



# Pep a local hero with lasting legacy

By: Sherman Cain, Journal Inquirer

11/28/2006

ROCKY HILL - The poster boards inside the Rose Hill Funeral Home on Monday were plastered with pictures of the man many still call the best pound-for-pound fighter who ever lived. People streamed into the funeral home to pay their respects and recall the days evoked by the countless pictures of Willie Pep.

You couldn't find a fight-by-fight list of Pep's bouts, but if you come across one, you'll see that the "Will o' the Wisp" fought in Manchester, of all places, on Aug. 1, 1941. The bout was held at Redman's Arena. Redman's was a fraternal organization, and the Arena was located at the corner of Silver Lane (Spencer St.) and West Center Street, a location where Lynch Toyota stood for many years.

"Redman's Arena was a very popular spot that used to have a lot of boxing," longtime Manchester resident Nathan Agostinelli said. "It was a fenced-in outdoor arena. A lot of local boxers would fight there. I didn't see Willie Pep fight there. I saw him fight in Waterbury. But Willie Pep and Sugar Ray Robinson did fight as amateurs at the Manchester Armory."

Pep won 230 pro fights, including 73 in a row. He was 24-0 when he fought in Manchester. His opponent, Harry Hintlian, was 4-3, according to boxrec.com, and Pep won a decision in a six-rounder.

What the heck was the greatest featherweight who ever lived doing fighting a 4-3 opponent in Manchester?

Mike Papaleo, Pep's nephew, had an answer.

"I asked Willie why he fought in so many towns, and he told me that he'd want to help the local fighters out, and help the people who maybe owned the venue," Papaleo said. "He'd fight the local guy because it would help that guy get a fight in the future. Willie would almost always win by a decision. The opponents wouldn't know it, but Willie would carry them for six, eight, or 10 rounds, so then they could get more fights by saying they went the distance with Willie Pep. Plus, I know he had ties in Manchester. I'm sure that's why he fought there."

Pep, whose funeral service was held today in Wethersfield, did indeed have Manchester ties. He was friendly with the late Earle Everett, who was the first boxing director for the Manchester Police Athletic League. When Everett put on his first amateur show, Pep was there.

Pep was born Gugliermo Papaleo in Middletown on Aug. 19, 1922, but he was a Hartford guy through and through. That's where he lived most of his life. This I know. When I was a kid growing up on 27 McLean St. in Hartford, Willie Pep bought the house on 27 McKinley Street, one block away. Willie bought the house so his brother, Nick, who now lives in East Hartford, and his kids, Mike and Nikki, would have a place to live. It wasn't uncommon to see Willie walking around the neighborhood, usually on his way to Casa Loma Restaurant, which had the world's best pizza.

Casa Loma was owned by the LaRosa family. Anthony Jr. is now the mayor of Rocky Hill. Before his son took over, Anthony Sr. ran the restaurant on Wethersfield Avenue. Casa Loma is no longer there, but the LaRosas were at the funeral home on Monday.

"Sometimes, Willie would forget where he lived, so he'd tell the cab driver to drop him off at Casa Loma because he knew how to get home from there," Anthony LaRosa Sr. recalled.

There are a million Pep stories, and Mike Papaleo, 44, knows most of them. He would often sit and talk with his uncle, and the stories would come out faster than a Willie Pep jab, and that's mighty fast.

"When I was 19, he told me a dream of his was to have a movie made about his life," Mike Papaleo recalled. "He had a truly amazing life. He overcame a lot to become champion of the world, and not everyone knows that. I told him I was going to write a screenplay. That was fine with him. He told me 'kid, as long as I get a cut.'

"I actually wrote a screenplay and shopped it around, but couldn't find any takers. Willie and Robert DeNiro exchanged autographed pictures and I asked DeNiro about producing a film about Willie, but he said after "Raging Bull," he was involved in some other boxing films that didn't do so well. I don't know if that was true or not, or maybe he just wasn't interested. Anyway, it costs \$60 million now to make a film."

If they made a film about Pep's life, I'd buy a ticket. His life was fascinating, between the six or seven wives - Mike Papaleo isn't sure if the one in Las Vegas counts - and his alleged associations with organized crime, which kept the state of Connecticut from giving him a referee's license.

"The one thing that really hurt Willie was not getting that referee's license," Mike Papaleo said. "He was friendly with people like Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr., and he would hang out with some of the people they hung out with and they used that against him. That was boxing. These types of people were involved in the sport. They controlled concessions at Madison Square Garden and other stuff."

Mike Papaleo recalled one story of why Willie used Pep instead of Papaleo.

"Willie tells me that one day a bunch of reporters asked him why he chose the name Pep," Mike Papaleo said. "It was in the 1940s and they wanted to know if it was because of the way people felt about Benito Mussolini and Italy during World War II. Willie said 'No, I changed my name because you bums don't know how to spell Papaleo.' "

For me, it was an eerie feeling approaching Pep's open casket. I had been in the very same room at Rose Hill just nine months earlier. My dad was in the casket then. Another Hartford guy through and through. In my book, that's a good thing. It did make me smile to know my dad's final resting place would be on the same burial grounds as one of the guys from the neighborhood, who just happens to be a boxing legend.

They buried Willie Pep today at Rose Hill. The best featherweight who ever lived is gone, but can't ever be forgotten. His spirit lives on through the Papaleo family, a classy bunch through and through.

Maybe some investor will pony up the bucks someday to get Mike Papaleo's screenplay produced. I suspect that people who leave a movie theater after watching an epic about the greatest featherweight who ever lived would feel the way people did after watching crafty Pep fight - shaking their heads in disbelief because they've just seen something wonderful.

