

# WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.

## Joe and Johnny Benna

**A**t a time when the national Golden Gloves Tournament of Champions was as popular as the NCAA basketball tournament is today, Joe and Johnny Benna of Terre Haute were at the top of the heap.

The two sons of Mike and Elizabeth (Shagan) Benna may have been the best amateur boxers in Wabash Valley history. In 1938 John was the National Golden Gloves champion at 135 pounds, etching his name next to Barney Ross, Joe Louis, Ezzard Charles and Cassius Clay (Muhammed Ali), all Golden Gloves champions who became world champions as pros. The same year, Joe, a year older, finished third out of 23,000 participants in the 160-pound class.

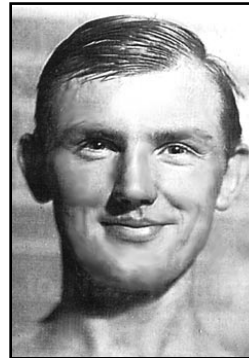
Children of a coal miner, the Benna brothers and sister Margaret attended Sacred Heart Elementary School. In 1931 the boys were enrolled at St. Meinrad's Seminary, but returned to Terre Haute in 1934 for their senior year at Garfield, excelling in athletics. Joe scored the touchdown which beat archrival Wiley, 7-6, and earned All-City honors in basketball. John — taller, skinnier and a semester behind Joe — lettered in football, basketball and track, finishing second in the Sectional in the pole vault at 11-feet, 8 inches. Upon graduation in January 1935, Joe renewed his commitment to boxing, a sport he had tested at age 10. John reluctantly joined him a few months later.

In 1936, the *Tribune-Star* sponsored a Terre Haute Golden Gloves sectional. The Bennas were ready. Both easily won their respective weight classes. Joe advanced to the quarterfinals at Chicago; John lost his second fight. Both repeated as sectional champs in 1937 and advanced to quarterfinals in Chicago. John won his third straight Terre Haute sectional in 1938. Then working for Inland Steel in East Chicago, Joe won the Michigan City sectional but lost a close decision to eventual middleweight champion Cornelius Young of Chicago in the national semifinals. John defeated John Joca of Cleveland in the title match to bring home the crown. After winning the title, John retired from the sport with a 108-12 record, rejecting offers to compete in the Olympics and turn professional. Joe attended Purdue University and coached boxing. In 1939 Joe won his fourth Golden Gloves sectional, competing at Lafayette, but lost in the Chicago quarterfinals. He retired with a spectacular 135-11 career mark.

Joe died Jan. 3, 1993, in Ft. Pierce, Fla., 11 days before his 77th birthday. Daughters Donna Geniti of Sunrise, Fla., and Cathy Benna of Terre Haute — products of his marriage to Elena Sordean of Terre Haute — survive. John, now 82 and long retired from the military, lives in Shalimar, Fla. He and wife Mary have three children: Mike of Ozark, Mo.; Anita of Mt. Vernon, Iowa; and John Jr. of Charleston, W.Va. Sister Margaret Salmon still resides in Terre Haute.



JOE BENNA



JOHNNY BENNA

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