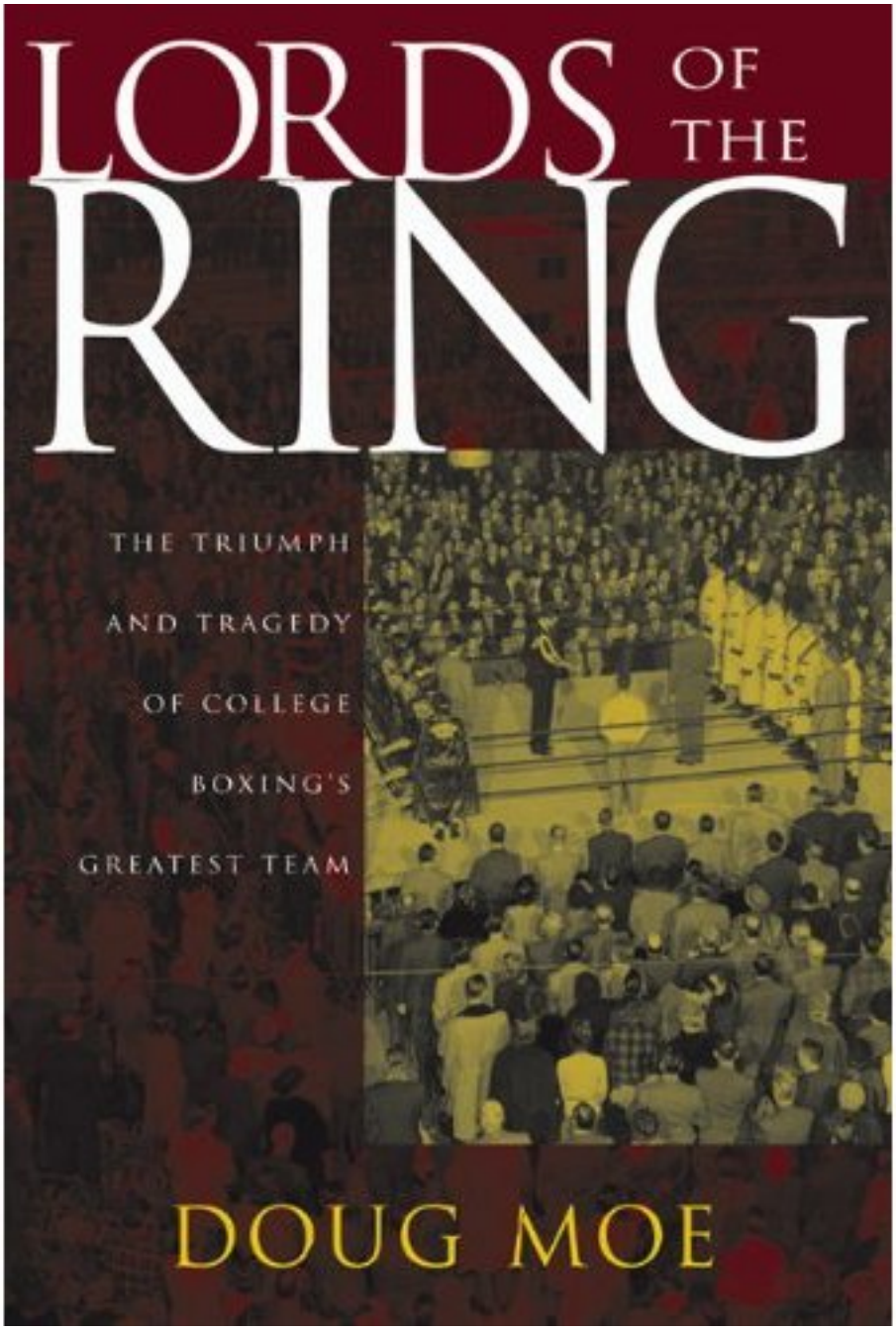

Boxing took hold on a handful of college campuses in the 1870s as an intramural sport. Theordore Roosevelt boxed as a student at Harvard and later wrote, “I like to see a bout between two evenly-matched men. There can be no harm in such an exhibition. In my opinion, it is much better for a man to know how to protect himself with his fists than to resort to firearms, knives, or clubs. I believe the sport should be encouraged. It is a manly sport.”

In *Lords of the Ring* (University of Wisconsin Press), Doug Moe explores the long-ago days of college boxing through the prism of the University of Wisconsin boxing team.

Wisconsin was the center of the college boxing universe. Starting in the 1930s, fifteen thousand fans packed the Wisconsin Field House on a regular basis to watch the Badgers compete.

“The fans - young and old, men and women – would begin to arrive two hours before fight time,” Moe writes. “The University of Wisconsin band would play rollicking tunes such as *The Beer Barrel Polka* , and necks would crane as people spotted their friends and neighbors in the throng.”

On March 29, 1940, Joe Louis defended the heavyweight championship of the world against Johnny Paycheck at Madison Square Garden with 11,620 spectators in attendance. That same night, more than 15,000 fans crowded into the Wisconsin Field House to watch a dual competition between Wisconsin and Washington State.

Over the years, Wisconsin won eight NCAA team championships in boxing and 35 NCAA individual titles. “I liken boxing at Wisconsin to football at Notre Dame,” Cal Vernon (a 1948 NCAA champion) later said. “We were the Notre Dame of boxing.”

But by 1960, college boxing was under attack. Mobs scandals had tarnished the professional ranks. College faculties were questioning whether an athletic competition founded on the intent to physically incapacitate an opponent belonged on campus. More and more universities were dropping the sport. The University of Wisconsin was one of the few major colleges that still had a boxing team.

In April 1960, the Wisconsin Field House hosted the NCAA championship boxing tournament for the seventh time. Six Badgers made it to the final round. One of them was middleweight Charlie Mohr.

Mohr could have sprung from the pages of a Horatio Alger novel. He’d won an individual NCAA championship the previous year, but had no intention of turning pro. He boxed because the sweet science was his passport to a college scholarship.

Local newspaper accounts of Mohr’s ring exploits and personality described him as “handsome” and “soft-spoken” with “bewitching charm.”

“Charlie had a way about him,” columnist Bonnie Ryan wrote in the *Capitol Times*. “When he talked to you, he made you feel that you were the best friend he had in the world. Never, never would he think of saying a bad word against anyone.”

Bill Urban (one of Mohr’s teammates at Wisconsin) told Moe, “He was just so very very kind. I always enjoyed being with him. Everybody did.”

But as Moe writes, “The pure and simple truth is rarely pure and never simple.”

Although the information was kept secret at the time, Mohr had been hospitalized for depression early in his senior year of college and given electroshock therapy.

Years later, Jim Doherty (a classmate) acknowledged in an article written for *Smithsonian Magazine*, “There was a lot more going on with Charlie than many of us realized. The legend was true as far as it went. He was a hero, for sure. But not the one we all thought we knew. Concealed beneath the jaunty facade he beamed at the world was a tormented young man who had the misfortune to end up in a place where he didn’t want to be but who never quit fighting and always tried to do the right thing.”

Mohr was ambivalent about boxing by his senior year but continued to box to keep his scholarship. On April 9, 1960, he entered the ring to face Stu Bartell of San Jose State in the finals of the 165-pound division at the NCAA championship tournament. The bout would determine both the NCAA individual title and team championship.

Bartell stopped Mohr in the second round. The fight ended with Charlie on his feet.

Earlier in the day, a young Nevadan named Mills Lane (yes, that Mills Lane) had beaten Gary Wilhelm of Wisconsin to capture the 147-pound NCAA championship. Lane later recalled, “I remember the Wisconsin Field House being a gigantic place. I was standing in back near my dressing room because I had already completed my fight. I saw Charlie walk back to his corner and sit down on his stool, and I saw him talking to his coach. I later found out that Charlie was apologizing for having lost the fight. Charlie felt he had let the school down because the defeat enabled San Jose State to win the team trophy. After a minute or so, Charlie got up off his stool, slipped through the ropes, and started walking back to the dressing room. Under any circumstances, that is a long walk. It’s even longer when you have been defeated. Charlie signed autographs all the way back to the locker room. I remember how bad I felt for Charlie. I watched Charlie step toward the Wisconsin dressing room, then turned away, lost in my own thoughts. Within minutes, word spread through the Field House that Charlie had collapsed.”

Mohr had suffered a massive subdural hemotoma. He died eight days later, on Easter Sunday, without regaining consciousness.

“What’s really sad,” Wisconsin boxing coach John Walsh later said, “is that Charlie had planned on retiring from boxing after the tournament. He was about two-and-a-half minutes away from never boxing again.”

Lords of the Ring is well-researched. It’s bit tedious at times, as Moe tends to fall into a tournament-by-tournament, fight-by-fight recounting of the history of Wisconsin boxing. But the story of Charlie Mohr and his tragic death adds an underlying drama to it all.

There’s also a poignant footnote.

On May 19, 1960, the University of Wisconsin faculty voted to discontinue boxing as a varsity sport. That led to a ripple effect. San Jose State, Sacramento State, and Washington State (three of the few other major universities with credible boxing programs) followed suit. On January 7, 1961, the executive committee of the NCAA voted to discontinue boxing as an NCAA sport.

Thomas Hauser can be reached by email at thauser@rcn.com. His most recent book (*And the New: An Inside Look at Another Year in Boxing*

) was published by the University of Arkansas Press.

Comment on this article

Radam G says:

Maligayang Pasko! Sweet copy. And it was grand how you included HOFer referee Mills Lane in there. Now that is a cat with a high IQ in boxing, along with great savviness -- pundits get the two fudged up and mixed all the time in this Universe. I guess that they just resent the correct education that's sent. Or maybe they just have some type of whacked-out intent. But school 'em on. They ought to quit not caring about being wrong.

Nobody in this Universe has to be naked to boxing education with his @ss hanging out in the cold of stupidity. There are a few university, including Mills Lane's old university, and the military academies, that still have boxing programs. Holla!