THE LEGACY OF CHARLIE MOHR AND UW BOXING

INTRODUCTION (30 seconds)

The story of the death of UW-Boxing great, Charlie Mohr is a now-little known chapter in the history of the UW-Madison campus. Aside from the way in which the story shook the campus community, the events that took place in the national championship round of 1960 also decided the fate for the sport of college boxing throughout the country; a sport which was one of the most popular of all college sports in its day—particularly here, on the UW-Madison campus.

Sports fans throughout the nation have become familiar with the athletic achievements of UW teams in sports such as football, basketball and hockey through their national exposure and excellent achievements. However, few Badger fans are even aware of the school’s unrivaled tradition in NCAA boxing. The UW attained eight national championships in the now non-existent sport. These titles came in the years of 1939, 1942, 1943, 1947, 1948, 1952, 1954. No other school attained more than five.

In its day, boxing was second only to football in popularity on the UW-Madison campus. Boxing matches regularly drew crowds of 10,000-12,000 people to the Wisconsin Field House. The badgers began competing in boxing in 1933 and continued on until 1960. In that time, the Badgers’ performance can be described as nothing less than dominant. Nine times throughout the decades of the nineteen-thirties and nineteen-forties Badger teams were neither beaten nor tied.

The first era of Badger boxing was established by, George F. Downer who organized the first official boxing team on campus. Head coach, John J. Walsh oversaw the team’s success from its inception until 1951. He helped to accumulate the program’s first five national championships.

Succeeding Walsh was head coach, Vern Woodward. Together, these men coached and developed some of the most remarkable athletes in the country year in and year out. Athletes such as UW Hall of Famers, Omar Crocker, Cliff Lutz, Dick Murphy, Bob Ranck, Gene Rankin, Woodie Swancutt and of course, Charlie Mohr.

Over the span of three decades, the Badgers were the preeminent powerhouse school in the entire nation. Therefore, the events of April 9th 1960 and the weeks and months after were not only tragic in their loss of life, but had unforeseen ramifications for the future of an entire sport.

On April 9th 1960, Badgers superstar, Charlie Mohr entered the ring to fight San Jose State’s Stu Bartell for the national championship in the 165 pound weight class. After winning the first round and completing the match, Mohr collapsed in the locker room and was rushed to the hospital. For days Mohr clung to life while the Madison community closely followed his progress.

Charlie, a New York implant to Wisconsin, was adored on campus, known as a wholesome and intelligent young man. His prowess as a college athlete made him a minor celebrity in the campus community. Mohr held on until April 17th, Easter Sunday when he finally passed away.

2 Ibid.
On May 4th UW students and alumni began a fundraising effort to set up a memorial scholarship in honor of Mohr which exists to this day.

During this time, the debate about the safety of boxing on the UW campus was in full swing and going strong. This was not the first time boxing had been the subject of controversy and scrutiny on campus. In 1948, at the request of Faculty, the Athletic Board began a four year study that would address matters such as, “the probability of mental and physical injury, spectator behavior, the function of boxing in maintaining or advancing the cultural standards of institutions of higher learning, and any other matters that may be of value to the Faculty in the performance of its duties with respect to the control of athletics.”

The report recommended modest changes to the mode of pairing but in general praised the NCAA for the measures they had employed “to safeguard the participants in Intercollegiate Boxing” Now, with the tragedy of Charlie Mohr’s premature death on the sports biggest stage, it seemed assured that the University would re-visit their 1953 decision to allow boxing on campus.

The college boxing world awaited the school’s decision. Hundreds of letters poured in from concerned fans and alumni, hoping to convince the committee not to put an end to the sport.

FINAL RESOLUTION ENDING BOXING ON CAMPUS (30 seconds)
(Primary Sources: General photos, opposition letters and resolution note)

However, in the end, the school and the NCAA decided to do just that.

The round in which Charlie Mohr lost his life turned out to be the final round for the entire sport.

Boxing still exists today on campuses across the country but in the form of clubs which focus on the teaching of the fundamentals related to the sport.

Those who would like to know more about Charlie Mohr, UW Boxing, or any other sport on campus should visit the UW-Madison Archives in Steenbock Library or at archives.library.wisc.edu

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3 Document 1066 – Final Report of the University of Wisconsin Athletic Board to the Faculty Concerning Boxing as a Collegiate Sport. 5/21/4 (Boxing-Medical Reports 1952-53 folder)
4 Ibid.