

## “IRISH PAT” MCMURTRY

Heavyweight Title Contender & Tacoma Native Son

By Peter Bacho

COLUMBIA The Magazine of Northwest History, Summer 2002: Vol. 16, No. 2

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*Patrol officer Gordon Swenson hadn't seen anything like it during his long career with the Tacoma Police Department. There he was on the beat in one of Tacoma's toughest neighborhoods on an evening in October and there wasn't a single soul on the street—and not one responder call for an hour. In downtown Tacoma the streets were deserted as well, with the exception of a boisterous crowd of people outside Rhodes Department Store watching a flickering black and white television screen in the window. It was 1958 and Tacoma's pride and joy, boxer "Irish Pat" McMurtry, was stepping into the ring at Madison Square Garden to square off against Canadian heavyweight champion George Chuvalo. Everybody in town was tuned in to watch the fight on television. This was Pat's chance at the big time and the longed-for title shot against world heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson. It was Tacoma's chance at the big time as well because there had never been a local sports hero to compare with Pat McMurtry. Pat was truly Tacoma's own—a blue-collar kid and former marine with looks, personality, and thunder in his fists. He was arguably one of the most talented amateur fighters to ever enter the squared circle, and after he turned professional his fans believed he was sure to go up against Patterson. No one—the president, Willie Mays, Clark Gable, Marilyn Monroe—got as much ink, local press, and media coverage as Pat. He was, of course, my hero, too.*

*Peter Bacho, an award-winning writer and author of the book, *Boxing in Black and White*, wrote the following account of Pat's fight with Chuvalo after viewing a videotape of the October 1958 Gillette Cavalcade of Sports broadcast. Peter is not only a noted writer, he boxed a little when he was younger—enough, he says, to get out of the ring.*

—Bill Baarsma, mayor of Tacoma

The old black and white fight tape doesn't lie. It shows Tacoma's "Irish Pat" McMurtry in his prime against top-ranked opponents. McMurtry had a full bag of boxing skills that he hoped would carry him to a world heavyweight championship. In holding that hope, he wasn't alone. Tacomans had been following the ring exploits of Pat McMurtry and his younger brother Mike for years. As an amateur, Pat posted a 103-2 record before turning pro in 1954. Mike's amateur record, which included an NCAA heavyweight title, was just as impressive. But there is a world of difference between amateur boxing, which puts far more emphasis on fighters' safety and scoring points, and the much rougher professional game.

In the latter, aggression and a heavy punch count—and the older McMurtry had a deeper supply of both. In fact, McMurtry's finely honed skills were such that he had a legitimate chance of

winning the world heavyweight championship—the most coveted individual title in professional sports.

Much has been written about the unique, often fierce personal bond formed between championship fighters and their fans, who bask in the glory of these boxing idols. For example, Joe Louis, the great black heavyweight champion, gave symbolic hope to a generation of African Americans with his victories in the ring. In much the same way, McMurtry came to represent the hopes of Tacoma, his hometown. For decades Tacoma had suffered in a one-sided competition with Seattle, its larger, more prosperous neighbor to the north. In contrast to Tacoma, Seattle's confidence was such that by 1962 it would be hosting a world's fair, an event that would bring the city into even greater national and international prominence.

But in the 1950s Tacomans could boast of Pat McMurtry, a legitimate title contender and potential heavyweight champion. He was homegrown—one of Tacoma's own—starting with his hard-nosed, blue-collar roots on Tacoma's South Side. His fans had known him since his early amateur days in the 1940s, often watching his bouts in person or following his career through the sports pages of the *Tacoma News Tribune* and the region's other dailies. In an era before major league sports arrived in the Pacific Northwest, McMurtry was arguably the region's biggest sports star.

In July 1956, 10,729 fans flocked to Lincoln Bowl to watch McMurtry face Ezzard Charles, a great fighter and former heavyweight champion. McMurtry was brilliant that night, winning nine out of ten rounds on his way to a unanimous decision. The next month McMurtry returned to Lincoln Bowl to face Willie Pastrano, a promising heavyweight who would later win the world light-heavyweight championship. The bout drew 11,095 fans—a new Tacoma fight record—and generated so much pre-fight interest that the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* ran a special edition on the morning of the fight. Although McMurtry lost a controversial ten-round decision, the fight tape shows him pressuring the slick-boxing Pastrano throughout the fight and staggering him on several occasions.

The loss to Pastrano was just a temporary setback. Campaigning on the West Coast, McMurtry reeled off five straight wins—including a convincing second-round knockout of former middleweight champion Carl "Bobo" Olson—and earned a heavyweight ranking of fifth from *Ring Magazine*, boxing's famed "bible." But to get a shot at the world championship, McMurtry would need a bigger stage than the Lincoln Bowl or other West Coast arenas.

In October 1958 he got his chance before a national television audience on the Gillette Cavalcade of Sports. The venue was New York City's Madison Square Garden, once prizefighting's most hallowed shrine and a necessary stop on the way to a world championship bout. McMurtry's opponent was the tough Canadian champion, George Chuvalo, then at the start of a sterling 93-bout career against some of the best heavyweights in the world.

Although McMurtry and Chuvalo were the same height, 6'1", the similarities ended there. At 207 pounds, the barrel-chested Chuvalo outweighed McMurtry by sixteen pounds. As the two fighters met in center ring for the referee's instructions, it was clear to boxing observers that if McMurtry was to have any chance at all, he would have to keep his distance and outbox the powerful Canadian.

McMurtry's superior boxing skills were evident from the first round on, when the aggressive Chuvalo pressed forward, crowding McMurtry and digging left hooks to his body. That was Chuvalo's plan. He wanted to stay on top of McMurtry and wage a punch-for-punch war of attrition—a type of fight he was sure to win. On those occasions, McMurtry coolly covered up and blocked many of Chuvalo's blows. For much of the round, though, McMurtry was able to stick to his plan of fighting at a distance and keeping the oncoming Chuvalo off-balance with an accurate left jab and deft footwork.

McMurtry's footwork was especially impressive—a sure sign of a "well-schooled" fighter. When McMurtry moved in the ring, he was always under control—balanced, whether he moved backward, forward, or to the side. More importantly, he tapped the full potential of footwork as both a defensive and offensive tool. McMurtry moved just enough to avoid many of Chuvalo's powerful punches, but not so much that he took himself out of punching or counterpunching range.

But the measure of a championship-caliber fighter isn't just his mastery of boxing's technical skills. At its core, boxing is a brutal sport that calls on its participants to ignore often numbing pain and fear and somehow summon the will to win. Those who can do this have a chance of becoming world champions.

McMurtry put his will on display during the second round, when Chuvalo launched a hard left hook that landed flush on McMurtry's jaw. The blow staggered McMurtry, who then danced away until his sensory fog lifted. Chuvalo, confident the end was near, pursued McMurtry and launched more left hooks and other powerful blows, some of which found their mark. But by staying away McMurtry bought time to clear his head enough to begin throwing textbook-perfect left jabs that caught the aggressive Chuvalo by surprise. Near the end of the round McMurtry recovered enough to move forward and hit Chuvalo with a volley of heavier punches—sharp left hooks and punishing uppercuts.

By the third and fourth rounds, McMurtry, now fully recovered, established control of the fight. With his left jab and ring movement, he outboxed Chuvalo from a distance. When Chuvalo got close, McMurtry outslugged him with fast, multiple-punch combinations. By the fifth round, the fighters had changed roles. The confident McMurtry was the one moving forward and throwing punches, while Chuvalo was backing up. At this point, the fight had become a lopsided contest and the only question was whether McMurtry would win by a decision or a knockout.

In round six, Chuvalo—his face puffy and bloody— gave a telltale sign of his desperation: Gasping for air, he glanced up at the arena clock. McMurtry continued to methodically stalk Chuvalo, battering him at will while blocking or slipping most of the Canadian's counterpunches. At the end of the seventh round, the ring physician examined the battered Chuvalo and inexplicably allowed him to continue.

What happened next was predictable. Chuvalo endured more punishment through the remaining three rounds. In the ninth round, Chuvalo, his nose swollen and his face a puffy mess, was reduced to desperation. He threw a wild, sweeping left hook that missed its mark and threw him off-balance. It also left him open to a McMurtry counterpunch—a short chopping right—that McMurtry landed on Chuvalo's face as he twisted into the hook. As punches go, McMurtry's

punch on this occasion wasn't especially powerful or spectacular. But the force of the well-timed blow and Chualos's imbalance were enough to send him sprawling to the canvas.

Chualo, though, got a break. The referee ruled the fall a slip, not a knockdown. That favorable and fortunate ruling was one of the few good things to happen to Chualo during the fight.

The outcome was a formality: a unanimous decision in McMurtry's favor. The win over Chualo should have been a stepping stone to a showdown with heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson. Although Patterson was a superb boxer with excellent hand speed, he was short (a shade under six feet) and light (about 190 pounds) for a heavyweight. Bigger, more powerful fighters could overpower Patterson, which is exactly what the formidable Sonny Liston did in two title fights in 1962 and 1963. Liston, who weighed 212 pounds, scored devastating first-round knockouts over the overmatched Patterson.

Although McMurtry wasn't as big as Liston, he had the edge in height and weight over Patterson. A 1957 photograph in the *Oregonian* shows McMurtry and Patterson standing together. The champion seems almost frail in comparison to the taller, robust McMurtry. While McMurtry's size would have given him an edge over Patterson, the fighting styles of the boxers often determine the winner of a given bout. And McMurtry had the right style to beat the champion. Patterson's famed trainer, Cus D'Amato, had taken great pains to develop the "peek-a-boo" style, which he designed to highlight Patterson's hand speed while protecting his jaw and head against the heavier punches of bigger men.

Patterson, his hands held high, fought out of a crouch and usually at long range. From this position, he would close the gap between himself and his opponent by leaping at him, often with a left hook that would be the first blow in a multiple-punch volley. The tactic, which opened Patterson up to a right hand counterpunch, posed an obvious risk, but the champion's hand speed was usually quick enough to escape the consequences.

In a McMurtry-Patterson bout, the shorter Patterson would have had to leap at McMurtry to hit him. But that tactic would have played into one of McMurtry's strengths. As shown in the Chualo fight, McMurtry's quick, pinpoint counterpunching punished fighters who came at him. The jaw or head of a leaping, left-hooking Patterson would have been an open target for a McMurtry right hand counter. McMurtry, the heavier man, would also have had the advantage of moving forward and punching down as Patterson sprang forward—factors that would have increased the impact of the blow.

Unfortunately, a McMurtry-Patterson showdown never transpired. After the Chualo fight, sports writer Harry Grayson approached McMurtry and his father, Clarence, about a deal he had in mind. McMurtry would have to move to Boston and have Sam Silverman promote him. Silverman had promoted many of the fights involving Rocky Marciano, the former heavyweight champion who retired undefeated. Grayson made a strong case that Silverman had the right connections within boxing circles to set up a McMurtry-Patterson title fight in the near future. It would have been an attractive, lucrative match. McMurtry was a talented, clean-living, highly photogenic white fighter in a division dominated by Patterson and other skilled African Americans.

In the end the deal—and McMurtry's best chance at a world championship—died because Clarence, who also served as his son's promoter, would have lost control of his son's career. The elder McMurtry rejected the deal and Pat, out of loyalty to his father, went along. It's a decision Pat McMurtry regrets to this day.

"I should have taken the deal," McMurtry said sadly in a 1990 *News Tribune* interview. Fighting in a world championship bout, every prizefighter's dream—is as much a matter of proper match-making as it is skill. On the road to the championship, tough bouts—which wear a fighter down and shorten his career—are necessary to establish a boxer's reputation and prove his skill and marketability. But once that reputation is established, caution should be used in guiding a boxer's career, especially if the fighter is close to a title bout.

Clarence McMurtry should have known which opponents to turn down. But instead of challenging the vulnerable Patterson for the title the next time he entered the ring, Clarence paired him with two opponents arguably more dangerous than the champion: Nino Valdes and Eddie Machen. Valdes knocked out McMurtry in the first round in a 1958 bout, a feat repeated by Machen the next year. The loss to Machen ended McMurtry's career.

For McMurtry, the losses were unexpected and certainly not the way he hoped to end his boxing career, which encompassed many more peaks than valleys. It galls McMurtry to believe he could have beaten Patterson to become heavyweight champion of the world. And that belief is not the exaggerated dream of an aging fighter.

For proof McMurtry has scrapbooks full of articles praising his skill and determination. He has memories of ring victories and dramatic knockout punches against quality opponents and glowing accounts of old-time fight fans who saw him box in person or on television. More importantly, McMurtry has the best testimony of all as to how good a prizefighter he really was: an old black and white fight tape that doesn't lie.

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