

JOHNNY TOCCO'S RINGSIDE GYM

The historic Las Vegas Ringside Gym survived the Covid Crisis and is still located at the corner of West Charleston Boulevard and Main Street in downtown Las Vegas, Nevada

I recently paid a visit to the legendary Johnny Tocco's Ringside gym in the downtown section of Las Vegas, Nevada at 9 West Charleston Boulevard. This was my first visit to the iconic gym, and I was met at the rear entrance of the gym by the owner James Smith.

As I looked around the rear parking lot of the gym, I noticed the large brick wall that had murals painted of Rocky Marciano, Salvador Sanchez, and Muhammed Ali. I was amazed at how lifelike the figures of the Hall of Fame boxers had been painted. Smith looked at the slightly faded figures on the wall and advised me that he did not know who actually painted the murals.



Mural at the back of the gym featuring (left to right) Rocky Marciano, Salvador Sanchez, and Muhammed Ali
—Author's personal photo

After taking photos with Smith in front of the murals, we walked into the gym together through the back door. The first thing I noticed when I walked into the gym was the boxing ring in the center of the room with four black and red ring ropes. Smith advised me that I was looking at the original ring that had been set up in the building by Johnny Tocco in 1953.



Johnny Tocco's original ring from 1953
—Author's personal photo.

I could not help but take more photos with Smith inside of the iconic ring, where all the ring greats had previously sparred. I sat down with Smith near the ring and observed a large, 3-foot, truck tire with holes in the sidewalls sitting in the corner of the gym. Smith told me that the tire had, at one time, belonged to ex-champion Sonny Liston. The tire had been saved by Gary Bates, Liston's former sparring partner for historic purposes. Liston and Bates had gone up to Mount Charleston to chop down trees for training purposes when they were caught by park rangers. The rangers threw Bates in jail for the weekend, but Liston was let go. Instead of chopping down trees in the future Liston and Bates took turns hitting the tire with a sledgehammer for training exercise.



Sonny Liston's tire
—Author's personal photo.

Smith informed me that Johnny Tocco came to Las Vegas from St. Louis, Missouri in 1953 to watch the Archie Moore versus Nino Valdes fight. Tocco liked the warm Las Vegas weather and decided to build a ring near the Zebra Club in downtown Las Vegas on West Charleston Boulevard.

The Zebra Club and Lounge was known at the time to have Mob connections and when Tocco inquired about putting up a boxing ring in the area, the Zebra Club inhabitants did not mind as there were always fights in their club anyway.

As I was talking to Smith, I noticed a large photo on a wall near the back door of ex-heavyweight champion Sonny Liston shaking hands with Johnny Tocco. I noticed that the photo had been signed by both Liston and Tocco.



Ex heavyweight champion Sonny Liston with John Tocco, autographed.

—Author's personal photo.

Smith then mentioned that Liston was probably Tocco's favorite fighter and that he had worked in Liston's corner in the final fight of his career against Chuck Wepner in 1970. Apparently Tocco and Liston had known each other in St. Louis prior to Tocco moving to Las Vegas. Smith advised me that Liston trained regularly at Tocco's gym and that they had maintained a close friendship over the years.

Smith advised that Tocco had a reputation of always being willing to help out any fighter whether the fighter was a professional or an amateur just starting out. Tocco eventually passed away in 1997 and the gym was sold right after his death.

The 59-year-old Smith related that he was a native of Las Vegas, and after a 25-year career with the local school district, he had an opportunity along with his wife, Elizabeth Benitez-Smith, a retired elementary school teacher in Las Vegas, to purchase Tocco's gym in 2005.

Smith organized the Johnny Tocco's Amateur Boxing Club from 2008 to 2019. One of Smith's prize amateur fighters was Alexander "The Great" Thiel who, as a super welterweight, compiled a record of 97 wins with just 5 losses. Thiel eventually turned professional and had a record of 4 wins and no losses, before he temporarily retired from the ring to raise a family.

Smith also trained professional fighters Antonio Mesquita, a Brazilian fighter with a professional record of 34 wins with just 3 losses, and Jesus Gutierrez a super lightweight who had a record of 14 wins, 4 losses, and 1 draw.

Smith stated that he sold the gym in 2019, but he took the gym back in 2022 when the buyers had been unable to keep the gym open due to the Covid crisis. Smith related that at one time the gym had two rings, but he took out one ring, where Tocco's office had been located, and turned it into a fun room.

Smith told me he first became interested in boxing from hearing family tales about his grandfather who fought under the name of "Indian" Johnny Smith in the 1930s and 1940s. Smith's grandfather had 46 professional fights, winning approximately one half of them. When Tocco's gym was made available to him in 2005, he jumped at the chance to take possession of the iconic gym. Smith advised me that though he never fought professionally he always had an interest in boxing as a fan and as a trainer.

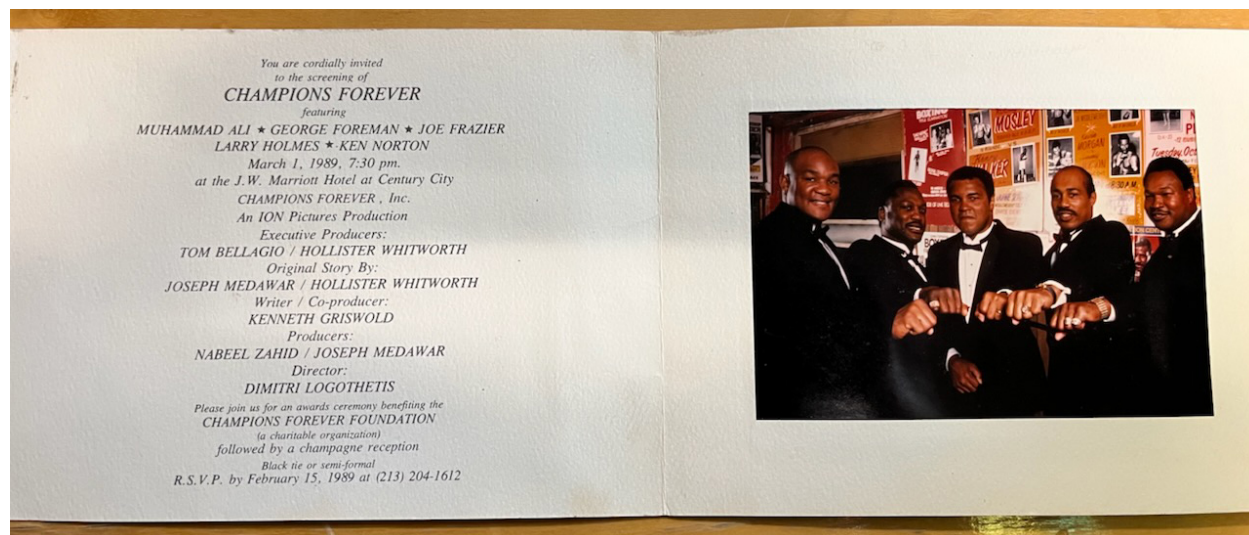
One of Smith's favorite fighters was Mike "The body snatcher" McCallum as McCallum once saved Smith from an irate customer who refused to pay his gym dues to train at the gym.

The famous fighter Bernard Hopkins advised Smith that he should never modernize the gym, and that it should be left in its "old school" state of being a blue-collar gym. When I asked Smith to name some fighters who had trained at the gym, he gave me a roll call of names that sounded like the who's who in the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

Some of the famous fighters who trained at the gym where Bernard Hopkins, Muhammed Ali, Larry Holmes, Joe Frazier, Ken Norton, Mike Tyson, Evander Holyfield, Michael Dokes, Michael Spinks, Marvin Hagler, Roberto Duran, Freddie Roach, Jermaine Taylor, Sonny Liston, Livingston Bramble, Ray Mancini, Sergio Martinez, Julio Cesar Chavez, Diego Corrales, Floyd Mayweather Senior, Laila Ali, Christy Martin, and mixed martial artist BJ Penn to name just some of the greats who trained at his gym.

I walked around the gym with Smith and looked at all the walls covered with fight posters. I saw posters of many of the greatest fights from the past 30 years. I saw a poster of Laila Ali versus Christy

Martin, and Smith informed me that they had both come into his gym and trained to help promote his gym. Further, Mike Tyson trained regularly at one time at this gym just to stay in shape between fights late in his career. Smith also showed me a photo that was taken at his gym of George Foreman, Joe Frazier, Muhammed Ali, Ken Norton, and Larry Holmes all standing next to each other in tuxedos posing for the camera and making fists with their arms extended.



Iconic photo of 5 heavyweight champions taken at JT's gym L to r George Foreman, Joe Frazier, Muhammed Ali, Ken Norton, and Larry Holmes
—Photo courtesy of James Smith

I walked outside to the front of the gym on West Charleston Street and noticed all the murals of some of the ring greats who trained at the gym, including a mural of Johnny Tocco. Tocco has a cigar in his mouth and is giving a thumbs up to passing motorists. A sign advertises that champions have been trained at this gym since 1953. There is also a mural of Ali standing over Liston in their rematch, yelling for him to get up off of the canvas. The artist of these murals was trainer/artist John Maynard Roberts.



The front of Johnny Tocco's Gym.
— Author's personal photo.

So, what is Smith doing now in the gym? Smith is giving private boxing lessons for people that want to train at his gym. As Johnny Tocco was inducted into the Southern Nevada sports Hall of fame in 2000, perhaps it is now time for the historic gym itself to be considered a Las Vegas historical site by the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce.

Two of the most famous boxing gyms in the country were the Main Street gym in Los Angeles which was run by Howie Stindler, and Johnny Tocco's ringside gym in Las Vegas. Steindler was murdered in 1977, and the Main Street gym closed in 1984, and was turned into a parking lot. Johnny Tocco is no longer with us, but it would be a real boxing tragedy to see this last of the great historic iconic gyms close.



Co-owners James Smith and Elizabeth Benetiz-Smith.
—Author's personal photo.

Larry Carli

Article 3, pic 1: Mural at the back of the gym featuring l to r Rocky Marciano, Salvador Sanchez, and Muhammed Ali, Author's personal photo.

Article 3, pic 2: Johnny Tocco's original ring from 1953, author's personal photo

Article 3, pic 3: Sonny Liston's tire, author's personal photo

Article 3, pic 4: Ex heavyweight champion Sonny Liston with John Tocco, autographed, author's personal photo

Article 3, pic 5: Iconic photo of 5 heavyweight champions taken at JT's gym L to r George Foreman, Joe Frazier, Muhammed Ali, Ken Norton, and Larry Holmes. Courtesy of James Smith

Article 3, pic 6: The front of Johnny Tocco's Gym, author's personal photo

Article 3, pic 7: Co-owners James Smith and Elizabeth Benetiz-Smith, author's personal photo