

THE HISTORY & FUTURE OF BOXING IN SACRAMENTO, CA

Larry Carli

Sacramento is the State Capitol of California, and it is located at the intersections of the American and Sacramento rivers, in the northern part of the state. Local residents of Sacramento, call it the River City, and it has always been known for its rich history of professional boxing, as it fights to maintain that interest and deal with the newer generation's interest in kick boxing, and mixed martial arts.

The first middleweight champion to be recognized under Marquis of Queensbury rules was Jack "The Nonpareil" Dempsey in 1884. Dempsey was also the first world boxing champion to fight in Sacramento when he defeated Tom Norton by 4 round decision in a non-title fight on September 12, 1885.

Stanley Ketchel arrived in Sacramento on May 23, 1907, and knocked out George KO Brown in 3 rounds. Ketchel would win the world middleweight title when he knocked out Joe Thomas 4 months later in San Francisco, California.

German born middleweight contender Frank Mantell arrived in Sacramento to rebuild his career after being knocked out by top middleweight contender Billy Papke in Boston in August of 1908.

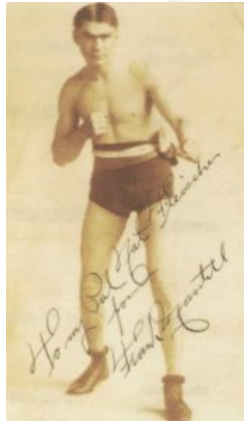
Mantell resurrected his career by winning all 7 of his fights in Sacramento in 1909, including a 20-round decision over middleweight contender Jack (Twin) Sullivan.

Mantell appeared again in Sacramento in August of 1910 and was held to a 20-round draw by Denver O'Keefe. In 1911 Mantell toured the East Coast and fought two no decision fights with top middleweight contender Joe Thomas.

By 1912 Billy Papke had gained worldwide recognition as the middleweight champion after Stanley Ketchell had been shot and killed in 1910. Sacramento had its first world title fight

when Mantell challenged Papke to a 20-round fight with the world title on the line. The fight was held at the old Buffalo Park and Papke was a prohibitive favorite to retain his title, as he had previously knocked out Mantell in 1 round in 1908.

The middleweight title fight took place on February 22, 1912, and Mantell shockingly won a 20 round decision over Papke and immediately claimed the middleweight title



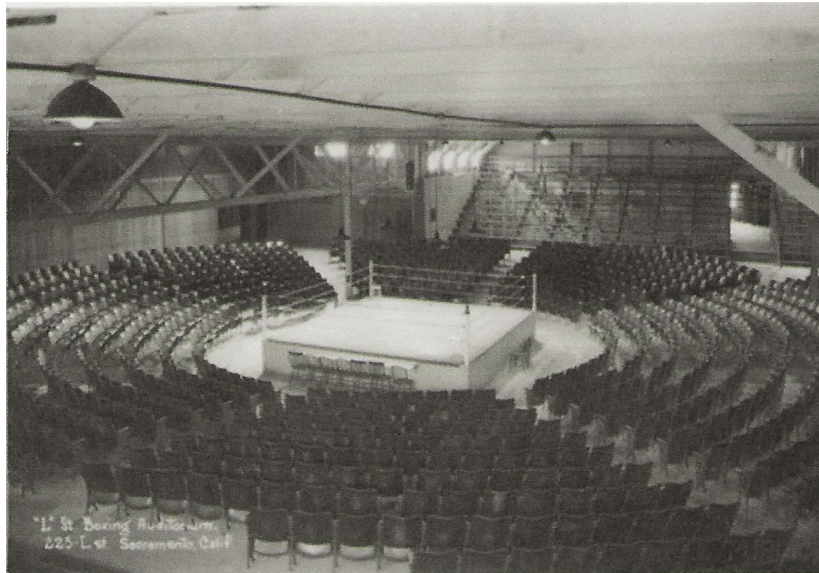
Frank Mantell, winner of the first middleweight title fight in Sacramento

Papke claimed that he failed to make weight for the fight and rejected Mantell's claim to the title. Mantell was still generally recognized in the United States as the champion and he successfully defended his title the following month by winning a 20-round decision over Jack Herrick in Vernon, California.

Mantell returned to the ring in June of 1912 and won a 20-round decision over Dan Sullivan and fought a 20-round draw with James Thompson in July. By 1913 Mantell no longer claimed the middleweight title and he returned to Sacramento in June and lost a 20-round decision to Sailor Grande, and then fought a 20-round draw in September with Harry Krantz.

Mantell left Sacramento for good in 1913 and fought on with moderate success against top middleweight and light heavyweight contenders before he retired from the ring with over 100 fights to his credit in 1917.

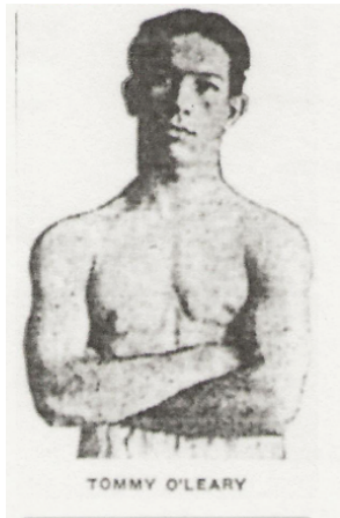
Professional boxing matches were held in parks in Sacramento until the L street Arena was built at 223 L street in the downtown area in 1916. The first boxing event took place on November 18, 1916, when "Fat" Willie Meehan defeated Charlie Miller in 3 rounds in front of 3 thousand spectators. This was the largest crowd to ever view a boxing event up until that time in Sacramento.



The L Street Arena, circa 1925
 Courtesy of The Sacramento Public Library
 -Erin Estrup, Librarian, Central Library

Meehan would go on to win 4 round decisions over future heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey in 1917, and in 1918 in San Francisco. California law limited boxing to 4 round matches around 1914. This law was revoked by legislation in 1925.

The first two fighters of note to appear at the L street Arena were local fighters Tommy O'Leary, and Babe Herman. O'Leary and Herman both turned professional as featherweights around 1920. In 1924 Herman defeated O'Leary by a 4-round decision.



Tommy O'Leary (left) and Babe Herman (right)

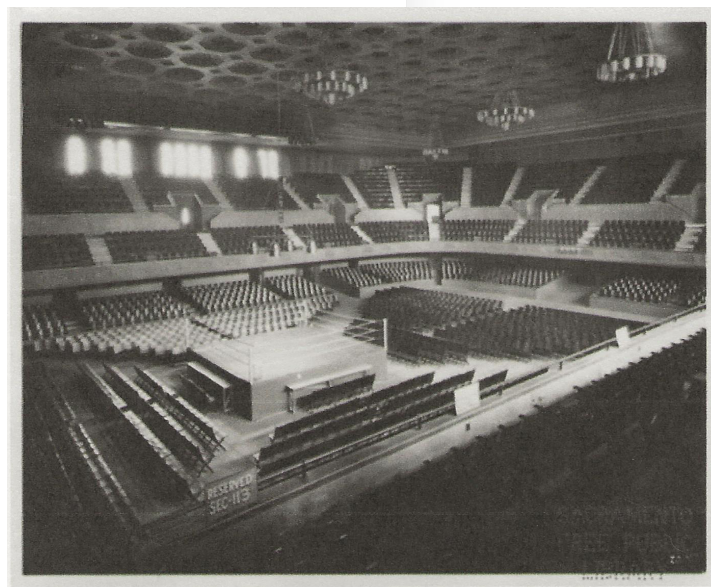
Herman became a top contender for the world featherweight title. In 1925. Herman fought World featherweight champion Louis (Kid) Kaplan twice for the world title. In August.

Herman held Kaplan to a 15-round draw in Waterbury, Connecticut, but lost the rematch by 15 round decision to Kaplan in Madison Square Garden in New York in December. Herman would retire from the ring in 1932 without ever winning the featherweight crown. Herman retired with a ring record of 95 wins, 50 losses, and 19 draws. Herman won 24 fights by knockout.

O'Leary also had a successful professional career and retired from the ring in 1930 with a record of 52 wins, 32 losses, and 43 draws. O'Leary won 10 fights by knockout. O'Leary defeated several contenders for the featherweight and lightweight titles. Among O'Leary's victims were future World Welterweight champion Young Jack Thompson.

Another fighter who fought in Sacramento was world welterweight champion Young Corbett III from Fresno, California. Corbett III defeated O'Leary by 4 round decision in 1923 and Dave Velasco by 10 round decision in 1932. Both fights were before Corbett III won the welterweight title.

The Sacramento Memorial Auditorium was built in 1926 at 16th/J streets in Sacramento and staged its first set of boxing matches on March 3, 1927. Tommy O'Leary won a 6-round decision over Billy Watson in one of the Auditorium's first big boxing main events. Babe Herman was fighting on the East Coast at the time.



Sacramento Memorial Auditorium set up for boxing, circa 1935
Courtesy of The Sacramento Public Library
-Erin Estrup, Librarian, Central Library

After retirement Tommy O'Leary opened up a boxing gym in downtown Sacramento. There was a fair amount of good boxing talent training at O'Leary's gym at the time. In 1932

former world heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey arrived in Sacramento during the Depression to referee a state bantamweight championship fight between Young Terry and Newsboy Brown. Young Terry won a decision over Brown to take the title.

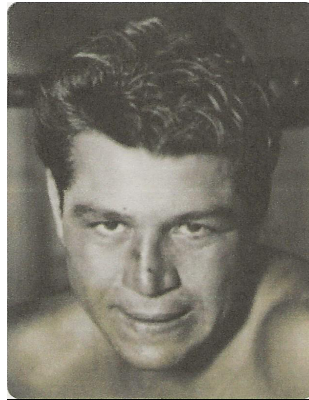


Jack Dempsey presents Young Tommy the bantam weight championship-
Courtesy of The Sacramento Public Library
-Erin Estrup, Librarian, Central Library

Other world champions who made appearances in Sacramento rings in the 1930's were 3 weight division champion Henry Armstrong in 1936, and middleweight champion Ceferino Garcia in 1932, and in 1934. World Light Heavyweight champion Maxie Rosenbloom fought in Sacramento in a 10 round non-title fight in 1932. Rosenbloom defeated Tony Peloni by 10 round decision.

Local talent in the 1930's included featherweight Tomboy Romero, middleweight Mario Duccini, and Newsboy Millich, a light heavyweight veteran of over 100 fights. Romero went undefeated in his first 20 4 and 6 round fights. In 1936 Romero lost his first fight to Young Joe Roche. During the same year Romero began fighting 10 round main event Romero's highest profile fight before retiring in 1940, was a 1939 5-round TKO loss to future Featherweight champion Richie Lemos in Hollywood, California. Romero's final ring record was 48 wins, and 12

losses. He won 28 fights by knockout.



Tomboy Romero
Boxrec.com

Mario Duccini turned professional in 1936 after failing to make the United States Olympic boxing team. Duccini lost in the Olympic box offs to future ring legend Charley Burley. Duccini was undefeated in his first 6 professional fights as a middleweight until he ran into hard punching southpaw Johnny Bassinelli from Reno, Nevada who defeated him by knockout in 1936. Duccini went onto a moderate win streak until he lost to Bassinelli again in 1937 by decision.

In 1939 Duccini entered the ring against Pat Valentino as a huge underdog. Valentino was an undefeated middleweight who would eventually go on to challenge Ezzard Charles for the world heavyweight title in 1949. Duccini won a 6-round decision over Valentino to give him his first professional loss. A 1940 loss to Valentino by knockout in a return match pretty much ended Duccini's ring career. Duccini's final record was 19 wins, 12 losses, and 9 draws.

Duccini would become a well-known Sacramento referee after his ring career was over. After a 25-year career as a referee, he retired to tend to a service station that he purchased about the same time he became a professional boxer. Duccini was such a well-known referee in Sacramento, that he later was compared to Mills Lane from Reno, Nevada.

Growing up in East Sacramento, near Duccini's service station, I asked him once what happened to him in his first fight with Johnny Bassinelli. Duccini just told me that "I forgot to duck". Duccini was well liked by everyone who knew him.



Mario Duccini in his later years
nyfights.com

George (Newsboy) Millich was the true definition of a traveling club fighter. Millich turned professional in 1932 as a middleweight and retired in 1948 as a heavyweight. In a 100-fight career, Millich won 65 fights, lost 26 fights, and had 12 draws. During his career he lost to middleweight champion Fred Apostoli, and twice to legendary great Lloyd Marshall. Millich could beat just about anybody except for champions and top contenders in the middleweight and light heavyweight divisions. Millich was a real crowd pleaser and was a favorite among fans in Sacramento, San Francisco and all the way up the West Coast.



Newsboy Millich
Boxrec.com

The 1940's brought the onset of the United States involvement in World War 2. Many fighters enlisted in the military for the war and boxing was quiet in Sacramento for the most part from 1942 to 1945. Joe Louis came to Sacramento in November of 1945 to box a couple of

exhibition matches, and former middleweight champion Fred Apostoli came to Sacramento in August of 1946 towards the end of his career to win a 10-round decision over Shiek Rangel.

The most exciting thing to happen in Sacramento during the 1940's was former heavyweight champion Max Baer moving here with his family after the war to live near his manager Ancil Hoffman. Hoffman was a well-known businessman and sportsman in Sacramento who managed Baer for most of his career. Hoffman managed Baer's career with fiscal responsibility and the former champion was financially secure upon retirement.



Max Baer on the cover of *Boxing Illustrated*
-Author's personal collection

Baer would occasionally referee boxing matches at the Sacramento Memorial Auditorium, and he was always very friendly to children when seen out in public with his family. Baer was never known to refuse an autograph request and he was totally unlike the way he was negatively depicted in the movie "Cinderella Man", the life story of boxer James J. Braddock.

Baer passed away in 1959 from a heart attack, and he was buried in Sacramento. Former heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey was one of the pallbearers at his funeral.



Max Baer's crypt, St Mary's Cemetery,
Sacramento
-Author's photo

Boxing began to boom again in the 1950's. The L Street Arena closed its doors in 1945, and all the major fights were held at the Sacramento Memorial Auditorium. Joey Lopes, a local lightweight boxer became a top contender in the 1950's. Lopes defeated Lulu Perez in 1954 by decision to enter the top ten rankings in the lightweight division.

In 1955 Lopes defeated top contender Percy Bassett, and former featherweight champion Sandy Saddler in Sacramento. In August of 1957 Lopes traveled to Chicago and held lightweight champion Joe Brown to a draw in a 10 round non-title bout. In December of 1957, Brown gave Lopes a rematch for the title in Chicago and stopped him in 11 rounds.



Joey Lopes,
Sacramento's
1950's lightweight
contender
Boxrec.com

In 1958 Lopes defeated former lightweight champion Jimmy Carter by decision. In 1960

Lopes stopped highly ranked contender Paolo Rosi to earn a title fight with Flash Elorde of the Philippines for his super featherweight title. Lopes lost a 15 round unanimous decision to Elorde in March of 1961.

In September of 1961 Lopes defeated contender Cisco Andrade, but he retired shortly after being knocked out by former lightweight champion Joe Brown in a May of 1963 fight held in Sacramento. Lopes would then go onto become the manager of Pete Ranzany. Ranzany would then become a boxing favorite in Sacramento in the 1970's.

Ranzany had been trained by Tommy O'Leary as an amateur in Sacramento prior to going into the United States Army. While in the Army stationed in Hawaii, Ranzany won some all-service boxing titles, and split a couple of amateur matches with future world welterweight champion Carlos Palomino. By the time Ranzany got out of the Army, Tommy O'Leary had unexpectedly died of a heart attack in 1970. Ranzany had several offers to turn professional, and eventually chose to go with a group of Sacramento businessmen who called their association RANSAC, which was similar in design to the group CLOVERLAY which managed Joe Frazier.

While Ranzany was fighting in the preliminaries in the early 1970s, fighters such as Carlos Salinas, Rafael Gutierrez, Bill McMurray, Henry Clark, Fred Roots, Joey Olguin, Monroe Brooks, Jimmy Lester, and former world champions Curtis Cokes, and Denny Moyer were fighting in the main events.

Promoting boxing matches became a big business in Sacramento in the 1970s. Babe Griffin from the San Jose, California area began promoting boxing matches in Sacramento along with local matchmaker Sid Tenner. Griffin had been a former professional fighter of note, and he was an experienced fight promoter. Ranzany became his main "meal ticket" in Sacramento.

Tenner was a "Runyonesque" type of colorful character who showed up in Sacramento from Chicago in the 1950's. Tenner could be seen fight night in the front of the Sacramento Memorial Auditorium selling fight tickets out of a cigar box, while he had one cigar hanging out of his mouth. Tenner would promise everyone good seats, no matter where they were located.

Hall of Fame boxing promoter Don Chargin, and his wife Lorraine also joined in promoting main events in Sacramento. Chargin was nicknamed "war a week" because of the sensational fights that he had promoted at the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles. Chargin even promoted the World Boxing Association heavyweight title match between Jimmy Ellis and

Jerry Quarry back in 1968 at the Oakland Coliseum.

When Pete Ranzany was fighting main event fights in Sacramento by the mid 1970's his fights were usually sell outs. His fights at the Auditorium with Adolfo Viruet in 1976, and Armando Muniz in 1977 were standing room only crowds at the fights. Ranzany eventually was ranked number one in the world in the welterweight division and on September 9th, 1978, he challenged World Boxing Association champion Jose "Pepino" Cuevas for the title at the outdoor Hughes Stadium venue in Sacramento.

Ranzany came out in the first round and won it easily by out boxing Cuevas. In the second round Cuevas flashed his famed left hook, and Ranzany was dropped twice and stopped in his only title fight.

Ranzany still remained a popular fighter in Sacramento, and he defeated other top contenders like Randy Shields, Clyde Gray and Jimmy Heair during his career. Ranzany was involved in another high-profile fight in Sacramento when he fought cross town super lightweight contender Sal Lopez at Hughes Stadium in 1980. The fight was billed as the "Welterweight Championship of Sacramento." Ranzany had a 2-inch height advantage, and a 5-pound weight advantage that Sal Lopez could not overcome. Ranzany won on a technical knockout as Lopez retired on his stool at the end of 6 rounds.

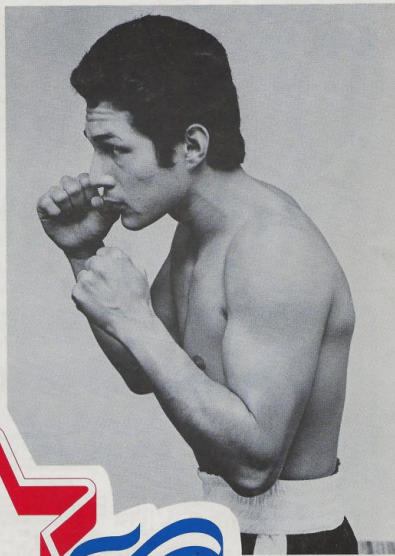
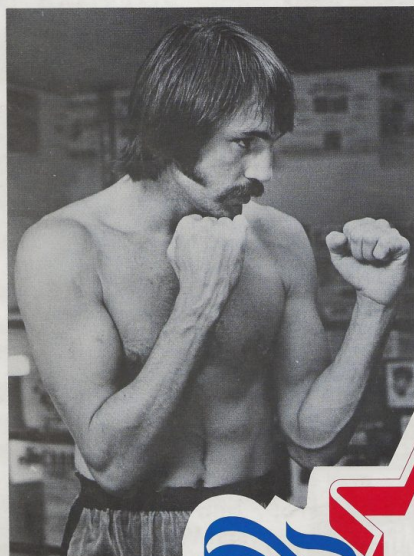
HUGHES STADIUM

Friday, September, 5, 1980

PISTOL PETE RANZANY

v.s

SALOMON SAL LOPEZ



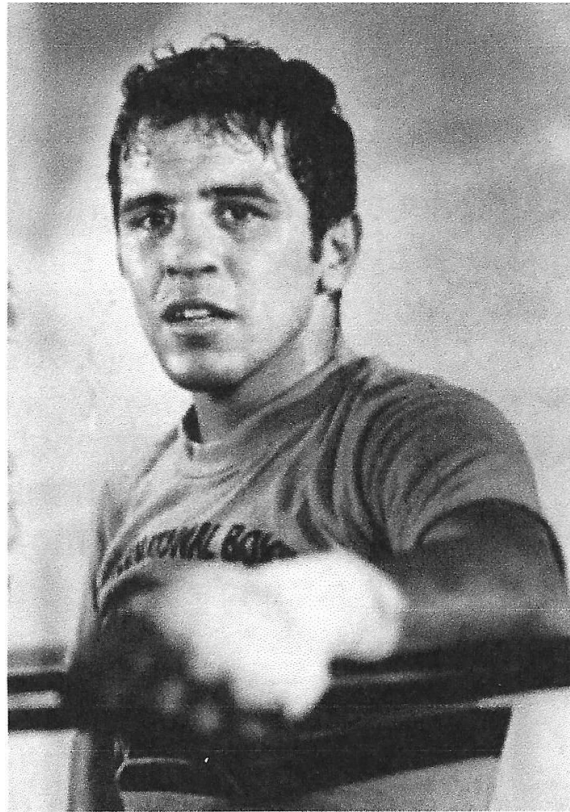
**WELTERWEIGHT CHAMPIONSHIP
OF SACRAMENTO**

SOUVENIR PROGRAM \$1.50

1970's Sacramento welterweight Pete Ranzany and super
lightweight contender Sal Lopez
-Author's personal collection

Ranzany would lose high profile fights to Wilfred Benitez, Sugar Ray Leonard, and Milton McCrory before retiring with eye problems in the early 1980's. Ranzany eventually became a Correctional Officer for the State of California.

In 1982 former world featherweight champion Bobby "School Boy" Chacon showed up in Sacramento and won a couple of tune ups fights before he challenged world super featherweight champion Rafael "Bazooka" Limon in December of 1982 for the title. It was a sellout crowd at the auditorium, and the fight was televised nationally.



Bobby "School Boy" Chacon

Chacon and Limon had fought 3 times previously. Each had won one fight, and the 3rd fight was called a technical draw. Both fighters knew each other well, and they were evenly matched.

The nationally televised fight was a classic between two evenly matched warriors. The fight was close going into the last round, when Chacon dropped Limon near the end of the round to win a close unanimous decision. It was probably the greatest fight that I had ever seen in person, and the beginning of the Golden Age of boxing in Sacramento.

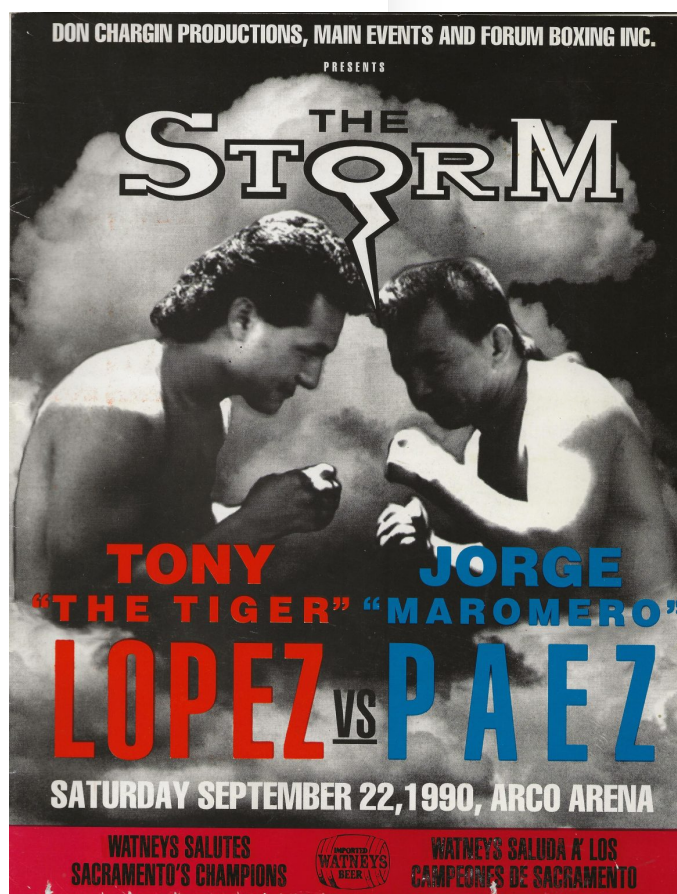
Ring magazine voted the Chacon vs. Limon fight the fight of the year for 1982. Chacon won win a couple of more fights in Sacramento after losing title recognition and his final fight was at the Arco Arena venue in Sacramento.

When Chacon was in Sacramento, he sparred frequently with local super featherweight prospect Tony "The Tiger" Lopez. Lopez spent countless rounds sparring with Chacon and adapted his style of head movement for defensive purposes in the ring.

Chacon left the Sacramento area around 1985 when Tony Lopez began fighting main event fights in Sacramento. Lopez was an aggressive power puncher in the ring, and he became

the number 1 contender for Rocky Lockridge's Internationally Boxing Federation Super Featherweight title in 1988. In July of 1988 Lopez challenged Lockridge for his title in Sacramento.

Lopez dominated the early going of the title fight, and survived an 8th round knockdown to win an unanimous decision and become the first local fighter in history to win a world title . Tony Lopez would go on to become a 2 time International Boxing Federation. world super featherweight champion, and in 1992 he won the World Boxing Association lightweight title from Joey Gamache by 11th round knockout. Lopez was a 3 time world boxing champion between 1988 to 1993, and won 12 world title fights, with just 3 loses, and 1 draw. To this date, Tony "The Tiger" Lopez has been the most successful fighter to ever come out of Sacramento.



1980's star Tony Lopez vs Jorge Paez
-Author's personal collection

Local Super Lightweight Loreto Garza became the second fighter from Sacramento to win a world title, when he traveled to France on just 2 weeks notice to upset World Boxing Association super lightweight champion Juan Coggi by 12 round decision in 1990. Garza made one successful defense of his title when he beat Vinny Pazienza by disqualification, and then lost his title in 1991 to Edwin Rosario by knockout in Sacramento. Between 1990 and 1991 both Lopez

and Garza were world champions but no attempt was ever made to arrange a fight between the two due to the 10 pound weight difference.



Garza's speed evades Coggi's punches
-Sacramento Union, August 18, 1980

George Foreman came to Sacramento in 1987 to start his incredible climb back to the heavyweight championship, when he knocked out club fighter Steve Zouski. The title reigns of Tony Lopez which started in 1988 where always sell out events when he defended his titles in Sacramento.

Sacramento hard punching super bantamweight Richard Duran would attempt to become the 3rd Sacramento fighter to win a world title when he challenged International Boxing Federation Super Bantamweight champion Kennedy McKinney in April of 1993 in Sacramento. Duran had built up a reputation for 1st round knockouts and was considered a legitimate threat to McKinney's title

Duran put up a stiff challenge in the title fight, and even threatened to stop McKinney in one of the early rounds before losing a close unanimous decision to the champion. Duran's strong showing earned him a shot at Tracy Harris Patterson's World Boxing Council Super Bantamweight title in Reno, Nevada in April of 1994.

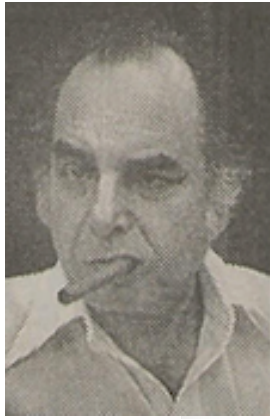
Duran again put up a competitive fight but was out pointed by Patterson over 12 hard fought rounds. Duran would soon retire after this fight with a ring record of 27 wins, and 3 loses. After his ring career was over Duran suffered health and legal issues. Duran would pass away in Sacramento at the young age of 44.

In 1995 ex- heavyweight champions Lennox Lewis, and Michael Moorer appeared in Sacramento to win separate 10 round bouts on the same boxing card, after having recently lost their heavyweight titles. Lewis stopped Lionel Butler, and Moorer won a 10-round decision over Melvin Foster.

In 2000 Super Bantamweight Willie Jorrin became the 3rd local fighter to win a major world boxing championship. Jorrin traveled to Manchester, England to win a 12-round decision over local favorite Michael Brodie for the World Boxing Council Super Bantamweight title. Jorrin made 2 successful defenses of his title before losing the title by knockout to Oscar Larios in 2002 in a bout in Sacramento. With Jorrin's defeat, the golden age of boxing which began in 1982, ended abruptly in 2002.

Sacramento lightweight Juan Lazcano had a successful professional career retiring in 2008 with a ring record of 37 wins, 5 losses and 1 draw. Lazcano fought only 4 times in Sacramento during his career, but on the road, he won the North American Boxing Federation lightweight title, and the lightly regarded International Boxing Association and World Boxing Federation lightweight titles. Lazcano defeated such fighters as John John Molina, Wilfredo Vasquez, and Jesse James Leija. Lazcano lost to Jose Luis Castillo in 2004 in a fight for Castillo's World Boxing Council Lightweight title. Lazcano retired after losing to Ricky Hatton in England.

Eventually the city's great promoters passed away. Babe Griffin was inducted into the World Boxing Hall of Fame in 1990, before passing away in Los Gatos, California in 1996. Colorful local fight manager and promoter, Sid Tenner passed away in 2004 after a long illness. Tenner was known as a soft-hearted individual who would frequently go to the local boys clubs and gyms and hand out free tickets to the fights to the kids who could not afford to attend.



Sid Tenner & his
characteristic
cigar
-Sacramento Bee,
June 25, 2004

The dean of California matchmakers, and promoters was undoubtedly Don Chargin. Chargin along with his wife Lorraine promoted matches in California for 69 years, notably at the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles, the Oakland Coliseum, and in Sacramento. Chargin was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 2001, before passing away in 2018 at the age of 90 in San Luis Obispo, California. Chargin's wife Lorraine was also inducted into the International Boxing Hall of fame in 2018. Lorraine Chargin had passed away in 2010.



Chargin signs Jerry Quarry for his title go with Jimmy Ellis
-Author's personal collection

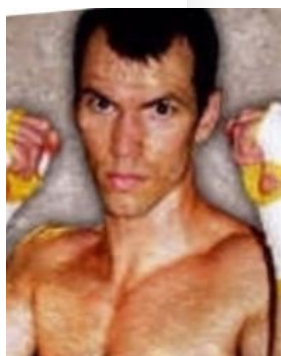
The only current Sacramento professional boxing promoter of note is local product Nasser Niavaroni. Niavaroni is a former Sacramento kick boxer turned trainer who first started training kick boxers at a Gold's gym in 1990 in Sacramento.

In 1996 Niavaroni was voted the International Kick Boxing Federation's trainer of the year award. Niavaroni helped to train legendary kick boxing champion Dennis Alexio as well as International Kickboxing Federation champion Eric Regan.

In 1997 Niavaroni formed Uppercut boxing promotions and soon after started his career as a local boxing promoter in 1998. In the past 25 plus years, Niavaroni has promoted 50 boxing events. His biggest promotion was probably ex-heavyweight Champion Oleg Maskaev versus Nagy Aguilera at the reopened Sacramento Memorial Auditorium on December 11, 2009. Aguilera pulled a huge upset by knocking out Maskaev in the 1st round and also knocking him out of an upcoming title elimination bout for the heavyweight title.

The Sacramento Memorial Auditorium had been closed for renovations since 1986 and had recently been opened for boxing events. Niavaroni sold out the house on this night and ran out of beer before the event was over.

Niavaroni also trained and promoted former kickboxing champion Eric Regan in his boxing career which began in 1998. Regan retired in 2007 with a record of 27 wins with just 4 losses. Regan won the International Boxing Association (IBA) continental middleweight title in 2003 by knocking out Ronald Weaver. Regan had been world ranked and had posted victories over former super welterweight world champion Ramon (Yory Boy) Campas, and world ranked Rito Ruvalcaba.



Sacramento's last
boxing star: Eric
Regan
-Boxrec.com

In 2024 Niavaroni co-promoted a boxing show with the Lion's Den promotions out of Pittsburgh, California. The boxing show held in Oakland; California featured undefeated middleweight prospect Amari Jones.

Niavaroni's goals are hopefully returning to sellout crowds at large venues like the Sacramento Memorial Auditorium, and the Golden 1 center in downtown Sacramento. Niavaroni has currently held events in nearby Sacramento casinos such as Thunder Valley in Lincoln, California.



Nasser Niavaroni, training in Folsom, CA, 2025
-Author's personal photo

Boxing became extremely popular in Sacramento in the mid 1970's when Pete Ranzany began fighting to sellout crowds in the Sacramento Memorial Auditorium. The real beginning of the Golden Age of boxing in Sacramento started when Bobby Chacon won the Super Featherweight title in the Memorial Auditorium in 1982, and ended when Super Bantamweight champion Willie Jorin lost his title in Sacramento in 2002. Between 1982 and 2002 Sacramento played host to 14 world major boxing championship fights. Professional boxing has had to

change with the current times to be able to succeed in keeping the public's interest in boxing. Professional boxing now has more challenges to face to keep the public interested in the sport. Kickboxing has been around for years and has presented somewhat of a public interest challenge to boxing but the real challenge to boxing has come from the recent popularity of Mixed Martial Arts fighting.

Mixed Martial Arts began in the 1990's, and within the last 15 years the sport has become increasingly popular around the globe with the sporting public. Mixed Martial Arts sells out arenas around the world for their events. Professional boxing has always had to face challenges including having to endure threats of being abolished by legislators and the medical communities. In Sacramento, professional boxing events used to be held at sold out auditoriums, and for the most part boxing events are now held in gambling casinos, where amateur fights are also on the card with professional fights. Many casinos host boxing events with less than one thousand fans in attendance at times.

I believe, however, that professional boxing will continue to survive like it always has. Like ex-world boxing champion Tony Lopez once told me. "If the promoters bring talented fighters to town to fight, the boxing public will always pay to show up and watch. "

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