 1930s university days. Like Rodríguez, Castro had a past that combined revolutionary activities with violent criminal acts. His path to the Director of Sports position took him through varied roles: pro-Grau, anti-Machado student activist in 1933; police lieutenant and later, university police deputy; engineering student and instructor; and, in 1945, President of the Students Union – assigned to that role by his ally, then-

⁵³ Thomas, *Cuba or the Pursuit of Freedom*, p. 743.

⁵⁴ Milt Baron, "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 23:12 (January 1945), p. 42; Milt Baron, "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 24:12 (January 1946), p. 63; Milt Baron, "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 26:7 (August 1947), p. 63; "Un mirador en el firmamento de los deportes," *Bohemia* 39:31 (August 3, 1947), p. 62.

President Grau, as a way to maintain university support or, at least, minimize protest. Castro was a member of the Movimiento Socialista Revolucionario (MSR), a radical organization founded by the former communist Rolando Masferrer. Castro's criminal history as "the attractive gunman" of the MSR, including links to the murder of another student, were no bar to his becoming the DGD head in 1947. As the "MSR's blue-eyed boy," he supported the failed 1947 invasion of the Dominican Republic to overthrow the dictator, General Leonidas Trujillo. As well as MSR associates, the would-be filibusters included members of rival factions, including – most famously – a young Fidel Castro, then with the Unión Insurreccional Revolucionaria (UIR), enemies of the MSR. Tensions were so high among the expeditioners that, even before their boat had departed Cayo Confites, a battle occurred in which five people were killed, including UIR leader Emilio Tró.⁵⁵

Although he did not live long enough to make substantial changes to Cuban boxing, Castro's youth and enthusiasm were initially assets in invigorating the sport. Under Castro, the DGD named its first ring inspector, José Piñeiro Páez.⁵⁶ Most of his tenure, however, was marked with controversy. With Castro taking charge, Pincho Gutiérrez left his position, replaced with Luis Parga – his earlier replacement at the Comisión Nacional de Boxeo y Luchas. The team of Castro and Parga lifted a month-long suspension on boxing and – in a departure from Mariné's refusal to permit shows by individual promoters – gave promotion licenses to three businessmen: Armando Alejandro, Miguel Suárez, and Miguel García. Suárez, as mentioned previously, was president of the Havana Ball Park Stadium. Alejandro would become the most well known of the bunch, having started as an amateur boxer before

⁵⁵ Thomas, *Cuba or the Pursuit of Freedom*, pp. 741-742, 754-756, 761 (quotes on p. 742 and p. 761).

⁵⁶ Peter, "Casi cincuenta años de boxeo en Cuba," *Diario de la Marina*, edición "Siglo y Cuarto: nuevo extraordinario" (September 15, 1957), pp. 211-212, 214.

becoming a promoter and manager – most notably to Ciro Moracén, Cuban featherweight champion over an astounding nine-plus years, from August 1948 to March 1958. In three months, the trio scheduled two fight cards at the Palacio de los Deportes, but many of their other shows were not successful.⁵⁷ Their inability to earn big gates caused columnist Don Pito to posit, in his predictions for 1948, that both Suárez and García would quit the promotion business.⁵⁸ In addition to allowing free promoting and abolishing semi-professionalism, Castro sought to increase boxing in the provinces, as is discussed below.

Manolo Castro's violent life itself ended violently. His strong association with MSR and his stranglehold on the university – through his friendship with the Education Minister and continued tie to Auténtico student leaders – made him a target of UIR. On February 22, 1948, members of UIR shot him and some of his friends down after they left a movie theater. At the time, Carlos Prío Socarrás was president; the adopted son of his immediate predecessor – a twenty-year-old student named Gustavo Ortiz Faes – was one of the men implicated in the murder. (Grau's intervention earned his son a pardon.) Also implicated was Fidel Castro – Manolo's former friend (no relation) – who was subsequently arrested at the Havana airport and had his passport confiscated. Nothing came of the charges against Fidel. To this day, his role in the murder remains murky; historian Hugh Thomas concludes, "It seems probable that [Fidel] Castro did not participate in the attempt itself nor did he fire a shot in the next street to distract attention, as alleged, but that he was present at the meeting of the UIR which agreed to undertake the attempt."⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Milt Baron, "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 26:7 (August 1947), p. 63; "Un mirador en el firmamento de los deportes," *Bohemia* 39:31 (August 3, 1947), p. 62; del Pino, *Enciclopedia del boxeo cubano*, pp. 94, 98.

⁵⁸ Don Pito, "Chiflidos," *Cuba Deportiva* 9:156 (January 5, 1948), p. 5.

⁵⁹ Thomas, *Cuba or the Pursuit of Freedom*, pp. 761, 812-813 (quote on p. 813).

The following year, MSR members revenged the murder by assassinating Justo Fuentes, an Afro-Cuban vice-president of the university's student union, who had led UIR at the time of Castro's death and remained a member of that organization.⁶⁰ The Fuentes killing created even more outrage in the Cuban public than that of Manolo Castro, but in the end very little was done by the Prío regime to prevent further revolutionary violence. The late 1940s in Cuba were thus marked by a combination of state-sanctioned corruption, greed, and inefficiency and gangster violence stemming from the revolutionary groups of 1933. The early promise of the Grau era, despite strong hopes for democratic change after Batista first left office, had quickly faded, and it would not be restored by Prío and his cohorts. As Roberto González Echevarría sums up, "Warring groups of former revolutionaries were in a feeding frenzy, vying for power and money. Gangsterism was rampant around the university, and political infighting deteriorated into full-scale battles, with many *atentados* (attacks on a single individual by gunmen)."⁶¹

After Castro's assassination, Juan Fresno and then José Adán Rodríguez each briefly served as DGD director in the waning months of the Grau regime. Their performances were roundly criticized by the Cuban press, leading the periodical *Avance* to urge the incoming Prío administration to dissolve the DGD. It was not clear how seriously Prío considered the proposal, since he was viewed as being sympathetic to the sports world; he had promised to address Cuba's athletic needs in his election platform, and he himself had once been an amateur competitor.⁶² A November 1948 editorial in *Cuba Deportiva* acknowledged the DGD's problems but stated that it was essential to have a governmental organization to

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 761-762, 812-813.

⁶¹ González Echevarría, *The Pride of Havana*, pp. 57-58.

⁶² "Opiones: Sobre la D. G. D.," *Cuba Deportiva* 9:183 (November 8, 1948), pp. 1, 4.

carry out what professional and amateur organizations could not on behalf of Cuba's youth and ordinary ("popular") athletes. The editorial delineated the unique role of the DGD in Cuban society:

Debe convocar a campeonatos de todas clases, auspicar [sic] competencias de circuitos humildes, impulsar la construcción de campos deportivos en todos los pueblos y ciudades de la Isla, mantener un buro de divulgación deportiva, sostener un cuerpo de coaches de todos los deportes que vaya a los placeres de la ciudad y a los terrenos del interior para enseñar y mejorar el status de los atletas populares.⁶³

It should convene championships of all types, sponsor competitions for modest [sports] circuits, impel the construction of sports facilities in all of the towns and cities of the Island, maintain a sports information bureau, [and] sustain a body of coaches for all sports that come to take root in the city and lands of the interior to train and improve the status of popular athletes.

In the wake of the chaotic situation facing the DGD, the chief of the Medical Department, Dr. José A. de Cardenas, authored a resolution calling for "a meeting of all Cuban sportswriters and personalities" to discuss and debate the organization's restructuring. The doctor argued that state-sponsored recreation remained the best way to create citizens disposed to serve the country, and that – given the rampant corruption and crime of the period – participation in sports was the best way to engage the youth of Cuba in the national project, rather than risk losing them to malaise and inactivity, and by extension, delinquency.⁶⁴ In late November, a meeting between several sportswriters and Manuel Sarría, then the personal delegate of the Minister Education, did occur in Havana's Palacio de los

⁶³ "D. G. D. es necesaria," *Cuba Deportiva* 9:183 (November 8, 1948), p. 2.

⁶⁴ "Importantes declaraciones del Cuerpo Médico de la Dirección," *Cuba Deportiva* 9:184 (November 15, 1948), pp. 1, 4. The original phrase was "una reunion donde participen todos los cronistas y personalidades deportivas de Cuba."

Deportes. Sarría was designated to be the next boxing assessor. Sarría was also a promoter of boxing shows, which made him familiar with the prizefighting world, but, as Pincho Gutiérrez made clear, was a potential conflict of interest; he called upon the new assessor to refrain from further promotions. Pincho and other sportswriters wished to separate the fiscal oversight of boxing from its promotion, which should be left to individual entrepreneurs.⁶⁵ Another familiar face in the Cuban boxing community, the journalist Manolo de la Regüera, was hired to be director of the DGD's publicity department.⁶⁶

Along with the speculation over the closing or restructuring of the Department of Sports and the staffing of the Boxing Commission came rumors over who, if anyone, Prío might announce to the post. Several names were mentioned, including Armando Ruíz; promoters expecting his nomination began offering him “hush-hush” bribes so that he might intercede on their behalf with the government and to secure business contracts for them.⁶⁷ Ruíz's chances to attain the directorship were over once it was revealed that he had supported discrimination in the UAAC.⁶⁸ In December 1948, it was announced that Juan A. Sosa Zamora would be the new director. Although “Juanito,” as he was commonly known, had few ties to the world of sports, it was hoped that his recent experience in national politics – originally from Jatibonico, he had moved to the capital in 1940 and served as secretary to then-representative Tony Varona, who later became premier – and his

⁶⁵ Pincho Gutiérrez, “Sarría debe terminar con el promotaje oficial en el boxeo definitivamente,” *Cuba Deportiva* 9:185 (November 22, 1948), pp. 1, 4; “Editorial,” *Cuba Deportiva* 9:189 (December 20, 1948), p. 2.

⁶⁶ “Sarría en la DGD,” *Cuba Deportiva* 9:185 (November 22, 1948), p. 2.

⁶⁷ “Investigación en los ‘affaires’ de la Dirección General de Deportes,” *Cuba Deportiva* 9:183 (November 8, 1948), pp. 1, 4.

⁶⁸ José Ocejo Pandiella, “Armando Ruz destruyó su posibilidad por apoyar la discriminación en la Unión Atlética: Hace mal en respaldar a ese circuito,” *Cuba Deportiva* 9:184 (November 15, 1948), pp. 1, 4.

“feverentísimo” (extremely fervent) interest in sports would compensate for lack of experience.⁶⁹

Certainly, the problems facing Sosa Zamora were severe. The Ministry of Education was auditing the department in late 1948 for the haphazard ways in which it chose to spend money. For instance, Coach Kendrigan – who had raised such an uproar with his negative comments about the state of Havana sports in *The Saturday Evening Post* a few years earlier – had a contractually obligated five percent “bonus,” although for what purpose he received that on top of his regular salary was not evident.⁷⁰ That November, rumors were flying that the DGD had offered a \$50,000 fee to Sugar Ray Robinson, whom it was trying to woo to Havana to face Kid Gavilán the following February. Around the same time, the blind former heavyweight boxer, Angel Sánchez, reported to the DGD’s offices at the Palacio de los Deportes six different times to obtain his usual monthly five-peso allotment; on his sixth visit, he was told he would have to wait until after an upcoming prizefight to receive his pay. Most scandalous, perhaps, was the fiasco surrounding a planned “Carnival on Ice” event, for which the DGD had borrowed five thousand dollars to pay American promoters.⁷¹

Undoubtedly, the chaos of this period affected the development of boxing in Havana, and to a lesser extent in the interior. There were frequent periods in which little or no professional boxing occurred in the capital, and the frequent turnover of DGD directors, boxing assessors, commissioners, commission members, publicity directors, and other high-ranking sporting officials had more to do with political maneuvering and financial

⁶⁹ “A la firma el decreto nombrando a Sosa Zamora Director de Deportes,” *Cuba Deportiva* 9:187 (December 6, 1948), pp. 1, 6.

⁷⁰ “Asombrados los auditores de lo sucedió en la Dirección,” *Cuba Deportiva* 9:185 (November 22, 1948), p. 2.

⁷¹ “¡Cuidado Doctor Prío!” *Cuba Deportiva* 9:184 (November 15, 1948), p. 1.

irresponsibility than with questions of merit. The growth of free promoting in these years – when allowed to flourish – provided additional venues for spectators to view boxing and more opportunities for pugilists in the interior to showcase their skills in the capital.

The Growth of Provincial Boxing and the Creation of Local Heroes and Martyrs

The DGD relied upon its provincial delegates to assist with the effort of developing boxing and other sports in the interior. In late 1940s Pinar del Río, an alderman of the municipality of Mariel, Sergio “Chino” Chan – so-known because of his obvious Chinese descent – was the DGD’s point man. Despite his youth, he had a long history of involvement in athletic causes. In 1937, Chan had, presumably as a teen, been involved in founding the Juventud Deportivo del Mariel (Sporting Youth of Mariel), an organization dedicated to promoting sports among their local peers. Chan later played on the basketball teams of the Institute of Havana and the University of Havana and worked as a basketball instructor at various institutions in the capital. Returning to Mariel, he began working independently to raise Pinar del Río’s sporting profile, particularly through the creation of a provincial basketball championship. He was ratified as DGD provincial delegate during the tenure of Luis Orlando Rodríguez and again during Manolo Castro’s directorship. He and Castro made plans to visit all of Pinar del Río’s fifteen municipalities as the first step in building athletic facilities and stadiums in each one. Among their top priorities were Guanajay, Mariel, Artemisa, Candelaria, Los Palacios, San Cristóbal, and the capital city of Pinar del Río. In addition to the construction of pools, stadiums, and baseball fields, Chan

and his provincial boosters planned to initiate a “Señorita Deportes de Pinar del Río” beauty pageant to embody the new spirit of athleticism in the province.⁷²

In other provinces, too, boxing became increasingly popular in the post-World War II era. The cities of Camagüey and Santiago de Cuba, Oriente, had long been regional centers of prizefighting, but beginning in the mid-1940s regular bouts were often held in Matanzas, Ciego de Ávila, and Manzanillo, among other important municipalities. Along with the drive to develop provincial boxing was the rise of local ring “ídolos” (idols) who toiled in relative obscurity except for in small columns in the sporting press. Sometimes these idols made good, moving to the capital and finding success as club fighters or even national contenders or titleholders. One of these was the Camagüeyan “guajiro” Rafael Legón, a.k.a. Joe Legón.

For most of the 1940s, Legón was arguably the most popular boxer in Cuba. He first won the national welterweight title in 1938 and held it for much of the next decade (losing and winning it two more times) before abandoning it for the middleweight ranks in 1946. Legón spawned a number of imitators, some of whom took his name, and was capable of drawing large crowds even when fighting poor quality competition. Because of drinking and public brawls, Legón was frequently at odds with the DGD; in April 1944, Jaime Mariné signed a resolution stripping Legón of his welterweight title “for not carrying himself honorably within his private life.”⁷³

⁷² Fernando P. Menendez, “Campos deportivos para Pinar del Río: La ‘Cenicienta’ tiene un buen padrino,” *Sábado Deportivo*, vol. I (July 20, 1947), pp. 10-11.

⁷³ Peter, “Casi cincuenta años de boxeo en Cuba,” *Diario de la Marina*, edición “Siglo y Cuarto: nuevo extraordinario” (September 15, 1957), p. 214. The original phrase was “por no llevarlo honorosamente dentro de la vida privada.”

Legón's long and impressive career, by then on the decline, ended abruptly on August 26, 1947, when he died ten days after being knifed over a dice game dispute in Aguacate, Camagüey.⁷⁴ His last fight was against Lee Sala, a Pennsylvania middleweight, in Tampa four months before his death; the Cuban lost in ten rounds. But Sala was a gentleman in victory, sending flowers to Legón as he lay dying and, afterward, offering to take part in a benefit for his loved ones.⁷⁵

Boxers from the interior had both advantages and disadvantages over those in Havana. Because they were able to fight often in their local prizefight rings, the best of them could quickly develop names and reputations. Many proudly used ring names that displayed their geographical affiliations, such as Bulldog Camagüeyano and the Panther of Camajuaní. But upon moving to the capital, as Santa Clara native Johnny Sarduy discovered first-hand in the 1950s, it was extremely helpful to have the support of family members, friends, or patrons. (In Sarduy's case, the tremendous hospitality he received there would likely have been due at least in part to his status as a white fighter.) Although many interior boxers relocated to Havana when their professional careers took off and remained there until retirement, a few stayed close to their roots while still active in the ring and in so doing might have harmed their chances of being able to compete abroad. Still, the DGD sought to pave the way for its boxers by providing a letter of introduction to show to prospective promoters and managers abroad. Because of the frequency with which Cuban boxers used *noms de guerre* – a trend that was in decline by the 1940s and almost entirely over by the late 1950s – the letters used boxers' real names. Letters given to fighters Rafael Lastre,

⁷⁴ Pedro Fernandez Alonso, "El más popular de los boxeadores de esta época en Cuba, ha desaparecido," *Sábado Deportivo*, Vol. I (September 4, 1947), p. 15.

⁷⁵ "De miércoles a miércoles," *Sábado Deportivo*, vol. I (September 18, 1947), p. 24.

Orestes Diago, Cheo Morejón, Joe Calixto, and Geraldo “El Niño” Valdés were addressed, respectively, to José de Jesús Elías de las Casas, Orestes Mora, José Graciano Rondón, José Torres, and Geraldo Ramos Ponciano – names that were unfamiliar within and without Cuban fistic circles.⁷⁶

While few secondary accounts of boxing in the interior are available outside of unpublished papers written by post-1959 students and historians in Cuban institutions, an examination of regional newspapers helps to shed light on this little-covered topic.⁷⁷ For the Guantánamo region, historian Jana Lipman’s excellent history of working-class guantanameros provides such a glimpse into the life of one boxer who became known not for his ring exploits, but for the manner of his death.

The case of Lino Rodríguez Grenot, a.k.a., Kid Chicle – who was murdered by a U.S. navy lieutenant in December 1940 after he had attempted to jump on board the ferry taking workers to the U.S. Naval Station at Guantánamo Bay – remains salient in present-day Cuba as an example of the shocking cruelty and exploitation forced upon Cuba by the Yankee imperialists. At the time of his death, Kid Chicle was an unemployed, twenty-seven-year-old Afro-Cuban boxer from Santiago de Cuba who carried out odd jobs in the city of Guantánamo. With the pre-World War II surge in construction at the naval station, known by its acronym GTMO, Chicle hoped to obtain a job with the Frederick Snare Company, a private contracting firm that was overseeing the expansion. When he was not chosen to

⁷⁶ Fernando Aceña, “Cosas del boxeo en Cuba,” *Sábado Deportivo*, vol. I (July 13, 1947), p. 19.

⁷⁷ I had the opportunity to review many such manuscripts while researching at the Museo del Deporte (Museum of Sport) in Havana. While offering fascinating glimpses into the lives of ordinary Cuban boxers, most of them display the methodological limits I discussed in the Introduction (lack of citations and bibliography, strong ideological viewpoints that may color the presentation of evidence). I have therefore hesitated to use these items without being able to confirm their findings through a perusal of the primary source material.

accompany the work crew that was departing from the nearby town of Caimanera to GTMO via Guantánamo Bay, Chicle jumped onto the boat. In response, the navy lieutenant, Kenneth M. West, in charge of the crew assaulted and manhandled the interloper, who splashed into the bay, either drowning there or already dead from his wounds. The distinction was important, for had he died before entering the water, the cause would have been West's violent beating. That was the conclusion of four local doctors who conducted an autopsy. U.S. officials on the ground claimed the death was a drowning due to Chicle's inability to swim. It was critical to know other facts before blame could be assigned: was the scene of the crime the boat or the bay? If the former, the U.S. had jurisdiction; if the latter, Cuba did. Ultimately, the Cuban Ministry of Justice declared the murder had happened aboard ship, thus giving the U.S. sanction to punish the perpetrator. Lt. West was court-martialed for involuntary manslaughter and found not guilty.⁷⁸

Although the regional outcry against the Cuban government and the naval base for their refusal to punish Chicle's killer is beyond the scope of this chapter – and has been ably covered in Lipman's work – there are a few issues that merit attention. One, although Cuba had lost dozens of boxers in ring deaths, homicides, and accidents over the past few decades, the death of Chicle resonated with locals not for his ring accomplishments but for what he represented. While other base workers died in questionable incidents prior to and after December 1940, only Chicle's death fueled an extended protest by ordinary citizens. Lipman attributes this to the fact that Chicle “died trying to get a job” rather than while “on the job,” and that his death was viewed by dozens of witnesses in a public setting – thus making it

⁷⁸ Jana K. Lipman, *Guantánamo: A Working-Class History between Empire and Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 29-60.

harder for the U.S. military to cover up the crime. While there is no doubt much truth to that, I would also argue that Chicle's death impacted the Guantánamo region because he was a symbol of a young man who, by his efforts in the ring – however unheralded they might have been – was trying to improve his life beyond the drudgery of day labor. It is significant that this became known as “the case of Kid Chicle” in the Cuban press and in the memories of those who remembered the event; the ring name of this obscure fighter thus became his identity even in a context when he was simply another would-be day laborer, another black face in a sea of black faces. Indeed, by 1964, the case of the largely forgotten Chicle was renovated for revolutionary use as an early example of U.S. exploitation at the naval base. Lipman asserts that, in his martyrdom, “Kid Chicle became the archetypal Cuban worker struck down by U.S. imperialism.”⁷⁹ I would argue, on the contrary, that Chicle's post-revolutionary identity was based upon his status not so much as worker but as boxer; by the mid-1960s, as discussed in the Conclusion, the Cuban state had already begun to single out former pugilists of varied athletic ability for their usefulness to the national project of creating athlete-citizens.

Whether Chicle was actually a professional or semi-professional boxer also remains murky, since his ring exploits did not merit attention in either the Havana or U.S. press, and no record of his fights exists on the thoroughly documented (if not always accurate) web site “boxrec.com,” which is maintained by popular sports historians and aficionados. A close perusal of the Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo newspapers would likely be required for the particulars of Chicle's ring feats to be uncovered. While that is beyond the scope of this

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 59.

project, a full reclaiming of Chicle's story awaits the connection of his sporting life with the consequences of his death.

With the development of the Golden Gloves, the institution of semi-professional championships, the rise of the physical culture movement, the increasing movement of Cuban boxers abroad, and the political dislocations caused by world war and civil unrest at home, the late 1930s and 1940s were something of a transitional period in Cuban boxing history, one that is inextricably linked to the machinations of the state. Under Batista's aegis, Jaime Mariné used the DGD both to further reforms in boxing and to enrich himself and his cronies. Although the "reformist generation of 1933 had triumphed in Cuba's 1944 presidential elections," in Rosalie Schwartz's words, the promise of the Grau administration was quickly dissipated through graft and corruption.⁸⁰ The gap that was growing between rich and poor, and white and black, in the 1940s laid the groundwork for the accelerated exploitation of Cuba's resources for the pleasure of the wealthy and foreign, especially American tourists, that would occur in the following decade and help to spur the onset of revolution. It was this decade, the 1950s, which many U.S. boxing commentators consider to be the "golden age of Cuban boxing," witnessing as it did the rise of Kid Gavilán and other telegenic Cuban prizefighters. We evaluate how golden it really was in our next two chapters.

⁸⁰ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, p. 110.

Chapter 5: The Golden Age of Boxing?

Cuba's Boxers at Home and Abroad in the 1950s

Boxing and the Nation: An Incomplete Integration

The year 1950 began inauspiciously for the boxing community in Cuba. It began with the death of the “original” Chocolate, Domingo Sardiñas, whose moniker of “Knockout Chocolate” had inspired his much famous younger brother, Eligio, to adopt the nom de ring of Kid Chocolate. The elder Chocolate had died at age 53 after a period in the hospital.¹ As January wore on, the lack of boxing events throughout the country, but especially in the capital, caused a serious rift between the prizefighting industry and the Director of the Dirección General de Deportes (DGD), Juan N. Sosa Zamora, and the sole Assessor of the Comisión Nacional de Boxeo y Luchas, Pedro Mendieta. As a result, wrestling replaced boxing as the primary athletic spectacle in Havana, and the slow trickle of Cuban prizefighters abroad became a stream, as even relative novices sought to find work not only in the United States but also in smaller Caribbean islands such as Trinidad and Aruba. As the Prío Socarrás government sought to heal this rift by assigning additional Assessors to the boxing commission, the news that one of Cuba’s top prizefighters had murdered his manager rocked the sporting fraternity and the entire capital. By May 1950, with weekly boxing programs returning to the capital and the provinces, the sport appeared to be on the mend.

As the decade wore on, it became increasingly clear that, when it came to boxing, the focus of the national government – under the aegis of Prío Socarrás until 1952, and from

¹ “Falleció un atleta,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:2 (January 9, 1950), p. 8.

then until the end of 1958 under Fulgencio Batista – remained on creating a body of prizefighters for domestic and foreign consumption, rather than pursuing a nationalistic agenda through amateur sport. While the achievements of world-ranked Cuban prizefighters (and the occasional champion, particularly Kid Gavilán) brought pride to the nation, they were carried out largely out of view of most fans, most often in the United States but increasingly in other locales as well. The state mostly ignored opportunities to increase national prestige through international amateur events and did not even send boxers to the Olympic Games. Indeed, prizefighting in this decade became further entrenched with the burgeoning tourist industry, which repackaged the splendors of Cuba, and particularly Havana, for American pleasure seekers. As a 1958 official English-language tourist guide for U.S. residents described it, Cuba in the 1950s was the “Playland of the Americas,” whose natural charms of geography and climate, most notably its beaches, combined with the comfort of its luxury hotels, the delights of its restaurants, and the sensuous excitement of its nighttime offerings. For these reasons, I contend that Cuban boxing in the 1950s remained incompletely integrated into the nation, even as the sport was arguably at its most popular. By emphasizing its appeal to foreigners and exporting much of its native talent, and belatedly by attempting to create a thriving market for international sports tourism at home, the state accelerated the commodification of boxing for short-term financial gain.

While cabarets and other music venues were undoubtedly the focus of many tourists to Havana, prizefighting – along with professional baseball and the still popular jai alai – was the athletic engine of the city’s weekend entertainment, spurred on by the growth of gambling. Locals and foreigners alike gathered each Saturday night at the Palacio de los Deportes (Sports Palace) to see the best Latin American and Caribbean fighters matched

with U.S. and European competition. Yet top-notch boxing could also be found outside the capital, a fact not evident from the 1958 tour guide. In spotlighting certain Cuban pugilists – “the small, lightning-fast boys like world champions Kid Chocolate and Kid Gavilan” as well as the occasional “top-flight heavyweight such as Niño Valdes” – the tourist commission played into preconceived notions of a “Cuban” style of fighting, one that featured non-stop action and a higher level of speed, skill, and offensive and defensive wizardry, particularly in the lower weight categories, than might be evinced in U.S. rings. The guide advertised both the 6,000-seat Palacio de los Deportes on the Malecón in Vedado and the newly built, 20,000-seat, Coliseo Nacional de la Ciudad Deportiva (National Coliseum of Sports City) – billed as “one of the world’s finest arenas” – on Rancho Boyeros Road, not far from the Havana airport, but did not discuss boxing in the provinces at all.² Nonetheless, the 1950s witnessed the sport’s development throughout the country, not simply in Havana. The result was the creation of regional boxing “ídolos” (idols) who attracted their countrymen and women to regular bouts in cities such as Camagüey, Cienfuegos, Guanabacoa, Guantánamo, Matanzas, Pinar del Río, Santiago de Cuba, and Santa Clara, as well as many smaller localities. At the same time, the Golden Gloves network – by allowing opportunities for the best young boxers to compete against their peers in other provinces and in the capital – helped to fuel the exodus of top boxers to the capital, and from there to the outside world. While there were opportunities for international amateur competition, such as the Central American and Caribbean Games, these were few and far between, and only the cream of the young pugilistic crop was given opportunities to showcase their skills abroad.

² *Cuba Magazine: Travel to Cuba, Playland of the Americas* (Miami, FL: United States Public Relations Office, Cuban Tourist Commission, 1958).

This chapter examines how the state's emphasis on developing Cuba's tourist market in the years prior to and during the Batista dictatorship led to the outmigration of its top ring talent. As a result, Cuban fighters more than ever before began to saturate the arenas and clubs of New York and Florida and to permeate more fully those of Europe and Latin America. The widely held notion that the 1950s was thus a "golden age of Cuban boxing" must take into account that, if a golden age it was, it was one that certainly did not occur in a political vacuum but was intricately tied to domestic political and economic considerations. Although the Batista dictatorship did attempt to establish a market for world championship boxing bouts in the capital, one that would presumably bring in moneyed tourists and allow top Cuban boxers to fight more often on their native ground, it was hampered in its efforts by the ongoing political rebellion and its own incompetence and greed.

This chapter also considers how television, which was already changing the nature of prizefighting in the U.S., was beginning to have similar impacts in Cuba. In both countries, middle-class and even poor families stretched their budgets to purchase a television set, around which families could share cultural experiences while remaining safely at home. As critics in the U.S. feared, the promotion of TV boxing not only accelerated the decline of small clubs but also fueled the creation of made-for-television stars who were vulnerable to mismatches. One Cuban fighter exemplified the trend of TV boxing, at least on the surface: Kid Gavilán (Gerardo González). Through the use of his bolo punch – an exaggerated, showy uppercut that he claimed to have invented while harvesting sugar cane with a machete as a child – this crafty boxer managed to achieve worldwide fame while portraying (or being portrayed as) a simple-minded, good natured farmer and family man who was as at home on

his family farm as he was in the rings of the big city.³ As did other high-profile Cuban prizefighters of this period, such as Niño Valdés, Gavilán's international success helped to market the island as an American vacation spot, one that promised whatever kind of amusement tourists wished for.

A Dry Spell for Boxing

In January 1950, the Association of Managers, Seconds, and Trainers demanded the dismissal of DGD director Juan Sosa Zamora, whom it claimed was more concerned with bringing in lucrative entertainment events to Havana's Palacio de los Deportes – such as the recently departed Ringling Brothers circus – than with authorizing regular athletic competitions there, notably prizefights. *Cuba Deportiva*, a popular sports weekly, spoke for the group when it claimed that, while Sosa Zamora and his collaborators “piensan solo en negocios, en recaudaciones” (thought only of business, of gate receipts), his opponents – unmotivated by politics or even by personal animosity toward Sosa Zamora – were “dedicado a los deportes en varios aspectos” (dedicated to sports in various aspects).⁴ Yet the criticism of Sosa Zamora did extend to politics; it was alleged that he had hired communists to assume some of the major responsibilities in the DGD.⁵ The youth section of the *Auténticos* issued a forceful statement against Sosa Zamora in its publication “Realidad.” Although they did not reiterate charges of communist infiltration of the DGD, the authors were incensed by the “purely economic” decision by “Sosita” to hand over the

³ For a description of the main punches used in modern boxing, see Introduction, n. 7. Many sources repeat the claim that Gavilán invented or “imported” the bolo punch; for one example, see “Kid Gavilan: The Cuban Hawk,” in Roberts and Skutt, *The Boxing Register*, 4th ed., pp. 406-409.

⁴ “La Asociación de Managers y Seconds y [Entrenadores] Demandan la destitución de Sosa Zamora,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:4 (January 23, 1950), p. 4.

⁵ “La Dirección de Deportes, Sosa Zamora y el P.S.P.,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:4 (January 23, 1950), pp. 1, 6.

Palacio de Deportes to “[e]l circo norteamericano que ha contribuido a la ruina de todos los espectáculos cubanos” (the North American circus that has contributed to the ruin of all Cuban public spectacles).⁶

Sosa Zamora was hardly the only Cuban official singled out for invective by the fans, participants, and commentators of Havana pugilism. Pedro Mendieta, the sole Assessor of the Cuban Boxing Commission, was known to critics as “Kid Promesa” for failing to live up to numerous promises to the boxing community. Among his harshest critics was boxing manager Juan Oliva, who argued in the pages of *Cuba Deportiva* that he had achieved his position through the influence of his uncle and castigated him for failing to reimburse the expenses of hosting a boxing program on October 9, 1949, at the Palacio de los Deportes.⁷

There had not been a major boxing card in Havana since December 17, 1949, when Kid Gavilán decisioned Baltimore welterweight Bobby Lee in a ten-round “star bout.” When impresario Luis Godoy, a local businessman, had sought to promote a card at Havana’s Cancha del Deportivo Asturias (Asturian Sports Field), he approached the DGD to borrow its boxing ring. As the ring was not in use – the Ringling Brothers circus was occupying the Palacio de los Deportes – it appeared to some commentators a simple matter to lend it to Godoy, who – should his new career as a promoter take off – could later purchase his own. But Mendieta rebuffed his request, stating that the DGD would be offering amateur bouts in the near future. No such event seems to have taken place.⁸ In December 1949, Luis Felipe

⁶ “La Juventud Auténtica contra Sosa Zamora,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:5 (January 30, 1950), p. 5.

⁷ See “¿Qué hará ahora la DGD?” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:3 (January 16, 1950), p. 5; “La Asociación de Managers y Seconds y [Entrenadores] demandan la destitución de Sosa Zamora,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:4 (January 23, 1950), p. 4; and “Mendieta dice que la Comisión de Boxeo nada tuvo que hacer en el cartel programa,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:5 (January 30, 1950), p. 9.

⁸ “Luis Godoy quiere comenzar el boxeo: La comisión se lo impide,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:2 (January 9, 1950), p. 7.

“Pincho” Gutiérrez, former manager of Kid Chocolate, briefly returned to Havana from New York for the Christmas holidays and had attempted to organize a show featuring U.S. versus Cuban pugilists, but received no word from the boxing commissioners because, as he said, “estaban ocupados con la compra de heno para los caballos del circo” (they were busy buying hay for the circus horses). Whether this anecdote was true or not, the implication was – as Gutiérrez concluded – that “los comisionados están mas interesados en los espectáculos de circo que en los de boxeo” (the commissioners are more interested in circus spectacles than in boxing ones).⁹

Very little pugilistic activity was happening in the provinces, either, but there were some signs of life. Not all of it was pretty. On January 17, Central Delicias in Oriente province held “[l]os más sangrientes peleas ofrecidas hasta ahora” (the bloodiest fights offered up to now), including one that resulted in a 137-pound fighter named Cosme Pérez being knocked unconscious by his 136-pound opponent, Panterita Holguinera (likely Raul Pérez). The ring doctor managed to revive Cosme Pérez, who received a standing ovation from the crowd. On February 4, Promoter Rogelio Mestre put on a small card at the baseball stadium in Cárdenas, Matanzas. He planned to put on additional cards featuring out-of-work Havana boxers, in the hopes of developing the sport in his city.¹⁰

As the first three months of 1950 wore on, fans in Havana had to make do with tidbits on U.S. boxing news – such as speculation as to whether former heavyweight champion Joe Louis would end his retirement from the sport – and on the exploits of

⁹ “Dijo Pincho Gutiérrez: ‘Los empresarios están ahora buscando heno para los caballos del Ringling Bros,’” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:2 (January 9, 1950), p. 7.

¹⁰ “Boxeo en Cárdenas,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:4 (January 23, 1950), p. 8; “Boxeo en Oriente,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:5 (January 30, 1950), p. 4.

homegrown prizefighters abroad. Most of the news was not good. The career of Gavilán, then Cuba's best prospect, was at a standstill; he had dropped four of seven decisions between October 1949 and May 1950 – to Lester Felton, Billy Graham, Robert Villemain, and George Costner. Though the losses were controversial, a third welterweight title match-up with Sugar Ray Robinson seemed out of reach. Meanwhile, Luis “Pincho” Gutiérrez, a well-known figure in U.S. fistic circles from his days managing Kid Chocolate and Black Bill, was pinning new title hopes on the Costa Rican middleweight, Tuzo Portuguéz, and on Cuba's national bantamweight champion, Luis Galvani, whom he brought with him to New York in January 1950. By that March, he and Portuguéz had parted ways after the latter stopped training and attempted to secure bouts without his manager's involvement. By April, Gutiérrez had sold his contract with the boxer he called “ingrato” (ungrateful) and “indisciplinado” (undisciplined) – and who, under his charge, had gone from \$400 to \$10,000 purses – to New York promoter Allie Zack for a total of \$3,600. He continued to manage Galvani, who was considered a strong talent but also one with something of a discipline problem. Shortly after arriving in New York, the bantamweight was ready to leave; he was quoted to have said, “I don't like this country, I have clothes, but I am always cold... I want to return to Cuba.” A January 1950 headline in *Cuba Deportiva* read, “Galvani puede triunfar si se entrena con atención” (Galvani can win if he trains hard). Fight commentators of a certain age compared Galvani's skills to those of Black Bill, the flyweight title contender and “maravilloso negrito” (marvelous little black boy) of the 1920s and early 30s who had “desgraciadamente desaparecido debido a sus propios errores” (disgracefully passed away due to his own mistakes) – a reference to the latter's having contracted syphilis, turned blind,

and ultimately committed suicide in New York.¹¹ Black Bill – like Chocolate – had often been referred to in the Cuban press as a “negrito,” a patronizing expression used by whites to refer to certain blacks from the fatherland. The term did not merely connote youth and blackness but also, as Envir M. Casimir notes, one’s status and class; it was used mainly in describing “poor and uneducated blacks who were often seen as obstacles to Cuban modernity and development.”¹² Yet in the context of invoking successful athletes such as Black Bill and Chocolate, it can be argued that this term, however demeaning, was also one of ownership and affection, reflecting white pride in the accomplishments of Afro-Cubans who had brought prestige to the nation by the showcasing of their skills abroad.

Still, the ring exploits of these once-celebrated Cuban fighters were ancient history by the start of the 1950s. In addition to Galvani, other young prospects seemed uncertain. In March, Yova Kid (Cristóbal Márquez), the national light heavyweight champion – having already voyaged to the interior of the country as well as Puerto Rico for bouts – embarked for Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, to fight Gentleman Daniel. No one accompanied him, though he had arranged to work with a manager in Trinidad, and it was further hoped that José “Carón” González, a respected Cuban trainer who had been living in Aruba for several years, might be willing to join up with him there. Although his chronicler felt that the 23-year-old “Yova” was “very young for these adventures on his own,” he argued that, “it is

¹¹ The original quote by Galvani was, “No me gusta este país, tengo ropa, pero siempre tengo frío... Quiero irme para Cuba.” “‘Pincho’ Gutiérrez embarca con Luis Galvani a los Estados Unidos,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:2 (January 9, 1950), p. 7; “Galvani puede triunfar si se entrena con atención,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:4 (January 23, 1950), p. 4; “‘Pincho’ rompió con Tuzo: ‘Se le había ido el triunfo a la cabeza,’” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:13 (March 27, 1950), p. 4; “Confirma Pincho la ruptura con Portugués,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:14 (April 3, 1950), p. 4; “\$3,600 recibió ‘Pincho’ Gutiérrez por el contrato de Portugués, de Zack,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:16 (April 17, 1950), p. 3.

¹² Envir M. Casimir, “From the Battlefield to the Boxing Ring: Kid Chocolate and the Emergence of Athletics as a Site for Afro-Cuban Male Heroism, 1928-1940,” paper presented at the American Historical Association Annual Meeting, New York, New York, January 3, 2009.

necessary to take risks when there are no fights in our country.”¹³ Orlando Zulueta, the former Cuban lightweight champion, had been fighting in the United States since January 1949, winning nine bouts in a row. Yet between December of that year – when Sandy Saddler defeated him for the vacant world junior lightweight title – and March 1950, he lost four of five decisions. Cuban heavyweight champion Omelio Agramonte found himself deserted by friends and acquaintances in New York after losing by seventh-round technical knockout to Jersey Joe Walcott at Madison Square Garden in March 1950. While holding the youth advantage, the 25-year-old Cuban lacked Walcott’s heft and experience. Agramonte weighed in nearly fifteen pounds lighter than his 36-year-old rival, the future world titleholder, who repeatedly knocked him down before the referee stopped the proceedings. Though it was not his first loss in New York, Agramonte complained that those who had filled the ring canvas during his earlier victories “shone by their absence... at the moment of defeat.” Yet his loss was not surprising to an unnamed Cuban observer, who watched Agramonte and Walcott perform an exhibition refereed by José “Carón” González in Aruba. Walcott, though wearing the heavier sparring gloves, had knocked Agramonte down in the fourth round. So as not to “disillusion” Cuban fans hoping for their hero’s success, the observer offered the anecdote after the Agramonte-Walcott bout was over.¹⁴

While boxing was on hiatus in the capital, seasonal professional wrestling shows were a popular alternative for fans. What made them so appealing, beyond the discipline’s

¹³ “Embarcó Yova Kid Para Port of Spain,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:12 (March 20, 1950), p. 9. The original phrases, respectively, were “muy nuevo para estas aventuras sólo” and “es necesario arriesgarse, cuando en nuestra patria no hay pelea.”

¹⁴ The original quote was, “brillaron por su ausencia... en la hora de la derrota.” See “Agramonte quejoso de falsos amigos,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:10 (March 6, 1950), pp. 1, 6 (quote on p. 6); “Joe Walcott impuso su clase frente a Onelio [sic],” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:10 (March 6, 1950), p. 9; “Actividades de boxeadores cubanos en Norte América,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:10 (March 6, 1950), pp. 9, 6.

usual theatrics, was the presence of foreign female wrestlers, such as 21-year-old American girl Dot Dotson. An all-around athlete since childhood and former basketball player with the Florida State League, Dotson had gravitated to wrestling as her “favorite” sport. The story went that Florida promoter Phil Duffy recruited Dotson, then an Orlando taxi driver, to join his professional wrestling stable when, as a belligerent rider in her cab, he goaded her into a physical confrontation to test her strength. Since then, she had supposedly earned about \$100,000 in 250 matches. In her first appearance in Havana, it was announced that Dobson would be matched against Beverly Lehmer on April 13.¹⁵ Fan anticipation was high:

La lucha entre estas dos chiquillas ha despertado un interés extraordinario ya que será la primera vez que se ofrecía en el Palacio de los Deportes, un match de luchadores profesional entre mujeres. Las reglas que rigen la lucha femenina son idénticas a la lucha masculina y ello debe contribuir a que el espectáculo sea más emotivo aún.¹⁶

The match between these two little girls has already awakened an extraordinary interest as this will be first time that the Sports Palace offers a professional wrestling match between women. The rules that adhere to women’s wrestling are identical to men’s wrestling, and that should help to make this spectacle even more exciting.

The match was considered to be the first “genuine” women’s wrestling match in Cuba, to distinguish it from the forms of female ring competition that had been occurring on the island for some time. Yet by grappling forcefully in between screams and groans – which were affecting enough that several male audience members called out for them to stop hurting one another – and then walking away seemingly unscathed by the blows was enough to persuade many spectators that this sport was a scam. Commentator Llillo Jiménez of

¹⁵ “Lucha libre,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:13 (March 27, 1950), p. 7; “Dot Dotson a gran encuentro con la Burke,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:27 (July 10, 1950), p. 5.

¹⁶ “Será un éxito la temporada de lucha libre,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:15 (April 10, 1950), p. 7.

Información pointed out that a “standard” woman who attempted such maneuvers, fixed or not, would have ended up much differently. Dotson won the bout, and with it, the chance to return to Havana to wrestle against Mildred Burke.¹⁷

Burke was the undefeated, female world wrestling champion, a title she had held for 13 years. Prior to the April meeting of Dotson and Lehmer, Burke cabled promoters Gilberto Becerra (brother of the wrestler Joe Becerra) and Oscar Martínez Conill as part of ongoing negotiations to bring her to Havana to wrestle the winner. Having earlier demanded a minimum of \$2,500, beyond the reach of the promoters, she now signaled an agreement to accept no less than \$1,500.¹⁸ Although it is not clear what the final terms were, Conill and Becerra personally flew to the United States to persuade Burke and her manager, Billy Wolfe, to sign a contract. When Burke later tried to cancel her Havana appearance, citing other offers, the promoters used their contacts with U.S. wrestling commissioners to pressure her to live up to the contract terms. Ultimately, they were forced to augment her guarantee to ensure that she show up. By July 1950, a photo of Burke – wearing a white flowered bikini, white open-toed heels, and a smile – appeared on the cover of *Cuba Deportiva* with an announcement that she would be wrestling Dotson the following week – the first time a female world wrestling championship match would be held in Cuba.¹⁹ In the end, Burke retained her title in decisive fashion, but Dotson was rewarded for her showing with another

¹⁷ Nick Jerry, “El Gran Espectáculo de Lucha,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:15 (April 10, 1950), p. 10; “Lo que opinan los colegas: Lillo Jiménez en *Información*,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:16 (April 17, 1950), p. 2.

¹⁸ “La Campeona Burke actuará en Cuba,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:14 (April 3, 1950), p. 4.

¹⁹ “Mildred Burke, a quien veremos contra la Dobson [sic] el miércoles,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:27 (July 10, 1950), p. 1; “Dot Dotson a gran encuentro con la Burke,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:27 (July 10, 1950), p. 5; “Lucha Libre,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:27 (July 10, 1950), p. 5. The article “Viene T. Galento,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:17 (April 24, 1950), pp. 1, 6 seemed to indicate that Burke would not be competing in Havana that season.

turn in front of Havana audiences in October 1950, when she was matched with June Byers.²⁰

In addition to women's wrestling, what made for novel viewing was the appearance in early May 1950 of former boxer "Two Ton" Tony Galento. The New Jersey native was in Havana to compete in what was a common fad of the day – the boxer vs. wrestler match-up. For decades, boxers had been meeting with martial artists and wrestlers in the ring as a means to support their income during their prizefighting career or, more commonly, after it was over. Sam McVea, Jack Johnson, Bob Fitzsimmons, Jack Dempsey, Primo Carnera, and Joe Louis had all accepted these types of match-ups. They often proved more lucrative than purses from prizefights; Carnera, for instance, made far more money as a wrestler than he had as a boxer, despite having won the world heavyweight title, and was rumored to be coming to Havana in 1950 to compete in the Palacio de los Deportes wrestling shows. (Jack Dempsey and Max Baer, like Carnera former heavyweight champions seeking lucrative pay in the wrestling arena, were supposed to be making the trip to Havana that season to referee matches.) In addition to the financial appeal of wrestling was the sense that it was "easy money." Generally speaking, it was not necessary for pugilists to train as strenuously for non-boxing events, as opponents had little or no defensive skill as boxers and had to rely solely upon wrestling or martial art techniques.²¹ In his 1978 autobiography, Joe Louis recalled getting the offer to wrestle professionally in early 1956, shortly after marrying his

²⁰ "Lucha libre femenina el próximo jueves," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:37 (October 2, 1950), p. 3; Asunción M., María del Carmen, "Tomando el pulso: Lucha libre," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:39 (October 16, 1950), p. 6. Asunción M. suggested that the Burke-Dotson bout was fixed.

²¹ "Viene T. Galento," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:17 (April 24, 1950), p. 1, 6; Maurice Golesworthy, "Wrestler v. Boxer," excerpt in Golesworthy, *Encyclopaedia of Boxing*, 8th ed. (London: Robert Hale, 1988), p. 277.

second wife, Rose, when he was beset by tax problems and without a visible means to eliminate them:

So when Ray Tabani, a professional wrestling promoter, came along with a \$100,000 guarantee for me to wrestle, shoot, I didn't think twice about it. Rose was real upset. She said to me that it was like seeing President Eisenhower wash dishes. I told her that it damn sure beat stealing. I honestly didn't feel there was anything dishonorable about it, but then when you're broke who can see straight?

For a time, Louis estimated he earned about \$20,000 a year through such exhibitions before the liquidation of the International Boxing Club (IBC) ended that lucrative endeavor. He continued to find work as, among other things, a referee at wrestling matches.²² Though it is not discussed in his autobiography, Louis appears to have continued wrestling into the 1960s and as late as 1972. More recently, world boxing champions Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, Leon Spinks, Mike Tyson, Evander Holyfield, and Floyd Mayweather, Jr., have all participated in mixed boxing/wrestling/martial arts exhibitions of one form or another.²³

Galento, Louis's former opponent, was once a squat, powerful heavyweight renowned for his devastating left hook. "Two Ton" Tony had reached the pinnacle of his sport by dropping Louis to the canvas in their June 1939 championship bout at Yankee Stadium. Louis returned the favor, winning by a TKO in the fourth and retaining the title. After retiring from prizefighting in the early 1940s, Galento turned to professional wrestling to make a living once his fight career was over. As part of his promotional activities, he once posed for photographs wrestling with a bear. At the Palacio de los Deportes, the 40-year-old

²² Joe Louis with Edna and Art Rust, Jr., *Joe Louis: My Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), pp. 232-234 (quote on p. 233).

²³ Dave Meltzer, "Boxers in Wrestling a Rich Tradition," Yahoo! Sports, 27 March 2008, <http://sports.yahoo.com/box/news?slug=dm-boxers032608> (accessed February 2, 2009).

Galento – using a combination of boxing and wrestling techniques – defeated his opponent, Gene Bowman, ten minutes into the match.²⁴

Most shocking of all during this boxing dry spell in the capital was the murder of boxing manager-promoter Juan Oliva at the hands of his protégé, Baby Coullimber (born Pablo Roca). Having earlier won the Cuban featherweight and lightweight titles, Coullimber had taken the vacant Cuban welterweight title upon the retirement of Joe Legón when he knocked out Joe Molina in the fifth round of their December 21, 1946, bout. His father, Jack Coullimber (also born Pablo Roca), had been a Cuban featherweight boxing champion in the 1920s – making them the first father and son pair to hold the same Cuban title. Ironically, Oliva himself had been a decorated featherweight in the 1920s, and had taken the senior Coullimber’s featherweight title from him in October 1922. Although Coullimber won their bout, he forfeited the title for coming in over the weight limit.²⁵

Despite some impressive wins, the younger Coullimber had had a spotty record of late and was considered to be an eccentric personality, owing in part, perhaps, to his devotion to Santería. Boxing historian Enrique Encinosa characterizes him thusly:

Baby Coullimber was a good fighter who was petrified by his fear of Santería hexes. Once Coullimber’s opponents realized his fears, they capitalized on his weakness. The fighter would arrive at a dressing room in a fight arena to find someone had left a dead black rooster or red bandanas tied in knots in his dressing room - hexes that preyed on his fragile psyche. Baby Coullimber lost fights he should have won because of his fear of the hexes, his performances lacking in confidence.²⁶

²⁴ “Actuará en Cuba,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:17 (April 24, 1950), p. 1; “Viene T. Galento,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:17 (April 24, 1950), pp. 1, 6; “T. Valento demostró clase,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:19 (May 8, 1950), p. 5.

²⁵ “Seis preguntas,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:38 (October 9, 1950), p. 2; entry for “Tuesday, October 22, 1922, Nuevo Frontón, Havana, Cuba,” http://www.boxrec.com/show_display.php?show_id=33138 (accessed February 4, 2009).

²⁶ Enrique Encinosa, “Looking for an Edge,” *Wail! The CBZ Journal*, August 2004, <http://www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/w0804-encinosa.html> (accessed June 5, 2008).

Although it is hard to ascertain to what extent Coullimber was motivated by genuine religious belief and to what extent he may have suffered from mental illness, what is known is that, in April 1950, after a heated exchange of words, he fired two shots at and killed Oliva at Havana's Gato Gimnasio (Cat Gym). One rumor had it that the argument stemmed from a debt he owed to his co-manager. But Manolo Ramirez, a columnist for *Cuba Deportiva*, pointed out that Oliva – himself a well-known writer for that publication – had been extremely generous with his fighter, even asking Ramirez to lend Coullimber money. He also noted that, shortly before the murder, the boxer had signed a contract with U.S. manager Irving Price to fight in Boston. Ramirez was more inclined to view the Cat Gym incident as the culmination of a long-standing psychological disorder, informing readers that Coullimber had been in trouble with the law before. An altercation at Kid Chocolate's Gym had resulted in the intervention of the local police, who attacked him with tear gas and sent him off to the Hospital de Dementes.²⁷ Whether his affliction was “locura” (madness) might be debatable, but his complicity in the crime was not; Coullimber did not deny shooting Oliva. It was thus necessary for the boxing commission strip him of his welterweight title.²⁸ Ultimately, Coullimber was convicted of murder and sent to prison.²⁹

The Oliva murder and its immediate aftermath were distractions during an otherwise slow time for boxing. Ultimately, however, these could not stem the rise of protests that were emanating from Havana newspapers over the lack of regular boxing shows. These were finally addressed in March 1950 by the Prío regime.

²⁷ Manolo Ramirez, “Opiniones del Sector,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:17 (April 24, 1950), p. 2.

²⁸ “Del Sector Pugilístico,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:17 (April 24, 1950), p. 5.

²⁹ Encinosa, *Azúcar y Chocolate*, p. 74.

Boxing Returns to the Capital

By mid-March 1950, the Prío government finally began to respond to the growing chorus of criticism from all sectors of the Cuban boxing world. Although it did not accede to demands to fire DGD Director Sosa Zamora and assessor Mendieta, it added two new assessors to the Boxing and Wrestling Commission: Captain Enrique Borbonet for amateur boxing, and Amor Urquía for professional boxing. The Havana boxing community seemed to embrace both selections. In January, Borbonet and Captain Rios Morejón had offered the use of a military training facility to the boxing team that went to the Central American and Caribbean Games, and he was considered a genuine and gentlemanly supporter of the sport. As a young military man, it was unclear what particular qualifications he had for the position. Just one year earlier, it seems that Borbonet had been a lieutenant involved in plotting a golpe de estado (coup d'état) in August 1949 against President Prío Socarrás. At that time, when Prío promoted General Ruperto Cabrera to replace General Pérez Dámara as chief of staff, he also promoted Borbonet and his military colleagues. Urquía, on the other hand, had served as a publicist, manager, promoter, and boxing critic and was considered eminently qualified for his new position. Both men began their positions facing a shortage of facilities and equipment for Cuba's boxers, while Urquía also had to contend with a lack of promoters at home and the exodus of top boxers abroad, both of which made it difficult to fill regular Havana fight cards.³⁰

³⁰ "Designado Luis Sarría Instructor del Team Olímpico Cubano que visitará Guatemala," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:3 (January 16, 1950), p. 4; "Triunfará el Capitán E. Borbonet como Asesor," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:12 (March 20, 1950), p. 4; "Acertada designación para Asesor de boxeo," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:13 (March 27, 1950), pp. 1, 6. Thomas, *Cuba or the Pursuit of Freedom*, p. 763, discusses a "Lieutenant Borbonet" who was promoted in August 1949.

To meet the immediate demand for boxing events, Urquía issued a call for those seeking to obtain a special promoter's license in the municipality of Havana to submit an application to the Asesoría de Boxeo y Luchas by April 4. Prospective promoters would need to provide a \$3,000 deposit to the Asesoría; agree to abide by soon-to-be-established rules concerning pay scales for boxers, managers, officials, and other employees; and commit to offering weekly boxing shows.³¹ Dr. Emilio San Pedro met these requirements and was selected to be a promoter in Havana. He was considered to be a "well intentioned" man with "unquestioned enthusiasm," but he would only succeed if he could obtain decent boxers. By July of that year, he had become known as Havana's "promotor único" (sole promoter), showcasing some of the island's most popular boxers – including Chico Varona, Charolito Spirituano, Diego Sosa, and Billy Lima – at the coliseum on Paseo and Mar. The shows ran weekly on Saturday nights until, in the fall, baseball fever took over the country and San Pedro was forced to hold them on Sunday nights. Yet some accused San Pedro of being too fiscally conservative to seek out the best talent; it would be financially risky to hold a genuine "star bout" with a weak undercard, since it might alienate fans used to viewing several solid fighters who could duke it out. The limits of San Pedro's approach were made more obvious when Camagüeyan official Mochuelo Escalada traveled to the United States during the summer of 1950 to recruit foreign boxers to appear in his city.³²

³¹ "Convoca el Asesor a promotores," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:14 (April 3, 1950), p. 4; Manolo Ramirez, "Opiniones del Sector," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:16 (April 17, 1950), p. 2.

³² Escalada was dismissed shortly afterward and replaced in the endeavor by César Temes. "Inside Deportivo," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:25 (June 26, 1950), pp. 1, 5; Manolo Ramirez, "Opiniones del Sector," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:25 (June 26, 1950), p. 2; "Inside Deportivo," *Cuba Deportivo* 10:27 (July 17, 1950), pp. 1, 5; "Boxeo," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:28 (July 24, 1950), p. 4; "El programa del sábado," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:30 (August 7, 1950), p. 4; "Juveniles," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:33 (August 28, 1950), p. 7; "Mosaicos," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:34 (September 4, 1950), p. 1; "Mosaicos," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:40 (October 23, 1950), p. 4.

Shortly after Urquía's appointment to the body, the Asesoría sent out feelers to the provinces indicating that it would begin authorizing boxing and wrestling shows. By April, several bouts were already scheduled, including wrestling shows in Matanzas, Ciego de Ávila, and Santa Clara and professional boxing cards in Puerto Padre, Caibarién, and Punta Alegre.³³ In Victoria de las Tunas, regular boxing shows were soon taking place in Kid Tunero Stadium. One of that city's best prospects was Eddy Botello, who was 23-2 and a huge local attraction.³⁴ Another heralded prospect was Victor Martínez of Caibarién, who had been featured frequently in Havana fight cards beginning in May 1950.³⁵ Camagüey – the province that had produced some of Cuba's greatest fighters, including Kid Gavilán – was especially active. Havana promoters Oscar Martínez Conill and Gilberto Becerra, who had brought wrestling to the Palacio de los Deportes that spring, was working with Camagüey's Club Gallístico (owned by General Genovevo Pérez Dámara) to host an upcoming boxing and wrestling show. That month also brought news that Camagüey would inaugurate a new boxing stadium. Built by Pérez Dámara's son, Genovevo Pérez Valdés, the stadium would seat 2,600 persons and cost approximately 300,000 pesos to build. While it was being constructed, Pérez Dámara – who was chief of staff for Presidents Grau and Prío Socarrás before the latter had dropped him in favor of General Ruperto Cabrera³⁶ – continued to promote fights using his 62,000-peso valla (cockpit), which had been rigged with a boxing ring. Signed to appear were Bombón Oriental, Diego Sosa, Rafael Lastre, and other well-known pugilists. By October, however, Pérez Dámara and his son had ended the boxing

³³ "Del Sector Boxístico," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:16 (April 17, 1950), pp. 1, 10.

³⁴ Tony Loga, "Crónica de Victoria de las Tunas," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:22 (May 29, 1950), p. 2.

³⁵ "¡Nueva estrella de boxeo!" *Cuba Deportiva* 10:22 (May 29, 1950), p. 2.

³⁶ Thomas, *Cuba or the Pursuit of Freedom*, pp. 745-746, 763.

season at the valla early, in order to begin the cockfighting season. Their plans for the new stadium were on hold for at least a few more months.³⁷

By May 6, Saturday evening boxing shows were back at Havana's Palacio de los Deportes. The headline bout was local favorite Chico Varona versus U.S. boxer Bobby Mann. Varona won by technical knockout in the ninth round. The undercard featured Puppy Garcia and Pablo Tapia (Garcia won by second-round knockout), Orlando (Zurdo) Echevarría and Manuel Perdomo (Echevarría by second-round knockout), Humberto Monier and Wilfredo Flores (Flores by decision), and Pedro Pablo Triana and Jesús Vila (Triana by decision). At the time, Vila was Cuban middleweight champion, but his title was not on the line during his eight-round bout with Triana.³⁸

One of the lamented effects of the dearth of boxing shows in the capital was the inability of up-and-coming fighters to challenge for national titles. (Few title challenges were held in the provinces, which was another point of contention.) Following the murder of Juan Oliva, when it appeared that the boxing commission would soon strip Baby Coullimber of his welterweight crown, the columnist of *Cuba Deportiva's* "Del Sector Boxístico" felt it was a good time to infuse new blood – particularly young men from the provinces – into the sport. As the national champions had not put their titles on the line in months (since most bouts they had had were non-title affairs), he argued that Urquía, should require them to defend

³⁷ Neco Marrero, "Deportes en Camagüey," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:26 (July 3, 1950), p. 6; "Stadium para Camagüey," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:28 (July 24, 1950), p. 1; Antonio Estrada M., "Deportes en Camagüey," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:35 (September 18, 1950), p. 6; Antonio Estrada M., "Deportes en Camagüey," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:41 (October 30, 1950), p. 6; Antonio Estrada M., "Deportes en Camagüey," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:44 (November 20, 1950), p. 5.

³⁸ "Chico Varona superó ampliamente a Bobby Mann," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:19 (May 8, 1950), p. 8.

their titles within 45 days – or else have their titles declared vacant and a new elimination process held.³⁹

The demand for new boxing regulations outpaced actual reforms, but the Asesoría was not completely inactive. For instance, Urquía clamped down on trainers and seconds, requiring them to follow new rules of dress and comportment. Seconds could no longer shout at their fighters from the corners during the three-minute rounds but would instead need to convey all instructions during the one-minute rest periods. This rule was announced shortly after the New York State Athletic Commission decreed that seconds would need to maintain the three-minute silences during all state-sanctioned prizefights. Urquía also enforced the new requirement that seconds wear white jerseys while in the corners, which were intended to make them look more professional.⁴⁰ Later that year, the Asesoría declared that the DGD's medical department had reached an agreement with the Association of Managers and Seconds that all Association members obtain a card testifying to their good health. The card would require a physical exam and would be valid for one year; all trainers and seconds were required to obtain one before being able to continue their work.⁴¹

Yet some felt that much more was needed to ensure the safety of boxers and the integrity of the sport. Rene Cubas put forth a serious proposal to found an academy for referees and judges, to reduce the arbitrary nature of decisions and to prevent unqualified people from officiating bouts. He likened such an academy to the courses that were offered to trainers, seconds, and masseurs to keep them up-to-date with the latest techniques in their

³⁹ "Del Sector Pugilístico," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:17 (April 24, 1950), p. 5.

⁴⁰ "Deberán guardar silencio los managers durante las duraciones de los rounds," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:16 (April 17, 1950), p. 3; "Harán cumplir a los seconds de boxeo la reglamentación," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:19 (May 8, 1950), p. 8.

⁴¹ "Notas de la D. G. D.," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:31 (August 14, 1950), p. 5.

fields. He pointed out that, prior to Sosa Zamora's tenure of the DGD, the organization had launched other athletic-related academies, such as one concerned with nautical sports. Cubas called upon the *Academia de Oficiales del Ring* (Academy of Ring Officials), led by popular referee and ex-prizefighter Mike Rojo, to lead the way in demanding that the DGD allocate funds for the academy, which would be free for students. By assuring proper training for its referees, moreover, Cuba could continue to avoid the "la epidemia de muertes en el ring" (the epidemics of ring deaths) that had infected the United States – which the island had avoided more through luck than wisdom. Not only would the academy improve the sport itself, but it would also provide an employment venue for former boxers and other athletes.⁴²

The 1950 Golden Gloves

Under the supervision of amateur boxing assessor Borbonet, the annual Golden Gloves championship got underway in the fall of 1950. Nine weight classes, ranging from junior flyweight (104 lbs) to heavyweight (+175 lbs), were up for challenge.⁴³ In Havana, entrants were asked to go to the national boxing commission office, located at the *Palacio de los Deportes*, to submit the necessary paperwork and undergo an exam by DGD doctors. In the provinces, they were to go to the offices of their local boxing delegations and examined there. Minors (under age 17) had to bring a parent or guardian along to consent to their involvement. All competitors had to be "estrictamente amateurs" (strictly amateurs) – any past semi-pro association would cause them to be indefinitely suspended and their results

⁴² Rene Cubas, "Es necesario crear una academia para árbitros," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:35 (September 18, 1950), p. 2; Rene Cubas, "Insistiendo sobre la falta que hace crear la academia," *Cuba Deportiva* 10:36 (September 25, 1950), p. 2.

⁴³ The other categories were flyweight (112 lbs.), bantamweight (119 lbs.), featherweight (126 lbs.), lightweight (135 lbs.), welterweight (147 lbs.), middleweight (160 lbs.), and light heavyweight (175 lbs.).

nullified. To ensure the best boxers would participate regardless of income level, the entry and medical exam were free for all participants, and those from the provinces who won their preliminary bouts would have their travel and lodging costs to Havana paid by the DGD. As before, the preliminary bouts were to be three rounds of two minutes each, with a one-minute rest period. The championship bouts were five two-minute rounds, for a total maximum duration of ten minutes each. No bouts could end in a draw, as each bracket needed to have one winner to advance to the next level.⁴⁴

Each province held its own series of preliminary bouts. In Havana, the contingents came from throughout the capital and were taught by the top trainers of the day, many of them former prizefighters. The Gymnasium Cuba y Merced (also known as the Arena Rafael Trejo), which was hosting the competition and whose students were instructed by members of the Asociación de Managers, had the largest entry pool, fifty boxers. Kid Tunero (Evelio Mustelier), the celebrated middleweight of the 1930s and 1940s, brought five students from his gym, El Stadium Municipal Rafael Conte. Wee Wee Barton (Gabriel López Nuñez), the Panamanian-born featherweight of the 1920s and 1930s, presented fifteen boxers from his Centro de Orientación Infantil. Higinio Ruiz, a top trainer and manager who had had a brief career as a prizefighter in the 1930s, brought six boxers from his namesake gym. The National Army team, under the instruction of Patricio Boada, had fifteen entrants.⁴⁵ Candelario Gallardo of Campo Alegre had five aspirants, while Federico Valdés of Club Rocafort had six. Assessor Borbonet postponed the tournament for a few more days to

⁴⁴ “Convocan al Campeonato Juvenil de los Guantes de Oro,” *Cuba Deportiva*, 10:35 (September 18, 1950), p. 3.

⁴⁵ In addition to an Army amateur boxing team, which was officially headed by Captain Enrique Borbonet, the amateur boxing assessor, Cuba had a Navy team led by Ship’s Lieutenant Leonardo Ullivarri and a police team led by Félix Masud. See “Seis Preguntas,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:43 (November 13, 1950), p. 2.

enable more boxers to enter. It was postponed once again due to rain. When it began, there were a sufficient number of entrants to schedule three televised programs per week.⁴⁶

Although the Golden Gloves was an amateur event that determined the annual champions in each weight class – which enabled them to compete internationally, such as at the upcoming Pan-American Games in Buenos Aires⁴⁷ – it was viewed by participants, trainers, and officials alike as serving one main purpose: bringing the best prospective young prizefighters to the fore. There was a feeling that “the art of the fists,” as boxing was widely known in Cuba, had decayed because of government apathy, more lucrative opportunities for prizefighters abroad, and the institutional focus on baseball above all other sports. The Golden Gloves – with its trophies, belts, and regional and national acclaim – were a way to inject enthusiasm into the sport. But this was not intended to be amateur boxing for amateurism’s sake. While many Golden Gloves participants never turned pro, the most successful ones generally did. Even the style of boxing that was favored by judges was closer to what might be seen in professional rings. It was expected that bouts demonstrate both “sangre y fuego,” blood and fire, in order to please paying fans. Boxers who ignored this edict did so at their peril. During the preliminary bouts in Ciego de Ávila in October 1950, two competitors – Severo Álvarez and Raúl Agramonte – were disqualified during the third

⁴⁶ Novato Veterano, “Deportivas Amateurs,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:41 (October 30, 1950), p. 5; Novato Veterano, “Deportivas Amateurs,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:42 (November 6, 1950), p. 5; “Guantes de Oro,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:45 (November 27, 1950), p. 2; “Guantes de Oro,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:45 (November 27, 1950), p. 5.

⁴⁷ It was announced during the 1950 Golden Gloves tournament that champions would be eligible for selection to the Cuban team that would attend the 1951 Pan-American Games in Argentina. See “Guantes de Oro en el Gimnasio de Cuba y Merced,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:49 (December 18, 1950), pp. 1, 6.

round of their bout for not hitting one another with forceful enough blows. The referee's decision was met with applause from the audience.⁴⁸

The preliminary Havana bouts of that year's Golden Gloves – held at the Arena Trejo in November 1950 – were the first boxing events to be televised in Cuba. The only operational Havana station at that time was Unión Radio TV (Channel 4), which had begun broadcasting programs on October 20, 1950, and had Cuban Winter League baseball games on by the end of that month. (Its main rival, CMQ-TV, did not begin airing programs until December.) Each boxing program began at 6:30 p.m. for the convenience of the TV viewers. Although it seems unlikely that many Havana residents would have access to TV so soon after programming had begun, historian Hugh Thomas notes that the advent of Unión Radio TV caused “a rush to buy television sets, [with] dealers buying large stocks on account and restaurants, bars and shops beginning to install sets.”⁴⁹ Indeed, Cuba was one of the first nations in the Americas to begin TV broadcasting; although it was a few years behind the United States, it was well ahead of its Latin American and Caribbean neighbors in both the speed and scope with which it embraced this new technology.

⁴⁸ For information on the national tournament, see Novato Veterano, “Deportivas Amateurs,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:41 (October 30, 1950), p. 5, and Novato Veterano, “Deportivas Amateurs,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:42 (November 6, 1950), p. 5. For information on Ciego de Ávila's preliminary Golden Gloves bouts, see Angel Rodríguez, “Deportes en Ciego de Ávila,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:36 (September 25, 1950), p. 3; Angel Rodríguez, “Ciego de Ávila,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:39 (October 16, 1950), p. 5; and Angel Rodríguez, “Ciego de Ávila,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:40 (October 23, 1950), p. 6.

⁴⁹ For details on the tournament, see “Deportivas Amateurs,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:41 (October 30, 1950), p. 5; “Guantes de Oro,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:45 (November 27, 1950), p. 2; “Guantes de Oro,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:46 (December 4, 1950), p. 2; and “Guantes de Oro,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:47 (December 11, 1950), p. 2. For information on the introduction of television into Cuba, see Michael B. Salwen, *Radio and Television in Cuba: The Pre-Castro Era* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994), pp. 40-41, and Thomas, *Cuba or the Pursuit of Freedom*, p. 766.

Boxing and the Nascent Television Age in Cuba and the United States

The rise of television's influence in U.S. prizefighting began in the late 1940s and peaked by the mid-1950s. The first fight shown on U.S. television was the April 1941 Lou Nova-Max Baer heavyweight match-up, in which Nova knocked out Baer in eight rounds at Madison Square Garden.⁵⁰ Because of the U.S. intervention in World War II by the end of that year, television did not become a major player in the boxing arena until the late 1940s, when GIs returned home from the war front and family leisure time became increasingly centered in the home. In the 1950s, the number of Americans with discretionary income to spend on TVs and other durable goods doubled; by 1960, 87 percent of America's 44 million families owned a television.⁵¹

The first heavyweight title bout aired on U.S. television was between the champion, Joe Louis, and challenger Billy Conn, the "Pittsburgh Kid," at Yankee Stadium on June 19, 1946. Louis had already defeated Conn, the former light heavyweight champion, almost exactly five years previously, on June 18, 1941, at the New York Polo Grounds. In their first bout Conn, who was the smaller but quicker of the two, was leading Louis by a wide margin when, instead of running, he decided to try to fight the champion toe-to-toe. Louis ended up knocking him out in the 13th round. As Conn recalled decades later, "I couldn't knock out anybody... And I tried to knock out Joe Louis." Yet Conn had proved to be so elusive that

⁵⁰ Michael Katz, "Sam Taub, 92, Fight Announcer, Broadcast First TV Bout in 1941," *New York Times*, 11 July 1979, p. B12; Joseph C. Nichols, "Crowd of 22,114 Sees Nova Score Knockout Triumph over Baer at the Garden," *New York Times*, 5 April 1941, p. 9.

⁵¹ Stephanie Koontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 2000 [1992]), p. 25.

when the rematch was announced, Louis was asked what he would do should Conn run from him again. Louis replied, “He can run, but he can’t hide.”⁵²

The intervening war had caused a substantial layoff for both men, who had enlisted in the army, though Conn’s – at four years, four months – was by far the greater. Their rematch had been two years in the making. Although Conn was four years younger than the champ, he weighed in at twelve pounds heavier than he had in his previous match-up with Louis, and his ring rust showed. His poor performance earned the Associated Press’s “Flop of the Year” award, but, like no other bout, it ushered in the television age in American prizefighting. While most fans heard the fight by radio transmission, others went to friends’ homes or to local taverns. As historian Jeffrey Sammons notes, “Tavern owners sensed that their customers were among the most rabid and knowledgeable boxing fans and invested early in television sets. ‘Fight Nights’ were happenings, and the Louis-Conn rematch transcended all others.”⁵³

In Cuba, too, television soon became a fixture in Cuban taverns and households, fostered by business owners’ and the middle and lower classes’ willingness to purchase new TV sets and other durable goods on readily available credit. In the early 1950s, graft and corruption in the Prío administration was rife, as it was during the previous Grau regime and as it would be following Batista’s 1952 coup. Even so, Cuba’s economy was rising. Although the Philippines and other sugar-producing areas had recovered from wartime dislocations, the outbreak of the Korean War succeeded in keeping sugar prices high (over 5 cents per

⁵² Gerald Eskenazi, “Sidelines: 50th Anniversary; Billy Conn to Be a Guest of Honor at Benefit,” *New York Times*, 9 September 1991; “Billy Conn, Fames for Title Bouts Against Joe Louis, Is Dead at 75,” *New York Times*, 31 May 1993.

⁵³ Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, p. 132.

pound). Since the U.S. remained committed to buying Cuban sugar to assist postwar Europe, and since wages were tied to sugar prices, this translated into greater prosperity for the upper and middle classes, who displayed their increased wealth through high-status purchases such as TVs and cars.⁵⁴

Cubans' desire for access to modern communications led to the importation of 25,000 TV sets in 1951 and 30,000 more the next year; about 400,000 were in operation by 1959. The island's dependence on credit in the immediate post-World War II period – from \$12.7 million to \$30 million between 1946 and 1951 – created the phenomenon of “floating televisions,” by which purchases of TVs and other items were made on credit but eventually returned for failure to pay. In this way, many families acquired TVs or radio sets for a short while before having them taken away, and then saved enough to continue the cycle by making another credit arrangement.⁵⁵

Prior to the TV invasion in Cuba, fans eagerly awaited the announcement of radio transmissions of important fights, particularly those from the United States. For example, the likely return of Joe Louis to the prizefight ring had been a main topic of discussion for months.⁵⁶ Louis had retired in March 1949, nearly nine months after his previous bout, a knockout of Jersey Joe Walcott. When – to try to unburden himself from a crushing tax debt – Louis emerged from retirement to challenge his successor to the heavyweight throne, Ezzard Charles, the Cuban newspapers ran photos and articles of Louis for several weeks before their September 27 bout in Yankee Stadium. The Gillette Company, the bout's

⁵⁴ Thomas, *Cuba or the Pursuit of Freedom*, p. 765.

⁵⁵ Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban*, pp. 333-334, 349-350. Pérez notes that the number of operational TV sets in this period was probably much higher, since the above numbers were based on official estimates and failed to take into account purchases made by Cuban tourists to the U.S. and those dealing with the black market.

⁵⁶ See, for instance, “Vuelve al Ring,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:29 (July 31, 1950), p. 1, and Manolo Ramirez, “Opiniones del Sector,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:29 (July 31, 1950), p. 2.

sponsor, arranged to transmit it to several Latin American countries. From ringside, Cuco Conde announced the fight to Cuban audiences on the radio station COCO.⁵⁷ Unfortunately for Louis, his return from retirement ended poorly; he lost a one-sided, unanimous, fifteen-round decision. Two months later, he continued on his path to reclaim former glory, one that brought with it eight straight victories – including one over Omelio Agramonte in May 1951. By October of that year, he had met with his ultimate, humiliating loss, against Rocky Marciano, which drove him into retirement for the last time. Although the Louis-Charles bout was televised in the United States, in Cuba the Brown Bomber’s career coincided with the heyday of radio; the heavyweights who followed him would become familiar TV faces in Cuba in the 1950s and early 1960s.

As early as 1951, Havana enjoyed three television stations: CMQ-TV (Channel 6), Telemundo (Channel 2), and Televisión Nacional (Channel 4), formerly Union Radio Televisión. A handful of others – including CMQ-TV’s sister enterprise, CMBF (Channel 7), in 1952, and the short-lived, U.S.-backed Televisión del Caribe (Channel 11) in 1953 – soon followed. The powerful Mestre brothers – Goar, Abel, and Luis Augusto – had purchased half of the CMQ radio station in 1943 and, by 1950, emerged as sole owners of the company, which was at the time venturing into television. In a field with few competitors, many of them awash in debt, CMQ-TV quickly became the largest and most lucrative television station in Havana. In 1957, the Mestres and several partners obtained Televisión Nacional and made it the centerpiece for a new national TV network called Cadena Nacional, S.A. From the outset, live and rebroadcast sporting events from Cuba and the U.S.

⁵⁷ “La transmisión del bout Joe Louis vs Charles y de la Serie Mundial de Base Ball,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:36 (September 25, 1950), p. 6.

– particularly boxing and baseball – were a cornerstone of Cuban television programming. Unión Radio TV, the first Cuban station to go on air in October 1950, broadcast Havana boxing and baseball along with advertising, improvised skits, and news. The network accomplished this feat with three cameras despite being something of “a kitchen operation” based out of its owner’s house. In 1954, with the assistance of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC), CMQ-TV carried live broadcasts of Major League Baseball World Series games to Cuban audiences by leasing an airplane to circle the Florida Keys at 8,500 feet while transmitting signals from a Miami station to Matanzas and from there to the capital. By 1957, with the advent of “over-the-horizon” linkages between transmitters in Guanabo, Cuba, and Florida City, Cuba, CMQ was able to use microwave relays rather than circling airplanes to transmit broadcasts between the U.S. and Cuba.⁵⁸

Purchasing exclusive rights to athletic events, though involving high up-front costs, was a surefire way to guarantee audience loyalty. The Mestre brothers were at the forefront of this effort. In August 1956, their CMQ station purchased five years of exclusive TV and radio Cuban Winter League baseball game coverage for \$1 million. Days before broadcasting its inaugural programs in March 1957, the Cadena Nacional network obtained exclusive TV rights to Havana’s Palacio de los Deportes Saturday evening fight cards. Through the new over-the-horizon technology linking Cuba and the U.S., which had been developed as a means to open telephone communication between the two nations, Cadena Nacional broadcast World Series baseball and boxing matches from the United States from 1957 until its takeover by the Castro administration in 1960.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Salwen, *Radio and Television in Cuba*, pp. xiv, 28-29, 38-41, 48-51, 59-61.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 59.

As with their U.S. cohorts, Cubans quickly gravitated to TV viewing as a leisure activity, one that involved family members, neighbors, and friends. In 1951, on the cusp of the TV explosion, a marketing survey estimated that each television set in Cuba was watched by close to eight viewers.⁶⁰ While Mexico and Brazil, respectively, were the first and second Latin American nations to broadcast television programming – accomplishing that feat just a few weeks before Cuba did in October 1950 – Cuba outpaced its more populous neighbors by the rapidity with which it embraced its new technology. By 1954, TV had surpassed radio as the nation’s top broadcasting medium. Two years later, Cuba had sixteen operation TV stations versus ten in Mexico, nine in Venezuela, and six each in Brazil and Colombia.⁶¹

Advertisers were quick to realize the potential of the growing Cuban TV audience, particularly for sports and entertainment programming. The Bacardí Rum Company – which since the 1880s had sponsored an employee-based Santiago de Cuba summer baseball team that later turned semi-professional – effectively used the new medium to translate its close association with that sport via not-so-subtle product placement. When Cuban TV stations began to broadcast ball games, Bacardí’s line of Hatuey beer served as the commercial sponsor. In addition to huge advertisements for Bacardí rum and Hatuey beer displayed on the billboard of the Havana stadium, “[c]utaway shots showed Manolo Ortega, a popular newscaster and sports announcer, sitting in a broadcast booth with a big red Hatuey sign behind him and a can of Hatuey beer at his elbow.”⁶² Sports programming was also more

⁶⁰ Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban*, p. 334.

⁶¹ Salwen, *Radio and Television in Cuba*, pp. 36-37, 62, 78.

⁶² Tom Gjelten, *Bacardi and the Long Fight for Cuba: The Biography of a Cause* (New York: Viking, 2008), pp. 157-158 (quote on p. 158).

cost-effective for television stations, since it did not require hiring and outfitting actors and musicians and designing sets, as did hosting variety shows and telenovelas (soap operas).

Similarly, in the United States, boxing was a natural target for television networks avidly seeking to reduce costs and increase advertising revenue. The cost of staging the average TV prizefight was \$5,000 by the mid-1950s – about half of what it cost to host a variety show or sitcom (situation comedy). Sponsors such as the Gillette Safety Razor Company – which sponsored weekly televised prizefights from Madison Square Garden between 1944 and 1964 – enjoyed the connotations of heterosexual masculinity that boxing conveyed, thus helping to reach its target male audiences to sell razors, cigarettes, beer, cars, and other products. Ratings remained high in the early 1950s – as high as 52% of the public watched televised boxing shows in 1952 – before tapering off at the end of the decade, to a 10.6% audience share in 1959.⁶³

In the United States as in Cuba, the sudden popularity of television boxing opened the sport to new fans while alienating many old ones. A “TV debate” sprung up in pugilistic circles over whether the positive ramifications of relinquishing the sport to the new medium were worth the price that would be paid. One of the most pointed critics of televised boxing was *New Yorker* essayist A.J. Liebling, who wrote humorous but impassioned defenses of what he termed “boxing with the naked eye.” In addition to critiquing the effects of boxing on the sport itself – the decline of small clubs, the pressure on young fighters to take on major fights before they were ready, the commercialization of sport – Liebling approached the pleasures of attending boxing matches from a fan’s point of view:

⁶³ Randy Roberts and James S. Olson, *Winning Is the Only Thing: Sports in America since 1945* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 103, 107.

Watching a fight on television has always seemed to me a poor substitute for being there. For one thing, you can't tell the fighters what to do. When I watch a fight, I like to study one boxer's problem, solve it, and then communicate my solution vocally. On occasion my advice is disregarded, as when I tell a man to stay away from the other fellow's left and he doesn't, but in such cases I assume that he hasn't heard my counsel, or that his opponent has, and has acted on it.... I get a feeling of participation that way that I don't in front of a television screen. I could yell, of course, but I would know that if my suggestion was adopted, it would be by the merest coincidence.⁶⁴

Arthur Daley, a sports columnist for the *New York Times*, accused TV of making “boxing a gigantic give-away program” that was turning off the spigot for new talent:

Amateur boxing was the kindergarten for professional boxing. Then the small clubs were the grade school and the high school, graduating only the brightest, cleverest, and best-equipped students to college – Madison Square Garden, the Boston Garden, the Detroit Olympia, Chicago Stadium, the San Francisco Cow Palace and other such show places.

...Television has done a double disservice to boxing. It has helped kill off the kindergartens and the secondary schools. So they are uneducated folks who suddenly reach the pugilistic college these days. They've skipped so many grades that they flunk the big test as soon as it comes.⁶⁵

Even writers for a glossy new monthly publication, *TV Boxing* (published by *Boxing and Wrestling* magazine) didn't have uniformly positive responses to the new medium. Inaugurated in October 1953, the magazine excoriated the ills of televised boxing while helping to promote it by informing audiences of upcoming bouts and reviewing ones that had recently occurred. More than serve as a source of criticism, which often spoke at a level

⁶⁴ A.J. Liebling, “Boxing with the Naked Eye,” *New Yorker*, 30 June 1951. Reprinted in A.J. Liebling, *The Sweet Science* (New York: North Point Press, 2004), pp. 17-29; quote on p. 17. See also A.J. Liebling, *A Neutral Corner: Boxing Essays*, edited by Fred Warner and James Barbour (New York: North Point Press, 1990), which contains additional Liebling *New Yorker* essays on boxing.

⁶⁵ Arthur Daley, “Is Boxing on the Ropes?” *New York Times*, 31 January 1954, pp. SM19-22.

which only genuine fight fans might understand, *TV Boxing* sought to convey the complexities of the sport to newcomers. Each month's issue featured a "Beginners Guide on How to Judge a Boxing Contest" on a page that ranked the top five fighters in each division and explained the different scoring techniques used in each state. Undoubtedly, the editors of the magazine were appealing to female readers as well as to younger males who might not yet be initiated into the fight game, since women made up a significant portion of new fans enjoying televised boxing from the comfort of their homes.

Nor did American promoters unanimously embrace the new medium, despite the potential for high TV fees. During Kid Gavilán's July 1952 bout with Philadelphia up-and-comer Gil Turner, promoter Herman Taylor refused to allow television or radio broadcasting to carry the fight. "I realize I can't halt progress," Taylor stated. "Television and radio are wonderful, but I have the greatest fight of the year, and I am certain it will draw a lot more money without television and radio than it would with the added TV and radio receipts." Despite lucrative offers from television networks to black out the fight within a 75-mile radius in return for \$100,000 and national broadcasting rights, Taylor held out for principle and the hope of massive gate receipts. "I think we could return to the \$1,000,000 gate in boxing if fights were not televised," he noted.⁶⁶ The fight did indeed have drawing power – 39,025 people witnessed Gavilán's methodical dismantling of the far less experienced Turner, who was finally knocked out in the eleventh round – and shattered the record for gate receipts for a welterweight championship bout, set at \$194,330 in 1934 during the Barney Ross-Jimmy McLarnin match. Still, the total Gavilán-Turner receipts –

⁶⁶ "Promoter Snubs \$100,000, Won't Allow Gavilan-Turner," n.d. (IBHOF file on Kid Gavilán). For more on Taylor's views of televised boxing, see Lanse McCurley, "Why I Am Against TV (Herman Taylor)," *TV Boxing* 1:1 (October 1953): 20-21, 60-61.

\$269,677 – was a far cry from the million-dollar gate alluded to by Taylor, and the television onslaught became more difficult for promoters to withstand.⁶⁷

Cuban observers followed the TV debate in the United States, including predictions that television would “was the beginning of the end for boxing in the small clubs.”⁶⁸ One commentator took it farther, titling his article, “La televisión ha resultado desastrosa a los deportes” (Television has been disastrous to sports). Not only boxing, but also baseball would be ruined by it, since people would stop coming to fights and games just to watch them at home or in the comfort of their local bar. Only wrestling, he argued, was improved by the medium; TV made it “more characteristic of a theatrical spectacle than of a pure but violent exercise of strength, agility, and dexterity.”⁶⁹

Yet the effects of television on prizefighting in 1950s Cuba were far less invidious on the sport than in the United States. For one, the technology of TV came later to Cuba; bouts were not televised before the end of 1950. Second, broadcasters favored Havana bouts and major U.S. prizefights; rarely did shows from the provinces make the cut. It was in the provinces, too, that boxing enthusiasm often ran highest. For instance, while commentators in Havana were bemoaning the lack of well-matched bouts at the weekly Palacio de los Deportes shows and complaining about the upkeep of the stadium, new boxing venues were going up in Camagüey and Morón. The Morón stadium, which was air-conditioned, employed a publicist, Rubén Fernández, and, for a time, an active prizefighter from the area

⁶⁷ James P. Dawson, “Gavilan Stops Turner in Eleventh Round and Retains His Welterweight Title,” *New York Times*, 8 July 1952, p. 30.

⁶⁸ “La televisión preocupa a los magnates del deporte: Opiniones en favor y en contra,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:22 (May 29, 1950), p. 7.

⁶⁹ Rene Cubas, “La televisión ha resultado desastrosa a los deportes,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:29 (July 31, 1950), p. 7. The original phrase was “más característica de espectáculo teatral, que de limpio y rudo ejercicio de fuerza agilidad y destreza.”

– Miguel Mendivil – to oversee matchmaking.⁷⁰ Although TV offered a way for fight fans to witness their favorite national-caliber boxers both at home and abroad, for lesser-known pugilists in local bouts, there was no substitute to being there. Those who were unable to do so were forced to rely upon daily newspapers, weekly sports publications, radio programs, and word of mouth.

Meet the “Keed”: Kid Gavilán and American Audiences

In the early 1950s, with the possible exception of Sugar Ray Robinson, no single boxer captivated TV viewers in the United States as Kid Gavilán. Certainly the Cuban press never tired of writing about him. The welterweight champion from Camagüey, Cuba, may have become famous for his “bolo” punch, which he was mistakenly credited as inventing; in point of fact, it was first introduced in mainstream prizefighting some years earlier by Filipino boxer Ceferino Garcia. Although Gerald Gems calls the bolo “a weapon symbolic of his [Garcia’s] Filipino identity,”⁷¹ it quickly transcended its nationalist Filipino roots and came to be known, in Gavilán’s heyday, as a Cuban innovation, one likened to the repeated gesture made with a machete when field hands cut sugarcane. Gavilán’s use of the bolo was linked in the mainstream press to the notion that, at least in his prime, he “mambo-stepped” his way through the ring, leaving less fleet opponents to flail in the face of his nimbleness. The implicit or explicit description of Gavilán as being as much dancer as boxer evoked notions of Cubans (particularly Afro-Cubans) as being musically and physically gifted, a product perhaps of their “passionate” Latin natures. Such caricatures neglected the obvious

⁷⁰ “Notas deportivas de Morón: Resurge el boxeo,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:42 (November 6, 1950), p. 6. Mendivil spent part of 1951-1953 fighting in the United States.

⁷¹ Gems, *The Athletic Crusade*, p. 62.

facts of Gavilán’s workmanship and endurance, particularly his impressive “chin,” which kept him upright in over 140 professional bouts. Even so, Gavilán’s appeal went far beyond fancy footwork or one novelty punch, for novelty it was; practically speaking, the bolo, then as now, was more about showcasing one’s superiority over an outclassed fighter, demolishing him psychologically, than it was about scoring a knockout blow.⁷²

A beloved celebrity in both the U.S. and Cuba, Gavilán was for several years the standard bearer in the welterweight division. Never knocked out and rarely knocked down in professional combat, Gavilán – an Afro-Cuban whose command of English was often belittled in the U.S. sporting press, where he fought most of his important ring battles – gained a rabid following in both his native and adopted countries. His meteoric rise is largely coexistent with the rise of television in prizefights. But although Gavilán clearly benefited from a wide TV viewership, he was considered by boxing writers of the day to be a genuine talent – perhaps one of the best welterweights of all time – rather than a “made-for-TV” creation, like several of the fighters he beat in dramatic fashion.

Gavilán’s every exploit, in the ring and out, became fodder for the American press. At his peak, from about 1951 to 1954 when he held the welterweight crown, his popularity extended well beyond the sporting pages. He posed for an endless number of promotional photographs with U.S. and particularly Latin American and African American celebrities of the day: Desi Arnaz, Jr., Olga Chaviano, famous baseball players and boxers. Gavilán was portrayed as an apolitical man, “a friend of Fulgencio Batista” when the dictator ruled the

⁷² As trainer Angelo Dundee recalled, Sugar Ray Leonard understood the advantage of using the bolo when he fought Panama’s Roberto Durán in their November 1980 world welterweight championship rematch; “Leonard, after first going into an Ali shuffle, wound up with a mocking imitation of Kid Gavilan’s bolo punch, in windmill fashion, and then, while Duran stood there, staring in disbelief, Ray popped him a good one in the banana with his left. It was humiliating, like a bully having sand kicked in his face.” Angelo Dundee with Bert Randolph Sugar, *My View from the Corner: A Life in Boxing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), p. 250.

island, a simple farmer from Camagüey, a devout Catholic, and a devoted family man. Even his family – beautiful wife Leonora and adorable tots Helen, Gerardo, Jr., and Victoria (who was born shortly before his bout with Bobo Olson and whose name was intended to invoke Gavilán’s victory) – became part of a promotional effort to make U.S. audiences comfortable with him. A cover story on the boxer in the October 1953 issue of *Ebony*, a monthly magazine read primarily by middle-class African Americans, was entitled, “Kid Gavilan: Boxing’s Happiest Champ.” Although largely a respectful glimpse of the champion and his family on their finca in Camagüey, the *Ebony* piece could not resist using some of the stereotypes common for that day in depicting a happy-go-lucky Afro-Cuban man – many of which Gavilán himself had a large part in perpetuating through his and his managers’ PR campaign:

To people who have seen Kid Gavilan only in the ring, the welterweight champion is an unsmiling, flat-featured fighting machine whose sole aim seems to be the blasting into oblivion of any opponent brash enough to climb into the ring with him.

But outside the ropes, the Kid is such a carefree, fun loving character that many of his friends have called him boxing’s happiest champion. Even in training for a serious title defense, Gavilan does not seem to worry. While getting in shape for his battle with Chuck Davey, the Kid entertained gymnasium visitors with rope skipping interspersed with rumba steps and lively Cuban songs. Gavilan is an excellent dancer, a good musician (he’s an expert on conga and bongo drums), a lover of good food and a night club follower. “Someday,” he says, “I might go into show business – like Sugar Ray [Robinson].”⁷³

These stereotypes of the pleasant, almost preternaturally gifted, but none-too-bright black Cuban entertainer were hardly unique to Gavilán. Kid Chocolate,

⁷³ “Boxing’s Happiest Champ: Cuba’s Only World Champion, Kid Gavilan, Lives Life of Carefree Country Gentleman,” *Ebony*, October 1953, pp. 122-129 (quote on p. 122). Gavilán is depicted as being “a friend of Cuban president, Fulgencio Batista” on p. 129.

the first “Keed” to take the U.S. by storm, had experienced similar types of publicity in the American press of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Moreover, although the terminology was more muted, white Cuban fighters such as Luis Galvani were at times painted in stereotypical terms in the United States. When Galvani fought Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales in Denver in August 1950, the local press emphasized the foreignness of the Cuban in contrast to the native Mexican American boxer, a former amateur national champion born and raised in the Mile High City. Not only was Galvani ignorant of English, one journalist pointed out, but the promoter, one Morris Salzer, had called upon nearby cigar makers to attend the bout at City Auditorium in order to give Galvani a share of audience support – and to translate for him should the rest of the crowd shout out practical advice to his opponent. His lack of English skills and a Denver fan base posed no problem for Galvani, however; during the bout, he knocked Gonzales down repeatedly and finally put him away in the ninth round, giving the local favorite his first knockout loss.⁷⁴

In Cuba as in the U.S., ethnic and racial stereotypes notwithstanding, the charismatic Kid Gavilán had a massive following in most stages of his ring career – as a title contender, the world champion, and a veteran trying to get back to the top. When he experienced a career dip in 1950 after several losses to mediocre-caliber opposition in the U.S., numerous articles appeared in the Havana press offering advice and assigning blame for his shift in fortunes. It was clear to boxing fans and commentators of the late 1940s and early 1950s

⁷⁴ Tom I. Romero II, “Wearing the Red, White, and Blue Trunks of Aztlán: Rodolfo ‘Corky’ Gonzales and the Convergence of American and Chicano Nationalism,” in *Mexican American and Sports: A Reader on Athletics and Barrio Life*, ed. by Jorge Iber and Samuel O. Regalado (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), pp. 89-120. One of Gonzales’s two previous losses, interestingly, had been to Cuba’s world-rated featherweight contender, Miguel Acevedo, in St. Paul, Minnesota, in December 1949.

that Gavilán was their best shot at winning a world title, which a Cuban had not done since Kid Chocolate in 1931.

While Gavilán fought all of the best Cubans in his weight class on his rise up the professional ranks, most of his important bouts as a welterweight – his natural division – occurred in the United States. Fighting as “Gerry Gavilan” in November 1946, he made his U.S. debut at Madison Square Garden. Despite being six pounds lighter than his opponent, Johnny Ryan, a journeyman from Detroit, Gavilán earned a five-round TKO victory.⁷⁵ The following month, Sugar Ray Robinson became the undisputed welterweight king when he decisioned Tommy Bell in Madison Square Garden. It was a title that Robinson was to hold until he vacated it to move up to the middleweight division over four years later – including an astonishing 91-bout winning streak.

That streak included two decision wins over Gavilán – a ten-round nontitle bout in September 1948 and a fifteen-round title bout in July 1949. Gavilán lost his chance at a third rematch when he was decisioned by Billy Graham in February 1950. When Robinson vacated the welterweight crown the following February, there was a scramble to find a replacement. Three fighters were invited to compete for Robinson’s crown: Kid Gavilán, Johnny Bratton, and Charley Fusari. Bratton decisioned Fusari over fifteen rounds on March 13, 1951, winning the vacant welterweight title recognized by two U.S. sanctioning bodies, the New York State Athletic Commission (NYSAC) and the National Boxing Association (NBA). Shortly afterward, on May 18, 1951, Gavilán defeated the durable Bratton – over fifteen rounds, Bratton broke both his jaw and his right hand but refused to be knocked out – and took the NYSAC/NBA title. Worldwide recognition of Gavilán’s title came once the

⁷⁵ Joseph C. Nichols, “Pellone Defeats Greco at Garden,” *New York Times*, 2 November 1946, p. 24.

European welterweight champion, Charles Humez, followed Robinson into the middleweight ranks by late 1951 and Gavilán defeated Billy Graham, another top U.S. welter, by a questionable split decision on August 29, 1951.

In their first of four bouts, Graham had beaten Gavilán at Madison Square Garden on February 10, 1950 – in a decision that James P. Dawson of the *New York Times* called “highly complimentary to Graham.” Gavilán had been the clear favorite going in, with some odds makers putting him at a 4 to 1 advantage. He was relying on a victory to justify a third welterweight title shot at Sugar Ray Robinson, but instead his loss showed “his inadequacy as a title challenger.” When the judges split in their verdicts – with Harold Barnes and Arthur Aidalla giving close margins to Gavilán and Graham, respectively – referee Ruby Goldstein cast the deciding vote for Graham. After the match, Gavilán’s managers, Angel López and Fernando Balido, announced their intention to protest the decision to the NYSAC and to seek to disqualify Goldstein from refereeing future Gavilán bouts.⁷⁶ Apparently, neither one expressed their discontent in person at the NYSAC offices, causing its President, Eddie Eagen, to declare the protest null and to verify the Graham victory.⁷⁷ *The Daily Mirror* laid the blame not on the referee but on Gavilán’s managers for scheduling the match when they did. Their fighter had gotten married on January 27 and had planned to take two months off from fighting. When his managers accepted the Graham bout, Gavilán was left without sufficient time to train. *The New York Post* agreed that the Cuban Hawk’s poor conditioning was to blame for his loss – an opinion shared by Gavilán himself.⁷⁸ Noting Gavilán’s lack of

⁷⁶ James P. Dawson, “Graham Outpoints Gavilan on Split Decision in Keen 10-Round Bout at Garden,” *New York Times*, 11 February 1950, p. 20.

⁷⁷ “Gavilán suspendió su pelea del día 20,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:8 (February 20, 1950), p. 4 and Joseph C. Nichols, “Gavilan Outpoints Graham in Thriller at Garden,” *New York Times*, 18 November 1950, p. 21.

⁷⁸ “En Malas Condiciones el Boxer Cubano Gavilán,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:7 (February 13, 1950), p. 4.

a “knock out punch,” *Cuba Deportiva* called López and Balido’s complaints about the nature of the decision “absurd” and mounted a case that both were ill equipped to manage an athlete. Columnist Juan Oliva castigated López for being more concerned with collecting the fight purse than in conditioning a fighter.⁷⁹

Although it was a nontitle affair, Graham would later view his February 1950 defeat of Gavilán as his “most important victory” because it led to his being ranked among the top welters of the day.⁸⁰ The euphoria was short-lived. When Gavilán and Graham rematched at Madison Square Garden on November 17, 1950, Graham lost a close bout by majority decision; the referee called it a draw, while the judges favored Gavilán six rounds to four.

Once Gavilán became the welter champion, Graham set his sights on a second rematch in hopes of claiming the throne for himself. His patience would be rewarded on August 29, 1951. This “rubber match” at Madison Square Garden – scored by split decision for Gavilán – would become one of the most controversial decisions in prizefighting history. Though Gavilán had built up a substantial lead in the early rounds, Graham took hold of the fight in the fifth:

After taking a drubbing through the first four rounds, Graham stung Gavilan to aimless fury with his clever boxing and sharp hitting through the three succeeding rounds. Repeatedly Graham reached the jaw over this span with sharp right-hand drives. He made Gavilan miss awkwardly with long lefts and rights while getting under the fire with solid rights to the heart or left hooks to the head.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Juan Oliva, “Querer justificar a Gavilán no es ayudarlo,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:7 (February 13, 1950), p. 4.

⁸⁰ Stanley Weston, “‘There’s No Money in Fighting,’ Says Billy Graham,” *TV Boxing* 1: 8 (June-July 1954), pp. 22-25, 48-50; quotes on p. 49.

⁸¹ James P. Dawson, “Gavilan Keeps Welterweight Title by Beating Graham in Close 15-Round Bout,” *New York Times*, 30 August 1951, p. 29.

Gavilán came back strong in the eighth, but Graham was not finished. He rallied again in the twelfth, and “through the fourteenth and fifteenth rounds Graham, throwing all caution to the winds, reached the champion’s jaw repeatedly with grazing rights and left hooks.”⁸² The two judges split in their verdicts: Arthur (Artie) Schwartz called it nine rounds for Gavilán to six for Graham, while Frank Forbes had seven rounds for Graham, seven for Gavilán, and one even. Since New York State at the time used both a round and point system to score professional cards, whenever an equal number of rounds was given to both fighters, as in Forbes’s case, the victor was determined by examining the point totals. These were assigned on a scale of one to four in each round. Referee Mark Conn proved the deciding factor by scoring his card similarly to Forbes – with seven rounds to Gavilán, seven to Graham, and one even. But his point totals went in the opposite direction; he gave Gavilán ten points to Graham’s seven. The decision was met with hoots of derision. The crowd protested angrily for over ten minutes, tossing debris and threatening to storm the ring. Referee Conn narrowly avoided being hit with a stool. A near-riot almost broke out near the Garden’s 50th Street entrance after police expelled some vehement protesters. Conn and Schwartz had to be escorted out of the Garden with police protection. Immediately afterward, Graham’s co-manager, Irving Cohen, immediately protested the decision to the NYSAC deputy commissioner.⁸³ Although Gavilán was on the winning side of a questionable decision this time – one that made him the undisputed world welterweight champion – he would later lose his title on another questionable decision, to Johnny Saxton in Philadelphia. Gavilán apparently believed that he genuinely won the bout, but that the

⁸² Dawson, “Gavilan Keeps Welterweight Title,” *New York Times*, 30 August 1951.

⁸³ “Gavilan Barely Outpoints Graham,” n.d. [UP article, probably August 30, 1951], from “Kid Gavilan,” Stanley Weston files, The Joyce Sports Research Collection, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana.

protest over the decision stemmed from ethnic tensions. As he told a British interviewer four decades afterward: “He [Graham] had the Irish and I had the Spanish rooting for me. The crowd noise was so much in his favour that from the very beginning people were going to think he won the fight.”⁸⁴

In his popular memoir, *Only the Ring Was Square*, former Madison Square Garden matchmaker Teddy Brenner maintained that, shortly before the August 1951 Gavilán-Graham bout, Graham’s manager, Irving Cohen, was asked to visit Frankie Carbo. (As Brenner noted, “When Carbo called, people answered.”⁸⁵ At their meeting, according to Brenner, Carbo asked for twenty percent of Graham’s purses in order to ensure his victory. When Cohen refused, Carbo insisted that he speak to the fighter before giving him an answer. Graham apparently also refused the extortion attempt, and Carbo is said to have remarked, “Does the kid know he ain’t going to win?”⁸⁶ Although there is no independent confirmation of these events – and despite evoking a colorful era in prizefighting, Brenner’s narrative suffers from other inaccuracies, as discussed below – it is possible, given the time period and Carbo’s substantial influence at the time, that he or his associates were involved in awarding the title to Gavilán. There were business links between Carbo and Gavilán, as will be discussed shortly. However, it must be emphasized that no widely accepted verification of that allegation has been made, and that given the closely contested nature of

⁸⁴ Jack Hirsch, “Gavilan: At 65, Still a Proud Exponent of the Bolo Punch,” *Boxing News*, 17 January 1992, pp. 22-23 (quote on p. 22).

⁸⁵ Teddy Brenner as told to Barney Nagler, *Only the Ring Was Square* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981), p. 17.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

the bout – *New York Times* correspondent James P. Dawson scored the bout nine rounds to six for Gavilán, identical to Schwartz⁸⁷ – Brenner’s claim seems questionable at best.

What is known is that, following the announcement of the decision, passion ran high on both sides. While Cubans thrilled to Gavilán’s win and his being named the undisputed world welterweight champion, Graham, born and raised on Manhattan’s East Side, had developed many impassioned supporters – not all of them Irish American, despite Gavilán’s impression – who viewed his August 1951 loss as the result of mob fixing. Among Graham’s fans, he would forever be known as “the uncrowned welterweight champion.”⁸⁸ Despite his tremendous disappointment – “I was never so confident about winning a fight in my life as I was about that third Gavilan match,” he said a few years later – Graham acknowledged the impact of his opponent’s punching power, which most boxing critics in the U.S. and Cuba downplayed, or even ridiculed. “Gavilan stung me harder than anybody in the title fight in New York,” he recollected. “He nailed me with a few good rights in the early rounds. He’s a pretty good puncher, better than people think.”⁸⁹

Graham’s persistence in calling out Gavilán after that disappointing loss was ultimately rewarded with one last title shot, this time in Havana. Although Graham knew his chances were slim going in – New York sources had informed him that, “the only way Gavilán would lose in Havana was if they carried him out of the ring on a stretcher” – he decided “it was a good payday anyway.”⁹⁰ Dr. Lorenzo Nodarse, director of the DGD, announced that his department was putting up the \$40,000 guarantee. The contract – signed

⁸⁷ Dawson, “Gavilan Keeps Welterweight Title,” *New York Times*, 30 August 1951.

⁸⁸ “Billy Graham, 70, Welterweight Boxer” [obituary], *New York Times*, 24 January 1992.

⁸⁹ George Bennett, “Billy Graham Tells What’s on His Mind,” *TV Boxing* 1:1 (October 1963), pp. 35-37, 63; quote on p. 63.

⁹⁰ Stanley Weston, “‘There’s No Money in Fighting,’ Says Billy Graham,” *TV Boxing* 1:8 (June-July 1954), pp. 22-25, 48-50; quotes on p. 49.

by IBC President James Norris, Jr.; Irving Cohen, Graham's manager; and Fernando Balido, for Gavilán's management team – called for a rematch within 90 days should Graham win.⁹¹ Although the referee and one of the judges were Cuban, the second judge was Nat Fleischer, founder of *The Ring*. On October 5, 1952, at Stadium Park, Gavilán beat Graham decisively by decision. This time, Graham did not protest the result, although he claimed later that he had woken up feeling ill that morning and “never would have gone on with the fight if I didn't think the Cuban Government would object.”⁹² Although widely acknowledged in the U.S. boxing press as a clear-cut loss for Graham, at least one prominent observer saw it differently; Graham later told an interviewer that, “Ernest Hemingway told him he had clearly won but that he was luckier to have lost since most spectators carried guns.”⁹³ The loss finally pushed Graham, long one of Gavilán's most persistent opponents, to move up to the middleweight ranks, where he spent the remainder of his career and where Gavilán would follow – despite reservations from co-manager Angel López – in 1954.

Although Graham and Gavilán never met in the ring again – and Graham never received another world title shot in any weight class – their stories would intersect several decades later. In April 1985, the *New York Times* reported that

On April 29, some members of The Players, made up of theatrical and newspaper people, will honor Graham, 63 years old, at a dinner at the club on Gramercy Park. Having voted themselves a “sanctioning body,” they will

⁹¹ “Billy, Kid Sign for Oct. Title Contest in Havana,” *Daily Mirror*, 7 August 1952, p. 34, from “Kid Gavilan” file, International Boxing Hall of Fame, Canastota, New York.

⁹² Weston, “‘There's No Money in Fighting,’ Says Billy Graham,” p. 49; Bennett, “Billy Graham Tells What's on His Mind,” p. 36; “Welterweight Champion: Kid Gavilan,” *The Ring's TV Fight Annual*, n.d. [probably 1954], p. 47, from “Kid Gavilan,” Stanley Weston files, The Joyce Sports Research Collection, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana.

⁹³ Douglas Martin, “About New York; Old ‘Contenders’ Look for Help on Final Count,” *New York Times*, 28 February 1990.

proclaim Graham the world welterweight champion for the 13 months between the first and second fights⁹⁴ against Gavilan.

“It’s beautiful, I’m so excited,” said Graham, now a liquor salesman on Long Island. “At this stage of my life, it’s nice to be remembered and to get the title I was never able to win. Every kid wants to be champ. I had to wait a long time, but I appreciate the recognition.”⁹⁵

What might have started as a way to honor Graham during his lifetime for nearly winning the world welterweight crown developed into an effort to overturn the original decision on the basis of Teddy Brenner’s claim that Arthur Schwartz had confessed to judging the bout for Gavilán due to mob pressure. In December 1985, the New York State Athletic Commission officially upheld Gavilán’s decision win. Stated NYSAC chairman José Torres, “I’m ruling out fraud because the evidence eliminates the issue of the deathbed confession.” Multiple sources proved that Schwartz had died of a cardiac arrest in Grand Central Terminal – thus making such a hospital bed deathbed confession, as described in the Brenner book, impossible.⁹⁶

Although the fame and accomplishment of Gavilán eluded him, Graham’s quest to become a world champion, one ultimately proved futile, became immortalized as the story of Eddie Brown in W.C. Heinz’s acclaimed novel 1958 *The Professional*.⁹⁷ In 1992, the year of his death, he was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame – two years after Gavilán was similarly honored.

⁹⁴ This should actually be “the third and fourth fights against Gavilan” – i.e., August 29, 1951, and October 2, 1952 – as noted above.

⁹⁵ Thomas Rogers, “Scouting: Squaring Matters,” *New York Times*, 16 April 1985.

⁹⁶ “Sports People: Gavilan Still Winner,” *New York Times*, 25 December 1985. For the supposed confession, see Brenner as told to Nagler, *Only the Ring Was Square*, pp. 19-20.

⁹⁷ “Billy Graham, 70, Welterweight Boxer,” *New York Times*, 24 January 1992. See W.C. Heinz, *The Professional* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001 [1958]). Graham’s last professional bout was as a middleweight against Chico Vejar on April 1, 1955.

Another of Gavilán's best-known opponents, Chuck Davey, epitomized the creation of pugilistic TV idols in the early 1950s U.S. While in college at Michigan State University, Davey began to box seriously. Though he was a quick study – he won four NCAA titles – his rapid rise through the professional welterweight ranks had more to do with careful matchmaking by his promoters than with his own experience and skill level. In building a streak of 39 straight wins, six of them nationally televised, Davey was matched against veterans who were no longer at their peak (such as Rocky Graziano and Ike Williams) and against perennial contenders who would never become champions (Chico Vejar).

On February 11, 1953, Davey met Gavilán at Chicago Stadium to contest the latter's world welterweight title. The event was nationally televised and earned a total gate of just under \$250,000; \$40,000 of that went to Davey.⁹⁸ There was little doubt among boxing journalists that Gavilán would retain his title, despite the massive promotional build-up. A news article by Gayle Talbot asked, "Is Tonight's Bout Big Mismatch?" Talbot feared the repercussions of "tossing the boy in there with such a fighter as Gavilan," noting that, in 1935, Penn State graduate Steve Hamas had "been beaten into a physical wreck" by former world heavyweight champion Max Schmeling, definitely ending Hamas's ring career.⁹⁹ A cartoon published just before the Gavilán-Davey fight depicted the two men battling it out on top of a TV antenna. Gavilán, who was shown trying to throw his famed bolo punch, had "105 pro fights" listed beneath his name, while Davey had "30 pro fights" beneath his. The text read,

⁹⁸ Bill Wise, "The Comeback of Chuck Davey," *TV Boxing* 1:1 (October 1953), p. 25.

⁹⁹ Gayle Talbot, "Is Tonight's Bout Big Mismatch?," n.d. [AP article, probably February 11, 1953], from "Kid Gavilan," Stanley Weston files, The Joyce Sports Research Collection, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana.

We fear Mr. Davey, the southpaw cutie with the reputation that T.V. built, is into Channel 2 over his depth tonight! – With all that college education and Master’s degree he should oughtta’ know better... After all, Gavilan is no washed-up Graziano or Ike Williams!!
The Havana Hawk will still be champ tomorrow morning!!¹⁰⁰

Davey was more fortunate than Hamas: he was definitively beaten, exposed for the made-for-TV creation he was, but he avoided serious harm despite being knocked down once in the first round and three times in the ninth. The referee finally stopped the bout in the ninth, awarding the TKO victory to Gavilán. The remainder of Davey’s career was unspectacular, without any further shots at the title, and he retired in 1955.

Gavilán’s career after the Davey bout, on the other hand, featured some of the greatest bouts of the mid-1950s. After winning a close decision against Italian Livio Minelli in April 1953, Gavilán was upset the following month by Danny “Bang Bang” Womber, a former sparring partner of Sugar Ray Robinson. Although Womber’s camp sought to use the victory as an incentive to offer Gavilán a rematch – this time with the title on the line – Gavilán adamantly refused the offer, claiming the decision had been unfair.¹⁰¹ Gavilán emerged with only a split-decision victory in a title defense with Carmen Basilio, a sturdy welterweight from Canastota, New York, in September 1951. Basilio managed to knock down Gavilán for only the second time in the Hawk’s career (the first had occurred during his loss to Ike Williams in February 1948). Gavilán and many ring observers blamed his poor showing on a weakened state caused by a struggle to make weight; since the Davey bout, he

¹⁰⁰ Undated cartoon, from “Kid Gavilan,” Stanley Weston files, The Joyce Sports Research Collection, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana.

¹⁰¹ “Gavilan Is Upset by Danny Womber,” *New York Times*, 3 May 1953, p. S1; “Gavilan Refuses to Box Womber for Title Despite \$40,000 Offer,” *New York Times*, 4 May 1953, p. 29.

had been fighting in non-title bouts at several pounds above the welter limit. (While Basilio had to shed a pound at the weigh-in to come in at 147 pounds, it didn't seem to affect his performance.) Following this bout, Basilio and his supporters, like those of Billy Graham before him, declared that he was the "uncrowned" king of the welters. Gavilán and his managers believed that the fighter had no choice but to move up in weight. Before doing so, however, he made one more successful title defense against Johnny Bratton, from whom he had first gained the NBA world welterweight title back in May 1951. In November 1953, Gavilán gave Bratton a serious beating – although he did failed to knock out the durable "Honey Boy" in a unanimous fifteen-round decision win.¹⁰²

Cuban Boxers and Organized Crime in the United States

After moving up to the middleweight division, Gavilán challenged Hawaiian Bobo Olson for his title on April 2, 1954. Gavilán had not significantly beefed up in the intervening months and weighed in with his clothes on. Olson won a close split-decision victory on the cards of the two judges and referee, and many ringside commentators considered it to be an exciting match, full of activity but without hard blows (other than an unintentional head butt by Olson).¹⁰³ But the Gavilán-Olson bout was remarkable not for the result, which was expected, but for the discrepancy between what TV viewers experienced and what the conventional boxing wisdom stated. To TV watchers, it was a dull fight, due to the limitations of the era's technology:

¹⁰² Joseph C. Nichols, "Gavilan Rallies after Being Floored in Second Round and Outpoints Basilio," *New York Times*, 19 September 1953, p. 10; "Gavilan Debates Abandoning Title," *New York Times*, 20 September 1953, p. S7; Joseph C. Nichols, "Gavilan Outclasses Bratton to Retain World Welterweight Title in Chicago Ring," *New York Times*, 14 November 1953, p. 21.

¹⁰³ Arthur Daley, "Gavilan Tosses More Punches but Champion Packs the Power," *New York Times*, 3 April 1954, p. 10.

Television puts a premium on the street corner brawl, the wild slugging that can be seen clearly over a distance. If a boxer is a proficient and methodical technician, as the sports writers suggest Olson is, he still can be a TV flop. The modern fighter, assuming he wants to share in the television gravy, must be a showman as well as a pugilist.¹⁰⁴

Gavilán was both, showman and pugilist, and he realized his best options remained in the welterweight division. Following the Olson bout, he set about training for his seventh welterweight defense. He and his managers opted to forgo the top five challengers in that division, instead opting for 21-year-old Johnny Saxton. Saxton was managed by mobster Frank “Blinky” Palermo, a capo in the Frankie Carbo organized crime family. Herman Taylor promoted the bout in conjunction with the International Boxing Club of New York (IBC), run by James D. Norris, Jr., and Arthur Wirtz. In 1949, the IBC had purchased Twentieth Century Boxing Club’s lease of Madison Square Garden. Mike Jacobs, the head of Twentieth Century, had been the Garden’s longtime promoter but had recently fallen ill. Following the purchase, the IBC of New York quickly established a monopoly over boxing title bouts, promoting all but four of them from 1949 to 1955. This and other irregularities caused it to be slapped with a federal lawsuit in 1952 for antitrust violations.¹⁰⁵ Among other charges, the lawsuit alleged that the International Boxing Clubs of New York and Illinois – along with their co-defendants, the Madison Square Garden Corporation and IBC heads Norris and Wirtz – had “exacted monopolistic control of championship fights as payment for its largesse,” principally in the forms of nearly half a million dollars worth of zero-

¹⁰⁴ Jack Gould, “Television in Review: Writers and Viewers Differ on Fight, Point Up Limitations of Cameras,” *New York Times*, 5 April 1954, p. 33.

¹⁰⁵ For a full accounting of IBC’s criminal activities and the U.S. government effort to stamp them out, see Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, Chapter 6, “The Unholy Trinity: Television, Monopoly, and Crime,” pp. 130-183.

interest loans and advances to boxers and managers under its promotion from 1949 to 1953 as a means of “wedding” them to the corporation, which was colloquially known as the “Octopus.” During that period, Kid Gavilán received the second-highest figure of all recipients, or \$55,830; only Sugar Ray Robinson, with over \$65,000 received, was more indebted to the IBC. Several other high-profile champions and contenders were implicated in the loan scheme, including Johnny Bratton, Joe Louis, and Joey Maxim.¹⁰⁶

At the time of the Saxton bout, some questioned whether Palermo’s involvement had influenced Gavilán’s decision to sign for a title match with the sixth-ranked, little-known welterweight, particularly in a contract that did not guarantee a return bout should Gavilán lose (a common stipulation in title bouts). Pennsylvania State Athletic Commission (PSAC) chairman Frank Weiner had insisted upon removal of the clause on the grounds that he did not approve of mandatory rematches. López did not push the issue, again for reasons unknown. One may only speculate as to the reasons for Weiner’s unusual role in the contract negotiations. Certainly, the state athletic commissions were not above mob interference. As Sammons notes, “Carbo [and by extension, Palermo] could not have been so effective without the acquiescence, and even indirect collusion, of the various state athletic commissions.”¹⁰⁷

After two delays – the fight had originally been scheduled for July but was moved to September because Gavilán’s physicians in Camagüey disclosed he had a broken right hand;

¹⁰⁶ Emanuel Perlmutter, “Government Charges I.B.C. Loans Led to Ring Monopoly,” *New York Times*, 25 April 1956, p. 43.

¹⁰⁷ “Gavilan Will Fight Saxton for Crown,” *New York Times*, 5 May 1954, p. 40; “Gavilan’s Hand Injured,” *New York Times*, 25 May 1954, p. 30; “Gavilan Bout May Be Delayed,” *New York Times*, 26 May 1954, p. 38; “Gavilan Will Defend Crown Against Saxton Wednesday,” *New York Times*, 29 August 1954, p. S9; “Gavilan’s Illness Puts Off Title Fight Scheduled for Tonight with Saxton,” *New York Times*, 1 September 1954, p. 34; Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, p. 153.

the date was moved again when he came down with the mumps – the Cuban Hawk met his latest challenger, Johnny Saxton, on October 20, 1954, at Philadelphia’s Convention Hall. Sportswriter Joseph C. Nichols of the *New York Times* called the fight “one of the poorest, dullest title encounters in many years... for the first ten rounds Convention Hall resounded with one long jeer as the onlookers expressed their disapproval.” Before the beginning of the sixth round, the PSAC chairman Weiner demanded to the referee that he “tell those men to do some fighting.” Saxton, an extremely cautious fighter, did not mix it up with Gavilán until the last four rounds, frequently resorting to clinching before that point as a means to prevent the Cuban’s aggression. In the end, the referee, Peter Panataleo, and both judges, Jim Mina and Nate Lopinson, gave the nod to Saxton. The crowd of 7,909 was clearly partisan to Saxton and wildly cheered the decision, despite general “disbelief” that he had pulled it out. Saxton himself hardly had time to celebrate his victory, for the next day he was due to report to New York the following morning to serve a fifteen-day jail sentence for frequent violations of that city’s traffic laws. He had already been granted one deferment in order to accept the Gavilán bout.¹⁰⁸

The loss of Gavilán’s title to Johnny Saxton was a shock to nearly everyone who witnessed it. No one was more shocked than Gavilán himself. In his dressing room, sobbing, he declared that the fight had been “fixed.” Without a knockout, he said, he had no chance to win. The AP writer captured Gavilán’s despair in the cadence of his Spanish-inflected English: “I don’t want nothing that I don’t deserve, but I win at least nine rounds. I no want a return bout. I no want to fight any more.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Joseph C. Nichols, “3 Officials Agree on Fight Verdict,” *New York Times*, 21 October 1954, p. 35.

¹⁰⁹ “Bout ‘Fixed,’ Cuban Says,” *New York Times*, 21 October 1954, p. 35.

Gavilán and his team were hardly alone in their surprise. A survey of twenty-one U.S. boxing writers who were at ringside revealed that nineteen scored the fight for Gavilán; the other two (John Webster of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and Joe Lee of the *Brooklyn Eagle*) gave a close victory to Saxton.¹¹⁰ Nat Fleischer, founder and editor of *The Ring* and the godfather of U.S. boxing writers, felt that the referee had clearly favored Saxton, frequently warning Gavilán for holding despite the fact that Saxton was generally at fault in that regard.¹¹¹ The result gave rise to the term “Philadelphia decision,” referring to an unfair judges’ decision that favors the hometown boxer despite the better performance of his out-of-town opponent. (Though Saxton was a Newark, New Jersey, native who was said to have learned how to box in a Brooklyn orphanage following the deaths of his parents, the comparison was close enough.) Philadelphia, in particular, became notorious as a city where fair decisions were hard to come by.

In Cuba, fans and commentators reacted angrily to the decision. The general sentiment was, as Gavilán’s co-manager Angel López put it, “They have stolen the fight.” It was widely believed that U.S. gangsters were behind the theft. The sports editor of *Alerta*, Fausto Miranda, wrote a column entitled, “The Gangsters Robbed the Kid.” He railed against “the bad faith of the judges” and held that the decision owed to “behind-the-door maneuvers of racketeers, the real owners of the pugilistic business in North America.” Miranda argued that there was a history of robbing Cuban fighters of well-earned decisions in American rings; he stated that another “swindle” had occurred to Kid Chocolate when he

¹¹⁰ “Writers See Keed Winning All the Way,” n.d. [AP article, probably October 21, 1954], from “Kid Gavilan,” Stanley Weston files, The Joyce Sports Research Collection, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana.

¹¹¹ Nat Fleischer, *The Ring* (January 1955), pp. 8-9.

fought Jack “Kid” Berg in New York in August 1930, the Cuban Bon Bon’s first loss. In his column for *Información*, sports editor Lillo Jiménez wrote that the Gavilán-Saxton result was “the biggest surprise in the last decade in the matter of boxing decisions.”¹¹²

There is no doubt that Gavilán’s managers – at the time, López and Emile Shade – had dealings with Palermo and Carbo, as evinced by the large amount of advance loans and advances the fighter received. To what extent Gavilán knew of, and condoned, such mob associations remains unclear. But the fall-out within his camp was rapid. Two months after the bout, he and López were engaged in a nasty public feud. Gavilán tried to abrogate his contract, citing displeasure over his manager’s “overconfidence” and failure to negotiate a return clause in his contract with Saxton. López, in turn, blamed Gavilán for his poor performance, saying he had fought like an old man, rather than the young man (28 years old) he still was. But Gavilán’s contract with López was valid until June 1957, and the latter was not inclined to give that away. The bidding for Gavilán’s contract would begin at \$50,000. López, who was a nightclub owner in Havana, seemed personally insulted by Gavilán’s refusal to fight for him any longer. He fumed, “I brought him up from nobody.”¹¹³ By January 1955, López was gone from Gavilán’s management team, which was now headed by Shade.¹¹⁴ That April, Saxton put his welterweight belt on the line against Tony DeMarco, who won it by 14th-round TKO – and lost it to Carmen Basilio seven months later.¹¹⁵

¹¹² “Cuban Fans Angry,” *New York Times*, 22 October 1954, p. 32.

¹¹³ “Gavilan Won’t Fight with Lopez as Pilot,” *New York Times*, 24 December 1954, p. 16; “Gavilan Contract for Sale,” *New York Times*, 25 December 1954, p. 15.

¹¹⁴ “Gavilan and Durando Matched for Garden 10-Rounder Feb. 4,” *New York Times*, 11 January 1955, p. 29.

¹¹⁵ Basilio lost the welterweight title to Johnny Saxton in March 1956, won the title back from him during their rematch in September 1956, and defended it in a rubber match with Saxton in February 1957.

Two other Cuban boxers, Isaac Logart and especially Orlando Zulueta, would find their careers tied even tighter to U.S. organized crime in the 1950s. Logart, the last of sixteen children, was, like Gavilán, from Camagüey. In just six years, he had gone from his first prizefight in Cuba (prior to which he had just six amateur bouts) to the ninth-ranked welterweight in the world. Nearly fifteen months after trying, and failing, to wrest the Cuban lightweight title from champion Rafael Lastre, Logart debuted in the United States at the Orange Bowl in Miami in January 1954, where he won a points victory over Young Kid Chocolate (a fellow Cuban with the name but not the accomplishments of the original Chocolate). A year later, under the training of Mundito Medina (Gavilán's former trainer), the 21-year-old had racked up 39 victories and four draws in 48 fights.¹¹⁶ Although some considered him likely to become an eventual welterweight champion, the closest he came was in 1957, when he, Virgil Akins, and Vince Martinez were selected to take part in a NYSAC elimination tournament for Carmen Basilio's vacant welterweight title after Basilio had moved up to middleweight. As Sammons explains, both Akins and Logart were managed by Carbo associates (Bernie Glickman and Jimmy White, respectively). Glickman wanted Akins to fight Logart first, since he believed the Cuban to be the easier opponent. He threatened IBC president Norris with pulling Akins out of the tournament unless he matched the two boxers. Norris paid off Carbo, and the bout was on.¹¹⁷ Akins defeated Logart by TKO in March 1958, and less than three months later defeated Martinez for the vacant welter title.

¹¹⁶ James F. Lynch, "Logart Is Latest Pearl of the Antilles," *New York Times*, 11 November 1955, p. 33.

¹¹⁷ Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, pp. 153-154. See also Tom Wicker, "Fixes Attempted on 2 Title Bouts," *New York Times*, 13 December 1960, p. 40.

Another Carbo associate – Herman “Hymie the Mink” Wallman (so-known because he was a furrier) – owned the contract of lightweight Orlando Zulueta, who had been fighting stateside since January 1949. A Cuban lightweight champion who owed that title to two questionable decisions, against Kid Bururu in July 1948 and in his defense with Bombón Oriental a month later – Zulueta had made a failed bid for the world junior lightweight title against Sandy Saddler in December 1949. Since that time, he had fought regularly, but without tremendous distinction, throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe, only rarely venturing back to Cuba for a bout. In addition to Zulueta and several less-known fighters, Wallman controlled Johnny Bratton, who was welterweight champion before Gavilán. He apparently bribed officials to ensure his fighters would win and gave Carbo betting tips based on that inside information. According to Sammons, in June 1957, when Zulueta received a lightweight title shot against champion Joe Brown, “Carbo told Wallman that if his man [Zulueta] won the title he had to give a piece of the fighter to Lou Viscusi, Brown’s manager (and the former manager of the great Willie Pep), who had been close to Carbo for many years. Perhaps fortunately for Wallman, Zulueta lost.”¹¹⁸

Benny “Kid” Paret, who followed in Gavilán’s footsteps as world welterweight champion when he defeated Don Jordan in May 1960, was yet another Cuban fighter tied to the Carbo machine. In late 1960, the Senate Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly, known informally as the Kefauver hearings for its chairman, Estes Kefauver of Tennessee, unearthed damaging testimony from Truman Gibson, Jr., James Norris’s successor at the by then defunct IBC, and other witnesses regarding the extent of organized crime involvement in matchmaking and sanctioning fights. Gibson acknowledged that Carbo “controlled” a

¹¹⁸ Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, p. 153.

slew of prizefight promoters and managers, including Gavilán's helmsmen Emil Shade and Angel López, and that Carbo's wife was put on the IBC payroll for carrying out such minor services as phoning from Florida about the condition of Gavilán and other fighters. In December 1961, Carbo was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for attempting to extort Jordan out of a share of his fight earnings from his successful welterweight title challenge of Virgil Akins in December 1958. Convicted along with Carbo were Palermo, who received fifteen years; mob enforcers Joe Sica and Joe Dragna, who received twenty and five years each, respectively; and Gibson, who received a suspended five-year sentence and probation. In addition, Carbo, Palermo, Sica, and Gibson were fined \$10,000 apiece.¹¹⁹

Although Jordan, like other high-profile boxers called before the Kefauver Committee, refused to divulge details about the extortion scheme, he was more open in an interview that took place years after Paret's notorious 1962 ring death. He stated that, in their May 1960 meeting, he had deliberately taken a dive against Paret, who won a fifteen-round unanimous decision: "I was beating him for 13 rounds and slackened off in the last two rounds... The deal was in. He had to win, and I didn't get a rematch because Paret was under Frankie Carbo." Had he not done so, Jordan alleged, "certain people" had threatened to take his wife hostage. The judges' and referees' fairly one-sided scores, as well as the syndicated United Press International synopsis of the fight – which praised Paret for his relentless body blows – appear to contradict Jordan's version of events. In any case, if his

¹¹⁹ Tom Wicker, "Norris Involved, Senate Body Told," *New York Times*, 6 December 1960, p. 57; "Carbo Loses Plea; Is Given 25 Years," *New York Times*, 3 December 1961, p. 50. For a fuller accounting of this sordid chapter in boxing history, see Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, pp. 130-183.

charge were true, Jordan received little for his efforts; after his managers took the majority of his purse as the price of terminating his contract with them, he was left with just \$2,000.¹²⁰

Despite the later revelations of his ties to organized crime, Gavilán's best career years remain a high point in Cuban sports history from the late 1940s to mid-1950s. As with Kid Chocolate, however, whose championship years coincided with the last years of the *machadato* and the September 1933 Sergeants' Revolt, the 1952 coup by Batista overshadowed, but could not fully dim, his ring achievements. Gavilán's success was a driving force to those who came after him, an indicator that Chocolate's achievement had been no fluke but that Cuba did indeed produce some of the world's best prizefighters. His appeal to television audiences in the U.S. and Cuba, moreover, foreshadowed an era in which boxers, baseball players, and other athletes, were known as much (if not more) for their personalities and other exploits than for what they accomplished in the ring, the ballpark, or the track. Finally, in an era when race relations was increasingly becoming an area of conflict in both the United States and Cuba, his smiling brown face, use of dance steps and bolo punches in the ring, and unthreatening personality served to reinforce images of blacks, and more particularly, Afro-Cubans, as being happily subservient to elite white North American interests as he demolished their fighters on live TV. The rumors that he might not have come by all of his victories legitimately, therefore, did not significantly tar his personal popularity in the U.S. even as they helped to propagate images of the boxing industry as a whole as being corrupt and rife with mafia influence. They may, however, have hurt his reputation in Cuban political circles after the onset of the Revolution, when Gavilán

¹²⁰ Thomas Myler, *The Sweet Science Goes Sour: How Scandals Brought Boxing to Its Knees* (Vancouver, BC: Greystone Books, 2006), pp. 38-39; "Cuban Triumphs with Body Blows," *New York Times*, 28 May 1960, p. 16.

found himself ostracized by the Castro regime. After suffering many personal setbacks, an impoverished and ill Gavilán was allowed to emigrate to the United States in 1968, where he lived for a time on the margins of respectability and died largely in obscurity in 2003.

Havana as Tourist Playground: Gambling, Vice, and International Sport

It must be emphasized that – while research on this topic remains sketchy at best – the impact of organized crime in sport was hardly limited to the United States. Though the mythology of organized crime in late-republic Cuba, thanks to images such as those put forth in *The Godfather Part II* (1974), has largely eclipsed the reality, there were many ways in which mid-1950s Havana had indeed become something of a mobsters' paradise.¹²¹

Nonetheless, the webs connecting professional sport to organized crime and other forms of vice in Cuba were never as well elucidated as in the United States. Several recent monographs discuss the influence of the U.S.-based mob on the island (including scholarly works by Rosalie Schwartz and Eduardo Sáenz Rovner and a well-regarded popular history by mafia expert T.J. English), but the intersections among Cuban sport, gambling, and illicit industries such as prostitution and drug trafficking are subjects that still demand future research.¹²²

Since the colonial era, gambling had enjoyed a central place in the pursuit of sports and recreation. As Sáenz Rovner notes, gambling was a staple of nineteenth-century life,

¹²¹ For a comparison between what he terms the “folklore” propagated by *The Godfather Part II* and the facts upon which the movie’s Havana scenes were based, see T.J. English, *Havana Nocturne: How the Mob Owned Cuba... and Then Lost It to the Revolution* (New York: William Morrow, 2008), pp. 30-38.

¹²² See Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*; Eduardo Sáenz Rovner, *The Cuban Connection: Drug Trafficking, Smuggling, and Gambling in Cuba from the 1920s to the Revolution*, trans. Russ Davidson (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008); and English, *Havana Nocturne*. Sáenz Rovner’s monograph was originally published as *La conexión cubana: Narcotráfico, contrabando y juego en Cuba entre los años 20 y comienzos de la Revolución* (Bogotá, Colombia: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, 2005).

embraced by whites, Afro-Cubans, and Chinese alike and transcending class as well as ethnic and racial lines. The activity took on many forms, from lotteries and card games to betting on pastimes such as cockfighting. In the republic era, the government instituted a popular weekly national lottery, which proved a lucrative source of bribes, graft, and other revenue. Furthermore, a culture of vice and corruption had long been the norm; in Schwartz's words, "Cubans did not need foreign gangsters to teach them the intricacies of extortion rackets and payoffs from gambling and prostitution." Nonetheless, the state's well-known tolerance for brothels, sex shows, drugs, alcohol, and casinos – interests that were often openly controlled or influenced by the U.S.-based mafia – aided the perception among tourists and other foreigners that Havana was an illicit playground for the rich and well-connected.¹²³

Despite the latter-day portrayal in American popular culture that Cuba emerged as a gangsters' stomping ground only in the 1950s, U.S.-based mobsters had been operating there since at least Prohibition days. Alphonse "Al" Capone operated a short-lived Marianao pool hall in 1928, probably as a front for bootlegging (Prohibition in the United States remained law until 1933). The New York-based Meyer Lansky (born Meyer Suchowljansky) had grander ambitions for Cuba; according to T.J. English, Meyer understood that, "With a friendly government in Cuba, there was no telling what the Mob could accomplish." The onset of the Great Depression, the political upheaval following Gerardo Machado's 1933 coup, and the conviction of Lansky's partner – notorious gangster Charles "Lucky" Luciano (Salvatore Lucania) – in New York on prostitution charges in 1936 prematurely ended the mafia's efforts to "establish the island as their own private fiefdom."¹²⁴ In 1938, Lansky – by

¹²³ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, pp. 137-138; Sáenz Rovner, *The Cuban Connection*, pp. 81-93.

¹²⁴ English, *Havana Nocturne*, pp. 11, 13, and 17 (quote on p. 13).

then running gambling dens in South Florida – was pegged by Fulgencio Batista to lead similar operations out of Oriental Park and the Hotel Nacional. In contradiction to the seemingly unsavory association of the foreign mob with a military-backed regime, Lansky has been credited with running a “clean” game, at least by Cuban standards.¹²⁵

In 1946, New York governor Thomas Dewey commuted Luciano’s prison sentence, apparently as reward for the gangster’s assistance to the U.S. in its campaigns against Italy and Germany during World War II. The government’s gratitude only went so far; the Italian-born Luciano was promptly deported. Instead of resettling in Italy, as planned, he embarked for Cuba that fall and – with the assistance of a Cuban legislator – soon obtained legal residence there. In Havana, he hobnobbed with elites and lived splendidly off his numerous business interests, which included the Hotel Nacional’s casino and a new airline that operated between the capital and Key West. At the same time, U.S. authorities suspected him of plotting to turn Havana into a transfer point for the trafficking of Turkish heroin via Italy and into their country. Before the U.S. government, using the threat of an embargo on medicinal narcotics, forced Cuba to deport the mafia kingpin in March 1947, he and his associates, most notably Lansky, had made significant strides in infiltrating Cuban government and business circles.¹²⁶

Even before the U.S.-based mob gained a foothold in Cuba, betting had riddled professional sports, from baseball and boxing to jai alai and (not surprisingly) horse racing. In the aftermath of the 1915 Johnson-Willard bout, for instance, Senator Erasmo

¹²⁵ Jack Moore, “Jewish Gangsters Starring Meyer Lansky,” in *Jews of South Florida*, ed. Andrea Greenbaum (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005), pp. 151-152; Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, pp. 100-101, 139.

¹²⁶ Sáenz Rovner, *The Cuban Connection*, pp. 65-73; Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, pp. 113-114. Luciano’s original prison sentence was for a term of thirty to fifty years.

Regüeiferos specifically referred to boxing's connection to gambling as one of many reasons to ban the sport.¹²⁷ Nevertheless, the growth of gambling in Cuban professional sports accelerated and intensified with the burgeoning tourist industry. Not only did current and former athletes, Cuban and foreign, at times actively take part in its development – former heavyweight boxing champion Jack Dempsey, for instance, invested fifty thousand dollars in Luciano's Gran Casino Nacional¹²⁸ – but many government functionaries, from the president on down, condoned, colluded with, and personally benefited from the mob's investment in casinos and hotels.

The influence of the mob in Cuba peaked following the assumption of power by Fulgencio Batista after a bloodless coup d'état on March 10, 1952. The influx of prosperous North Americans during these postwar years, and the growth of the resort sector throughout the Caribbean, provided an incentive for Batista's government to turn over to foreign elements a substantial portion of the tourist market. Moreover, Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver's televised subcommittee hearings on organized crime had, by the early 1950s, not only broadened public awareness of corruption in gambling and other U.S. sectors, but also forced many of the top mob families to find new pastures elsewhere. As the *Saturday Evening Post* reported in its notorious March 1953 exposé of organized crime infiltration of the Caribbean, mafiosi from New York, New Jersey, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Chicago soon "moved into Havana in such force that the town looked like a haven for the underworld in exile." There they opened gambling houses and casinos, most of them dishonest; naïve

¹²⁷ "Contra el Boxeo," *El Mundo*, 8 April 1915, p. 2.

¹²⁸ Sáenz Rovner, *The Cuban Connection*, pp. 65-66. T.J. English has unearthed evidence that, during his travels to Havana, Dempsey "frequently acted as a cash courier for the Mob, à la Frank Sinatra." See English, *Havana Nocturne*, p. 44.

tourists were quickly fleeced of their savings in games that were biased toward the house.¹²⁹ Outrage over the crooked nature of Havana gambling establishments led Batista to deport the more egregious operators and to hire Meyer Lansky (who had run the Hotel Nacional and Montmartre Club casinos and whose relationship with Batista went back decades) as his “adviser on gambling reform.”¹³⁰

Not surprisingly, Batista and his cronies personally benefited from the regime’s close association with the mob. Having assumed the presidency in 1952, Batista dismissed the DGD director Lorenzo Nodarse and replaced him with the brother of Batista’s much younger second wife, Marta Fernández Miranda. In his new position, General Roberto Fernández Miranda declared that he was especially interested in developing popular sports, such as boxing. With the establishment in May 1953 of the Comisión Nacional de Deportes (National Sports Commission, or CND), replacing the DGD, Batista promoted Fernández Miranda to head the new body, which oversaw most amateur and professional sports on the island. (According to Decree 860, excluded from the CND director’s duties were control over the Cuban Olympic Committee, scholastic and university sports, and certain women’s sports.)¹³¹ Fernández Miranda’s control of the CND also gave him supervision of the national lottery, thus offering a means of obtaining many lucrative sources of graft. In March 1958, *Life* magazine alleged that he skimmed not only from slot machine revenue, taking a

¹²⁹ Lester Velie, “Suckers in Paradise,” *Saturday Evening Post* 225:39 (March 28, 1953), pp. 32-33, 181, 183 (quote on p. 32). For an investigation of the Kefauver Committee’s interventions into organized crime, see William Howard Moore, *The Kefauver Committee and the Politics of Crime, 1950-1952* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974).

¹³⁰ English, *Havana Nocturne*, pp. 98-99 (quote on p. 99); Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, pp. 148-149.

¹³¹ Edmundo Estrada y Zayas, *Leyes-decretos vigentes*, Vol. 10, March 1952-31 December 1953 (La Habana: Editorial Lex, 1956), pp. 1286-1287, cited in Servando Valdés Sánchez, “El deporte en la cultura de las elites militares: 1952-1958,” *La Jiribilla*, Vol. 190, 2004, http://www.lajiribilla.co.cu/2004/n190_12/190_01.html#_ednref5 (accessed August 9, 2009).

fifty percent cut with the blessings of the mafia, but also from Havana parking meters.¹³²

There were likely many other ways in which Batista's brother-in-law used his access to sports and other revenue to benefit his political associates and extended family – similar to what former DGD director Jaime Mariné had achieved during Batista's earlier presidency, but this time with the active or passive involvement of foreign-based gangsters.

Beyond augmenting his own personal wealth, however, Fernández Miranda did seek to use his tenure at the CND to increase the visibility of international sporting events in Cuba. At six feet tall and around 210 pounds, he was himself a career military man and all-around athlete whose amateur boxing prowess, in particular, was singled out for praise in a fawning *New York Times* article:

Would you like to box? Fernández-Miranda can outstep a middleweight, outjab a welterweight and duck and shift in Willie Pep fashion. His last three heavyweight "victims," all sergeants in the Presidential farm detachment, asked for transfers to less active posts.

Despite his own enthusiasm for physical recreation, there was a financial rationale behind Fernández Miranda's focus on recruiting sports tourists. The strategy was to attract a handful of world-caliber events that, like the Johnson-Willard bout decades previously, could serve as a magnet for foreign visitors to stay and spend their money elsewhere – whether that be the respectable, risqué, or downright seedy sides of Cuban life. Prizefighting was at the center of those plans, but the Batista administration had grander ambitions. Even sports without a longtime connection to the island, or that lacked a significant number of native participants, were eligible for inclusion.

¹³² English, *Havana Nocturne*, pp. 164, 256; Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, p. 184.

Along those lines, Fernández Miranda supervised the creation of the Gran Premio automobile race, which attracted over 150,000 paying viewers during its first year in February 1957.¹³³ Won by Argentine Juan Manuel Fangio, the race was intended to secure favorable publicity for the regime at a time when it was battling Fidel Castro and his rebel forces in foreign newspapers as well as the battlefield. Just twelve months later, the Gran Premio became a public relations nightmare when, the night before the race, insurgents kidnapped Fangio and prevented him from taking part. He was later released unharmed, with positive words for his captors. During the race, moreover, a Cuban driver crashed into a grandstand full of spectators, killing four and injuring dozens more. Rather than showcase Cuba as the site of well-run international athletic events, then, the 1958 Gran Premio did quite the opposite.¹³⁴

Fernández Miranda also oversaw the development of Ciudad Deportiva (Sports City), an eighty-acre complex located between central Havana and the airport. Several years in the building, this site included indoor and outdoor facilities for a variety of sports, including baseball, swimming, tennis, and track and field. Yet its centerpiece, the Coliseo Nacional – which was topped by a large concrete dome – was designed at least in part to attract world championship prizefights to Havana. With Cuba’s renowned stable of pugilistic contenders and current welterweight champion Kid Gavilán, the state wished to give locals as well as visiting tourists the opportunity to view them in action in their own backyard. In addition to hosting the CND’s offices, the National Boxing Academy would be based at Ciudad Deportiva, and there would be accommodations for visiting athletes. Originally

¹³³ Frank M. Blunk, “Colonel Leads Drive for Sports in Cuba,” *New York Times*, 10 March 1957, p. S12.

¹³⁴ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, pp. 170-171, 186-189.

slated to open in October 1954, the complex would take several more years to be completed – a delay that was likely due to incompetence and graft.¹³⁵ Not until 1959, the first year of the Revolution, did regular boxing events take place there.

Ironically, with the eventual repudiation of professional sports by the newly installed Castro regime, Ciudad Deportiva became a symbol not of Cuba's embrace of revenue-generating international sporting events but of its dedication to socialist ideals of sport. It is still in use today, host to important national, regional, and international events, albeit all of them in the amateur arena. Cutting-edge for its time, to more recent observers its name (so different from the commercially sponsored structures of developed countries) and utilitarian architecture evoke Soviet rather than capitalist sensibilities. In his travelogue on Cuba, *Washington Post* editor Eugene Robinson puts his finger on this disconnect for present-day U.S. visitors:

The arena itself was like an early prototype of the modern sports palace. The size and shape were right, but the materials were all wrong (painted concrete instead of glossier surfaces), the portals of ingress and egress too few and too narrow to satisfy modern theories of crowd flow, the seats too narrow, the pitch of the seating galleries too steep, the spectators dangerously close to the action. Instead of being Oz-like and intimidating, like every arena in every big American city, the place was almost intimate, with the ambiance of a high school gymnasium.¹³⁶

Most astonishing of all for those inside and outside the Batista administration who had championed the development of Ciudad Deportiva as a mark of capitalist progress, its coliseum was used briefly in January 1959 as the site of show trials for former Batista military

¹³⁵ R. Hart Phillips, "Cuba Building Big Sports Center," *New York Times*, 7 February 1954, p. X17.

¹³⁶ Eugene Robinson, *Last Dance in Havana: The Final Days of Fidel and the Start of the New Cuban Revolution* (New York: Free Press, 2004), pp. 42-43.

officials. Their convictions brought with them sentences of death by firing squad. Perhaps because of the negative international publicity – which likened the stadium crowds crying for blood to a “Roman holiday” – the court-martials were relocated to Camp Columbia, once the headquarters of the U.S. military occupation on the island. Having learned its lesson, the Castro regime allowed access by foreign and domestic journalists to the Camp Columbia trials but prohibited television and radio coverage.¹³⁷

Cubans in International Amateur Boxing Tournaments

Although virtuosity in international amateur competition was not a hallmark of pre-revolutionary Cuba, this did not mean that it did not exist. One of the bright spots of the island’s boxing program in 1950, at a time when the prizefighting industry was in flux, had been the success of its amateurs abroad. Through coverage in daily newspapers and sports magazines, Cuba’s “fanáticos” kept up with the exploits of the national contingent to the VI Central American and Caribbean Games, held in Guatemala from February 8 to March 12, 1950. This athletic competition was founded in 1926 and rotated among member states every four or so years, depending on the region’s political stability and other factors. After Havana hosted the second Games in 1930, the contest migrated to San Salvador, El Salvador (1935), the first to include boxing. It was subsequently held in Panama City, Panama (1938) and Barranquilla, Colombia (1946). The VI Games were set in Guatemala, which had founded the competition along with Mexico and Cuba. In 1950, thirteen delegations that had

¹³⁷ R. Hart Phillips, “Cuban Show Trial of Batista Aides Opens in Stadium,” *New York Times*, 23 January 1959, pp. 1, 3; R. Hart Phillips, “Batista Major Condemned in Havana Stadium Trial,” *New York Times*, 24 January 1959, pp. 1, 3; “Cubans Call off Stadium Trials,” *New York Times*, 27 January 1959, p. 17. According to *New York Times* Havana correspondent Phillips, one of those sentenced to death, Major Jesus Sosa Blanco, himself compared the stadium trials to “a spectacle like those of the Colosseum of Rome.”

previously attended the Games were in attendance (in addition to the host country and Cuba, these were Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dutch Antilles, El Salvador, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Puerto Rico, and Trinidad and Tobago), while Haiti made its first such appearance. Half the delegations fielded boxing teams; Cuba, Mexico, and Guatemala had full eight-men squads, while Colombia, Jamaica, Panama, and Nicaragua had five, three, two, and one boxing entries, respectively.¹³⁸

The Cuban team – led by trainers Luis Sarría and Wee Wee Barton, both respected former prizefighters – won three gold medals, two silvers, and three bronzes, or one in each weight division on offer. While that record appears to be impressive, a closer look reveals that no Cuban boxer won more than two fights, since no weight class featured more than six competitors. The gold medalists were Enrique Lamelas at paperweight (46 kg/101 lbs.), a division that was making its first appearance at the Central American and Caribbean Games and had four competitors; Cirlio Gómez at middleweight (75 kg/165 lbs.), with five competitors; and Julio Mederos at light heavy (81 kg/178 lbs.), with three competitors. Evelio Caballero won a silver medal at bantamweight (54 kg/119 lbs.) without winning a bout, as there were only three men in his weight class and he was given a bye to the finals. In the featherweight division (57 kg/125 lbs.), which had six competitors, Félix Triana also earned a silver medal. Sergio Peñalver at flyweight (51 kg/112 lbs.) and Rosendo Brunet at lightweight (60 kg/132 lbs.) won bronze medals in brackets with five men apiece, while Gilberto Gutiérrez at light middleweight (71 kg/156 lbs.) picked up bronze after losing a

¹³⁸ Domínguez, *Boxeo cubano*; Montesinos and Sigfredo Barros, *Centroamericanos y del Caribe*, pp. 44-48. For general background on the Games from a Guatemalan perspective, see Richard V. McGehee, "Revolution, Democracy, and Sport: The Guatemalan 'Olympics' of 1950," *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* 3 (1994): 49-81.

preliminary bout in his four-person division. Brunet also participated in the track and field competition.¹³⁹

On the surface, the onset of dictatorship in 1952 seemed to change little in Cuban amateur pugilistic circles. Yet Batista's funding priorities further weakened amateur sports in Cuba and reduced opportunities for international competition. Because of lack of funds, the Cuban delegation to the VII Central American and Caribbean Games – held in Mexico City in March 1954 – was smaller than the one that had traveled to Guatemala City in 1950. Although Cuba had won the baseball gold medal during the five of the first six Central American and Caribbean Games (it had to settle for the bronze in 1946), it did not bring a baseball team to the VII Games. It is hard to imagine that Cuba would not have won the 1954 Central American and Caribbean Games had it brought a baseball team, but as historian Roberto González Echevarría has noted, the “great amateur era” of Cuban baseball was in decline after 1944, not to recover again until the consolidation of the Cuban Revolution. The end of World War II had brought a revival of the minor leagues, and many Cuban players were being recruited to play professionally in the United States, particularly in the Florida International League. The rise of the Mexican League and revival of the Cuban League in the mid-to-late 1940s also fueled the exodus of young Cuban players. In 1959, nine months after the start of the revolutionary regime, Cuba suffered its worst loss in

¹³⁹ Domínguez, *Boxeo cubano*; Montesinos and Barrios, *Centroamericanos y del Caribe*, pp. 196-208. For contemporary Cuban accounts of the boxing competition at these Games, see “Designado Luis Sarria instructor del team Olímpico cubano que visitará Guatemala,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:3 (January 13, 1950), p. 4; “Boxeo Olímpico,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:11 (March 13, 1950), p. 4; and René Cubas, “Los atletas cubanos se anotaron muchas más victorias que derrotas en Guatemala,” *Cuba Deportiva* 10:11 (March 13, 1950), p. 9.

international amateur baseball competition to that point – coming in eighth place at the Chicago Pan-American Games.¹⁴⁰

It is likely that the growing demand for Cuban pugilists abroad fueled a similar plight in terms of both quantity and quality of amateurs available for international competition. Of the twelve delegations attending the 1954 Central American and Caribbean Games, seven fielded boxing teams. None brought a full squad, although Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Venezuela each had seven-man teams. Panama brought six, the Dominican Republic five, and Guatemala four boxers. The eight weight classes had shifted somewhat from the previous Games. Gone was the paperweight division (46 kg/101 lbs); the lightest group now comprised flyweights (51 kg/112 lbs). The light middleweight division (71 kg/156 lbs) had been replaced with the welterweight class (67 kg/147 lbs). Finally, the heavyweight division (+81 kg/+178 lbs) was added, though only Puerto Rico and Mexico were able to field competitors big enough to compete in it. These changes did not help the Cuban squad much, if at all. In contrast to the Guatemala event, when it earned medals in every weight class, it emerged with just one silver, for bantamweight (54 kg/119 lbs) Sergio Cárdenas – the only Cuban boxer that year to win two bouts (in a seven-person bracket) – and a bronze for Reynaldo Tabío, who lost his first bout after receiving a bye to the flyweight semi-finals (a five-person bracket). Host country Mexico dominated the boxing finals, winning five gold medals, with Venezuela, Puerto Rico, and Panama earning one apiece.¹⁴¹

Amateur accolades, then as now, hardly guaranteed one success in the prize ring. Cárdenas, Tabío, and their teammates – Pablo Cárdenas (featherweight), Severiano Herrera

¹⁴⁰ González Echevarría, *The Pride of Havana*, pp. 250-251.

¹⁴¹ Domínguez, *Boxeo cubano*; Montesinos and Barrios, *Centroamericanos y del Caribe*, pp. 47, 48-55, 196-208.

(lightweight), Benigno Fernández (welterweight), Reynaldo González (middleweight), and Pablo Valderráin (heavyweight) – did not become as well known professionally as did their cohorts who went to Guatemala – Enrique Lamelas, Cirilo Gómez, Julio Mederos, Félix Triana, and Sergio Peñalver, all of whom turned professional in 1951. Tabío turned professional in 1954 and moved to Mexico in 1957 to continue his ring career. González turned pro in 1954 and fought in Cuba until at least 1958, while Valderráin was active professionally in Cuban rings at least through March 1961. I have found no record to indicate that Herrera and Fernández turned pro. The whereabouts of all these men after the Revolution remain in doubt.

The 1953-54 Golden Gloves competition, which ran before and after the Central American and Caribbean Games, did attract several young pugilists who turned pro by the end of the decade, many of whom hailed from outside Havana, and a few of whom made their way to U.S. rings. Jose M. “Johnny” Sarduy, José Rigores, Lázaro Hernández Kessell, Lino Rendón, Joe Pedroso, and Paul Díaz were just some of the youths who participated in that year’s Golden Gloves events. Reynaldo Tabío and Benigno Fernández from the Central American and Caribbean Games also participated.¹⁴²

Among the top amateurs of the early to mid-1950s, only a few had significant careers abroad. One was Julio Mederos, though given his weight class (heavyweight), it would have been harder for him to find opponents in Cuba. Despite his strong amateur credentials – in addition to the gold at the Guatemala Central American and Caribbean Games, he was a Cuban Golden Gloves champion – Mederos was much less successful as a professional. As so many others of his caliber were, he was frequently used to test young contenders on their

¹⁴² “Eliminaciones hoy en Guantes de Oro,” *Diario de la Marina*, 2 May 1954, p. 28.

way up to a title shot, or to mix with those who had never quite made it and were on their way down.

In May 1955, Mederos was embroiled in a minor scandal in his rematch with Harold Johnson – who comprised the “up-and-coming” type of opponent and had already defeated Mederos by unanimous decision in Miami Beach the previous December. Their second bout, a nationally televised but sparsely attended affair in Philadelphia, had just begun when Johnson, then the number-one ranked light heavyweight contender and heavily favored to win the rematch, sank from his stool to the canvas after going to his corner at the end of the second round. After a ring physician stopped the bout, the referee awarded Mederos a second-round technical knockout, a decision that remains on the books today. Johnson was taken to the hospital, but that was hardly the end of it. Johnson, himself a Philadelphia native, claimed that an autograph-seeking stranger had offered him an orange several hours before the fight, and that it must have been drugged. Although initial reports cast doubt on his claim, a few days after the bout, Pennsylvania Governor George M. Leader announced that a barbiturate had indeed been administered to Johnson, who remained under police guard while convalescing at an area hospital. In the wake of the original “Philadelphia decision” which earlier that year had derailed Kid Gavilán’s welterweight reign, Leader instituted a stunning 90-day statewide ban on professional boxing so that the newly appointed State Athletic Commission could undertake “a most critical examination of the sport of boxing in Pennsylvania.” Only a few already approved bouts were given an

exemption to go on.¹⁴³ Although the means (it wasn't the orange), motives, and perpetrators of the drugging did not come to light, it was believed that it involved illicit gambling and bookmaking. By August, the Governor had signed a "clean boxing" bill passed by the Pennsylvania General Assembly, which put additional controls on out-of-state promoters and took a portion of closed-circuit TV receipts – a bill that was squarely aimed at the IBC.¹⁴⁴ In the end, however, it would take a few more years, and a full-fledged federal antitrust suit, to prevent the IBC and its associated mobsters from further enriching itself at the expense of professional boxing.

Neither of the pugilists appeared to be adversely affected by the scandal. Harold Johnson ended up becoming the NBA world light heavyweight champion in 1961 and the undisputed world light heavyweight titleholder in 1962, a title he held until losing a split decision to Willie Pastrano in June 1963. Johnson remained active in the ring until his early forties and was ultimately inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame, but he and Mederos – who in any case was a true heavyweight fighting nearly fifteen pounds heavier – never met in the ring again. As for Mederos, he became a hardy club fighter with a solid right hand and chin, winning roughly as often as he lost, losing rarely by knockout, and even beating a few top heavyweights of the day, such as Bob Satterfield. During the spring of 1956, he also worked in New York as a sparring partner for Floyd Patterson, who at age 21 became the youngest world heavyweight champion ever when he knocked out the great

¹⁴³ "Johnson Stopped by Mederos in 2d," *New York Times*, 7 May 1955, p. 11; "Boxer Not Drugged, One Report States," *New York Times*, 8 May 1955, p. S1; "Pennsylvania Bans Boxing 90 Days in Drugging Episode," *New York Times*, 11 May 1955, p. 39; "Rind Gives No Drug Clue," *New York Times*, 12 May 1955, p. 37.

¹⁴⁴ "New Boxing Code Drawn," *New York Times*, 14 July 1955, p. 28; "Boxing Bill Introduced," *New York Times*, 20 July 1955, p. 24; "Ring Pilots Ordered to Produce Records," *New York Times*, 24 September 1955, p. 16.

veteran Archie Moore that November.¹⁴⁵ Mederos continued to battle with veteran pugs and up-and-comers alike until one night in Chicago in May 1958, when a vicious jab by Sonny Liston – then slicing a terrifying swathe through the heavyweight division on an eventual collision course with Floyd Patterson and the world title – cut his lip badly enough that the ring doctor advised a halt to the bout after the second round. Mederos was just 25 years old, but his boxing career was over.¹⁴⁶

There is an interesting footnote to international amateur boxing in the revolutionary era, a period that would – at a cost that has yet to be ascertained in either economic or social terms – usher in a period of unrivaled amateur ring success. At a 1958 meeting of the International Amateur Boxing Association (known by its French acronym, AIBA), Cuba had been selected to host the third annual world Diamond Belt tournament the following year. Founded in 1936, the Diamond Belt had, like the Golden Gloves, originated in the United States as a series of regional tournaments that culminated in a national championship. In 1957, it was transformed into an international competition under AIBA's supervision. That year, in Seattle, three Cuban entrants in ten weight classes – featherweight Douglas Vaillant, light welterweight Antonio Zaldivár, and welterweight Sarvelio Fuentes – won International Diamond Belt titles, besting boxers from the U.S., Canada, China, Japan, and Mexico. Two other competitors, flyweight José Rigores and bantamweight Ultiminio Ramos, lost in the

¹⁴⁵ Frank M. Blunk, "Patterson Sharp in Sparring Drill," *New York Times*, 12 May 1956, p. 31; Joseph C. Nichols, "Patterson Knocks Out Moore in Fifth Round to Win World Heavyweight Title," *New York Times*, 1 December 1956, p. 24.

¹⁴⁶ "Sonny Liston Stops Mederos in Third Round," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 15 May 1958, p. B6.

finals and semifinals, respectively, but no doubt gained valuable experience. Only the U.S. performed better.¹⁴⁷

The 1958 event, held in Mexico City, had featured ten nations, including Cuba, and it was predicted that even more would attend the following year. But the sudden victory of Castro's forces on New Year's Day 1959 persuaded some of the tournament organizers that it was best to stay away from Havana. Their response came as a surprise to the new boxing assessor, Jess Losada, and director of sports, Captain Felipe Guerra Matos, who may have lobbied behind the scenes to keep the prestigious event in the capital. In March, however, after AIBA ratified the Diamond Belt tournament's move to Mexico City "owing to the conditions in Cuba," Guerra Matos announced that Cuba would boycott the competition.¹⁴⁸

What particularly rankled the Executive Committee of the Unión Atlética Amateur de Cuba (UAAC), Cuba's foremost amateur association, was the implication that the present "conditions in Cuba" were to blame for what it felt was unsportsmanlike conduct by AIBA and the Mexican delegation. In a press release, the UAAC committee members conceded that, in August 1958, they had given up the right to host the 1959 tournament due to the political upheaval then taking place in Havana, but with the return of "la paz pública" (the public peace) and "un ambiente de libertad" (the atmosphere of freedom), they felt that they should regain it. Although AIBA's general secretary appeared to agree with them, other influential members, including boxing promoters, had successfully pushed for the move to Mexico. The UAAC committee members were troubled as to why AIBA had deemed

¹⁴⁷ "Diamond Belt Tournament – Seattle, USA – August 1-4 1957," Amateur Boxing Results, <http://www.amateur-boxing.strefa.pl/Tournaments/Seattle1957.html> (accessed August 9, 2009).

¹⁴⁸ "Torneo Mundial de Boxeo Amateur: Transfieren la Sede del III Torneo para Ciudad de México," *Información*, 23 January 1959, p. B6; "Ratifican a México como sede del Torneo Cinturones de Diamante," *Información*, 25 March 1959, p. B5; "No enviará Cuba team a la justa que se dará en México," *Información*, 26 March 1959, pp. B3-B4.

Havana a suitable site for the tournament in 1958 but not in 1959. By way of consolation to any disappointed amateurs, assessor Losada stated that the national team would be attending an international event that year, most likely the Golden Gloves in the United States.¹⁴⁹

Although Cold War politics appear to have played a minor role in this spat, it is notable that the Castro regime's first official decision to boycott an international athletic event took place just three months into its tenure. As participating nations took part in the International Diamond Belt competition in Mexico City that September, Cuba's officials were attempting to nurture its professional as well as amateur athletic programs in line with the new ideals of revolution.

This chapter explored some of the ways in which boxing remained incompletely integrated into the Cuban nationalist project. Although boxing in the 1950s remained an extremely popular sport, its appeal to the Prío and especially Batista regimes was primarily financial. As with other areas in which Cubans excelled, such as music and dance, there was an eagerness to export the country's best talent to areas, particularly the United States, where they could earn the most money and glory for the nation. Yet most Cuban boxers abroad were far from successful in the ring or out of it – eking out meager existences, at the mercy of sometimes exploitative managers and promoters, by taking on too many fights with men they could not beat. The existence of a National Boxing Academy in Havana did offer a means by which to recycle retired pugilists for the benefit of the state, but most of them had few prospects after their ring careers were over. Moreover, although the national Golden

¹⁴⁹ “No enviará Cuba team a la justa que se dará en México,” *Información*, 26 March 1959, pp. B3-B4; “U.S. in Diamond Belt Boxing,” *New York Times*, 21 June 1959, p. S4.

Gloves network offered valuable experience to many would-be professionals, the Batista regime repeatedly ignored or neglected opportunities to send amateur boxers abroad. The vaunted CND even opted out of sending boxers to the 1956 Munich Olympics, instead prioritizing the pursuit of tourist dollars through prizefighting and other professional sports. While a successful amateur boxing record remained the likeliest means to a successful professional career, judging by the illustrious names who emerged out of the Cuban amateur ranks in the late 1950s, its importance had diminished. The ability of underemployed young men to seek out poorly paid bouts elsewhere in the Caribbean, or in Central or South America or Mexico – or, if they were lucky, in Florida, where they might receive U.S. press coverage – meant that only the most talented, protected, or economically secure pugilists could stay amateur for long. Boxing in 1950s Cuba, in short, was valued by the state as a generator of foreign revenue rather than as a symbol of national unity or pride. Although boys might still seek to learn the craft of boxing out of sheer love for the sport, as many of them had in the first few decades of the century, its practice was increasingly commodified. Even the Batista regime's desire to stage multiple world championship bouts in the capital – supposedly as a means to allow citizens to see their brightest fighters in action – was, first and foremost, a financial decision. As such, it ignored the realities of the emerging civil war and did not, ultimately, come to fruition. Despite the tremendous transnational popularity of Kid Gavilán, the singular Cuban world champion of this decade, his mugging for American cameras and much lauded victories could not conceal the patina of corruption that coated Batista's illegitimate administration.

Our last chapter examines how and why, with Batista's ouster and the onset of the Revolution, Cuba's still thriving prizefighting industry, humming along even in the throes of

civil war, would come to a complete stop by early 1962. Change was both gradual and swift, and incorporated ideological motives as well as practical ones, but the initial goal was modest: reform of the existing system. In later years, the Castro regime would paint a picture of its break from Batista-era boxing as having been both inevitable and necessary, but in 1959 and into 1960, it was a break that was neither foreseen nor desired by the new government and its youthful leaders.

Chapter 6: Cuban Boxing at the Dawn of Revolution, 1959-1962

Professional Boxing's Slow Decline, 1959-1961

“People say, ‘Before the Revolution?’” the great Kid Chocolate once remarked, “but there was no Cuba before the Revolution.”¹ Although he was speaking of the years of futility felt by many during the rule of Fulgencio Batista, he may as well have been invoking centuries of economic hardship faced by the majority of his countrymen and women, the scars of slavery and of entrenched racial discrimination against Afro-Cubans, and the island’s ongoing dependence upon outside nations for its political and economic survival. Kid Chocolate was hardly alone in seeing the Revolution as a break from all that came before. Millions of Cubans of all classes, colors, and ages have – since 1959 – rallied around opposing views of nationhood that are intricately tied to the Revolution. For at least the past 45 years, there has been no discussing Cuba without reference to the disjunctions of its most admired and reviled Revolution – the “old Cuba” vs. the new. For many in exile – particularly those in Cuban enclaves such as South Florida and New York – the willfulness of remembering an imagined “old Cuba” is both political gesture and personal coping mechanism, a means of finding one’s way in another country while maintaining a mental foothold in the old. For those who chose to stay and embrace the Revolution as the means to a better life, even as its gains slipped away over time, old Cuba continued to signify corruption, racism, and enormous inequities.

¹ James Dugate, “The Turbulent Flight of the Cuban Hawk,” *The Ring*, date unknown, pp. 47-51. From the International Boxing Hall of Fame (IBHOF) file on Kid Gavilán (Gerardo González).

Despite the rhetoric of both sides, historians have long argued against viewing Fidel Castro's triumphal ascension to power on January 1, 1959, as the dividing line between "before" and "after" in Cuba. There were many small moments in which Cuba stepped away from its past en route to a different future. In the realm of sports, and especially boxing, the dividing line is generally viewed to be March 1962. That is when – with National Decree 83a – the revolutionary state banned all professional sports. A few weeks later, the death of Cuban exile Benny "Kid" Paret to Emile Griffith after their world welterweight championship bout – in which Griffith administered to Paret, already damaged from earlier bouts, a vicious beating that was shown on live U.S. television – provided Castro with further rhetorical justification for cutting Cuba's ties to prizefighting once and for all.

Although the decree was the final nail in prizefighting's coffin in Cuba, the death was a slow one. Professional boxing had been in decline since 1960 for a variety of economic as well as political reasons. Once the ban was enacted, however, many active prizefighters were given a choice between a job in the state apparatus and permission to leave the country. While most chose the latter, a few – such as Sarvelio Fuentes, currently the national team's head coach – gave up promising professional careers in order to help develop Cuba's amateur talent.

Others became involved in the anti-revolutionary movement and suffered exile, death, or imprisonment as a result. Johnny Sarduy, Pedro José González, and Antonio "Puppy" García were three boxers who not only opposed the establishment of communism in Cuba but also took part in political or military efforts to defeat it. Sarduy and González were members of Brigade 2506, the 1,500-strong exile group that took part in the failed April 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. García, once Cuba's most popular boxing idol, became a

Havana-based agitator who served nine years in prison before ultimately leaving in the 1980 Mariel boatlift. García, along with the gifted young Florentino Fernández, whose mother disowned him for leaving the family behind in Cuba, were branded as traitors to Cuba – and as washed-up pugs. On the contrary, a few boxers, such as the novice Giraldo Córdova Cardín – who died with anti-Batista forces in the 1950s before either the Revolution or his ring talents could be realized – and ex-amateur Lino Salabarría, who died in 1963 fighting counter-insurgency forces in Escambray – were immortalized as talented boxers and revolutionary martyrs and held up as examples for all of Cuba’s athletes. And years after 1962, the state continued to valorize former prizefighters, most notably Kid Chocolate, as long as they did not openly criticize the new regime.

As Cuba moved toward communism, moreover, U.S. sportswriters and ex-fighters, most vocally exiles, spoke heartrendingly about “the end of Cuban boxing,” dismissing the Revolution’s soon-to-be highly vaunted amateurs as not worthy of carrying on its pugilistic tradition. (An aged, overweight, and long retired Niño Valdés, former contender to the heavyweight crown, once boasted, “put me in a telephone booth with [Olympic champion Teófilo] Stevenson and I’ll be the one walking out of that booth on my feet.”²) Exiles wrote adoringly of professional boxers who had built successful careers outside Cuba and pitied those who remained “trapped,” in their words, on the communist isle. The Castro regime, on the contrary, railed against the evils of prizefighting in republic-era Cuba and corralled dissenting current and ex-boxers in a variety of ways – for Kid Gavilán, agrarian “reform,” including appropriation of property, and short jail stints; for Puppy García, a long prison

² Enrique Encinosa, “The One and Only Nino Valdez,” *Wail! The CBZ Journal*, October 2001, <http://www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/w10x-ee.htm> (accessed on February 14, 2008).

sentence; for Puppy's brother Lino, isolation and supervision; and for many of the active professionals who chose to leave Cuba, preventing their family members from leaving with them. Most interestingly, the state undermined anti-Castro boxers by disputing their boxing credentials in the press and history books. And both sides claimed to represent the best of Cuban boxing – a “golden age” that would ultimately prove to be the direction in which boxing as a sport needed to go.

This chapter explores the gradual transformation of the revolutionary state from its tentative efforts to embrace capitalist sports beginning in 1959, to its adoption of socialism and repudiation of professional sports by early 1962. The creation and implementation of new state institutions not only created a means for training and developing untapped talent but also sought to corral competitive sport into the revolutionary agenda. Although the survivors of this period are old men and women now, at this writing there continues to be a bitter stalemate between those who venerate Cuba's role in amateur boxing as central to its transformative agenda and those who depict the elimination of professional sports as a tremendous betrayal – not only of individual athletes and trainers, but of the Cuban people as a whole.

The Demise of the Social Clubs

From 1959 to early 1961, the state continued to work largely within the pre-revolutionary apparatus to build up Cuba's sports programs and open up recreational facilities to the public. In doing so, however, it departed significantly from the prior administration, which had delayed or opposed efforts to increase racial equality. On at least three occasions prior to what came to be known as Castro's “Proclamation against

Discrimination” on March 22, 1959, the premier expressed concern with racial (as well as sexual) discrimination and recognized the importance of these issues to the Cuban people. In the Proclamation, Castro decried the often virulent racism that continued to be felt in Cuba and expressed his desire to deal with the segregation plaguing both the leisure and work sectors. This speech also announced the impending desegregation of all-white beaches (the best had been privatized by hotels or exclusive clubs, which excluded blacks).³

Three days later, Castro qualified his remarks somewhat – emphasizing equal opportunity in the workplace while downplaying that in leisure centers – to counter growing white fears that “blacks had become impossible” since his March 22 speech and would now demand integration of what had previously been construed as the private sphere of whites. The image of blacks and whites dancing together in a social club was especially scandalous, to elites and petit-bourgeoisie alike; Castro tried to tame these fears by stating, “People dance with whomever they want and... socialize with whomever they want.” Nonetheless, Castro continued to assert the need for racial integration and called for a national debate on racism. This campaign was supported by a wide cross-section of institutions in Havana and throughout the country – universities, churches, political and civil groups, and professional organizations. This process set in motion the dismantling of public and private desegregation in Cuba.⁴ Within a few months of taking power, the regime desegregated and nationalized beaches and private athletic clubs, which had been some of the most visible symbols of racism and class inequality during the Batista era. While they were more piecemeal and

³ de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, pp. 263-269.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 264-267; quotes on pp. 264 and 265 respectively.

gradual than may have appeared at the time, these changes seemed rapid to many Cubans and no doubt further fueled the desire of elites to leave the country.

In accomplishing the desegregation of white facilities, moreover, the state in 1961 began to shut down most *sociedades de color*, which had long served as centers for Afro-Cuban civic and cultural expression – since the “existence of racially defined associations was perceived by revolutionary leaders to be in blatant contradiction to the revolution’s goals concerning racial integration.” Alejandro de la Fuente argues that most of the affected *sociedades* at that time were “virtually dead already” due to sharp declines in membership, as new state institutions quickly assumed their role as centers for cultural, leisure, educational, and social activities. Yet unlike the opening of the all-white facilities to poor and nonwhite peoples, which was intended to accomplish class and race unity, the closure or marginalization of the *sociedades de color* was necessary not only so that the state could declare the end of discrimination in Cuba, but also so it might eliminate a potential competitor – less radical Afro-Cuban intellectuals who might call for cultural rather than class unity – over the hearts and minds of Cuba’s black populace.⁵

The new regime did not stop at desegregating athletic facilities and organizations but moved quickly to institutionalize major changes in the realm of sport. From early 1959 to early 1961, while working to construct a more permanent body to oversee Cuban sports, it passed the responsibility for overseeing athletics to municipal governments, sports federations, and eventually the *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución* (Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, CDRs).⁶ Established in September 1960 to uproot and defeat

⁵ Ibid., pp. 280-285; quotes on pp. 283.

⁶ Pettavino and Pye, *Sport in Cuba*, p. 69.

“counterrevolutionary” tendencies in Cuban society and structured along geographical lines, the CDRs were racially integrated and heralded as “an instrument for promoting the unity and cohesion of the people.”⁷ Their use in supporting the development of a national sports program would be temporary, however. By 1962, the state had established an institutional body that would oversee Cuban athletic, physical education, and recreational programs for the next five decades.

The First Olympian

Batista’s regime had been notorious for refusing to sponsor amateur boxers and other athletes to compete in international tournaments, notably the quadrennial Olympic and Pan-American Games, which required expensive travel and were not financially profitable for the state.⁸ Under the administration of Carlos Prío (1948-1952), Cuba sent a boxing squad to the first Pan-American Games in 1951, where welterweight Cristobal Hernández earned a silver medal. Yet it sent no boxers to the 1955 Pan-American Games in Mexico City, an event for which Batista had refused to provide funding.⁹ Unlike Castro, who viewed such venues from the outset as helping to build Cuban prestige at home and abroad, Batista made no major changes in amateur athletic policies during either period of his rule (1933-1944 and 1952-1958) and used public funding for professional boxing events.¹⁰ Though it seems contradictory given his own status (albeit publicly unacknowledged) as Cuba’s first

⁷ Richard R. Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969), pp. 69-71; quote on p. 71.

⁸ The Olympics and Pan-American Games take place every four years, but the latter is staggered so that it occurs one year before and three years after the former. The Central American and Caribbean Games, of which Cuba was a founding participant, is now quadrennial but has at times been held more irregularly.

⁹ Pettavino and Pye, *Sport in Cuba*, p. 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

president of Afro-Cuban descent, Batista not only allowed but also encouraged segregation to continue in full force at beaches, hotels, pools, and social clubs. Under his regime, Afro-Cuban athletic societies and university teams were forced to establish their own sites for recreational and competitive activity; he even prevented Afro-Cubans from using the Hotel Nacional pool during a regional swimming competition.¹¹

In prizefighting, while mixed-race bouts had been the norm before the 1915 Johnson-Willard bout, the Unión Atlética Amateur de Cuba had excluded nonwhite Cubans from amateur competitions since its establishment in 1922. Afro-Cubans found other options to hone their pugilistic skills before turning professional, such as semi-pro bouts and, by the late 1930s, the annual Golden Gloves competition. The first annual Cuban Golden Gloves tournament began in 1938 and would serve as an important training ground for the professionals for the next two decades, among them Luis Galvani and Lino Garcia.¹² Yet it operated in Cuba at a time when southern Golden Gloves tournaments remained rigidly racially segregated. (Despite campaigning for inclusion since 1937, African Americans were not permitted to participate in the Washington, D.C., Golden Gloves until 1947.¹³) When in the 1950s the Cuban Golden Gloves was subsumed into the southern division of the U.S. Golden Gloves, Afro-Cuban boxers traveling to the U.S. for the final bouts were shocked by the racism and discrimination they experienced. Although the professional ranks in Cuba were not segregated, white prizefighters on average received more favorable

¹¹ Ibid., p. 24.

¹² Milt Baron, "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 20:4 (May 1941), p. 61, lists these accomplished professionals among the competitors in the 1941 Golden Gloves tournaments at the Arena Cristal, Havana.

¹³ David K. Wiggins and Patrick B. Miller, eds., *The Unequal Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), pp. 183-185.

treatment from managers and promoters, who also tended to be white.¹⁴ And as noted above, the exclusion of Afro-Cubans from elite athletic facilities and athletic federations did not conclude until a few months after the onset of the Revolution.¹⁵

With its athletic institutions in flux, the revolutionary state continued to show support for professional boxing while taking tentative steps to encourage amateurism. A year and a half after Castro assumed power, his regime sponsored the entry of the first Cuban boxer in the Olympic Summer Games. The sport had been among the earliest to be incorporated into the modern Olympic movement, debuting at the St. Louis Games in 1904.¹⁶ Fifty-six years later, Manzanillo native Estebán “Tevita” Aguilera Leiva was the sole pugilist – and one of only 12 Cuban athletes – to go to the 1960 Rome Games. In a preliminary lightweight (132 lbs/60 kg) bout, the 18-year-old Aguilera lost by a unanimous judges’ score of 5-0 to Danny O’Brian of Ireland.¹⁷ Aguilera was ill prepared for the bout; as no Cuban trainer had accompanied him, he had to rely upon Cuban trainers from other sports at the Games to staff his corner.¹⁸ Cuban Olympic chronicler Rolando Crespo also claims that Aguilera, affected by the unfamiliar climate, was also suffering from a bad cold.¹⁹

¹⁴ This was not always the case, of course, particularly when the boxer in question was of the caliber of a Kid Chocolate or Kid Gavilán. For an example of likely preferential treatment, see Johnny Sarduy, *De Tierras Nuevas a la nueva tierra* (Miami: Editorial Lincoln-Martí, 2005), p. 30, in which the self-described *guajiro* Sarduy describes his relationship with patron Benito Fernández. Fernández housed Sarduy in his own home rather than in a nearby guesthouse, where Sarduy took his meals and where Fernández housed his other boxers.

¹⁵ Richard Gott, *Cuba: A New History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 174.

¹⁶ Boxing was not featured in the 1912 Stockholm Games because the sport was outlawed in Sweden. There were no Summer Olympic Games in 1916 because of World War I and in 1940 and 1944 because of World War II.

¹⁷ Rolando Crespo, *Cuba en el boxeo olímpico* (La Habana: Editorial Científico-Técnica, 1999), p. 14. A list of all 1960 Olympic lightweight boxing competitors is available at <http://www.sports-reference.com/olympics/summer/1960/BOX/mens-lightweight.html> (accessed October 19, 2008).

¹⁸ Elio Menéndez, “Nuestro primer boxeador olímpico,” *CubAhora*, 5 May 2008, http://www.cubahora.cu/index.php?tpl=principal/ver-noticias/ver-ot_dep.tpl.html&newsid_obj_id=1025357 (accessed October 20, 2008).

¹⁹ Crespo, *Cuba en el boxeo olímpico*, p. 14.

Revolutionary Cuba would manage a steep learning curve in Olympic boxing, however. At the 1964 Tokyo Games, it entered competitors in six of eleven weight classes. Four of the six lost in their first bout, while Fermín Espinosa and Félix Betancourt won two bouts apiece.²⁰ In 1968, Cuba sent its first boxing referee, Waldo Santiago, and a full eleven-man squad to Mexico City, where Enrique Regüíferos and Rolando Garbey each earned silver medals.²¹

A Special Relationship: Joe Louis and Cuba

In explaining Cuba's poor showings at the Olympic Games, Castro in 1960 blamed the elite status of pre-revolutionary athletes – arguing that personal wealth was antithetical to athletic success:

Of course, as the rich are not great athletes Cuba always looked ridiculous in any international competition. At the Olympics [before the Revolution] it was shameful to see the position occupied by Cuba because the rich, accustomed to good living, had not the necessary spirit of sacrifice to be good athletes. Good athletes must come from the people, from the working classes, from the lower strata, because they are capable of sacrifice; they can be consistent, tenacious; they can possess all the enthusiasm and interest needed to enter a competition and win.²²

There were few boxers who better represented this “spirit of sacrifice” than Joe Louis. Born Joseph Louis Barrow, he was the son of Alabama sharecroppers who had emerged from deep poverty to become the first African American heavyweight champion in

²⁰ Crespo, *Cuba en el boxeo olímpico*, pp. 15-19.

²¹ The number and definition of internationally recognized amateur and professional boxing weight classes have varied over time. In Olympic boxing, the number of weight classes has fluctuated between five and twelve since the sport's introduction at the 1904 Games. The 2004 and 2008 Games featured eleven weight classes.

²² Sonia Castanes, *Fidel, Sobre el deporte* (Havana, 1975), para. 40 [1960], quoted in Pickering, “Cuba,” *Sport Under Communism*, p. 174.

over two decades when he defeated James “Cinderella Man” Braddock in June 1937. Louis held that title until his retirement in 1949, for nearly twelve years. Even accounting for the interruption of World War II, his longevity in the ring was astonishing.

As explored in earlier chapters, Louis had had a long relationship with Cuba, not all of it positive. In December 1935, his promoter, Mike Jacobs, traveled to Havana to explore conditions there ahead of a scheduled Louis bout there with Basque heavyweight Isidoro Gastanaga. While there, Jacobs postponed the bout, citing Louis’s fatigue from “overtraining,” but by the time he returned to New York City, canceled the bout “because of the unsettled political condition in Cuba.”²³ The Cuban government, then under Batista’s rule, was outraged; it suspended Jacobs, Louis, and Louis’s manager, Julian Black, for six months for breach of contract and also fined Jacobs for improper behavior.²⁴

Nearly a decade later, although Gastanaga never got a shot at him, Joe Louis thrilled Havana locals by taking part in a March 1947 exhibition there as the last stop on a lucrative Latin American tour. In what was billed as the largest crowd ever assembled to see a fight card in Cuba, approximately 25,000 people paid nearly \$40,000 to see Louis “meat-axe” his sparring partners, Art Ramsey and Walt Hafey, on a fight card on which the main event was a match-up between Cuban featherweight champion Miguel Acevedo and veteran New York lightweight Lulu Constantino. Crowd size notwithstanding, the organizers of the bout reportedly lost \$11,000 from the promotion.²⁵

²³ James P. Dawson, “Fight in Havana for Louis Is Off,” *New York Times*, 24 December 1935.

²⁴ “Jacobs and Louis Suspended in Cuba,” *New York Times*, 27 December 1935.

²⁵ Nat Fleischer, “Louis’s Tour a Financial Success for Joe Not Promoters,” *The Ring* 26:4 (May 1947), p. 3. The quote is from “25,000 See Louis Spar,” *New York Times*, 11 March 1947. Boxrec.com gives the attendance as 13,076.

Once the Castro regime took power, Louis became a recurrent visitor to Havana and supporter of Castro. He was frequently quoted by the U.S. press saying favorable things about the Revolution – such as “there is no place in the world except Cuba where the Negro can go in the wintertime with absolutely no discrimination.”²⁶ Louis and his new (third) wife, Martha, were among seventy featured guests at the elegant 1959 New Year’s Eve celebrations hosted by Fidel Castro in the Habana Hilton Hotel (now the Habana Libre) marking the one-year anniversary of the Cuban Revolution.²⁷

In February 1960, Louis became vice president and one-quarter partner of an all-black Manhattan public relations firm – Louis, Rowe, Fisher, Lockhart Enterprises, Inc. – that negotiated a \$287,000 contract with the Cuban tourist board, INIT (Instituto Nacional de la Industria Turística, the National Institute of the Tourism Industry). Louis’s firm was to promote the island as a destination for African Americans.²⁸ This was simply the latest in a long line of tourist schemes, many of them owned or operated by black businessmen, to attract U.S. blacks to Cuba. In examining this little-noticed tourist network from the early 1930s to early 1950s, Frank Guridy explains how it differed from white U.S. tourism:

Unlike white tourists who went to Cuba to experience a culture that they perceived to be fundamentally different than their own, African-Americans traveled to the island to see ‘their own people’ even as their understanding of Afro-Cubans was sometimes shaped by touristic gazes.

²⁶ “Winning Friends,” *Time*, 18 April 1960. Rosalie Schwartz notes that, with the fall-off in tourism during the 1959 holiday season, INIT’s wooing of Joe Louis indicated a new interest “a previously ignored segment of the North American market” – African Americans. Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, p. 202.

²⁷ Martha sat next to Castro at the head table. See R. Hart Phillips, “Cuba Celebrates Year of Castro,” *New York Times*, 1 January 1960; “Castro Gracious in New Year Role,” *New York Times*, 2 January 1960.

²⁸ “Joe Louis Agency Engaged by Cuba,” *New York Times*, 26 May 1960.

The ways in which they found such commonality with Cuba varied. From viewing Afro-Cubans in top positions – many African Americans considered Cuban President Fulgencio Batista, who did not comment openly on his biracial heritage, to be a “Negro Leader” – to seeking out African cultural modes of survival, as motivated Langston Hughes, African American elites “sought to harmonize their desires for leisure with motives for cultural exchange,” he concludes. The 1933 Soldiers’ Revolt further accelerated African American tourism to Cuba, as it helped to usher in a period of increased demands for racial equality led by Afro-Cuban *sociedades de color* and the island’s Communist activists.²⁹

This point is important to emphasize, for such tourism was not driven only by pent-up African American longings to visit a more equal multiracial nation or the increased leisure time and resources available to a small class of black intellectuals, professionals, and businesspeople. As Alejandro de la Fuente demonstrates, by the early 1930s, the Partido Comunista de Cuba (Cuban Communist Party, PCC) and the Communist-influenced Confederación Nacional Obrera de Cuba (National Workers Confederation of Cuba, CNOOC), an influential organization that militated for workers’ rights, sought to unify workers along class lines by ending workplace racial discrimination. In advocating for greater self-determination among Afro-Cubans, it condemned overt acts of racism in the U.S., including the notorious 1931 case of the Scottsboro Nine. Although African Americans in the 1930s were only too familiar with the conditions of their own oppression, the news coming out of Cuba regarding a possible social revolution – one that was foreshadowed by

²⁹ Frank Guridy, *Diaspora in Action: Afro-Cubans and African-Americans in the U.S.-Caribbean World*, chapter 5 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming); quotes on p. 263. I am grateful to Frank for sharing this chapter with me.

new President Grau's decision to abrogate the hated Platt Amendment – must have been encouraging to those accustomed to rigid race hierarchies in their own nation.³⁰

More than two decades later, the rise of the Cuban Revolution was met with jubilation among many African American journalists and intellectuals, who – long before the Revolution grew questionable in U.S. circles for its association with socialist or communist elements – saw it as a boost to their own liberation struggle and that of black peoples around the globe. Interestingly, as Van Gosse notes, most African American newspapers “ignored” the rebel movement prior to 1959, “[d]espite, or perhaps because of the heavy, highly favorable coverage of Castro’s guerilla struggle in the white press during 1957-58.” Following January 1, 1959, however, he identifies four major strands in positive African American press coverage on Cuba: the interracial nature of a revolution that depended upon black leadership as well as white; Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.’s “ostentatious” show of support for Castro; the strong rhetoric of the new Cuban leader in denouncing racism at home and abroad; and the “hypocrisy” of white U.S. leaders denouncing the executions of former Batista associates while tacitly approving or actively advocating for white-on-black violence in their own country.³¹

Although Joe Louis had apparently been making frequent trips to Cuba since the New Year’s celebrations, the story of his association with the Cuban government broke in the press a month before the Floyd Patterson-Ingemar Johansson heavyweight championship rematch fight at New York’s Polo Grounds on June 20, 1960, an event which

³⁰ de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, pp. 189-194.

³¹ Van Gosse, “The African-American Press Greet the Revolution,” in *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution*, ed. Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda Fuertes (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), pp. 266-280 (quote on p. 267). The “white press” that Gosse signals out for favorable Castro coverage during 1957-1958 includes the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and magazines *Time*, *Life*, and *Look*.

Louis was hired to help promote. The president of the firm, William “Billy” Rowe – a former New York deputy police commissioner – attempted to disassociate Louis from the agreement. He noted that one of the partners, Maurice Lockhart, had begun to hash out the arrangement with an Afro-Cuban INIT representative in 1959, and that Castro and Louis did not discuss it during their New Year’s meeting.³² Nonetheless, the promoters of the Patterson-Johansson bout terminated the former champion’s association with their fight card, fearing that rising public anger at his Cuban connection might harm ticket sales.³³

Louis himself seemed taken aback by such criticism. “We have nothing to do with Castro or politics; it’s just another publicity account,” he initially explained. Within days, however, the firestorm of negative media attention – some questioning his patriotism and calling him a “foreign agent” – forced Louis – on advice of his counsel, his wife Martha – to hold a press conference in which he announced that he would end his association with the public relations firm if it did not allow its contract with INIT to lapse. “I have been accused of selling out my country,” he remarked, noting that, despite the contract’s having earned the approval of the U.S. Embassy in Havana, the public’s reaction to the story had left him “depressed and confused” and with “only one decision I can make.”³⁴ Although Rowe initially objected to terminating the contract, as the company was awaiting additional funds from Cuba, the firm notified the Cuban government in July 1960 of its unwillingness to continue the contract. Louis’s personal share of the losses came to approximately \$1,500.³⁵

³² “Joe Louis Agency Engaged by Cuba,” *New York Times*, 26 May 1960.

³³ Barney Nagler, *Brown Bomber* (New York: World Publishing, 1972), pp. 197-199.

³⁴ “Joe Louis Denies Ties with Castro,” *New York Times*, 2 June 1960.

³⁵ “Fidel & the U.S. Negro,” *Time*, 13 June 1960.

Although Louis appeared repentant at the time for violating the public's expectations of "their" former champ, his 1978 autobiography offers a different take on his brief association with the Castro regime. Louis was irate that his firm "had the tourist contract with Castro before the United States got upset with Cuba because he'd lined up with the Russians" and that, when the contract was signed, "we [partners] weren't getting bad vibes from anybody." While ridiculing the idea that he shared Castro's ideological bent ("Me, the lover of money and the best that money can buy, a Communist?"), Louis showed sympathy for the Revolution's aims and for Castro personally, whom he thought "was a fine man."³⁶

Most of all, he chafed at losing a profitable source of income at a time when the U.S. government was still squeezing him for back taxes accrued during World War II. Though he donated \$100,000 to Army and Navy funds from purses earned in fights and exhibitions during the war, the U.S. Internal Revenue Service had refused to forgive the taxes on those earnings. The Latin American tour was an early but failed effort to resolve the debt. After retiring in 1949 just shy of his 35th birthday, Louis reemerged in 1950 to challenge Ezzard Charles, unsuccessfully, for the heavyweight title. Though he won his next eight bouts, including two with Cuban heavyweight Omelio Agramonte, his final bout – with Rocky Marciano in October 1951 – made it obvious that Louis was well past his prime. He retired again, for good, and tried his hand at multiple endeavors that might have earned a quick buck – refereeing wrestling matches, playing on TV quiz game shows, working as a greeter at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas – but did not take care of the underlying debt. The Cuban tourist board venture was thus one in a long string of failed attempts by Louis and his circle of friends to ease his U.S. tax burden. Had not relations between the U.S. and Cuba

³⁶ Louis, *Joe Louis: My Life*, pp. 242-243.

worsened as rapidly as they did, perhaps he might have succeeded in helping to develop Cuba as an African American winter paradise as well as returning to financial stability. In any case, with his wife's intervention, Louis finally received a reprieve from the Internal Revenue Service, who stopped trying to collect from him while not officially retiring the debt.

Predictably, the fracas over Joe Louis's apparently coerced repudiation of his ties with the Castro regime added tension to a quickly fraying U.S.-Cuban relationship. The Cuban government stepped up its propaganda war against the U.S., with radio commentator José Pardo Llada alleging that U.S. government pressure was placed on Joe Louis to end the contract. In doing so, Pardo Llada claimed, the U.S. sought to "prevent the Negro middle class of the United States from coming to Cuba to enjoy good hotels and beaches from which they are barred by discrimination in Florida."³⁷

In what was likely the peak of African American solidarity with Cuba's Revolution, in September 1960, Fidel Castro brought Cuba's public relations machine directly to the people of Harlem by dramatically making the Theresa Hotel his base during a United Nations visit. In doing so, he "instantly created a crisis that exposed the omnipresence of racism in the United States," states Cynthia A. Young. In her scholarship on a movement in the 1960s and 1970s she terms "U.S. Third World Leftists," Young examines how, in the post-World War II era, African American and U.S. Latino/a populations came to view decolonization and liberation struggles abroad as intricately tied to ending their own domestic oppression. Should the point not be clear enough to U.N. delegates, Castro made it explicit in his speech to the General Assembly, in which he called for "African American manhood" and equated

³⁷ "U.S. Pressure Is Charged," *New York Times*, 2 June 1960.

black Americans with his own cadre of revolutionaries, as well as those seeking nationhood on the African continent.³⁸

In a country that remained woefully behind on civil rights, it was feared that Castro's appeal among influential African Americans such as Joe Louis, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Robert F. Williams might make the black population as a whole open to his agenda.³⁹ Yet despite these and other attempts to woo black tourists to Cuba, the effort was doomed to failure. Rosalie Schwartz concludes, "Escalating antagonism over issues of sovereignty, property, and ideology threatened, and then ruptured, U.S.-Cuban relations. By the time Castro nationalized U.S. property in October 1960, most Americans already had scratched Cuba off their lists of desirable travel destinations."⁴⁰ With "patriotic" Americans of all colors, Louis among them, gradually pulling away from the movement, only a small cadre of white and black radicals remained in active support of Cuba. Most of them, too, gradually drew disenchanted with the revolution they found in practice. Although it quickly lost mainstream African American support, the Cuban Revolution would seek to affiliate itself with African liberation struggles over the next decades.⁴¹

The repudiation of the Revolution by an icon like Joe Louis, then probably the most beloved former heavyweight champ in the world (and still years away from his descent into destitution and mental illness), also boded poorly for the future of professional sports in that country. After all, if Cuba really were communist, as Louis's critics had alleged, then it was

³⁸ Cynthia A. Young, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 21-22 (quote on p. 22).

³⁹ "Castro Is Seeking Negroes' Support," *New York Times*, 21 September 1960.

⁴⁰ Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, p. 203.

⁴¹ For a critical look at Cuba's Africa policy, see Carlos Moore, *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa* (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, 1988). For one tale of a black radical's disillusionment with the Castro regime, see John Clytus with Jane Rieker, *Black Man in Red Cuba* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1970).

only a matter of time before the island followed down the path of the Soviet Union in eliminating capitalism and imposing draconian limits on leisure activities. By mid-1960, tourism from the U.S. to Cuba was dying out as “the novelty of the revolution wore off.”⁴² Yet the Castro regime’s October 1960 nationalization of foreign businesses seemed to prove these critics correct, reducing what remained of American tourism to a trickle and – for perhaps the first time in the sport’s history on the island – making Cuban boxing, as such it remained, an almost entirely Cuban affair. Although the last Cuban prizefight occurred sometime in 1961 or very early in 1962 – there is still no clear consensus on when it occurred – the business side of the sport began to die out with the loss of critical foreign tourism. Ironically, although an excessive government focus on the tourist industry and athletes’ and artists’ open access to U.S. markets had initially served to fuel the exodus of these performers abroad, the reverse process – tourism’s slow death and the closing of Cuban borders to foreign travel – would bring about an entirely different exodus, this time not of transnational citizens willing to overlook the republic’s racial and social inequalities because of their own privileged status, but of exiles angered by the loss of their families, possessions, and homeland. While most Cuban exiles in the early 1960s were upper- and middle-class whites who resented the expropriation of their property and other state intrusions, the boxing elites who fled tended to be (but were not exclusively) Afro-Cuban. Without perhaps intending to, they served as a useful Cold War weapon in criticizing the supposedly discrimination-free Cuban Revolution at a time when race relations in the U.S. (and in the South, particularly, of which Florida was a part) remained seriously strained. We look at the processes by which Cuba lost much of its boxing brain trust (trainers, seconds,

⁴² Schwartz, *Pleasure Island*, p. 202.

managers, and promoters) and athletic talent, mostly but not exclusively to Miami, in the next section.

Defections in the Ranks: Cuban Fighters in the United States

The sociologists Nelson Amaro and Alejandro Portes have depicted the migration of Cuba's exiles to the United States as occurring in distinct waves, from "those who wait" to "those who escape," and from "those who escape" to "those who search."⁴³ The first wave, from 1959 to 1962, involved Cuba's elite, the "upper and upper-middle classes [who] were not tied to Batista's government but were bound to a political and economic structure that was completely interpenetrated by the demands and initiatives of American capital." Their flight was in response to the nationalization of American property, worsening U.S.-Cuba relations culminating in a diplomatic break, and agrarian reform laws that stripped many landowners of their property.⁴⁴ Following the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, the next exodus, "those who escape," were largely middle class but also included blue-collar workers, the petit-bourgeoisie, and thousands of children sent to live in the United States without their parents via "Operation Pedro Pan." This migration, which began as a "small flood," slowed after flights were suspended following the October Missile Crisis of 1962. The last wave of the pre-Mariel period, "those who search," lasted from 1965 to 1974 and largely comprised economic refugees who were more "pulled" by the opportunities to be found abroad than "pushed" by political circumstances at home. Thus, Pedraza concludes, "Cuban migration

⁴³ Nelson Amaro and Alejandro Portes, "Una Sociología de Exilio: Situación de los Grupos Cubanos en los Estados Unidos," *Aportes* 23 (January 1972).

⁴⁴ Silvia Pedraza, "Cubans in Exile, 1959-1989: The State of the Research," in *Cuban Studies Since the Revolution*, ed. Damián J. Fernández (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992), pp. 235-257; quote on p. 237.

has always been characterized by an inverse correlation between date of departure and social class of the immigrants.”⁴⁵

While most of Cuba’s top boxers and trainers were not “elite” in economic terms, their status in the Batista administration carried on in the early years of the Castro regime. They thus were given additional opportunities to travel and work abroad and eventually, to defect. These opportunities did not transfer to those whose bouts were mostly regional in nature, outside of the Havana fight center. Nor did it tend to apply to “club fighters,” who made up the majority of active pugilists. These were considered worthy opponents for up-and-coming competition or perhaps for foreign boxers visiting Havana, but who lacked the talent or connections to be valued for their ring skills abroad. As for former amateurs and prizefighters who had not become highly demanded trainers, they were not usually accorded opportunities for travel unless they already achieved influence and status or unless, as with members of the all-white social clubs, their amateur activities had correlated with wealth and privilege. Some active and former boxers and trainers began to leave with the first wave of immigrants, but the exodus did not gain force until mid-1961. By that time, not only did relations between the U.S. and Cuba appear to be at the breaking point, but the very future of prizefighting was in serious doubt. The term “those who escape” characterizes this generation of exiles quite well.

Nonetheless, throughout 1959, 1960, and the first months of 1961, the state-run media furthered the notion that little had changed in Cuba’s pugilistic universe. Indeed, the move away from prizefighting was piecemeal. The regime at first appeared quite willing for

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 237-238. The reference to the “small flood” is from Richard R. Fagen, Richard A. Brody, and Thomas J. O’Leary, *Cubans in Exile: Disaffection and the Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968), p. 62, quoted in Pedraza.

professional sports to continue as before, although it was unable to quell the uneasiness felt by tourists and other visitors. Recalls Angelo Dundee, trainer to world heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali and to numerous Cuban exiles – some famous, many not – at his 5th Street Gym in Miami:

I was in Cuba three days after the revolution... I stayed at the Hilton, where Castro stayed. At that time, Castro still wanted things to go on as usual and he wanted there to be a boxing show. He was at the card and so was his brother Raul and Che Guevara. The atmosphere was always sensational at the fights in Cuba. But now, there were soldiers with machine guns at the fights too. One guy, his machine gun went off straight up in the air. What a scene that caused. That last time I went, when I was going through the airport, security was very tight. They checked everything but the kitchen sink. I said to myself, I'm not coming back anymore.⁴⁶

Throughout 1959, 1960, and into 1961, despite appearances to the contrary, the state-run media furthered the notion that little had changed in Cuba's pugilistic universe. The Spanish- and English-language dailies continued to detail all manner of professional fights, whether held at Havana's Palacio de los Deportes, in the United States, or in far-flung places such as England and Japan. Local prizefights continued to be broadcast on television and radio. (Even Fidel Castro was mindful of not overshadowing major fights; on May 27, 1960, he cut short an interview so that Cubans could watch the televised broadcast of the Benny "Kid" Paret-Don Jordan title fight, taking place that evening in Las Vegas.⁴⁷) The Golden Gloves remained active in Cuba. And in early 1961, the state awarded one of its three "Figuras del Año" (Person of the Year) athletic awards to Paret, winner in the professional

⁴⁶ Robert Cassidy, "History of Cuban Boxing Part 1: The Last Generation of Pro Fighters," International Boxing Hall of Fame, <http://www.ibhof.com/pages/archives/cubapart1.html> (accessed May 1, 2009); "Kid Gavilan," International Boxing Hall of Fame inductee profile, <http://www.ibhof.com/pages/about/inductees/modern/gavilan.html> (accessed May 1, 2009).

⁴⁷ "Castro Rejects 'Threats,'" *New York Times*, 28 May 1960, p. 8.

category (the other categories were amateur and women's sport), for having wrested the world welterweight title from Jordan. Cuba's first world champion, the beloved Kid Chocolate, was on hand to pass out honors at the Gran Fiesta de los Deportes, where the athletes were being celebrated, as was Kid Tunero (Evelio Mustelier), a former top middleweight contender active in Europe who would later move to Spain.⁴⁸

Months before the formal end of prizefighting in revolutionary Cuba, an extraordinary crop of boxers, trainers, managers, promoters, and officials began to desert Cuba. The most notable fighters among them were Luis Manuel Rodríguez, Benny "Kid" Paret, Ultiminio "Sugar" Ramos, José Angel "Mantequilla" Nápoles, Florentino Fernández, Douglas Vaillant, José Stable, José Legra, Orlando Zulueta, and Angel Robinson García. They would come to form the faces of Cuban boxing after 1961, even as they embraced new lands, new families, and new ways of life. While most simply wished to be able to pursue their profession, their decision to live abroad would come to be viewed as a betrayal by the state. Before the U.S. and Cuba broke off diplomatic relations in early 1962, however, it remained possible for North American exiles to travel back and forth to Cuba and to delay any final decisions about which land they would ultimately reside in.

INDER, the First Playa Girón Tournament, and Prizefighting's End

On February 23, 1961, Law 946 established the Instituto Nacional de Deportes, Educación Física y Recreación (National Institute for Sports, Physical Education, and Recreation, INDER). Headed by José Llanusa Gobel, Havana's former mayor, INDER was granted the power to "direct, orient, and plan the development of sports, physical education

⁴⁸ "La Concentración Deportiva," *Deportes: órgano oficial de la DGD*, 1:2 (March 1961), pp. 36-37.

and recreation as an integrated whole.”⁴⁹ Specifically, it was tasked to disseminate sport and recreation to the masses; discover and develop promising athletes; and to introduce new sports.⁵⁰

INDER would be responsible for implementing and overseeing an interconnected, two-pronged mission that came to be known as *masividad* (mass participation): to create an elite athletics program that could be spotlighted in international amateur events and bring acclaim to the Cuban state, particularly from developing nations; and to universalize participation in physical education, sports, and recreation that would not only lead to the development of future athletes but would strengthen the Cuban people and further invest them in the Revolution’s cultural and symbolic achievements. The latter aim was emphasized through the widely used government slogan, *el deporte es salud* (sport is health).⁵¹

In pursuing both a nationalist and internationalist agenda through sports, INDER was modeling itself upon the examples of communist countries, in whose orbit Cuba had been gravitating for some months and would officially enter the following year. On a policy level, the Cuban leadership style was to borrow program ideas from the Soviet bloc as they might work on the island and modify them as needed.⁵² In ideological aims, however, there was a great similarity between these two visions on the role of athletics in modern society. Central those aims, as James Riordan notes of the Soviet Union – and could be said of the

⁴⁹ Pettavino and Pye, *Sport in Cuba*, p. 70.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁵¹ Paula Pettavino and Philip Brenner, “The Dual Role of Sports,” in *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: Reinventing the Revolution*, ed. Philip Brenner, et. al. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), pp. 379-380.

⁵² Pettavino and Pye, *Sport in Cuba*, p. 15.

revolutionary Cuban state as well – “sport has been accorded the vital rôle of *helping to change society*.”⁵³

In Russia, as early as 1917, Vladimir Lenin called for the establishment of a High School for Sports and Physical Culture.⁵⁴ In 1930, the U.S.S.R. opened the All-Union Physical Culture Council to oversee the organization of sport on the level of workplaces, such as factories and schools. By the mid-1930s, the Soviet state had decided to stratify its athletic program into popular and elite levels, thus creating a quasi-professional class of sportsmen and women whose achievements would serve as inspiration for the masses.⁵⁵ Following World War II, the Soviet Union imposed its two-pronged athletic system onto its Eastern European satellite states, such as Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic. Although the comparison is not exact – the Soviet Union’s devastating loss of 20 million people in World War II reinforced its growing emphasis on physical training on the mass level as critical for strengthening national security – it is instructive. For one, the Soviet athletic apparatus early on sought to develop athletes in sports that lacked a strong tradition in Russia and outlying areas – such as basketball and volleyball – as well as ones such as gymnastics and weightlifting that enjoyed deeper traditions there.⁵⁶ Similarly, Cuba beginning in the late 1960s sought to widen its athletic specialties to introduce nontraditional athletic endeavors – which was indeed one of the stated purposes of INDER.

In boxing, as in baseball, however, INDER was hardly working with a blank slate. While the talent was unquestionably there, far less so had been opportunities for young

⁵³ James Riordan, “The U.S.S.R.,” in *Sport Under Communism: The U.S.S.R., Czechoslovakia, The G.D.R., China, Cuba*, ed. James Riordan (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2nd ed., rev., 1981 [1978]), p. 15 (emphasis in original).

⁵⁴ Don Anthony, “Introduction,” in *Sport Under Communism*, p. 6.

⁵⁵ Riordan, “The U.S.S.R.,” in *Sport Under Communism*, pp. 23-25.

⁵⁶ Riordan, “The U.S.S.R.,” in *Sport Under Communism*, pp. 27-28, 31.

boxers of all classes and colors to compete on the amateur circuit. Cuba had been active in Golden Gloves competition since 1938, had sent boxers to the Pan-American Games, and had sent athletes to the 1960 Olympic Games. Yet amateur boxing had taken a decided back seat to its professional variant, particularly since the early 1950s.

INDER moved quickly to establish a national tournament that would not only feature the best the nascent state had to offer, but would soon begin to serve as a site for international competition as well. The first Torneo Nacional Aficionado Playa Girón (Playa Girón National Amateur Tournament) was organized under INDER auspices in October 1961, several months after Cuba had successfully repelled a spectacular invasion attempt by U.S.-based Cuban exiles.⁵⁷ This tournament determined Cuba's first national amateur boxing champions in the revolutionary era, most of whom would go on to compete at the 1962 Central American and Caribbean Games, Cuba's first international tournament as a communist country.⁵⁸

INDER's importance to the development of Cuban sport grew stronger with the promulgation on January 4, 1962, of Resolution 67-D, suspending professional boxing in the island. It was the first professional sport to be singled out for suppression, though not the last. The Frontón, long a center for Havana's jai alai activity (and, by extension, of its

⁵⁷ The failed invasion has come to be known in U.S. English shorthand as "Bay of Pigs" because the exiles arrived in the Bahía de Cochinos in Matanzas province. Cubans refer to it as "Playa Girón," the name of the beach where some of the exiles first made land.

⁵⁸ The first Playa Girón tournament winners were Robert "Chocolático" Pérez (flyweight, 112 lbs/51 kg), Osvaldo Riverí (bantamweight, 119 lbs/54 kg), Benigno Junco (featherweight, 57 kg/125 lbs), Moisés Vives (lightweight, 132 lbs/60 kg), Lázaro Montalvo (light welterweight, 63.5 kg/139 lbs), Virgilio Jiménez (welterweight, 67 kg/147 lbs), Waldo Santiago (light middleweight, 71 kg/156 lbs), Gregorio Aldama (middleweight, 75 kg/165 lbs), Marino Bofill (light heavyweight, 81 kg/178 lbs), and Raúl Díaz (heavyweight, +81 kg/+178 lbs). These were the weight classes in use in Olympic boxing between 1952 and 1964. See Alfonso, *Puños dorados*, p. 117.

gambling), was shuttered soon afterward.⁵⁹ Nor was baseball, Fidel Castro's own passion, exempt from the government's zeal against capitalism in sports. Resolution 67-D was quickly followed up with National Decree 83a on March 19, 1962. With this, the Castro regime sought to strengthen "nuestra Revolución Socialista" (our Socialist Revolution) by permanently repudiating the country's link to professional sports, which were now viewed to be a remnant of an exploitative and racist capitalism. Referencing the prior resolution, the decree declared prizefighting, in particular, to be "a completely noxious activity and contrary to the development and state of health of the boxers who practice this sport." It claimed that professional sport "fomenta la explotación de hombre por hombre y rompe el espíritu que debe animar la práctica de las actividades deportivas."⁶⁰

Cuba was hardly the only country in the early 1960s to consider ending prizefighting. (Iceland has had a ban in place since 1956.) There had been calls to regulate or ban prizefighting in the United States long before the 1950s, calls which grew louder and stronger with the high-profile deaths of Benny Paret in 1962 and Davey Moore in 1963. While little changed in the U.S., Sweden and Norway did end up instituting bans (Sweden has since lifted many of its restrictions).

What made revolutionary Cuba's position on prizefighting unique, of course, was its decision to ban all professional sports. For practical purposes, the ban principally affected two sports – boxing and "slavery baseball," as Castro termed it. Given all else that had been going on in Cuba since Castro's rise to power, the ban itself was anticlimactic. Prizefighting

⁵⁹ Sugden, *Boxing and Society*, p. 150.

⁶⁰ The full text of the law is available in Alfonso, *Puños dorados*, p. 80. The original excerpts read, respectively, "una actividad totalmente nociva y contraria al desarrollo y estado de salud de los atletas que practican este deporte" and "fomenta la explotación del hombre por el hombre y lo desvincula del espíritu que debe animar la práctica de las actividades deportivas."

– and tourism – was already dead. But the country’s move toward communism dictated the unhinging of sport from capitalism, just as had been done in the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that many popular accounts of the end of prizefighting in Cuba refer to 1960 as the year in which the Castro regime instituted its ban. By early 1962, the political battle lines – in boxing as in many other areas of Cuban life – had already been drawn, and they would only continue to harden as the Cold War wore on.

The Death of Benny “Kid” Paret

Even deceased boxers were not exempt from the political tug-of-war between the Cuban state and its enemies abroad. This was most vividly illustrated in the sad case of Benny “Kid” Paret, who lost his life several days after being knocked unconscious by Emile Griffith during their televised welterweight championship bout at Madison Square Garden, New York, on March 24, 1962.

The details of the bout are well known. It was to be a “rubber match” between the Santa Clara native and the U.S. Virgin Islander, both transplants to New York. They had fought twice the previous year (on April 1 and September 30), with Griffith winning the first bout by 13-round knockout and Paret the second by split decision. Though Paret was still a young man, his career was already on the decline; he had lost four of his prior six bouts and had recently experienced a severe beating at the hands of Gene Fullmer. He came into the last Griffith fight most likely brain damaged from his prior bouts, but because of his reputation as someone who could “take a punch” and who had a “good chin” (terms used to

indicate someone who can remain on two feet, and perhaps even pull out a victory, while taking a punishing beating), Paret was an especially vulnerable target.

Following his death, his brother traveled to the U.S. to claim his body for burial in Havana. Castro critics claimed that the dictator planned to put on a “show” of prizefighting’s brutality there using the body as his showpiece. In any case, Paret’s young widow, Lucy – a New Yorker of Puerto Rican descent – refused to permit it. According to Johnny Sarduy, Paret had expressed a desire not to return to Cuba, “ni muerto” (not even dead) while the Castro regime was in place; Sarduy and Luis Manuel Rodríguez spoke up on the widow’s behalf.⁶¹ According to her wishes, her husband’s body is now buried in Saint Raymond’s Cemetery in the Bronx, New York. Griffith, deeply regretful over Paret’s death, was not welcomed to attend his funeral.⁶² The political struggle over Paret’s corpse (which Sarduy sarcastically called “el trofeo” that the Castro regime was unable to obtain⁶³) is now a little-known element of this sordid tale, which ruined the career of the referee, Ruby Goldstein, who failed to stop the fight, devastated Griffith personally and affected his career for a time, caused legal investigations into Paret’s inexperienced Cuban manager, Manuel Alfaro, and others involved in promoting and arranging the bout, and strengthened the anti-boxing lobby in the U.S. and elsewhere.

In Cuba, Paret’s death provided Castro with further rhetorical justification for cutting Cuba’s ties to prizefighting (“el boxeo rentado”) once and for all. In the United States, however, Paret’s death – like Davey Moore’s a year later at the hands of Cuban exile

⁶¹ Sarduy, *De Tierras Nuevas*, p. 149.

⁶² Ron Ross, *Nine... Ten... and Out! The Two Worlds of Emile Griffith* (New York: DiBella Entertainment, 2008), pp. 65-66; Martin Mulcahy, “Resting places of boxing icons,” 24 August 2005, <http://sports.espn.go.com/sports/boxing/news/story?id=2141018> (accessed on February 21, 2008).

⁶³ Sarduy, *De Tierras Nuevas*, p. 149.

Ultiminio “Sugar” Ramos – brought about little reform of the sport despite much public hand-wringing. Indeed, in an unforeseen twist of fate, Paret’s death has – since the release of the documentary *Ring of Fire: The Emile Griffith Story* (2005) – become notable in the U.S. primarily for what it has to say about the tragic consequences of homophobia.⁶⁴ Paret called Griffith a “maricón” and made obscene gestures toward him at the weigh-in prior to the fight – their third, a “rubber match” to determine the welterweight championship after each had racked up a victory over the other in 1961. An enraged Griffith took his anger out in the ring, winning by technical knockout in the twelfth round, though referee Goldstein could have stopped the fight much earlier. Though later cleared of any wrongdoing by a special NYSAC report to the governor on the causes of Paret’s death, Goldstein would never live it down, or escape it even in death. Nearly half of his 1984 two-column obituary in the *New York Times* discussed the death of Paret.⁶⁵ In an autobiography published in 1959, the referee, himself a former highly touted prizefighter, had unwittingly predicted his own future:

If you, as a fan, do not remember who refereed the last important fight you saw, in person or on television, count that as a point in the referee’s favor, for it means he must have done his work efficiently, keeping out of the way of the fighters and attracting no attention from the spectators. Yet there are times when, through circumstances beyond his control, the referee’s name will always be associated with a fight, or fights.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ *Ring of Fire: The Emile Griffith Story*, directed by Ron Berger and Dan Klores, Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2005. For an example of commentary linking Paret’s death to his anti-gay slurs, see “Boxer Benny (Kid) Paret died because of homophobia,” Pam’s House Blend web log, <http://www.pamspaulding.com/weblog/2005/04/boxer-benny-kid-paret-died-because-of.html> (accessed on February 22, 2008).

⁶⁵ Thomas Rogers, “Ruby Goldstein, Ex-Fighter and Controversial Referee,” *New York Times*, 24 April 1984, p. B6. Though the obituary focused upon criticism of Goldstein for failing to intervene quickly enough in the third Griffith-Paret bout, additional paragraphs noted, ironically, two of his prior controversial TKO stoppages – of Randy Turpin vs. Sugar Ray Robinson in September 1951 and of Floyd Patterson vs. Ingemar Johansson in June 1959 – either one, perhaps, which could have ended tragically had the referee not acted as he did.

⁶⁶ Ruby Goldstein as told to Frank Graham, *Third Man in the Ring* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1959), p 153.

Despite the senselessness of Paret's death, as many contemporary observers concluded, it was the product not so much of Goldstein's inaction or Griffith's fists but of the cumulative effects of prior ring wars, especially the beating Paret had experienced three months prior at the hands of the larger and stronger Gene Fullmer. With a family to support and limited other employment skills, there were simply too many financial incentives for Paret to keep fighting, even if he were aware on some level that he might be risking his life. Regardless, this shocking tragedy helped to spur safety improvements in U.S. prize rings – including the increase in glove weight from eight to ten ounces and the addition of a fourth rope enclosing the ring. These changes, ironically, were first made during the Emile Griffith-Luis Manuel Rodríguez welterweight championship bout at Madison Square Garden on June 8, 1963. Unfortunately, on this night of triumph for Rodríguez, Paret's good friend, these changes were not enough to prevent another ring death. In the very next bout, in attempt to defend his featherweight championship, Davey Moore lost his life after a one-sided beating and knockout by yet another Cuban exile, Sugar Ramos. It had been just over a year since Paret's death.⁶⁷

In spite of having paid the ultimate price for his homophobia, the young, uneducated Paret – the man who lost his homeland and died at age 25 – is today, in many quarters, much less of a sympathetic figure than Griffith, who has for decades expressed regret over Paret's death and who has recently come out as being non-heterosexual (the U.S. Virgin Island native tends to avoid labels, such as “gay” and “bisexual,” other than to admit when pressed

⁶⁷ “Formal Inquiry of Ring Fatality Opened by Pennsylvania Board,” *New York Times*, 9 April 1963, p. 76; Ross, *Nine... Ten... and Out!*, p. 91.

that he has had sexual relations with both men and women⁶⁸). In an ironic footnote, Griffith too nearly died after a savage beating – at the hands of unknown assailants in the summer of 1992 who attacked him after he left a New York City gay bar – and which led to injuries that were initially explained in the *New York Times* as the result of a fall.⁶⁹

Boxers Taking Sides: Revolutionaries and Counter-Revolutionaries

In the months after the propagation of National Decree 83a, active or current boxers who sought to defend the old system – or worse, to propagate it abroad – were viewed as traitors to the state. Those who appeared to embrace the new regime were held up as examples for all Cubans despite their ties to the old system. Kid Chocolate was especially praised for having been Cuba's first professional world champion and refusing to leave his home despite numerous calls to defect. The state honored the Cerro native by renaming a Havana stadium for him. The other great Cuban pre-revolutionary champion, Kid Gavilán, who had retired from prizefighting in 1958, also initially chose to remain. While he retained some privileges, he would ultimately lose much of his land and, for stretches at a time, his freedom, for attempting to proselytize as a Jehovah's Witness. He was given emigration papers for the United States in 1968, where he lived for the rest of his life.

The state saved its greatest praise for those who had abandoned sports altogether in order to fight for a new Cuba. Giraldo Córdova Cardín, a young amateur boxer, died as part of the anti-Batista insurgency – reportedly in the fabled Moncada Barracks attack of July

⁶⁸ Bob Herbert, "The Haunting of Emile Griffith," *New York Times*, 14 April 2005.

⁶⁹ Ira Berkow, "Sport of the Times; That 'Sinful Business' Remains in Business," *New York Times*, 17 August 1992. For a study of Cuban attitudes toward homosexuality before and since the Revolution, see Ian Lumsden, *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

1953. According to the mythology that the revolutionary state would build around him, Cardín had won all of his amateur bouts up to that time and suffered his only defeat at the time of his death, for “failure to present” (no-show).⁷⁰ Cardín, a *mulato*⁷¹, is depicted as being far ahead of his time – as a boxer with tremendous talent and dedication, but with no interest in professionalism, believing that “el deporte era el deporte” (sport was sport) and that “los pesos se los iba a buscar en otra parte” (he was going to look for money elsewhere).⁷² Revolutionary Cuba would honor his sacrifice by naming his neighborhood CDR after him⁷³ and by inaugurating an annual amateur boxing tournament in 1968 bearing his name. Similar treatment was given following the death of former amateur Lino Salabarría, who joined the national revolutionary militia in 1962 after 45 amateur fights, most of them victories. Salabarría’s death while combating counter-insurgency forces in Escambray in 1963 gave the Revolution another boxing martyr.⁷⁴ As with Cardín, he was remembered through the renaming of institutions, such as an EIDE (School for the Initiation of Scholastic Sports), and in the creation of a boxing tournament bearing his name.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Cardín’s amateur record at the time of his death is listed as 5 wins, 1 loss, and 1 draw, with the loss due to his no-show on the night of his death.

⁷¹ According to a historian of the Moncada attack, Antonio Rafael de la Cova, Cardín was one of fourteen Afro-Cuban insurgents at Moncada (two blacks and twelve *mulatos*), “making up less than 9 percent of the [insurgent] total.” See de la Cova, *The Moncada Attack: Birth of the Cuban Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), pp. 295-296, note 14.

⁷² Jorge Daubar García, *Giraldo Córdova Cardín: Cita con la gloria* (Ciudad de La Habana: Ministerio de Cultura, Editorial Científico-Técnica, 1983), p. 8.

⁷³ Daubar García, *Giraldo Cordova Cardín*, p. 4.

⁷⁴ Joaquín Gómez Nazco and José R. Crespo, *Golpes Limpios* (printed in conjunction with the “XXVI Torneo Internacional de Boxeo ‘Giraldo Cordova Cardín,’” 1993), p. 19.

⁷⁵ Less well known, but recently honored in the Cuban state media, was Holveín Quesada, an 18-year-old with 30 amateur bouts who was “asesinado por los esbirros de Batista” (assassinated by Batista’s henchmen) in April 1958. See Elio Menéndez, “Joven mártir de la Revolución que dejó el boxeo para combatir a Batista,” *Cub.Ahora*, June 9, 2008, http://www.cubahora.cu/index.php?tpl=principal/ver-noticias/ver-not_dep.tpl.html&newsid_obj_id=1026064 (accessed October 21, 2008).

The state even attempted to change the language of boxing in order to remove both its ties to the English language (*nocaut, ring, etc.*) and to prizefighting. These efforts were ridiculed by the Miami-based Unión Deportiva de Cuba Libre (Free Cuba Sporting Union), a group of exiled athletes and sympathizers formed in 1962 that protested Cuba's participation at the Central American and Caribbean Games in Kingston, Jamaica. The Unión Deportiva's alarmist literature claimed to speak for all of Cuba's athletes burdened by communism. In boxing, it lampooned the Cuban press's avoidance of the phrase "technical knockout," in English shortened to "TKO" and in Spanish to "KOT": "Nowadays in Red Cuba, the official rules prohibit the use of the word TKO. They substitute 'involuntary rest.'" Unión Deportiva de Cuba Libre's propagandists viewed such language modifications as a sign of the communists' "fear" of the English language and desire to replace it with Russian in influencing Cuba's everyday vernacular.⁷⁶ In this instance, ironically, the International Amateur Boxing Association (AIBA) would follow Cuba's lead; in amateur competition, the terms "knockout" and "technical knockout" were replaced with RSC (referee stopping contest).

In contrast to such martyrs, the state excoriated those who had failed to live up to their revolutionary potential as athletes in the public eye. One of the ways in which it tried to discredit disgruntled active or former boxers was by attacking their credentials inside the ring. The smear campaign against an imprisoned Antonio "Puppy" García was particularly vicious; he was depicted as a talentless brawler who was notable primarily for bleeding (and occasionally fainting) in his fights. While García fought all but three of his fifty professional

⁷⁶ Unión Deportiva de Cuba Libre, *El deporte sin libertad no es deporte: el deporte comunista es un instrumento político* (Miami, FL: Unión Deportiva de Cuba Libre, 1963), p. 30. The original text read, "Ahora en Cuba Roja el reglamento oficial prohíbe usar la palabra k.o.t. Ellos la sustituyen por 'descanso involuntario'."

fighters in Cuba – the others were in Caracas, Venezuela – he was a beloved national featherweight champion who had experienced three ring wars with compatriot Ciro Moracén. Shortly after the Revolution occurred, he was being prepped for his first U.S. bout, a title fight in Miami’s Orange Bowl.⁷⁷ According to Cuban exile and boxing historian Enrique Encinosa, “At the age of twenty-seven, waiting for a world title fight, Puppy Garcia had to decide between his career and his country.” He claims that García “retired from the ring, but not from fighting, for by 1960 he was involved in the resistance against Castro, transporting weapons, hiding covert operatives, driving cars in urban guerrilla operations.” García was sent to the Isle of Pines prison in 1961. Refusing to accept “rehabilitation,” which would have required him “to issue a public apology asking forgiveness for opposing the revolution, attend Marxism classes and if requested to teach the ideology to other prisoners,” García spent the next nine years there, emerging at age 36 with a smashed ankle (the result of an attack by his guards) and unable to box any longer. He was finally able to leave Cuba as part of the Mariel boatlift in 1980 and lived in Florida until his death from stomach cancer in 2005. García was heralded among the exile population in and around Miami and given a remunerative position as sports director of the Sweetwater, Florida, Parks and Recreation Department.⁷⁸ His death occasioned many heartfelt, albeit florid obituaries by exiles about his courageous stance against the communist regime. Puppy’s older brother, Lino, also a former prizefighter, was not so lucky; he is apparently still in Cuba, an ailing old man, said by exiles to have been isolated by the state.

⁷⁷ Robert Cassidy, Jr. “25 Years Later, the Fighters of Mariel,” October 31, 2005, <http://www.thesweetscience.com/boxing-article/2805/years-later-fighters-mariel/> (accessed February 15, 2008).

⁷⁸ Enrique Encinosa, “Puppy Garcia Was Something Special,” Wail! *The CBZ Journal*, July 2006, <http://cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/0001-enrique.html> (accessed February 11, 2008).

At least two former boxers, Johnny Sarduy and Pedro José “Huesito” González, converted themselves into “boxeadores-brigadistas” as part of Brigade 2506, the CIA-backed group of Cuban exiles who unsuccessfully attempted to invade Cuba in April 1962 as part of the Bay of Pigs invasion (referred to by the Cuban state as Playa Girón). In his 2005 memoir, Sarduy details how he gave up a solid career as a Miami-based prizefighter – a young Cassius Clay once served as a preliminary fighter for a main event featuring Sarduy – to begin training with the brigade in Louisiana. After returning to the United States unharmed, Sarduy at age 24 decided to give up boxing, dispirited by the low purses to be earned in Miami’s rings – which he remembered as being less than half of what he made in Havana – and concerned with raising enough money to bring his family in Cuba to live with him.⁷⁹ His memoir glosses over the decades he spent becoming a millionaire drywall contractor in Miami and instead focuses mostly on his early years in boxing and on the fates of his peers, “la generación de los cincuenta.”⁸⁰ While revolutionary Cuba has had little to say of Sarduy, he has plenty to say about it – and about the way it has treated its boxers, in particular. He claims that 90 percent of Cuba’s boxers left the island by the end of 1961 and takes particular pains to detail the sad trajectories of boxers imprisoned by the Castro regime and those whose careers ended in drunken poverty while in exile, their lives ruined by the loss of their homeland and families. Sarduy frequently offers his bona fides for offering such a critique – one, that he was born poor in Las Villas (a poverty that, in his mind, negates his

⁷⁹ Sarduy, *De Tierras Nuevas*, p. 115.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

relative privilege as a white boxer in a mostly black sport); and two, that he was, in his own estimation, the second-best bantamweight produced in Cuba, after the gifted Luis Galvani.⁸¹

Similarly, the Cuban state sought to discredit those anti-revolutionary exiles whose successful ring careers made them impossible to ignore by attacking both their quality as fighters and their ties to family and nation. Florentino Fernández was widely heralded in Cuba for taking middleweight champion Gene Fullmer the distance in their August 1961 bout. Fernández was close to his family and would return to Cuba after every bout. But when he decided to remain in the United States after the Fullmer bout, Fernández was disowned by his mother and labeled a traitor in the Cuban press. A service station he owned in Havana, valued at approximately \$35,000, was appropriated by the state. Fernández's close ties to Cuba also came under fire in the U.S., where a photograph of him in Cuban militia uniform was published. In response to this controversy, Fernández publicly aligned himself with the United States.⁸² In retaliation, the Cuban sportswriter Elio Menéndez published a December 1962 diatribe against Fernández in *Semanario Deportivo LPV*, the Revolution's equivalent of *Sports Illustrated*. It read, in part:

Florentino Fernandez, según informes recibidos, trabaja como portero en un Circo Mexicano. El traidor Florentino, que viene en vertiginoso descenso, habiendo perdido sus últimos tres combates por nocaut, sigue la misma ruta de otros tantos. Suerte para él que su último combate no tuvo el mismo desenlace que el de Paret.⁸³

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 132. Sarduy minimizes his own perceived achievement, however, by describing Cuba's weakness in the flyweight and bantamweight divisions in the 1950s; he notes that he only fought three Cubans in main events, including the aforementioned "Huesito" González, whom he later ran into during the Bay of Pigs invasion.

⁸² Pat Putnam, "No More Trouble Within," pp. 15-17, 78, from the IBHOF file on Florentino Fernández.

⁸³ Quoted in Unión Deportiva de Cuba Libre, *El deporte sin libertad no es deporte*, p. 10. Fernández had actually lost three of his four fights from January to October 1962 by knockout – to Dick Tiger, Joey Giambra, and Rubin "Hurricane" Carter – but he defeated Phil Moyer in between the Giambra and Carter bouts.

Florentino Fernandez, according to received reports, works as a janitor in a Mexican Circus. The traitor Florentino, who has experienced a vertiginous decline, having lost his last three fights by knockout, continues along the same route of others like him. It was lucky for him that his last fight didn't have the same denouement as did that of Paret.

The Unión Deportiva de Cuba Libre rebuffed this image of Fernández, publishing a photograph of him happily driving a convertible in Miami, with the following caption: “Here we have Florentino. The glory of our boxing. The photo is from Miami, where he is acclaimed by an international fan base, and where he also contributes to the liberation of Cuba.”⁸⁴ In the end, however, Fernández remained caught between the dueling propaganda machines, unable to find the success he had dreamed of in the United States or to disconnect himself from Cuba. As one commentator put it, “Habit sent Fernandez to the Fifth St. Gym in Miami Beach each day. But he might as well have saved the effort. He didn't have to put on boxing gloves to fight himself.”⁸⁵

Although Fernández was symbolically pulled between two different countries, Luis Manuel Rodríguez was physically so. In July 1961, the pianist-boxer who had been lionized in the early revolutionary press for representing the best of what Cuban athletes had to offer, found himself, along with masseur and trainer Luis Sarría, on a hijacked Eastern Air Lines flight from Miami. Bound for Tampa, New Orleans, and ultimately Dallas, where Rodríguez was to face Curtis Cokes, it was instead diverted by gunmen to Havana in late July 1961. The passengers were allowed to return to the United States a few days later. Rodríguez and Cokes

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 10. The original text read, “Aquí tienen a Florentino. Gloria de nuestro boxeo. La foto es de Miami, donde es aclamado por una fanaticada internacional, y donde también contribuye a la liberación de Cuba.”

⁸⁵ Putnam, “No More Trouble Within,” p. 15.

did fight in Dallas soon afterward, but the plane remained in Cuba.⁸⁶ Sarría and Rodríguez both made permanent homes in the Miami area, working – like so many other Cuban exiles of this and later generations – out of the Dundee brothers’ 5th Street Gym.

While prizefighters are infamous for having unhappy endings, and while there were individual success stories, Cuba’s pugilistic exiles seemed to be especially unlucky – with experiences such as untimely deaths, lifelong family separation, ongoing physical problems, mental health issues, jail sentences, obscurity, poverty, unemployment, and divorce more often the norm than the exception among the top fighters of the 1950s and 1960s. There is no way to quantify their suffering, of course, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the road of most exile prizefighters was a difficult one, and that financial and personal stability were extremely hard to obtain. As just one example, José Stable lost his one shot at fame and fortune – a welterweight title bout with Emile Griffith, the man who had inadvertently killed his close friend Benny Paret. In a double main event card at Madison Square Garden (also featuring José Torres-Willie Pastrano) on March 30, 1965, one that broke the 1947 Joe Louis-Joe Walcott record for fight receipts, Griffith endured a slugging contest with a valiant Stable over fifteen rounds, retaining his welterweight title by decision.⁸⁷ For their efforts, Griffith earned \$70,000, Stable a career-high \$10,000. Yet this payday, which nearly matched the \$12,000 he had earned the previous year in three main-event fights, did little to help the 24-year-old Cuban immigrant, who had a young family to support and did not know English, to achieve the American dream. A total of \$1,600 was taken out for training expenses (food,

⁸⁶ “Luis Manuel Rodríguez... un boxeador que debió ser pianista,” *INRA*, January 1960, pp. 74-77; “U.S. Plane Seized; Flown to Havana,” *New York Times*, 25 July 1961; “33 Passengers Listed Aboard Seized Airliner,” *New York Times*, 25 July 1961.

⁸⁷ Robert Lipsyte, “Torres Halts Pastrano and Griffith Beats Stable in Title Bouts at Garden,” *New York Times*, 31 March 1965, p. 30; Ross, *Nine... Ten...and Out!*, p. 133.

lodging, sparring partners, equipment, tickets to the fight for friends and family, and the like). Ten percent of the remaining \$8,400 went to Stable's lead trainer, Victor Valle, and one-third of the ensuing amount went to his manager, Manny Gonzalez. Of the \$5,040 remaining for Stable, slightly over half the original purse, he received only \$540 in cash up-front and the remainder in small weekly installments. As a *New York Times* reporter concluded, for a "middle-range fighter" like Stable, "even the big pies turn out to be small potatoes."⁸⁸

As for Stable's career, it was never the same after the Griffith beating. The loss of his only title shot demoralized him, and he sank into a lifestyle of drinking and adultery, deserting his family when his wife was pregnant with their third child. The money that he had sought to earn so he could bring his extended family to the United States from Cuba never materialized; he ended up fighting for purses of \$250 or less before retiring in 1967. His story ended tragically, with a life sentence in prison for the attempted murder in late 1981 of a policeman in Florida.⁸⁹

Although surviving exiled prizefighters who left Cuba behind in the 1960s have long since retired from the ring, their stories continue to resonate nearly five decades later. The waning Castro regime (now under the leadership of Fidel's younger brother, Raúl), though it has instituted some minor reforms of late, continues to embrace many of the principles upon which it has ruled for fifty years, including a ban on professional athletics. In the intervening

⁸⁸ Robert Lipsyte, "Too Many Hands Often Spoil the Boxing Pot of Gold," *New York Times*, 4 April 1965, pp. S1-S2.

⁸⁹ Various articles, IBHOF file on José Stable; "Sports People: Former Boxer Charged," *New York Times*, 18 November 1981; "Stable, Ex-Boxer, Sentenced to Life," *New York Times*, 20 August 1982; Ira Berkow, "The Images of José Stable, Jr.," *New York Times*, 30 September 1982, p. B19.

years, the regime's amateur boxing and other athletic programs have achieved an astonishing level of international success. Yet the lack of personal liberty and relative poverty that such institutions exact upon their participants has, since the end of the Cold War, been one that athletes (particularly boxers and baseball players, those most likely to achieve lucrative professional careers abroad) are increasingly unwilling to pay. In the Conclusion, I briefly explore the trajectory of Cuba's amateur boxing successes since 1963 and consider whether prizefighting might be reinstated there in the not-too-distant future.

Conclusion: The Ascendancy of Cuba's Amateur Boxing Program and Its Uncertain Future, 1963 to the Present

Framing the Republic Era in Revolutionary Terms

Histories of republic-era Cuba run the risk of projecting ahead to the Revolution, of analyzing this earlier period in light of what came after it. Throughout this dissertation, my close attention to the nature of U.S.-Cuban relations and the ways in which it shaped the growth of boxing on the island has helped me to maintain my focus on the neocolonial state rather than upon the rebellions that would ultimately overthrow it. In doing so, I do not wish to imply that the long Cuban insurgency had no bearing upon the world of boxing; as evidenced by the previous chapter, boxers were often at the forefront of the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary movements, leaving behind stylized combat for the genuine article. Yet it is impossible, perhaps, to avoid the republic-revolutionary dichotomy altogether, for the point-counterpoint of the second Batista administration and the early Castro regime – and, more broadly, of the neocolonial and socialist state – offer a kind of symmetry that is difficult to ignore. In acknowledging it, however, we must be careful not to give in to caricatures but rather to draw attention to the nuances of each.

It is true, for instance, that the Batista regime sought to maximize revenue from prizefights and encouraged the export of talented athletes (as well as musicians and others) abroad. Still, it did not entirely ignore the opportunity to gain national prestige at less costly regional amateur tournaments; nor did all amateurs choose to enter the professional ranks. Similarly, the Castro regime did not initially elect to eliminate prizefighting, but rather sought to find a way to reduce the influence of foreign business interests and to minimize

exploitative practices that put boxers at risk for injury or death. Its decision to ban professional sports must be viewed in light of worsening U.S.-Cuban relations and the concomitant destruction of the Cuban tourist sector.

This Conclusion briefly considers the fate of Cubans who continued to work as boxers or trainers after 1962, whether for their native country or for new lands. It is ironic that, while rejecting prizefighting as corrupt and violent, the Castro regime has sought to incorporate amateur boxing into its nationalist agenda. This attempt has met with rejection by exiles who argue that amateurism as practiced by the socialist state is professionalism under another name. No level of Olympic success, in their view, can justify individual athletes' loss of personal liberty and of the ability to profit financially from their talents.

Perhaps what is most striking about Cuban boxing after 1962, however, is not its blurring of the line between amateur and professional, but rather the absence of contemporary U.S. influences in its manner and methods of fighting. Under former national team coach Alcides Sagarra, the Cubans developed their own school of boxing, influenced to some extent by the Soviets, which proved difficult for opponents to beat. Relying heavily upon defensive techniques, including incremental head and hand movements and rapid footwork, as well as furious precision punching, this style owes something to earlier Cuban prizefighters like Kid Chocolate but may be characterized as “scientific” rather than flashy, seeking to overwhelm an opponent not so much by power or even speed as by totality. With every new administrative change in amateur scoring, including a transition from calculating victories by the number of rounds won toward a computerized system that credits a boxer's cumulative number of “clean” punches, the Cubans have modified their style accordingly. However one views what the Cubans have accomplished in amateur rings since the 1962 ban

on professional sports, it is worthy of attention that, under the regime of Fidel Castro, boxing has finally become “Cubanized” in a way that the earliest advocates of Muscular Christianity on the island could never have anticipated. Exiles who decry the current style of Cuban amateur boxing as bloodless or uniform fail to note that what is considered the pinnacle of international amateur boxing today varies vastly from what was in practice five decades ago, when competitors did not wear headgear and judging was based upon a variety of factors, such as the nebulous concept of “ring generalship,” beyond the number of clean punches connected. Those changes were not Cuba’s doing, but it has capitalized upon them. For if the motive is winning while expending the least amount of energy, without doing long-term physical damage either to the competitor or his opponent – in order to bring prestige to the nation, demonstrate superiority over capitalist systems, and sustain linkages with international sport –, then the Cubans, until very recently at least, have found their own ways to do it. With a fairly new crop of Olympic-caliber defectors honing their skills in U.S. and German gyms, however, it remains to be seen how well this style will translate into success in the prize rings.

This project has argued that the trajectory of boxing in republic-era Cuba, while heavily influenced by the new nation’s dependence upon and cultural ties to the United States, nonetheless developed along internal rather than external lines. The Johnson-Willard bout brought with it a tremendous amount of publicity that might have helped to lift Cuba’s nascent boxing culture from obscurity to acceptance. But with the end of that history-making moment, the national government not only failed to capitalize upon the growth of interest in the sport, it actually sought to suppress it. The legalization of boxing spectacles was largely accomplished by middle-class men who, perhaps swayed in part by the Muscular

Christian ideals brought to the island by American missionaries and businessmen, sought to tie the practice of pugilism to the cultivation of a modern masculinity – one that rejected prior forms of colonial-era combat, such as knife fighting.

Despite U.S.-led efforts to ban interracial bouts as potentially divisive for a nation only a few decades out of slavery, aficionados were able to prevent drawing the race line in prize rings, thus giving Afro-Cubans a meaningful venue to personal as well as professional advancement and, not incidentally, providing a showcase for top African American fighters for whom opportunities were limited at home. While the YMCA and exclusive athletic associations prevented the participation of Afro-Cubans in their instructional classes and amateur competitions, the initiation of the state-run Golden Gloves tournament in the late 1930s provided the impetus for blacks and poor whites throughout the island to secure critical experience in amateur rings before making the transition to the professional, or semi-professional, ranks.

These promising developments notwithstanding, boxing was incompletely integrated into the Cuban nationalist project. Having initially ignored or rejected its potential to serve nationalist ends, the state would eventually attempt to exploit boxing – particularly prizefighting – for financial gain. It accomplished this primarily through the export of talent abroad. Although amateur and professional boxing remained popular pastimes in Havana and the provinces well after the overthrow of the Batista regime, by the 1940s the most talented pugilists found they had to leave the country if they wished to make their mark at the highest levels – or, in many cases, to eke out a living at all. The state encouraged their outmigration throughout the Americas, but especially to the United States, rather than attempt to develop a homegrown market for international sports tourism that might have

brought long-term benefit to average Cubans. Men and women of the middle class – businessmen, writers, editors, students, housewives, and the like – had played a major role in the popularization of the sport, with a few hardy young souls even joining the prize rings in the days when there was little difference (in terms of skill levels) between amateurs and pros. By the 1940s, however, prizefighting had become firmly established as a sport for the poor, one that attracted “negritos” like Kid Chocolate and Black Bill as well as poor whites like Johnny Sarduy, as well as underemployed semi-professionals such as Guantánamo’s Kid Chicle. Except for those who made their living from commenting upon or organizing bouts, and the small numbers of amateur practitioners in exclusive athletic clubs, the middle classes were no longer participants, but merely consumers, of boxing.

The creation of a privileged class of transnational fighters, whose personal exploits as well as ring results were reported in the U.S. and Cuban press, helped to cement the notion that the best way to achieve success on the island was to leave it behind, at least during one’s peak years. Undoubtedly, many of these men, foremost among them Kid Chocolate and Kid Gavilán, brought their fellow citizens a great deal of pride, as well as a source of enjoyment during difficult political and economic times (of which, unfortunately, there were many). Nonetheless, the vast majority of Cuban boxers who sought their fortunes abroad won neither fame nor fortune but were instead little more than manual laborers earning wages with their fists. Only the best or luckiest among them could expect to earn a living through boxing – as trainers, referees, or instructors, perhaps – once their own careers were through. Even the most fortunate of them could expect to suffer from lingering health problems from years of fighting week after week, month after month, without significant medical intervention or safety regulations; not all, in fact, lived to be able to retire from the ring.

Those who did might have viewed their sacrifices as worthwhile, however, in order to have been able to see something of the outside world and to have experienced a few fleeting moments of glory that only an athlete can understand.

As with other entertainers and athletes, Cuba's boxers faced a unique series of challenges in coming to terms with the revolution that engulfed their country in the 1950s. Some took up arms in defense of or against the Batista regime; others attempted to remain above the political fray, hoping not to have to choose between profession and home. Those who made their political preferences known were at risk for being used for propagandistic purposes, whether or not they chose to be. As prizefighting began to die out in the early 1960s due to frigid U.S.-Cuban relations and a dearth of foreign tourists, it became increasingly evident that the industry could not continue to thrive on the island for the foreseeable future. By the time the state instituted its 1962 ban on professional sports, most of its top pugilists had already left Cuba, resuming their professional careers in exile – in the United States, Mexico, Spain, and other locales. A small but influential number of active fighters stayed behind, retiring from competition in order to help build the new amateur athletic program. Former members of the pugilistic fraternity had wider options, although many of them, too, depended upon prizefighting for a living. Some of those who stayed, such as Kid Gavilán and Kid Chocolate, would find themselves marginalized in later years, viewed as embarrassing remnants of a time when the earlier dictatorship had championed the most exploitative forms of professional sport – and co-opted the support of famous black celebrities while squashing opportunities for most Afro-Cubans at home.

One could argue, though sympathizers of the Castro regime might vehemently disagree, that the Revolution's ideological insistence upon separating sport from labor while,

at the same time, using athletics as a diplomatic wedge, has actually turned amateurs into a new class of semi-professionals. In return for their victories, the state has rewarded them – in varying amounts, depending upon how flush its treasury was at the time and how important the athlete was considered to be – with tangible goods, services, and stipends but without the freedom to negotiate their wages. As we briefly review the trajectory of amateur sport in the Castro years, it is important to remember that the Revolution did not begin its sports programs with a blank slate but that it built upon systems already in place. Moreover, for a number of years its sports program benefited from financial and technical support from Soviet bloc countries, a subject that largely falls outside the time frame of this project. Yet by any standard, what revolutionary Cuba has achieved in the amateur realm in its first five decades has been phenomenal. Whether the cost has been worth it – and whether the pursuit of excellence in amateur athletics will remain at the forefront of a post-Castro regime, one that grapples with crippling economic problems and a discontented populace – is another question entirely.

The Island of Olympic Champions

In the amateur realm, Cuban boxing undoubtedly achieved its greatest victories – in terms of quantity as well as quality – well after the 1959 assumption of power by Fidel Castro and the 1962 ban on professional sports. Clearly, this did not occur by accident but was the product of an institutionalized amateur program that sought out the most promising athletes from a young age and cultivated them for competition at the regional, national, or international levels depending on age, ability, desire, and the vicissitudes of luck. In spite of recent setbacks in international competition that have cast doubt on the actual depth of this

seemingly well regimented system, the Cubans remain the single greatest powerhouse in men's amateur boxing since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1992. For perhaps no other country since the end of the Cold War has achievement in the amateur ring portended so much for the legitimacy of the regime in power. Nor was boxing exceptional in this regard; for the Cuban state post-1964, the only sports worthy of financial and technical assistance – with the major exception of Cuba's national sport, baseball – were those that were officially included in Olympic competition.¹

Having only sent one boxer to the 1960 Olympic Games, Cuba sent a larger squad of six to the 1964 Games in Tokyo. By 1968, when Cuba began regularly sending a full squad of eleven men to the Summer Games, Cuba earned its first medal in boxing competition when light middleweight Rolando Garbey defeated Boris Lagulin of the Soviet Union for a silver medal. Munich 1972, saw Cubans taking three home three golds – at bantamweight (Orlando Martínez), welterweight (Emilio Correa), and heavyweight (Teófilo Stevenson) – as well as one silver and one gold. Stevenson's performance, in particular, was the start of an improbably string of consecutive Olympic victories (for a single defeat would have eliminated him from competition) that lasted eight years; he also won the gold in Montreal in 1976 Montreal and Moscow in 1980. At Montreal, Cuba won its largest medal tally to date – three golds, three silvers, and two bronzes – a number it would surpass in 1980, when the U.S. boycotted the Games. Moscow witnessed Cuba's acquiring an astonishing six gold

¹ Although included as an exhibition sport on several previous occasions, baseball was included as an official sport in the Summer Olympic Games held from 1992 to 2008, inclusive. It was announced recently that both baseball and softball will be dropped from the 2012 London Games, possibly to be reincorporated into the 2016 Games. Whether women's boxing is admitted to the 2012 Games is a decision on which the IOC is expected to rule by August 2009. Should that happen, the Cubans will have less than three years to build a competitive amateur female team if they choose to field one, although whether that will be a priority for the Cuban national boxing program at a time when its men's program seems to be in jeopardy remains to be seen.

medals, two silvers, and two bronzes – leaving only flyweight Jorge Hernández on the squad without a medal. After Cuba boycotted the Los Angeles 1984 and Seoul 1988 Games, it quickly reclaimed a position of dominance in Barcelona in 1992. The Cuban team there performed as well as any had previously when faced with both Soviet (competing as the Commonwealth of Independent States) and U.S. competition. In what may well be the single greatest performance by Olympic boxers since that sport was first included in the 1904 Games, the Cubans earned seven gold medals and two silvers. By then, the competition had expanded to include twelve weight classes, and Félix Savón – as a heavyweight – had begun his own unlikely string of Olympic victories. In 1996 and 2000, competing in the superheavyweight division, he repeated his Barcelona performance. Although Cuba may have lost at least one gold medal with the defection of Joel Casamayor in Atlanta in 1996, it still managed to come away with four golds and three silvers.²

Those who believed the last days of the Cuban communist state were near – that the “Special Period” incorporated since the removal of Soviet subsidies at the end of the Cold War – hoped that the Cuban boxing performance in Atlanta, however impressive on the surface, was a sign of what was to come. Despite the much-publicized “Team Freedom” made up of Casamayor, Ramón Garbey, and other Cuban exiles, however, there were no major boxing defections from Cuba between 1997 and 2005.³ The 2000 squad in Sydney won four golds and two bronzes in twelve weight classes, while the Athens participants in

² For detailed information on each Cuban squad at the Olympic Games from 1960 to 1980 and 1992 to 1996, see Crespo, *Cuba en el boxeo Olímpico*.

³ Some defectors during the 1997-2005 period had limited professional success, however, such as Yanqui Díaz (formerly known as Yamplier Azcuy Díaz), a heavyweight who failed to make the Cuban Olympic team. In what was probably the highlight of his pro career, Díaz won a surprise first-round TKO victory over much heralded fellow Cuban defector Juan Carlos Gómez in 2004. For background on Díaz, see Dean Juipe, “Yanko [sic] Díaz on the Road to Becoming Cuban Superstar,” *Las Vegas Sun*, 5 February 2004.

2004 did even better, earning five golds, two silvers, and a bronze out of only eleven weight classes.⁴

It appeared that with the island's gradual recovery from small-scale entrepreneurship, an increased push for tourism, and beneficial bilateral relationships with countries such as Venezuela (from where it received oil subsidies) and Spain (which financed the construction of many of the newer Havana hotels) had made life in Cuba bearable enough for its athletes that fewer chose to take the risk of defecting. (This was not always true for baseball, however, due to aggressive scouting.) By the mid-2000s, and particularly after July 2006 when Fidel Castro was forced by health considerations to step away from his previously unrivaled position of power, however, this situation has begun to change, as more defections appear to be as inevitable, if equally unpredictable, as the gradual opening up of the Cuban state to democratic reforms and increased political and economic interaction with the United States. The most obvious evidence of the uncertain future that faces Cuba's amateur boxing program is its dismal performance at the 2008 Summer Games in Beijing. For the first time since 1968, Cuba was shut out of Olympic boxing gold, winning four silvers and four bronzes. While Fidel Castro and others protested vehemently that the true reason for this stunning reversal was politics rather than a demonstration of the national team's youth and relative inexperience, many commentators outside Cuba speculated that it would take that

⁴ Beginning with the 2004 Summer Games, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) required that the International Amateur Boxing Association (AIBA, known by its French acronym) reduce the number of athletes in boxing competition to allow four weight classes of women's freestyle wrestling to be admitted as an official sport without increasing the total number of athletes. AIBA responded by cutting the total number of boxing weight classes from 12 to 11. Rather than eliminating the superheavyweight category, as it had initially proposed, AIBA instead increased the maximum weights in several divisions, thus causing a larger gap between classes than had traditionally been the case.

nation several years to rebuild the boxing program that so dominated the international sporting scene for over three decades.⁵

It may be premature to conclude that Cuba's amateur boxing program has seen its best days and is on an inevitable decline – one that will be arrested only when U.S.-Cuban relations improve to the extent that the embargo or blockade (as it is known in the U.S. and Cuba, respectively) has ended and Cuban citizens can freely travel to other countries.

Without travel restrictions, of course, promising amateurs might achieve a path to professionalism, and all of the fame and riches that may come with it, without having to give up their Cuban citizenship. Yet while the Cuban program appeared to be able to hold onto most of its top competitors for a decade after the embarrassing desertion of teammates Joel Casamayor and Ramón Garbey shortly before the 1996 Olympic Games, the past three years have seen a number of high-profile defections that have undoubtedly affected the caliber of the Cuban boxing team.

In December 2006, Athens Olympic champions Yan Barthelmy, Yuriolkis Gamboa, and Odlanier Solis fled while in training in Caracas for that city's Pan-American Games. Perhaps more damaging was the loss of Guillermo Rigondeaux, 2000 and 2004 Olympic bantamweight champion who was widely viewed to be Cuba's best hope of tying Teófilo Stevenson's and Félix Savón's remarkable feat (first accomplished by Hungary's Laszlo Papp) – of winning three Olympic golds in boxing. Rigondeaux and another Olympic hopeful, world welterweight amateur champion Erislandy Lara, appeared to defect while at the Rio de Janeiro Pan-Am Games in July 2007, but ultimately claimed to have just gone off

⁵ Cuba's shocking semi-final loss in the 2009 World Baseball Classic, similarly, is viewed as a sign of things to come as the nation struggles to deal with the defection or retirement of its best players. See, for instance, Alan Schwarz, "Whispering Farewell to Cuba's Dominant Past," *New York Times*, 20 March 2009.

for a little (unauthorized) fun. While enjoying themselves at a Brazilian resort, they were arrested for lack of travel documentation and deported back to Cuba. The Cuban government was not amused and removed both from their coveted spots on the national team. Regardless of their talent, both Rigondeaux and Lara needed to be made examples of, as did Héctor Vinent over a decade before.⁶ As an ailing Fidel Castro summarized in one of his regular columns for the Cuban daily *Granma*, “An athlete who abandons his team is like a soldier who abandons his fellow troops in the middle of combat.”⁷ Ultimately, both Lara and Rigondeaux succeeded in defecting to Miami, in 2008 and 2009, respectively.⁸

In Search of the American (or Spanish, or Mexican) Dream: Boxers’ Lives in Exile

There are no universal set of experiences common to Cuban exiles, even if they have the same occupation in common. When they left, whether they were still competing at the time of their defection, how well they performed as boxers or trainers, what health issues they battled, and how strong their support networks were are all factors in how well Cuban boxers did during their lives in exile. Similarly, there is no easy answer as to why some former Cuban professionals and top amateurs were satisfied with their choices to remain on the island. One of the most important factors, of course, is the relationship of each fighter to the state. Despite Teófilo Stevenson’s famous declaration that the love of ten million Cubans

⁶ Vinent was the gifted junior welterweight champion who won his division’s gold medal in Barcelona in 1992 and Atlanta in 1996 but had later been removed from the team for being close friends with, and having possibly considered defecting with, Casamayor and Garbey at Atlanta. He was removed from the national team in 1997.

⁷ “Bad Boxers: Castro: Cuba May Skip Boxing Meet Due to Defections,” *Sports Illustrated.com*, August 8, 2007, <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2007/more/08/08/bc.boxing.cuba.castro/index.html> (accessed April 25, 2009). For Vinent’s story as told by a sympathetic *Sports Illustrated* reporter, see Price, *Pitching Around Fidel*, pp. 261-268.

⁸ Santos A. Perez, “2004 Olympic Boxing Gold Medal Winner Guillermo Rigondeaux Defects from Cuba to Miami,” *The Miami Herald*, 24 February 2009.

was more valuable than a million U.S. dollars (the sum that was supposedly proffered to him to fight Muhammad Ali in the 1970s), communist Cuba has a spotty track record in how well it has treated its former ring greats. Cuba's two greatest world champions, Kid Chocolate and Kid Gavilán, experienced sad declines upon their return to their native country.

Although he had been feted early in the Castro regime, Chocolate by the 1980s had come a shell of his former self, living in squalor in the Miramar neighborhood, malnourished and neglected, and possibly suffering from dementia. The British journalist Jonathan Rendall immortalized this devastating version of Chocolate in his memoir, *This Bloody Mary Is the Last Thing I Own*, when he went in search of the famous ex-champion a few weeks before the latter's death in August 1988.⁹

Having retired in 1958, on the eve of the Cuban Revolution, and converted to the Jehovah's Witness religion, Gavilán's fantastic prizefighting career could not save him from becoming an outcast in his own country. In the 1960s, he frequently found himself on the wrong side of a Cuban jail cell when his religious beliefs, or rather his refusal to give up proselytizing them, brought him in opposition with the atheist state. He lost his *finca* to expropriation and the eyesight in one eye due to cataracts. A physically diminished but still hopeful Gavilán was finally allowed to depart for the United States in 1968.¹⁰ Yet the American dream continually eluded him in the 35 years he spent in this country before dying in Miami in 2003.¹¹

Gavilán was one of many exiles who found life in the United States difficult. José Stable, another top-ranked welterweight – albeit one who deserted his native country while

⁹ Rendall, *This Bloody Mary Is the Last Thing I Own*, pp. 37-53.

¹⁰ Steve Cady, "Gavilan Returns, A Champion of Truth," *New York Times*, 26 September 1968, p. 68.

¹¹ "Kid Gavilan, 77, Welterweight Champion in the Early 1950s," *New York Times*, 15 February 2003, p. 23.

still in his prime as a professional fighter – was convicted of murder in 1982 for murdering a police officer in Florida.¹² Luis Manuel Rodríguez died of pneumonia in 1996 in poverty, despite having attained the world welterweight championship. Not all exiles found their new lives as challenging. In Mexico, Ultiminio “Sugar” Ramos and José Ángel “Mantequilla” Nápoles made promising new careers and lives, winning their featherweight and welterweight world titles, respectively, under the Mexican flag. The “Pocket Cassius Clay,” José Legra, too, earned his featherweight world title fighting out of a third country – Spain – where he was trained by former middleweight contender Kid Tunero. And more recent exiles, such as Joel Casamayor, Diosbelys Hurtado, Juan Carlos Gómez, and – most recently, Odlanier Solis – were able to win world championships in their weight divisions while residing in the U.S. and Europe.¹³

Telling the Stories of Those Who Remained

Although no scholarly work has been carried out on the lives of Cuban boxers who pursued prizefighting or training careers abroad, U.S. sports journalism and popular history are replete with their stories, some of it laudatory, some of it tragic. With the exception of three-time Olympic champions Stevenson and Savón, much less is known about the lives of those who chose to remain in Cuba, pursue promising amateur careers, worked as trainers or administrators once they retired in their 30s, had families, and continued to survive – in a few cases, thrive – despite the numerous challenges of living on the island since the early

¹² “Stable, Ex-Boxer, Sentenced to Life,” *New York Times*, 20 August 1982.

¹³ Of this group, Casamayor is the most heralded. With only eleven prior professional bouts, Solis won the vacant World Boxing Council world heavyweight title on October 11, 2008, after defeating little-known Chauncy Welliver by ninth-round TKO. Although Solis is no doubt a promising heavyweight who has already successfully defended his title (in January 2009 against Kevin Burnett), his rapid accession is yet more testimony, as though any more were needed, as to the weakness of the heavyweight division in recent years.

1960s. A true assessment of their stories is not possible at present, for the limits of free speech in Cuba today prevent hearing their voices without the heavy hand of an ideological filter, one that shapes its athletes into heroes, martyrs, or (tacitly, by erasing their memories should they defect) villains. Yet one hopes that, with the thawing of the western hemisphere's last Cold War, one that includes a move toward greater democratic reforms in Cuba and a more humble, more cooperative foreign policy by its long-term nemesis, the United States, it will soon be possible to highlight the voices of the many athletes, artists, musicians, actors, and others who have so shaped the nation's modes of cultural production over the past five decades.

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This manuscript was typed by the author.