

Joe Iannacone



Joe Iannacone never did anything halfway, especially when it came to his boxing career. Except the way he used his last name. That he did do halfway.

That's because Iannacone, a standout amateur boxer from Norwalk during the 1930s, fought under the name "Joey Cone." As the story goes, Iannacone's first cousin of the same name also boxed and the two of them, both from Norwalk, would often fight in many of the same arenas. So the Iannacone cousins agreed to each take half of their last name in the ring. Joe Iannacone, the one being honored tonight, fought as "Joey Cone" while his late cousin was known as "Joey Ianna" in the ring.

"He says to me, 'You look more Jewish. You take Joey Cone.'" So I said, 'Okay, cuz.'"

As it turned out, only half of Iannacone's name put plenty of fear in opponents. He took up boxing in 1935 at the age of 17, and although he would box for only three years, Iannacone managed to carve out quite an amateur career for himself.

A talented southpaw with power in both hands, Iannacone, who started out as a lightweight and ended up as a middleweight, fought over 100 times and once put together a streak of over 20 wins in a row.

"I could hit," the 85-year-old Iannacone said recently. "If I could catch you, you went down."

Born and raised in South Norwalk, Iannacone trained with several other top local boxers from his era, such as Phil Baker, Frankie Smith, and Tommy Brown, under the watchful eye of manager Chick Dorsey.

"We used to go to train in Saugatuck," Iannacone recalled. "Chick had a place there and we used to train in the garage."

Iannacone would become a regular crowd favorite at the old Staack Arena on Spring Street. His reputation as a tough brawler, however, was well known throughout the state in arenas in Bridgeport, New Haven, and Waterbury. His fights with Jimmy Della of Bridgeport back then were legendary around these parts.

"We fought six or seven times," Iannacone noted. "We had three draws, but I beat him all the other times. They used to call us the 'Patent Leader Kids.' We used to have some fights."

"But nobody wanted to fight me because I was a southpaw. I had a pretty good left hand."

That left hand also helped him win championships in different weight classes while he was in the military, and he also fought in the New York Golden Gloves. He was good enough to fight professionally, too, and was ready to turn pro until a conversation he had one night with his father.

"I wanted to turn pro and Chick, my manager, told me I was ready," Iannacone said. "But my mother was pretty sick and me fighting upset her. One night I got home around two in the morning after a fight in the New Haven Arena and my father was waiting for me. He told me how much it upset my mom that I was fighting and my dad said, 'Joe, if you want to continue fighting, you can but you'll have to leave home.' I told him, 'Dad, I have one more fight on my contract in Portchester, and after that I'll quit.'"

"And after that fight I took my gloves and my boxing shoes, went over to the East Norwalk Bridge, and threw them all into the water. That was the end of my boxing career." But Iannacone's talents weren't restricted to just the ring. He would also play football for the Laurel Athletic Club as a guard for six seasons from 1947-'52. In fact, he says his boxing career helped prepare him to play football.

"I was on the line and would take all the blows. It didn't bother me."

Iannacone, still a member of the Laurel AC, also bowled for the Laurels for 10 years and was a regular in leagues at the Broad River Alleys. In addition, he played softball during the '30s as a pitcher with Meyers Manufacturers.

After his retirement from the construction business in 1981, Iannacone worked for the City of Norwalk Recreation and Parks Department for 17 years and was a fixture at Calf Pasture and Shady Beaches. He and his wife Millie still reside in Norwalk and have one daughter.