

Vote Mitchell for a Prouder (but Paler) Milwaukee!

Written by Pete Ehrmann
Sunday, 14 January 2007 19:00

When I walk into my neighborhood polling place on Election Day, the workers start to retch and moan because they know they will have to decipher and painstakingly record all the write-in votes I cast in preference over the printed choices that always make me retch and moan.

But not since Nixon vs. McGovern in 1972 has an election raised my gorge like the one being held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin right now.

And it won't even determine who gets the next shot at my wallet and precious liberties.

It's an on-line election to decide the most legendary dead Milwaukeeans ever, cooked up by the local Press Club for the city's 161st birthday celebration later this month.

"As part of this year's birthday party," states the website at www.legendsofmilwaukee.org/, "the Milwaukee Press Club is asking you to vote for your favorite Legends of Milwaukee: The people who made Milwaukee famous! Those who made this list either were born in Milwaukee or made 'their mark' in our city. In all cases, candidates have a strong Milwaukee connection.

There are eight separate categories: entertainment, founders, "icons," community, media, government, business and sports.

In the last category the Press Club politburo nominated eight candidates. They are Lionel Aldridge, a Green Bay Packer from the 1960s; NASCAR champion Alan Kulwicki; Milwaukee Braves stars Eddie Mathews and Warren Spahn; Marquette Warriors basketball coach Al McGuire; pro rassler Reginald "The Crusher" Lisowski; 1930s big league ballplayer Al Simmons; and Dick Bacon.

For those insufficiently up on their Milwaukee sports history, the ballot notes that Dick Bacon was "known for sunbathing year-round on Milwaukee lakefront." I used to see him there, lounging amidst snow drifts in the wintertime and surrounded by mirrors to reflect the weak sunlight, wearing just posing briefs, sunglasses and the eye-poppingest tan this side of George Hamilton. He always waved cheerfully when anyone called out to him using the nickname by which he was widely known: "Nude Dude."

That there are no boxers on the list isn't really too surprising. As in most places these days, the Sweet Science isn't on the Milwaukee media's radar screen. But in the first third of the 20th century the city was, as The Milwaukee Journal itself then enthusiastically noted, "the big, real boxing center of the country." And that was mostly on account of a homegrown fighter the Journal anointed as "the greatest sporting favorite Milwaukee ever possessed."

But Richie Mitchell – known as "The Milwaukee Marvel," for crying out loud – didn't make the Press Club's roster of local sports greats, and the Dick Bacon did?

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Maybe for the members' own good it's time to look into revoking the club's liquor license.

I'd stake my own yellowed press card on the fact that few if any of its nominees were as idolized as Richie Mitchell, or gave his sport and hometown a bigger thrill than the one Mitchell provided exactly 86 years ago this January 14.

That's when he met Benny Leonard for the lightweight championship of the world at Madison Square Garden in New York, got knocked down three times in a row by the champion in the first round and then got up and knocked Leonard down and almost out. It was, said *The Ring* magazine, "as sensational a first round as the ring has known," and even though Mitchell went on to lose on a sixth round TKO, his incredible courage won him immortality that, the Milwaukee Press Club notwithstanding, is more indelible than even the Nude Dude's tan. Which is really saying something.

The small crowds who attend concerts and plays at the Milwaukee Theater nowadays have never raised the roof there the way Mitchell's fans did when it was the Milwaukee Auditorium and he fought Freddy Welsh, Johnny Kilbane, Benny Leonard and other great mitt stars of that era. Local fans were so crazy about the classy, handsome blond boxer that after Mitchell's thirteenth pro fight, a victory over Patsy Brannigan on February 24, 1914, they carried him out of the ring and down the street to a restaurant for a celebration.

By the time Mitchell fought Johnny Dundee at the Auditorium on August 30, 1915, it was the norm for hundreds of "Mitchell Rooters" to parade all over town in cars, led by a brass band. They even put a piano on a truck. "If you hear a bunch of noise on Thursday," warned the *Journal* on the day before Mitchell fought Welsh on April 7, 1916, "it will not be anything but the Mitchell followers parading the downtown district."

Lightweight champion Welsh wasn't thrilled when the paraders held a Mitchell pep rally outside his window at the Pfister Hotel. He was even unhappier the next night when the local boxer clearly outpointed him over 10 rounds at the Auditorium (though Welsh kept his title because it was a no-decision fight).

Later that year, while Mitchell was watching a movie in a downtown theater one day, his car was stolen from the street in front. His avid fans put an ad in the newspaper offering a \$50 reward for "information that will lead to the return of Richie Mitchell's 1916 5-passenger Mitchell automobile," and God help anyone seen driving a similar vehicle around town.

When Mitchell joined the U.S. Navy during World War I, and left Milwaukee for Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, a crowd turned out at the railroad station to bid him farewell. He wept as he told his fans, "I'm going to do my best, and serve my country to the best of my ability."

Over a thousand people saw him off when Mitchell went to fight Leonard for the title, and later a chartered train called "The Mitchell Special" ferried hundreds of Milwaukee fans to New York for what *The Ring* called "the night boxing crossed over from 'the other side of the tracks' – when rugged Tenth Avenue mingled with fashionable Park Avenue, and the Gas House District met up with Newport and the Hamptons. Bankers, brokers and political bigwigs blended with

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longshoremen, clerks, truck drivers and barbers in one happy gathering.” The fight was promoted by Tex Rickard and Anne Morgan, daughter of financier J.P. Morgan, to raise money for war-devastated France.

“I never seed nuthin’ like it!” said Rickard, agog at the tuxedoed, begowned crowd. And at the end everyone agreed with columnist Rube Goldberg of the New York Mail, who said of the fight: “It was simply wonderful, that’s all. Old case-hardened, leathery-skinned, grimy-bearded sports, who have been going to sports since the aquarium had only one fish, were enthralled and speechless.”

Mitchell and his fans blamed those three knockdowns on his “first-round jinx.” He was often knocked down in the opening round of important fights, and Journal reporter Sam Levy said the problem was Mitchell’s popularity:

“Mitchell has countless friends. These friends have been a worry to him. He enters the ring thinking of his moral supporters. He is in there to satisfy their wishes. Being of a nervous temperament, it has required several rounds for him to get well started. His first round disasters may be attributed to this. He worries too much, and is too anxious to make a flying start so his friends will not be disappointed in him.”

When he fought in Milwaukee after the losing the championship fight to Leonard, crowds at the Auditorium would stand on the chairs, toss their hats into the air and scream themselves hoarse when the bell rang to end the first round, because “Richie the Lion-Hearted” – another popular Mitchell nickname – had survived the jinx.

On April 9, 1921, under the headline “The Idol,” the Journal reported that Mitchell “was acclaimed the city’s hero Friday night at the Auditorium when he appeared as second to Jimmy Muzzy.” For merely stepping into the ring to work the corner of a preliminary fighter, the crowd gave Mitchell an ovation that went on for five minutes.

When he died at 53 on June 26, 1949, the headline in the Journal was, “City’s Greatest Era Dies With Mitchell.”

“No one who came to Milwaukee since Mitchell’s fighting days can appreciate what an idol he was,” said the story by sports editor R.G. Lynch.

I’d be surprised if a lot of the Press Club folks were even born in 1949, which would explain their egregious snub of the city’s greatest sports legend.

But there is a remedy for that. The Legends of Milwaukee election runs through the end of this month. The results will be announced at a party at the Milwaukee Public Museum on January 31.

Write-in votes – the salvation of a free society – are accepted, so in the great American tradition of such political heavyweights as Boss Tweed, Mayor Richard Daley and “Landslide Lyndon” Johnson, I’m calling on fight fans to stuff the ballot box by logging onto the Legends of

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Milwaukee website and writing in Richie Mitchell. (While you're at it, throw in a vote for Thomas S. Andrews, author of annual boxing record books in the early 20th century and a Milwaukee newspaper editor, in the Media category.)

In addition to being a terrific prizefighter, Richie Mitchell was by all accounts a very humble, sweet human being who shrank from self-promotion. But under the circumstances – the Nude Dude, for God's sake! – I suspect that he would approve this message.