

In a dim Spartanburg hall, fighters join with a born promoter to create . . .

The boxing world of Don White

By RICK WARNER
News sports writer

SPARTANBURG — On a breezy-warm autumn night, the roadside in front of the National Guard Armory is lined with a wide assortment of late model cars and pickup trucks. It's the kind of summery evening that makes you feel like taking an aimless drive with the top down, but a few hundred boxing fans have chosen instead to spend it inside the musty, dimly lit confines of the armory.

A late arrival takes a seat on one of the metal folding chairs at ringside just in time to catch the closing minute of a preliminary attraction on the "All Star Carolina Boxing" card.

Four gangly boys are flailing away at each other inside the ring and the small crowd is cheering wildly. When the bell sounds to end the "tag-team" event, spectators hurl coins through the ropes to show their appreciation. The young boxers

throw a towel down on the beaten canvas and begin scooping up the donations.

A stocky, casually dressed man enters ring center holding a microphone.

"OK," he says, waiting for the crowd to settle. "OK, let's give the kids a big hand. They put on a great show so let's hear it for 'em."

The crowd responds and Don White, mike in hand, loves it. White is the "founder and promoter" of Carolina Boxing. An ex-

boxer himself, he started promoting boxing cards around Spartanburg in the late '60s and he's been doing it off and on ever since.

"I remember my first show, it was a disaster," White tells a visitor at his ringside table. "I must have lost \$2,000. So I put another one on and I lost another \$2,000. I realized then that I wasn't going to get rich with boxing. As long as I don't lose money, I'm happy.

"When I was a kid I

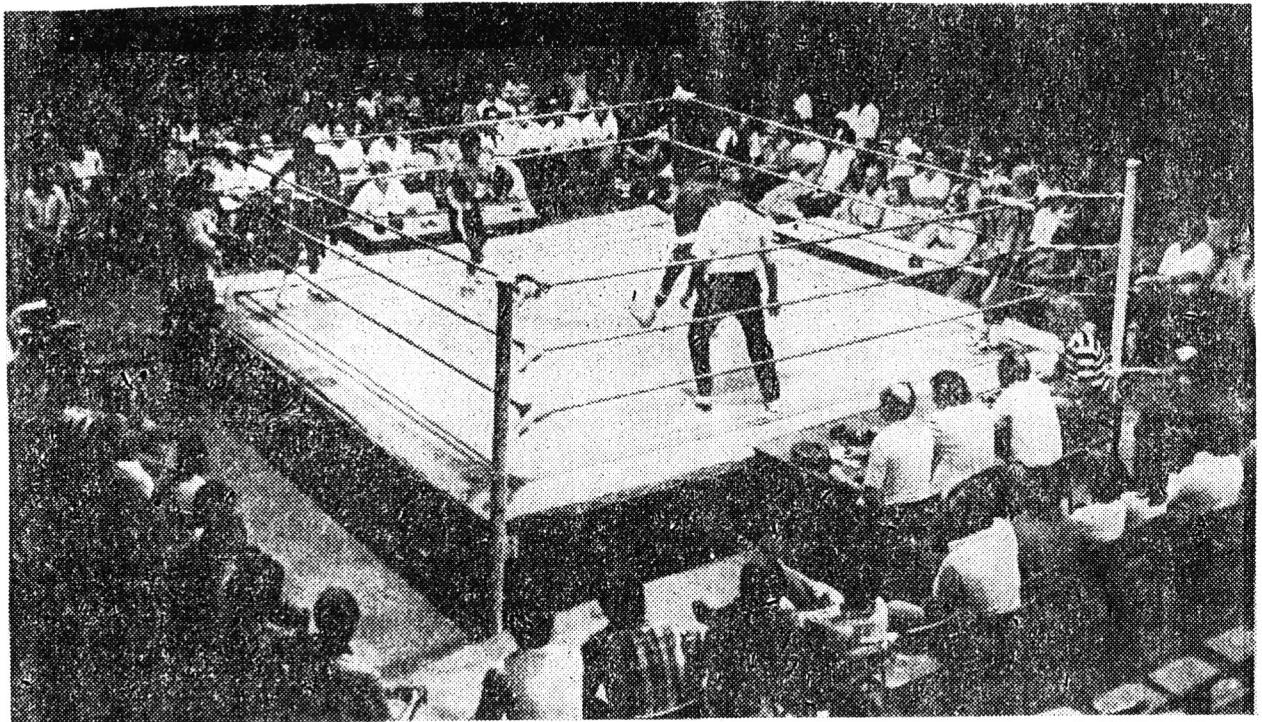
guess I was kind of average at everything. But I could fight and didn't even know it. Boxing was something I was good at. I guess it's always been in my blood."

While he talks, White is keeping a close eye on the ring, where newcomer Santos Costello and high school wrestler Tim Martin are exchanging wild overhand rights at the end of a three-round fight.

"You'd be surprised how many guys want to fight," says White. "We'll

get high school wrasslers who want to see if they can box. A lot of kids who are good athletes want to know that. The wrasslers make good fighters cause they're always in good shape.

"But we get all kinds, guys who work in gas stations, factory workers, all kinds. Lots of times, you'll get two guys who want to fight each other. They just don't like each other or something and they want to put on the gloves. That's what makes the best fights."



News-Fletcher W. Ross

Fans watch a "tag-team" match, a gimmick promoter Don White uses to draw fans

As Costello and Martin leave the ring, White is center-stage ready to introduce the last amateur fight of the night.

A promising convict-fighter named Jerry Miller is scheduled to take on two lesser boxers in a handicap match, but unfortunately someone had thrown a bottle at Miller's face earlier in the week and he is still recovering. So White pairs the scheduled partners against each other and goes on with the show.

"INTRODUUUUCING, in the right corner, from STAAAARTEX, South Carolina, Wild Man Bill Dudley.

In this corner

"And in this corner, from SPARTANBURG, South Carolina, Dr. Pee Wee Dunbar."

White is a born promoter. For one, he loves nicknames. Wild Man. Pee Wee. Little Champ. Peanut. Black Star. The Car Wash King. Then there's the White press release, a mixture of prose that would make P.T. Barnum and Muhammed Ali proud.

Tonight's two featured pro matches have received the White treatment. In one, Spartanburg's Robert Mullins — the South Carolina lightweight champion and probably the best fighter in the state — faces Ed Conner of Lenior, N.C.

White has billed it as Mullins' first pro fight against a white boxer. "I don't know what the big deal is about him being white," Mullins is quoted as saying. "I fought white guys in the amateurs, he's just another man in the ring to me. I plan to make it to the top and I've got to remove all the stones in the path to success. I'll roll over Conner like a crusher and be ready for my next opponent."

Reputed grudge match

Better still is the reputed "grudge match" between Gary Barlow of Lenoir and 40-year-old Billy McQueary of Hickory, N.C. "I beat Barlow in Lenoir and he knows it," says McQueary, according to White. "But he had all the judges paid off and they give the fight to him. I was fighting when he was a kid and they ain't no way he can beat me."

Sometimes, White's hyperbolic style gets him in trouble. Sports Illustrated, in its current issue, takes White and promoter Don King to task for spreading false information about one of White's fighters who appeared on the recent Ernie Holmes heavy-

weight championship card in Las Vegas.

Wrongdoing denied

The magazine says the fighter's real name was not James Brown, as he was billed, but James Brannon, and that he was not a successful heavy-weight, as the promoters claimed, but an over-the-hill former middleweight who may have never won a fight. White denies any wrongdoing, says Brannon has won a number of fights as a middleweight and as a heavyweight, and blames any exaggerations on "the matchmakers in New York."

None of this is likely to change White's style. He knows people aren't breaking down the doors to see boxing in South Carolina, and he'll try most anything to drum up interest. For White and his boxers, there are no million dollar gates, no closed-circuit television contracts. His is a world of drafty dressing rooms, six-round fights and cash on the line.

Promotion needed

"You need the promotion to get the people interested," he says. "We don't get the TV revenue or the radio revenue. Half the people here tonight are freebies. I'll tell you why. We've got out-of-town talent on the card, and local people aren't going to spend five dollars to see somebody they never heard of. If a guy fights good, maybe they'll come back to watch him again. But you got to get them in the first time.

"I'll tell you who makes the interest. The TV people. The radio and the newspapers. For example, if nobody covered the Ali-Spinks fight but the local writers in New Orleans, you wouldn't have all that attention. All I know is that we're the only ones promoting boxing in South Carolina and it's hard to get anybody's attention."

In the ring

In the ring, Dudley and Dunbar have grown arm weary and their punches are sliding off their sweat-covered bodies with little noticeable effect. The fight ends with a lengthy clinch.

White steps into the ring to announce the victor. "The wwwwwwwwwwinner, by split decision, Wild Man Dudley." Continuing his announcing chores: "OK, we've got an intermission now. I want y'all to go try Miss Evelyn's hot dogs and chile. She's selling right behind me here and I know it's real good."

Back at the timekeeper's table, Junie White is talking about his brother Don.

"He fought some in the Golden Gloves and in the service, was a pretty good fighter. Just got the bug. Lot of men drink, lot of men gamble. Don, he blows all his money on boxing."

Like an ex-boxer

Sitting next to Junie White is 45-year-old Jack Alexander. Alexander is a

former pro fighter who now lives in Anderson. He looks and talks like an ex-boxer. His face can best be described as craggy. He speaks with a slur.

"I fought all my life," he says. "I grew up in Mauldin. My dad was a fighter. He fought all his life too. I started fighting when I was 7 years old. Had 182 amateur fights, 71 pro fights, lost 16. I fought all over — New York, Alabama, Mississippi, Mexico.

"I fought Willie Pep, Chuck Davey, Kid Gavilan, the welterweight champ. I fought Pep in Meadowbrook Ballpark in 1953 after he was champ and beat him in an eight-round decision. I was a Golden Glove and AAU champ. Twenty-seven straight KOs as an amateur.

"I quit when I was 31. Won my last fight too, but I got hurt a little bit. I knew it was time to get out."

The referee

Alexander is the referee for the second pro fight of the night, a scheduled four-rounder between James Nash of Spartanburg and Noe Crouch of Granite Falls, N.C. Crouch knocks down Nash early in the fight, but later suffers a deep cut over his left eye courtesy of a head butt from Nash. He wins the fight, though, when Nash can't recover from a blow to the stomach and has to **double-over in his corner** and throw up.

"I've refereed a lot of fights," says Alexander, shaking his head. "Never seen it happen like that, though. Never."

The next fight, between McQueary and Barlow, turns out to be more of a mismatch than a grudge match. Barlow is younger and obviously in better shape. When McQueary goes down for the second time in the third round, he lies on the canvas gasping for air. He starts to push himself up, but looks at Barlow waiting to close in for the kill and seems to reconsider. The fight is over.

Last fight

White rushes up to interview the fighters. McQueary says it's his last fight. "I've had enough," he tells the crowd. Barlow, meanwhile, has put on a mock frown and is ranting about a match with Mullins.

"I've heard so much about Mullins, I'm tired of it. I want a piece of him. The guy I want to fight has already beaten Mullins. He'll be pretty easy for me."

Mullins is a 26-year-old former AAU bantamweight champion from Boiling Springs High School in Spartanburg. He turned pro in 1975 and has won 11 times without a defeat. A few years ago, he went to Philadelphia to train with Joe Frazier, but he missed his wife and children in Spartanburg and decided to return home.

Today, Robert Mullins

trains at a makeshift gym on top of White's construction offices in downtown Spartanburg. He's trying to make boxing his full-time work, but the money's not the best and he has to fill in with odd jobs.

Every boxing manager has a fighter who's his great hope, his would-be world champion. Robert Mullins is Don White's hope.

"He's a good fighter, but there's no competition around here. If he's going to be a champion, he has to fight top fighters. That's what I'm working on. A few big fights, that's what he needs."

During Mullins' fight, White shouts instructions from ringside. "Combination, combination. Box him, box him. Don't try to knock him out. Wait on him. Combination, combination."

Doesn't fight well

Despite White's advice and encouragement, Mullins does not fight well. Against a vastly inferior opponent, he is knocked down once and awkwardly slips to the canvas another time. Still, he wins on a second round TKO.

"He tried too hard for the knockout," says White. "He's a boxer, not a puncher. When you try for the knockout, you look bad sometimes."

Outside Mullins' dressing room — actually a small, barren office — an older man identifying himself as Leo Epstein, one of Joe Frazier's former cornermen, offers his opinion of the fight.

"He (Mullins) hit him with a good right, knocked him cold. When a guy gets up from the canvas like he did, he's a good fighter. It

separates the men from the boys.

"Believe me, I know boxing. I trained Joe Frazier. I trained Buddy Baer for the Joe Louis fight. I was with Ali for his first fight in the Garden. I know boxing, alright. It's a tough game."

Nearly empty

The armory is nearly empty. The floor around the ring is littered with half-empty popcorn containers and soda cups. Most of the lights have been turned off. Two small boys have jumped into the ring and are trading imaginary jabs.

Billy McQueary, looking tired and very old, has dressed without a shower and is waiting for his ride back home to North Carolina.

"I'm really 40," he admits. "It's hard for people to believe I'm this old and still fighting."

"Why do I keep fighting? I just love it, I reckon. After you do it so long, you can't help but love it. But people don't like to see you lose, and I've lost my last three. It might be time to hang it up."

McQueary pauses, a long thoughtful pause. "If the people down here still want to see me fight, though...."