

The End of An Era for New York Boxing

Written by Mitch Abramson

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When Sunnyside Gardens finally closed its doors in the mid '70s, a neighborhood in New York City didn't just lose a boxing arena, it laid to rest one of the most glorious eras in all of boxing: The last time Henny Wallitsch got into a fight with someone at Sunnyside Gardens he was arguing over a coke and fries.

A wrecking ball unceremoniously demolished the famous boxing arena on Queens Boulevard in Queens, New York in December 1977 and in its place a Wendy's was built - a monument to fast-food lovers and salad-bar fanatics but not fight fans. The kitchen is where the ring once was, and the tables are where the seats used to be. Gone are the dressing room and the bar and the bleachers and all those memories that were swept under the carpet like dirt.

"I left a lot of my blood in that kitchen," said Wallitsch, an Austrian heavyweight who fought at Sunnyside at least 20 times and grew up in Queens. "Or maybe that's my blood coming from those hamburgers."

The final show was on June 24, 1977 between Ramon Ranquello and Bob Smith, a couple of out-of-towners from Jersey City and Natchez, Miss. with no connection to New York, maybe 400 fans in the audience, and no clue that the place was about to be replaced by a restaurant whose slogan used to be "Where's the beef?"

"It was a great atmosphere. You could die of lung cancer there," said Bobby Cassidy, a middleweight contender who fought there 26 times and reportedly holds the record for main events at Sunnyside. "I went back there around 10 years ago. I parked my car under the El and just walked around the neighborhood. The Chinese restaurant was still there next door. My god, it brought back memories. I never went into the Wendy's, though, couldn't do it. Life goes on, but it hurts a little that they tore it down- all those memories."

In contrast to other venues such as St. Nicholas Arena, whose proprietors knew when the wrecking ball was coming, nobody expected Ranquello-Smith to be the final show at the fabled arena. Sunnyside was never given a proper burial and closed abruptly when Vic Manni and Nick Annest, a pair of local promoters entrusted with the keys to the building, became the centerpiece of a police investigation concerning gambling in connection with a local synagogue.

By that time the neighborhood rivalries were drying up anyway. People were leaving the city for the suburbs. The gimmicks that matched a police officer against a firefighter were drawing flies, and publicity stunts such as camera night, in which fans could have their picture taken with a famous fighter, were no longer gate attractions.

As a result, the promoters feebly resorted to gambling to pay off the \$8,000-a-month rent and their operation was subsequently closed. With that, the guillotine came down on an era that once boasted around 20 fight clubs in New York - almost a show every night - and a boxing scene that was so healthy it seemed it would last forever.

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"Sunnyside was the last of the real small, self-sustaining fight clubs," said boxing historian and matchmaker Don Majeski. "After it left, that was it."

Sunnyside was a mythical place, full of charm and imagination, women and cigar smoke and, best of all, fights. Dozens of world champions fought there on their way to bigger paydays at Madison Square Garden, guys like Tony Canzoneri, Floyd Patterson, Vito Antuofermo, Eddie Gregory, later known as Eddie Mustafa Muhammad. Gerry Cooney turned pro there. Heavyweight Bobby Mashburn, who fought Larry Holmes and Ken Norton and was the father of the New Orleans Hornets' Jamal Mashburn of the NBA, appeared at Sunnyside.

"Sunnyside Gardens is an ugly, red-brick relic tucked beneath a trestle for the Flushing line on Queens Boulevard, fighting for survival in a dormant sport," is how Bill Verigan of the Daily News described it on May 11, 1972.

Built in 1926 as a ritzy tennis club by millionaire Jay Goulds, Sunnyside developed into a sanctuary for activities such as wrestling, karate, arm wrestling, bingo nights and eventually boxing when it was sold in 1945. Before then, if you wanted to see a fight you went to Queensboro Arena next to the Queens Plaza station. Primo Carnera headlined there before the wooden stadium was torn down the '40s and Sunnyside became the gathering place for the discriminating sports fan where men recently returned from the service met their wives in the wooden bleachers and businessmen had a drink at the bar in the lobby.

Gamblers in fedoras huddled outside with bookmakers placing bets, and fans couldn't peek into the referee's scorecard before they made a wager like they could in the balcony at St. Nicholas Arena. A seafood restaurant across the street was the pre-fight destination and the neighboring bars like the Merry-Go-Round and Escape were the spots you hit after the fight.

Young kids lucky enough to find seats at the arena stole peaks of what their parents were doing when they weren't at home.

"I was old enough to go to my father's fights, and I was in the audience when a riot broke out," said Bobby Cassidy Jr., a writer for Newsday and son of the middleweight contender. "This fighter named Bobby O'Brien, who was a cop, was in the audience that night; he wasn't fighting and someone just cold-cocked him. He just starts knocking people out, and I'm a 10-year-old kid watching all this."

Sunnyside was around for the confluence of Spanish immigrants in the '50s and '60s who moved into the area and helped fuel famous rivalries, all chronicled in papers like La Prensa and the Long Island Star-Journal that people still talk about today.

A matchmaker at Sunnyside Gardens in the '60s, Gene Moore, now 70, never hesitated to square off fighters with divergent ethnicities. Then he crossed his fingers that the enthusiasm wouldn't boil over into bedlam. When "Irish" Bobby Cassidy Sr. fought Carmelo Martinez, a riot ensued after the decision was announced.

"The place was packed to the pillars with Puerto Ricans and my Irish crew," said Cassidy Sr.,

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now 59 and still living in Levittown, L.I. "In the seventh round he dropped me. I came back to the corner and my trainer, Jimmy Glenn, slapped me. That was the first time a trainer had ever slapped me before. I came back in the eighth round and landed some heavy shots and he was walking around like a cripple. He was wobbling around and his foot kept kicking up in the air. People were throwing chairs and tossing things into the ring after I won the decision."

The kids who belonged to neighborhood gangs, like Henny Wallitsch ("If you missed me with a punch, I was mad"), a member of the Midnight Boys, trained at local gyms and became instant celebrities at Sunnyside for their neighborhood wars and ability to sell tickets.

"Me and Bobby Halpern had a bloodbath there," said Wallitsch, now 69. "They had to move the ringside seats two rows back because of the mess. The Daily News said that it was the greatest fight in the last 20 years."

There was never a dull moment at Sunnyside. The 1965 blackout canceled a show that three busloads of fans from East Rockaway, L.I. came to see.

When the promoter, a vaudevillian character named Broadway George Albert, a retired milliner who always had a cigar in his mouth, booked the same fighters the following week, the fans never came back.

To help brunt the occasional unsuccessful promotion, Madison Square Garden subsidized Sunnyside with \$500 a week during Albert's seven-year reign in the '60s. Duke Stephano, Albert's matchmaker, was Teddy Brenner's assistant at the real Garden in Manhattan, and fighters who consistently won at Sunnyside were promoted to the Mecca in Manhattan. Garden publicity chief, John Condon, handled Sunnyside's press for free. General admission was \$4, ringside was \$8 and it cost roughly \$5,000 to put on a fight. If the promoter made a \$100 profit, it was considered a moderate success.

"It was a great place," said Howie Albert, George's son who co-managed former welterweight and middleweight champion Emile Griffith. "There wasn't a bad seat in the house. I drive by the place now, and I have tears in my eyes, even though I like Wendy's. There were so many nice times there."

So much has changed since then. Nowadays boxing shows are risky ventures bereft of charm and substance. Promoters are more likely to go to casinos and their free rooms than to legitimately build up a following in the city. Too many promoters have gone broke running unimaginative shows that tank at the box office and once bitten, they rarely return.

"Before television (changed the way boxing is operated), Sunnyside was the minor leagues of the sport," said Daily News cartoonist, Bill Gallo, who grew up in Astoria and whose father covered fights at Sunnyside for the New York Sun. "It was a popular place, and managers would come from overseas just to try their fighters out at Sunnyside. Some of them became stars, some of them didn't, but Sunnyside was a fun place to be."

Today, Sunnyside is a special word, spoken at Ring 8 meetings in Long Island City at Tony

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Mazzarella's Waterfront Crabhouse and at New Jersey Hall of Fame gatherings in Lodi, NJ kept alive in fight posters and ticket stubs that Bobby Cassidy Jr. saved from his father's fighting days and in scrap books cobbled together by Howie Albert.

To old-timers whose memories of their fights are as sharp as a diamond stud, Sunnyside Gardens is a living, breathing entity, capable of turning grown men into hyperactive kids suddenly walking along Steinway Street to the Red Door Bar, not a care in the world following a tough fight at Sunnyside, as Bobby Bartels, a popular welterweight from Astoria in the mid '50s did on more than one occasion. Those were the days.