

The Forgotten Genius of Wrestling

By Allan Best

With the introduction of 'all-in-wrestling' to Britain came the need for quality wrestlers able to adapt to the new concept and able, above all, to entertain. A man of massive talents came into the game by a roundabout route, spent but a short time, made a tremendous impact, then was forgotten, gaining no mention in Atholl Oakley's book "Blue Blood on the Mat" about the advent of 'all-in-wrestling'. Who was this forgotten Genius of Wrestling?

Born Samuel Rabinovitch in Manchester on June 20th 1903, he was the son of a Russian-Jewish cap-maker who numbered Rasputin amongst his clients. Sam Rabin, from his earliest days, aspired to be the best. He trained to be "the strongest man in the world" but he didn't quite make that. He did, however, become the youngest ever entrant, at 11 years, to the Manchester College of Art, where he was a contemporary of L.S.Lowry, the famous "Matchstick Men" artist. Whilst studying the art of drawing, he befriended an ex-army boxing champion who

worked in the college boiler house and from him learnt the basics of the noble art. From Manchester, Sam graduated to the Slade School in London, and then on to Paris.

On his return to London, Sam enrolled in the famous Ashdowne Club and trained in wrestling under the eagle eye of the legendary George Mackenzie. In 1928, Sam beat the reigning British Amateur Middleweight Champion and qualified for a place in the Olympic team to Amsterdam. Although fortunate with the draw (he had a bye in the second round), Sam was finally beaten by Dean Stockton, the Canadian silver medallist, by a fall in seven minutes, and picked up the Olympic bronze medal.

Sam continued his artistic studies and his talents came to be recognised and commissions followed. He was part of a talented team including Jacob Epstein, Eric Gill and Henry Moore, which produced sculpture for the HQ of London Underground. Sam's commission for the

Daily Telegraph offices called for him to work 90 feet above Fleet street on scaffolding to chisel his creation. He was often seen shinning down the scaffolding to view his work from ground level.

Unable to secure a teaching post, Sam took to boxing professionally and was at one time sparring partner to the great Len Harvey, the British Middleweight champion, appearing with him for a week at the Prince's Theatre in the Christmas review of 1933. Harvey's opinion was that Sam could be trusted not to show off and maybe damage the middleweight title holder. When Harvey caught Sam with an accidental blow, Sam warned him that if it happened again he would pick him up and throw him out of the ring.

The necessities of life turned Sam's thoughts to the professional wrestling ring and a new star was born. The new all-in-wrestling had been introduced to Britain by Henry Irslinger and Atholl Oakley and they were looking for men capable of adapting to

the new code and Sam was such a man. Not only was he Sam Rabin, the Hebrew champion, but also Sam Radnor and The Cat. Sam wrestled all the top men of the early 1930s. His 1932 calendar reads 21-7-1932 'Rabin versus Letailleur' International Heavyweight Supporting fight to the finish. From then on, top billing: 'The Black Eagle versus The Cat (Sam)' 28-7-1932 at the Ring, Blackfriars. 2-2-1933 'The Hawk versus Sam Rabin'. The return match in the Liverpool Stadium brought the report: "Tomorrow's wrestling programme at the Stadium is undoubtedly the finest that Mr Bankier has presented here. Pride of place is taken by the long-awaited return match between Sam Radnor, the fierce Hebrew Champion and our own local wrestler, The Hawk. The first bout between these two big men was a thriller and the ending was unexpected, as it was dramatic. Radnor, with a wonderful effort, lifted the Hawk over his head and threw him heavily to the canvas. The fall damaged Hawk who was unable to continue."

Sam's career motored forward at great pace, facing George Clarke, Mike Demitre, Carl Reginsky, George Gregory and Tony Mancelli. Of his meeting with Jack Pye, the Portsmouth Evening News observed: "Rabin it will be remembered hit 'the Doncaster Panther' on the chin

at the last show and knocked him from the centre of the ring through the ropes and onto the Press table, where he bounced onto my shoulder to be counted out." Of Sam's bout against Rene Morris of Australia at the Drill Hall Portsmouth in 1934, the local press reported this: "*The bout between Rene Morris and Sam Rabin was an example of the more classical possibilities of the sport. The Adonis-like Hebrew Rabin gets to work with all the grace of a champion of old Olympia. Here it is the case of mod wedded to physical prowess, but with the contest between his style and say a wrestler like Jack Pye or Rough House King Curtis is most striking. It is the difference between the bull and the leopard*"

Combining his talents, Sam made a habit of drawing cartoons of his opponents. Not always flattering but somehow capturing the 'inner man'. The film producer Sam Korda chose Rabin to play the role of the wrestler in the 1933 movie "The Private Life of Henry VIII" opposite Charles Laughton. Later, Korda cast him as the prize-fighter Daniel Mendoza in the 1934 movie "The Scarlet Pimpernel". All this was, though, only a means to an end. A man has to eat. After 1930, Sam abandoned sculpture to concentrate on drawing, especially scenes from the ringside, both boxing and wrestling. He was

commissioned, later in life, to sketch the Cassius Clay – Henry Cooper fight. Rabin also had a strong bass-baritone voice and during the second World War was a member of the "Stars in Battledress" unit that toured the army camps entertaining the troops. After the war he regularly sang for the BBC and even auditioned for the famous opera company La Scala, Milan.

He decided to return to his art and became a teacher of drawing at Goldsmith's College, London, where he was considered an outstanding teacher with pupils of the calibre of Mary Quant and Tom Keating. Sam left London to work at the Bournemouth College of Art and from 1985 taught at the Poole Art Centre. His work went on tour and was seen throughout the country. He was a quiet, gentle man, an image far from his ring persona when the Liverpool Echo said: "Carver Doone, 6ft 9ins and weighing 24 stone figured in the main bout with Sam Radnor the Hebrew Champion at the Stadium last night. Radnor, conceding no less than 10 stones in weight won in 16 minutes. Pulling the legs from under Doone and falling on him. Doone was forced to retire with a dislocated shoulder".

Sam died in 1991, leaving a son.