Written by Jim Amato
Tuesday, 18 January 2005 18:00

Can you name which all-time great Cleveland boxer lost only four of one hundred and forty bouts? Here is another hint. He was a world champion for over eleven years? He is probably one of the most underrated fighters of all time. Yet he crossed gloves with Benny Leonard, Joe Rivers, George “KO” Chaney, Johnny Dundee, Kid Williams, Abe Attell, Monte Attell, Jimmy Walsh, Freddie Welsh, and Rocky Kansas. This is a virtual who’s who of the featherweight and lightweight elite of that era.

Give up? Well it is none other than the great Johnny Kilbane.

Kilbane was born in Cleveland on April 18, 1889 and was a life long resident of the Lake Erie port. He began his professional career in 1907 and by 1910 he was one of the area’s top boxing attractions. He suffered his first defeat in October of 1910, losing a ten round decision to world featherweight titleholder Abe Attell in a non-title fight. In 1911 he lost a 20 round decision to Indian Joe Rivers. In September of the same year he avenged the loss to Rivers via a 16th round knockout.

Johnny was then offered a match with world lightweight champion Ad Wolgast. Being a natural featherweight Johnny decided instead to challenge his old foe Abe Attell for the 126-pound title. Attell agreed and in February of 1912 Kilbane outpointed Attell to win the featherweight championship. In Johnny’s first defense in 1912 he drew with former bantamweight champion Jimmy Walsh. In his second defense in 1913 he drew with Johnny Dundee. Johnny did not defend again until 1916 when he stopped George “KO” Chaney in three rounds.

Kilbane engaged in several NO DECISION bouts during his reign against the likes of Benny Leonard, Rocky Kansas, Kid Williams, Ritchie Mitchell, and Walsh. On May 1, 1917, he fought a ten round NO DECISION bout with lightweight champion Freddie Welsh. After Welsh lost his title to Leonard, Johnny challenged Leonard for the crown. In one of Leonard’s best career performances he halted the smaller challenge in round three.

Kilbane did not box again for close to two years and when he did he engaged in a series of non-title bouts. Finally in April of 1920, he stopped Alvie Miller in the seventh round of a title defense. In September of 1921, he halted British champion Danny Frush in seven rounds in what would be his last successful defense. On June 2, 1923, Johnny fought for the last time losing his crown in six rounds to Eugene Criqui.

No longer a champion Johnny retired at the age of 34. Kilbane passed away in his hometown on May 31, 1967.