

## Could the D.C. Armory Become Washington, D.C.'s Boxing Institution?

Written by Aaron Tallent

Thursday, 23 January 2014 10:05

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Unless you live in the District of Columbia, you probably find it odd that Lamont Peterson will defend his IBF Light Welterweight title against Dierry Jean at the headquarters of the Washington, D.C. National Guard. In actuality, the D.C. Armory has an arena that holds 10,000 people and if you call our nation's capitol home, you've probably been in it at least once. For a city with a rich boxing history, but no institutions, the D.C. Armory may be the answer.

Peterson is just one of many champions to come out of the D.C. area. Sugar Ray Leonard, Mark Johnson and William Joppy are just a few others. Yet there is no single venue where greatness and boxing are expected. New York has Madison Square Garden, Philadelphia had the Blue Horizon, and Las Vegas has the MGM Grand and Mandalay Bay. The District has nothing of the sort. In a city that reinvents itself every four to eight years, an unstructured sport has little chance of finding a permanent home.

Things were a bit different during the sport's golden era. Washington's first recorded

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professional fight took place in 1882 and the next 50 years saw fights being staged in a variety of places ranging from athletic clubs to the city's Marine Barracks to an Anheuser-Busch warehouse to Walter Reed General Hospital (now Walter Reed National Military Medical Center).

By the mid-1930s, the majority of the District's fights were held in two venues. One was Turner's Arena, an 1,800-seat arena owned by wrestling promoter Joe Turner that hosted fights on a frequent basis. Seven champions fought there.

The other was Griffith Stadium, the home of baseball's Washington Senators and football's Washington Redskins. In its heyday, Griffith could hold more the 29,000 spectators and it hosted 180 fights. Joe Louis defended his heavyweight title against Buddy Baer in 1941.

In that same year, the D.C. Armory opened as the headquarters and training facility of the District's National Guard. The year also saw the completion of another historic D.C. landmark, the Uline Arena (now the Washington Coliseum). The 9,000-seat arena hosted numerous fights, but is best remembered for being the site of the Beatles' first U.S. concert on February 11, 1964. Because the Uline's stage was in the middle of the arena and designed to hold a boxing ring, the Fab Four performed their concert in the round.

In 1965, both Griffith Stadium and Turner's Arena (then known as Capitol Arena), were closed. Vince McMahon, Sr., then the owner of Turner's, sold it to the Washington City Orphan Asylum, who demolished it to build a clinic. Griffith Stadium closed because both the Redskins and the Senators had moved to the new D.C. Stadium (now RFK Stadium). It was also torn down and is now the site of Howard University Hospital.

The 1968 riots following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., destroyed the area surrounding the Uline and fights, concerts and all other events became less frequent. It closed in 1986 and is now the coolest parking garage in the country. For \$100 a month, one can park his or her car on the floor where the Beatles first played.

Following the riots, D.C. followed the trend of many cities of building major arenas in the suburbs. The Capitol Centre opened in nearby Landover, Maryland, in 1973 and became the

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home of basketball's Washington Bullets (now the Wizards), hockey's Washington Capitals, and Georgetown Basketball. It also hosted 15 major fight cards between 1974 and 1975. Leonard fought there thrice and Muhammad Ali successfully defended his heavyweight title there against Jimmy Young in 1976 and Alfred Evangelista in 1977.

Meanwhile, the D.C. Armory explored ways to use its facilities. On December 9, 1975, the Armory hosted its first fight, with Larry Holmes knocking out Leon Shaw in the main event.

On May 22, 1993, the District held its most extravagant fight ever, a card at RFK Stadium where Riddick Bowe defended his heavyweight title again with a second round stoppage of Jesse Ferguson. This was also the event where Roy Jones, Jr., defeated Bernard Hopkins by decision to win the middleweight title. Unfortunately, a crowd of only 9,000 – 3,500 of who had tickets donated by Bowe's manager Rock Newman – attended. A fight has never been held at RFK since then.

The Capitals and Wizards moved back into Washington in 1997 when the MCI Center (now the Verizon Center) was completed. The 20,000-seat arena has hosted three fight cards, the last one being Mike Tyson's final fight in 2005. However, like most cities in the northeast wanting to host a major fight card, it is faced with the same truth: New York and the Garden are only a few hours away.

The Armory, on the other hand, provides the perfect alternative with its mid-range size. It is next to a subway/metro stop and shares thousands of parking spaces with the adjacent RFK Stadium. Also, part of the reason places do become boxing institutions is because they reflect the culture of the city. With the D.C. Armory, a military base located in the Capitol Hill neighborhood that has hosted inaugural balls for every president since Harry Truman and has been an integral part of the city for more than 70 years, I can't think of a better fit.

Oh, and I also live four blocks away.

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