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Eclectic exhibit takes intimate look at Irish fighters

By Don Stradley
Special to ESPN.com
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A favorite bit of boxing folklore involves the time Peter Maher fought Tom Sharkey in 1897 at New York's Lenox Club.

In the audience sat an old Irishman, a supporter of Maher from Galway, Ireland. He told everyone within earshot that Maher would need only one punch to "knock Sharkey kicking." When the announcer introduced Maher as a fighter from Galway, Ireland, the old man smiled proudly and waved his Irish flag high over his head.

When Sharkey was introduced as a fighter from Dundalk, Ireland, the old-timer turned silent.

"Is Sharkey Irish?" the old man asked. "Then I don't give a damn who wins."

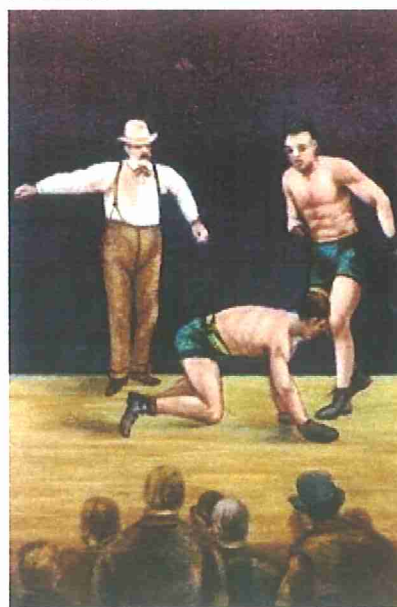
This old joke reveals a basic truth. At that time in history, boxing was dominated by the Irish.

"Fighting Irishmen: A Celebration of the Celtic Warrior," a warmhearted exhibit on display at the John J. Burns Library at Boston College through September, brings that era to life.

Curator James J. Houlihan, a New York real estate entrepreneur and lover of all things related to the Irish and boxing, saw the exhibit enjoy a successful 2006-07 run in New York, first at the Irish Arts Center, then at New York's Seaside Museum.

"The exhibit has everything I wanted and more," Houlihan told ESPN.com.

There are plans to bring the show to other American cities. A trip to Ireland also is a possibility.

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Bob Thomas/Popperfoto/Getty Images

Win or lose, Tom Sharkey, left, could count on the support of his countrymen.

"Many new friends have helped make it a great success," Houlihan said. "The Irish Arts Center in New York has been able to grow through the outsourcing of the exhibit. People have really identified and delighted in the special stories that make it so interesting."

The exhibit is small, but it's elegant and lively. From behind decades of dust and rust, the colorful era emerges like a melody played on a faraway piano: Gene Tunney's dented old punching bag hangs alongside a fur coat belonging to John L. Sullivan; personal items donated by famous Irish fighters are on display, as are dozens of paintings, posters and vintage photographs.

The grime of Ireland's fighting men is airbrushed somewhat -- little reminds us that more than a few of these pugs ended up in asylums or on skid row. But, as the program says, this is a *celebration*, not a definitive portrait of the era. As a celebration, it works just fine.

The most-talked-about item rests stoically in a glass case. Looking like a hellish back scratcher, it's nothing less than the mummified arm of Dan Donnelly, one of Ireland's most famous bare-knuckle bruisers.

"Dan Donnelly's arm is certainly one of the oldest and most unique pieces of sports memorabilia existing in the world today," Houlihan said.

As the show's designated mascot, the arm lends a "Tales from the Crypt" quality to the otherwise understated event.

Donnelly, who will be inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame this year as part of the "pioneer" group, gained fame in Ireland when he became the first Irish-born fighter to win the bare-knuckle championship of Britain.

It was his 1818 bout with English champion Tom Oliver that put Donnelly into the annals of Irish fight history forever. Donnelly beat Oliver at Crawley Hurst and collected over 100,000 British pounds.

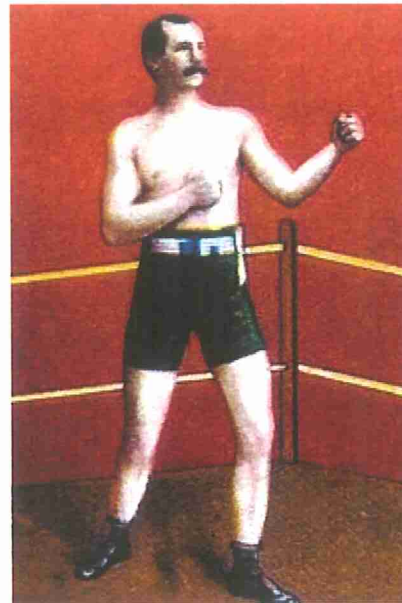
Legend has it that when Donnelly's wife came to retrieve him, he already had burned through the prize money.

He became a hero in Ireland, a subject of folk songs and escalating legends. The plot of land where one of his fights was held became known as Donnelly's Hollow, a revered place where yearly festivals took place. A legend even grew that he had been knighted, but no documentation supports that tale.

Another story had Donnelly refusing a knighthood, telling the Brits that he was just a regular fellow and couldn't be bothered with such fluff. Apparently, he was too busy running a series of Dublin pubs into the ground by guzzling the profits.

Two years after beating Oliver, Donnelly died at the age of 32. Various accounts say he succumbed to alcohol poisoning and venereal disease, while others have politely written that he

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Bob Thomas/Popperfoto/Getty Images

Peter Maher plied his trade during the heyday of the Irish fighting scene.

died of a "fever." Nearly 70,000 people turned out for Donnelly's funeral procession.

A very short time after his death, Donnelly's corpse was stolen by grave robbers and taken to the medical college at Edinburgh University. This was not an unusual practice in those days, as fresh corpses would be used for practice by the students at the College of Surgeons. By the time friends of Donnelly arrived in Scotland to reclaim the body, Donnelly already had been dissected and reburied; a surgeon had removed Donnelly's arm and dipped it in red lead to preserve it.

Anatomy teachers used the arm as a class model until a circus owner bought it and took it on tour throughout the United Kingdom. In 1904, the old limb landed in Belfast, where it "resided" for 50 years. Its most recent showcase before its New York debut was in a family tavern in Kilcullen, County Kildare, Ireland, known as The Hideout.

"Donnelly's arm might be a gruesome sight, but it's always the center of attention at the bar," Des Byrne, The Hideout's proprietor, told The Ring magazine in 1996. Byrne eventually sold the bar but kept the arm, hoping that one day it would be useful as a museum piece.

"The arm needed special permission to travel," Houlihan said. "The Irish government had to grant a waiver for it to leave Ireland. They considered it an irreplaceable antiquity. Henry Donohoe, chief pilot for Aer Lingus, flew over with it in the cockpit of his plane. It almost didn't fit. The owner, Josephine Byrne, is a close personal friend of Henry's, and she traveled with the arm as well."

Donnelly's arm still has a curious strength about it. The hand is shaped as if pointing, the index finger outstretched as if accusing someone, perhaps the grave robbers, of ruining his eternal slumber. Donnelly's crooked finger also could be beckoning to fighters of the future to join him in becoming a seedy old relic.

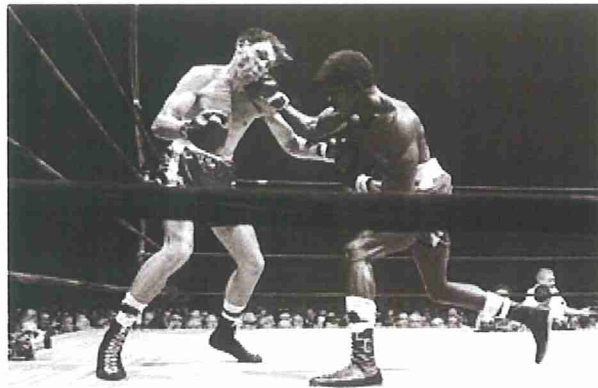
Or maybe, because Donnelly could never resist a drink, the hand is gesturing for one last shot of whiskey.

Although still active in boxing to some degree, the Irish no longer occupy a prominent place in the sport, particularly in America.

Pete Hamill's program notes put it nicely: "In the years after [1950s middleweight contender] Joey Archer, there was no longer any need for Irish fighters to act out scenarios of courage, ambition, endurance and the ability to absorb pain in order to triumph. The long tale of the Irish-American, which began with such deprivation and turmoil in the 19th century, had become a different story.

"There was nothing to prove. We had our American president," Hamill said. "We had our splendid novelists. Today, we have our company presidents and our chairmen of banks, our teachers and scholars. In that sense, we do have something to teach all those who came after us, including the new immigrants. In spite of everything, the Irish won all the late rounds."

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Herb Scharfman/Sports Imagery/Getty Images

Writer Peter Hamill felt that in the years after Joey Archer, left, "there was no longer any need for Irish fighters to act out scenarios of courage, ambition, endurance and the ability to absorb pain in order to triumph."

The other items on display -- Wayne McCullough's silver medal from the 1990 Olympics, for instance -- give the room some glamour, but a more earthy tale of Irish fighters was told by Donnelly's lonely arm.

The boxing ring can bring you fame and fortune, the limb seems to say, but it can also lead to a premature, dirty death.

Don Stradley is a regular contributor to The Ring.

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