

Salita and Foreman: A renaissance for Jewish boxing?



Dmitriy Salita, left, is the most prominent Jewish boxer in more than 50 years.

Photo by David Lincoln

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Junior middleweight contender Yuri Foreman improved his record to 26-0 with a 10-round victory over Vinroy Barrett on Oct. 18 in Atlantic City. Meanwhile, Dmitriy Salita will put his own unsullied record on the line as he prepares to take on Derrick Campos for the IBF Intercontinental Championship on Saturday, Nov. 8, at Madison Square Garden.

Foreman and Salita are more than just boxers: they follow an Orthodox-Jewish lifestyle that includes observing kashrut and refraining from participating in their livelihood on Shabbat. Foreman is also studying for rabbinical ordination.

Boxing historian and author Mike Silver sees them as throwbacks to a time when tough Jews were a constant presence in the squared circle, a period from the early 1900s to the late 1940s.

Silver, who has been following the fight game for some 40 years, told *NJ Jewish News*, “There were 28 Jewish world boxing champions from 1901-1938. This was before there were multiple title and multiple weight classes, when it really meant something to win a world title.”

In the first half of the last century, “boxing was a tremendous mainstream sport. It rivaled baseball,” said Silver, whose book *The Arc of Boxing: The Rise and Decline of the Sweet Science* (McFarland), was published earlier this year. “There were tremendous opportunities for young strong athletes to make a living in boxing. Most knew they weren’t going to be world champions,

but they were able to find steady work. They could earn more in one week than their sweatshop-laboring fathers could earn in a month.”

During the Depression, young men who might never have considered putting on the gloves sought any kind of employment, which was a factor in the number of Jews in the sport, Silver said.

And not just as athletes. “The Jews were absolutely, completely part and parcel of the sport during its golden age. You couldn’t have had boxing without Jews as trainers, as managers, as boxers, as manufacturers, as publishers.... They were totally involved in the sport.”

That presence died out after World War II as first-generation Americans found more economic opportunities. “They became more assimilated into the greater society,” going into professions — medicine, the law, accountancy — that weren’t available to them in previous years.

“The age of the Jewish gangster — which also disappeared after World War II — coincided with the golden age of the Jewish boxer because it was all enmeshed with economics,” he said. Prosperity seemed to doom both “professions.”

Thanks in part to the GI Bill, Silver said, Jews, Italians, and the Irish left boxing “in droves,” replaced by African Americans and Latinos, who inherited the role as the new underclass. “Boxing is a sport of ethnicity,” he said.

Silver, who will be the featured speaker at a screening of *Orthodox Stance*, a documentary about Salita as part of the Rutgers New Jersey Jewish Film Festival (see sidebar), said the history of Jews in such a rough-and-tumble endeavor was “a fascinating story that’s not told and [one] that’s been ignored by these Jewish scholars who don’t quite understand the significance of it. But that’s changing.” He created an exhibit, “Sting Like a Maccabi: The Golden Age of the American Jewish Fighter,” that appeared at Philadelphia’s National Museum of Jewish History from 2004 to 2005.

Silver, who lives in Queens, where he works as an executive recruiter, called the Ukrainian-born Salita “an interesting phenomena,” a reminder of that era of Jewish boxers because of his status as an immigrant. “These days, you don’t find many American-born Jewish boys involved in boxing.

“You hear about Dmitriy Salita, a Jewish fighter boxing in this rough sport, don’t you have a certain amount of pride? What it does, it recalls the tremendous pride of Jews at that time, especially when they were struggling to make it and to be accepted and there was so much prejudice. Imagine the pride they felt when a Benny Leonard or a Barney Ross won a championship, beating these tough Irish guys that used to beat them up on the block.”

Silver did not see Salita and Foreman’s religious lifestyle as hindering their chances for success in their profession. “Absolutely not. It should be a boost. In fact, it puzzles me as to why [Salita] has not gotten more publicity just for the fact that he’s an Orthodox Jew on the cusp of making the big time.”

Salita gets more press than Foreman, Silver guessed, simply because of a better support and publicity machine. Salita had signed with legendary fight promoter Bob Arum, and received the benefit of that relationship early on. Foreman, on the other hand, started quietly. “I think it’s a lack of good press agency, a lack of understanding on how to promote these guys properly.”

Orthodox Stance “joins two completely different worlds: Judaism and the inner world of boxing. Time will tell just how far he’s going to go.”

Film screening

Mike Silver will be the guest speaker at a screening of *Orthodox Stance* on Sunday, Nov. 9, at 12:45 p.m. at the Regal Cinema Commerce Center in North Brunswick. The documentary tells Dmitriy Salita’s story, from a gym in the Brooklyn projects to a White House Hanukka celebration. The film offers behind-the-scenes access to Salita and his crew for three years, tracing his maturation in the gym, with the press, at fights, in business meetings, and at speaking engagements and culminates with his first professional title in front of a crowd of boxing fans and Orthodox Jews at Manhattan’s Hammerstein Ballroom.

“You can’t find a boxing film from the ’20s, ’30s, and ’40s that doesn’t have a Jewish character in it,” said Silver, who noted that twice as many films have been produced about boxing than all other sports combined.

Orthodox Stance is part of the ninth annual Rutgers New Jersey Jewish Film Festival. There will be an additional screening on Sunday, Nov. 16, at 7 p.m. with an appearance by Salita.

Ticket prices range from \$5 to \$10 and are available on-line, by mail, at Rutgers’ Bildner Center, or at the theater. Tickets are also available at Trio Gifts, 246 Raritan Ave. in Highland Park. Check jewishstudies.rutgers.edu for film updates and ticket availability.

For information, visit jewishstudies.rutgers.edu or call the Bildner Center at 732-932-4166.

— RON KAPLAN

<http://njewishnews.com/njjn.com/103008/sptSalitaForeman.html>