

Monte Munn, Politics, Boxing, Life

Written by Pete Ehrmann

Saturday, 11 February 2006 19:00

On October 20, 1912 the New York Times reported that the campaign of a candidate for governor of Washington State was on the ropes because among other scandalous revelations about Progressive Robert Hodge was that he “was once a prize fighter, which fact had not commended him strongly to the public.” Accompanying the piece was the damning evidence: a photo of the disgraced politico in fighting togs.

Fourteen years later, boxing was so popular that a Nebraska lawmaker launched a campaign to become heavyweight champion of the world. And commending him strongly to the public was no less than the editor of The Ring magazine, Nat Fleischer, who predicted in 1926 that Monte Munn was a cinch to become boxing’s Commander-in-Chief.

That obviously never happened, but Munn still holds the distinction of being the only political office holder to throw his hat into the prize ring.

This was also after he’d become a lawyer and played a season of pro football.

Born in Fairbury, Nebraska on New Year’s Day, 1901, Munn’s parents were both over six feet tall, and at Lincoln High School Munn was a standout in football, track and basketball. From 1918-22, he attended the University of Nebraska, and played for the Cornhusker football team.

“He was 6’5”, 200, and played tackle his first year, then moved to right guard,” says Mark Fricke of the Husker Press Box. “He was a steady force on the line and often broke through to record tackles for loss.”

Monte also was a wrestling champion at UN, and played varsity basketball.

Nineteen twenty-five was a banner year for the Munn family athletically and electorally. Monte and his younger brother Wade, also a gridiron star at UN, played for the Kansas City Cowboys of the National Football League. Their older brother Wayne (who, at 6’6” and 275 pounds, was naturally called “Big”) knocked off Ed “Strangler” Lewis to become heavyweight wrestling champion of the world.

That’s also the year that Monte was elected to the Nebraska House of Representatives from Lancaster County, for a two-year term.

On December 23, 1925, Big Wayne Munn gave pro boxing a try. But he was flattened in two minutes by Andre Anderson in Chicago. “I never wanted to be a boxer, and I never want to engage in another bout,” declared Munn afterwards. “I know I can’t box, and I doubt whether I will ever be able to fling my fists. Wrestling is my game, and I intend to stick to it a few years.”

His brother’s experience with the gloves notwithstanding, Monte decided to forsake the smoke-filled rooms of politics for the smoke-filled arenas of boxing. He was only a part-time

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legislator anyway, and heavyweight championship fights had been drawing million dollar gates. Pro football was a hard and unprofitable way to make a buck (the Kansas City Cowboys, with a 2-6-1 record in 1925, would be around for only one more season).

So off to New York went Munn, where he hooked up with somebody who had experience when it came to molding an athlete from another sport into a top-caliber boxer. Dan Hickey had trained onetime triple-champion Bob Fitzsimmons, but his real score came when he turned Paul Berlenbach, who'd won the national amateur wrestling championship in 1922, and made the U.S. Olympic wrestling team two years before that, into the light heavyweight boxing champion of the world in 1925.

"The Fighting Legislator" made his pro debut on April 4, 1926, knocking out Bill Joseph in the first round. After he KO'd Jim Sigmund in the opening round for his eighth straight win, Nat Fleischer wrote in the October, 1926 issue of *The Ring*, "In Munn, Dan Hickey has the next world's heavyweight champion. We predict that if (Gene) Tunney wins the world's title and he consents to meet Munn a year from now, a new world's titleholder will be crowned."

Tunney, of course, beat Jack Dempsey for the title that September 23, and on the undercard at Sesquicentennial Stadium in Philadelphia, Munn needed less than a round to overcome Hughie Clements.

Not everyone was agog as Fleischer, though. "In Milwaukee he would be mighty lucky to be placed in a four-round opener," wrote Milwaukee Journal boxing writer Sam Levy of the new heavyweight sensation. "He moves at a snail's pace and delivers his long, sinewy arms with similar precision."

On December 22, 1926, Knute Hansen vetoed the Nebraska lawmaker's title aspirations when he decisively outpointed Munn at Madison Square Garden. "...Facing his first serious ring encounter, (Munn) failed to measure up to the standard," wrote James P. Dawson of the *New York Times*. "He had strength, but he was revealed as only a strong, game fighter, slow in thinking and action."

The comeback started the following July, and the now ex-legislator (Munn's term as state representative expired in 1927, and he didn't run for reelection) started a new winning streak. But his opponents were less than stellar, including one Chief Metoquah, who was in the opposite corner at Madison Square Garden on August 25, 1927.

New York Times sports columnist John Kieran got it wrong when he called Munn "the ex-Congressman from the tall corn district," but his report of the fight was still hilarious:

"At the sound of the bell the ex-Congressman advanced on the redskin and aimed a blow that would have wiped out a whole tribe of Kickapoos if it had landed.

"'This,' sighed Chief Metoquah, 'is the way that a Congressman would naturally treat an Indian. But I will hide behind a tree and massacre him as he deserves.'

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“So he looked for a tree. It so happens that there are remarkably few trees inside the ordinary prize ring, but the search for the tall timber was interesting.”

Not to the referee and fans, though. For failing to throw a punch, Chief Metoquah was disqualified in what the Times called “one of the jokes of the boxing year.”

Once Munn’s greatest booster, Nat Fleischer wasn’t laughing.

“It is high time that Monte Munn ceased fighting set-ups,” he editorialized in the October, 1927 issue of *The Ring*. “He has been fed with enough of these so-called fighters for the last two years to cause even his most ardent supporters to turn away from shame... It is a disgrace to the boxing game to have a big, bulky fellow like Munn, a fighter who carries a terrific wallop and aspires to championship laurels, pick the worst heavyweights in the field as his opponents.”

Big George Godfrey was no pushover, and when Munn started out fast against The “Black Menace” in their Ebbets Field match that September 15, the 20,000 fans whooped it up. But in the third round Munn went down, and he was getting pummeled in the fourth when referee Lou Magnolia stopped it.

The Fighting Legislator was subsequently stopped by Phil Scott of Great Britain and an Italian called Roberto Roberti (whose chief claim to fame was that he was once referred to in a press release sent out for promoter Tex Rickard by Gene Fowler, who remembered the fighter’s name as “Arterio Sclerosis”).

But Munn scored a large upset when he traveled to Buenos Aires, Argentina, and on May 25, 1928 knocked out Victorio Campolo, who Rickard had hoped to bring to America as the next Luis “Wild Bull of the Pampas” Firpo. Firpo himself had said beforehand that he would fight whoever won the bout, but when Campolo ended up in the hospital Firpo announced that he would need a few more months to think it over.

Not thrilled about letting a Yankee take home the South American title, the Argentineans hurriedly got Munn back into the ring against another native son, Clemente Sanchez. At the end of 10 rounds in which the homeboy did little but wrap his arms around his own head, Munn was declared the loser and ex-champion.

Adios, boxing. Hello again, politics. That fall Munn went home and managed the presidential campaign of Republican candidate Herbert Hoover in Nebraska. “When the election has been held...it is likely that the big college battler will decide to run for Congress in a district where he is very popular,” reported the news wires.

But instead Munn moved to Indiana and became manager of the Binkley Coal Company in Indianapolis. In 1932, he ran for the State Senate, but was defeated.

Munn was only 32 when heart disease killed him a year later. Big brother Wayne, the rassler, had died two years earlier, at 31.

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As a fighter, said reporter Lawrence Perry, Munn “had a lot of fun, a lot of hard knocks – which he also gave – and made a fairish sum of money.” If nothing else, added newsman John J. Romano, “Munn’s experience in the fight racket is one of the reasons why many collegians are taking to the game.”

And as the late Sen. Eugene McCarthy would attest, anybody who can bring out the students is one hell of a politician.