



Johnny Kilbane: The Making of a Boxer

Not many Clevelanders of Irish descent can boast that 200,000 people lined the streets of downtown Cleveland just to catch a glimpse of them. That's what happened on March 17, 1912, when boxer Johnny Kilbane returned from California to his hometown after winning the world featherweight title for the first time a few weeks earlier, on February 22. It was a title Kilbane would retain through 1923—a record of ten straight years that, even today, has yet to be beat at any weight category in professional boxing.

Kilbane was born in 1889, in “the Angle” neighborhood of Cleveland on West 28th Street, near Old River Road. His father, also John Kilbane, had immigrated about a decade earlier from the small island of Achillbeg, off the western coast of Ireland. His mother, a Mary Gallagher, had been born in Cleveland to Irish parents. Johnny's mother died when he was three, his father subsequently went blind, and Johnny had to leave school at St. Malachi's at a young age to work as a laborer. Under those tough circumstances, he would later recall, “I was just one of those little kids that run wild, and, like Topsy, ‘I just grew.’”

The young Kilbane dreamed of joining a vaudeville “hoofing” or tumbling act. But in 1906, he attended a boxing match at the LaSalle Club on West 25th Street and was hooked. As he would remember, “the lights and the crowd, the prominent Clevelanders present, the heavy cigar smoke and the general atmosphere of romance made a deep impression on me.” A friend suggested that Johnny seek out Jimmy Dunn, a professional fighter who was training at that time near Vermilion. Kilbane took the advice, and Dunn decided to take the scrawny kid from Cleveland under his wing.

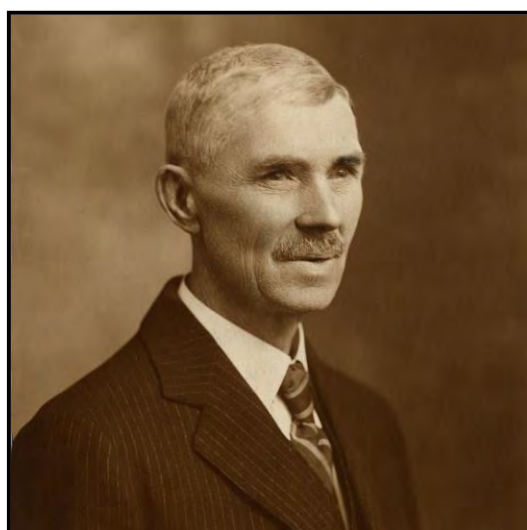
Professional boxing was a risky venture for the young man, who in 1905 had already met the woman, Irene McDonnell, whom he would marry in 1910. The young couple's first child, a girl named Mary, was born in 1911; a second daughter, Helen, was born in 1913 but would not survive childhood. Kilbane's extended family included his blind father, a stepmother—Bridget McNulty (born Sweeney)—his paternal grandmother who joined the family in Cleveland in 1884, a stepbrother and two half-sisters. And yet in the 1910 census, two years before the match that would secure his fame, Kilbane confidently listed his occupation as “pugilist” in the “prize ring.” Kilbane's sunny outlook appealed to fans and sportswriters alike.

PHOTOGRAPHS:

Top left: The photograph of Kilbane as a laborer was set up after his prize match in 1912 but captures the kind of work he had done from a young age. Cleveland State University.

Top right: Manager Jimmy Dunn and Johnny Kilbane arriving in Cleveland after the title fight. Western Reserve Historical Society.

Below, clockwise: (1) Photograph of Johnny and his wife-to-be Irene, marked “Our First Date ‘1905.’” Courtesy of Kevin O’Toole. (2) Johnny, his wife Irene, and daughter Mary as he prepared to fight Frankie Burns in New York in May 1912. Cleveland State University. (3) Kilbane and his daughter Mary, both wearing hats, with Cooney family relatives, probably of his paternal grandmother, in Sraheens on Achill Island, during a visit to Ireland in the 1920s. Western Reserve Historical Society. (4) The fighter's father John Kilbane ca. 1927. Cleveland State University.



Featherweight Champion 1912-23



In 1907, Johnny Kilbane and a group of friends scraped together the money to take a train out to Crystal Beach, near Vermilion, where lightweight Jimmy Dunn was training. When Dunn's sparring partner turned up hurt, the boxer asked for volunteers from the crowd, and up stepped Kilbane—who had never before laced up a pair of boxing gloves. According to sportswriter Dan Taylor, Dunn was impressed with Kilbane's "desire" and "speed." Sparring with Dunn whetted Johnny's appetite for the sport, and he soon sought out a fight at the LaSalle Club against "Kid" Campbell, a tough character with a roundhouse swing who had twenty-five pounds on the slight Kilbane. As Taylor recounted, "They fought on a Sunday afternoon and the admission was 25 cents. Kilbane surprised even himself when he knocked Campbell out in the sixth round. Kilbane was paid \$8 for his efforts. His success against Campbell was all Kilbane needed to convince him he was going to become a fighter."

Of the many rounds fought before the title match, none was more renowned in local legend than a grudge match with a neighborhood rival (but no relation) named Tommy Kilbane who had also grown up in the Angle and sought to equal Johnny's growing success. The two Kilbanes fought twice to a draw, which fueled the rivalry further. As Taylor tells it, in 1908, "They agreed to a 25-round match to a referee's decision, winner to take all the gate receipts. Bouts of this type were forbidden in the city, so Watson's Farm on Pearl Road was decided as the site." A fire battalion chief served as referee. Taylor continued: "The day of the fight, 408 fans, at \$1 a head, jammed the barn of Watson's farm to the rafters. Once the crowd had gathered in the barn, all the windows and doors were nailed shut, just in case the sheriff decided to pay a visit." Deemed a "savage brawl," the fight finally ended after 25 rounds when Johnny Kilbane caught Tommy Kilbane on the chin. The two subsequently became friends and sparring partners in the preparation leading up to Johnny's title fight with Abe Atell on February 22, 1912.

Atell had reigned as world featherweight champion for a record six years at the beginning of 1912. But by then, news accounts reported that Attell was more interested in cards and gambling than in training for the ring. Kilbane, on the other hand, trained hard. The championship fight was "a spectacular struggle" in which Kilbane bested Attell in 20 grueling rounds.

Kilbane defended his title against all contenders. Known for his "science," speed, and graceful footwork, he was said to "abhor brutality." "Does Johnny lack the punch?" was a hotly debated question. And yet he mastered known sluggers—from Johnny Dundee in 1913 to George "Knock-Out" Chaney, who went down for the count by the end of Round 3 in a much anticipated match in 1916. His thrilling victory over Danny Frush at League Park in 1921 drew one of Cleveland's largest boxing crowds. During the First World War, he took a hiatus from the ring to serve as a boxing instructor in army training camps. Time caught up with Kilbane in 1923, when at age 34 he lost a title fight to Frenchman Eugene Criqui in New York.

PHOTOGRAPHS

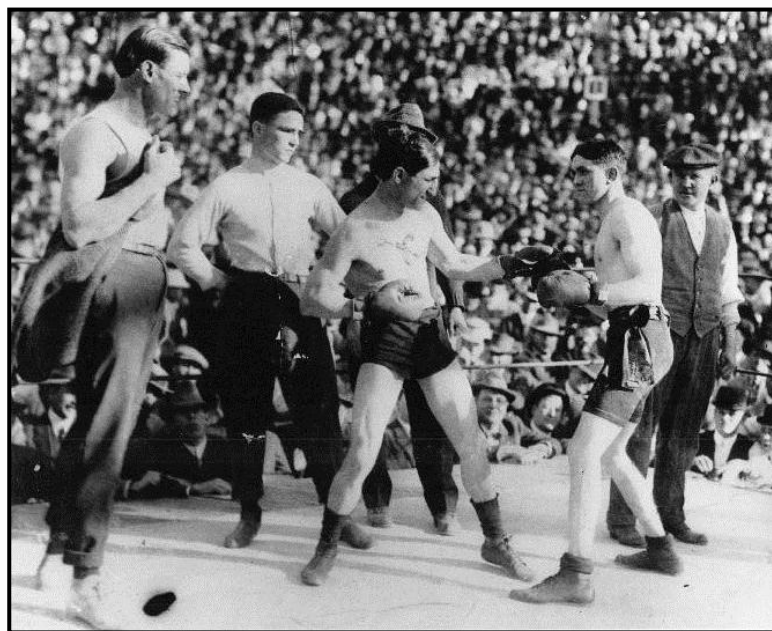
Top left: Kilbane and unknown young fighter, before 1912. Courtesy of Kevin O'Toole.

Top right: The inscription on the back of this photograph, now in the CSU collection, reads: "March 9, 1912. This is one of the most interesting pictures ever taken of men connected with [the] fight game. It shows the boys who [were] instrumental in causing the defeat of [Abe] Atell in his bout with Kilbane. From left to right are Danny Dunn, Tommy Kilbane, Jimmy Dunn and Johnny Kilbane. Jimmy Dunn is the manager of the Kilbane boys and Danny was formerly a member of the camp."

Right, center: Kilbane and Atell in the ring in 1912. Courtesy of Kevin O'Toole.

Right, below: The moment of victory. Cleveland State University.

Below, left: A ticket stub to Kilbane's match against George Chaney, in 1916, at Cedar Point. Courtesy of Kevin O'Toole.



Johnny Kilbane: Public Servant

According to Kilbane's great grandson, Kevin O'Toole, "Johnny fought over 140 fights in his career losing only 4 and held the Featherweight title longer than anyone in the history of boxing in any weight class. Many consider Joe Louis to hold that distinction; however, for part of his reign Louis was technically retired. Kilbane's reign was completely uninterrupted. He retained the title until losing in the Polo Grounds to Eugene Criqui on June 2, 1923. Kilbane is generally considered one of the top 5 Featherweights of all time."

After losing the title in 1923, Kilbane tried a variety of endeavors. In 1921 he had purchased land near Vermilion and started his own training camp. Later he ran a summer camp for boys on the Vermilion property and also refereed and taught boxing in local gyms and schools. It was estimated in 1923 that he was one of the top moneymakers in the sport of boxing, along with Jack Dempsey. But like many Americans, Kilbane lost his savings and property in the Great Depression.

An outgoing optimist and "people person," Kilbane was a natural politician with a well-known name. Though unsuccessful in his campaigns for Cleveland City Council in 1921 and sheriff in 1928 and 1948, he was elected State Senator from 1941-42 and State Representative in 1951. He left the State House in 1952 when he was elected Clerk of Courts, a post he would hold until his death in 1957.

Kilbane was often photographed with his family—a rare occurrence in the world of boxing. His wife, Irene, to whom he was married 47 years, was always on hand to cook his meals in training camp, but she refused to watch him fight. Looking back, Johnny always credited his wife for her support, claiming, in 1951, "My life has been a very happy one. Ninety-nine percent of this is because of my wife, and the other one percent is the Luck of the Irish."

Kilbane once told reporters, "Show me a business where I can make more money than I can in the ring and I'll never fight again. I don't fight because I like it. I fight because it means a living for my family and myself." Boxing and life were one and the same—daily struggles to be faced with courage. As Johnny Kilbane himself once wrote, "For when the chips of life are down/ and troubled waters mount/ A fighting heart will see us through/ However long the count."

For more information about Johnny Kilbane's life and boxing career, see the website maintained by his great grandson, Kevin O'Toole: www.johnnykilbane.com. The website contains updates about ongoing efforts to commemorate the centenary of Kilbane's first title match.

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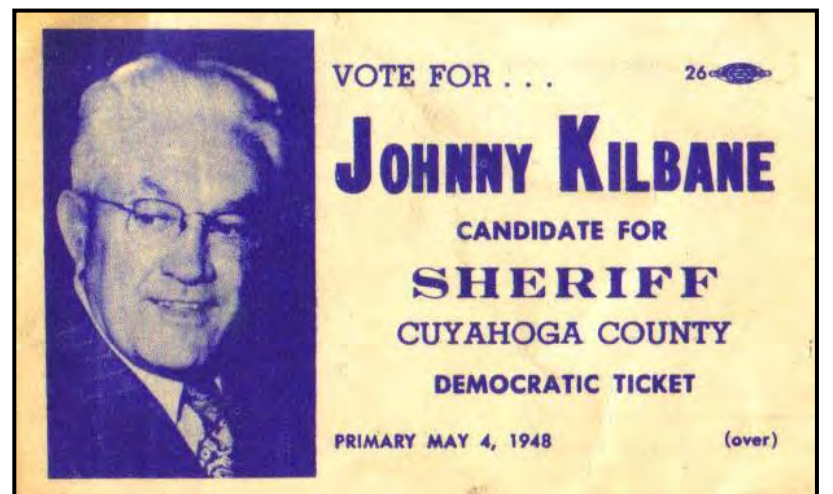
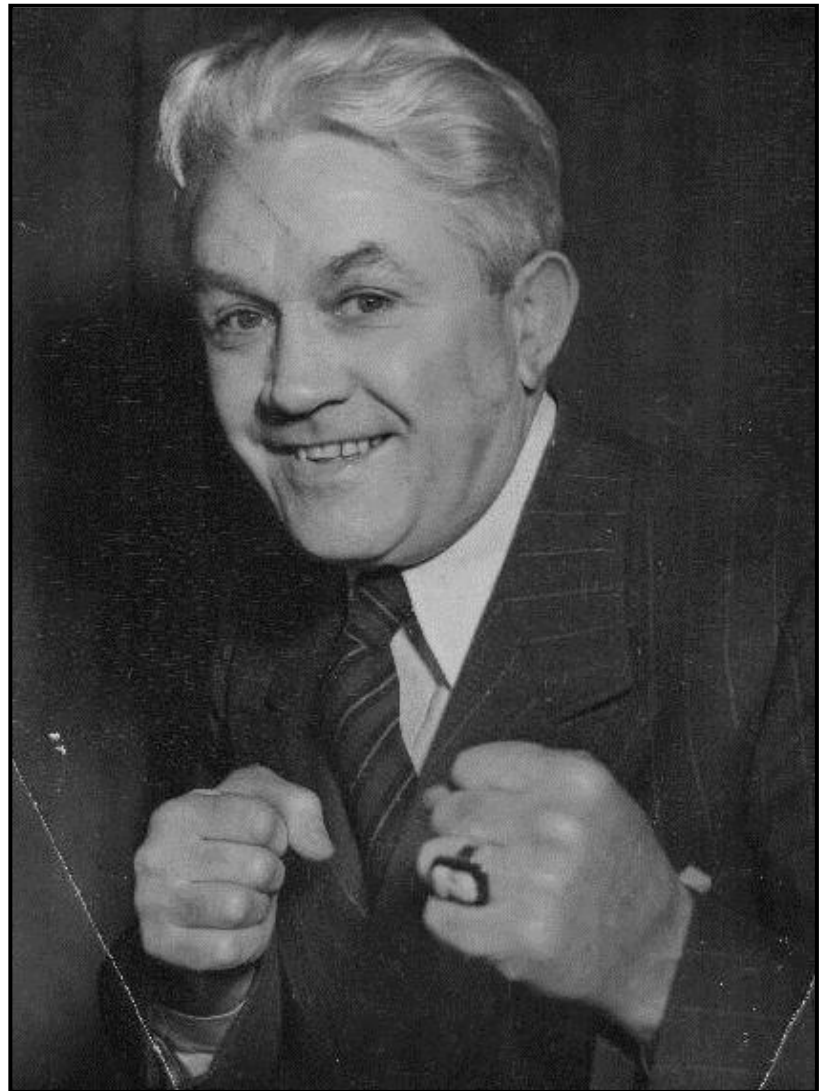
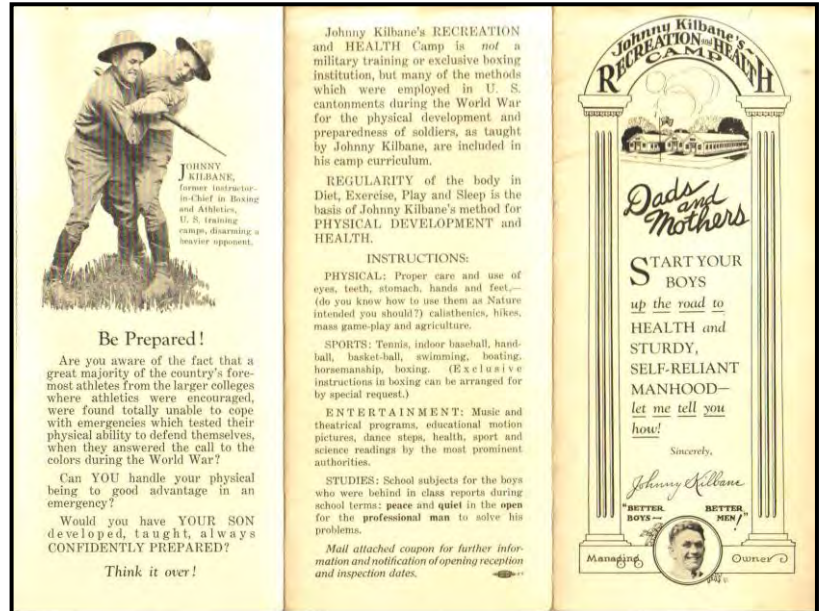
Top: In later years, Kilbane ran a gym and taught boxing to many neighborhood boys on the West Side of Cleveland.

Center: A brochure for Kilbane's summer "recreation and health" camp.

Center: Kilbane's successful run for an Ohio State Senate seat in 1947 capitalized on the fighter's boxing fame.

Bottom: Campaign literature for an unsuccessful bid for Sheriff.

Photographs courtesy of Kevin O'Toole.



This display was prepared by Margaret Lynch for the Irish American Archives Society, with support in part from the residents of Cuyahoga County through a public from Cuyahoga Arts & Culture. Special thanks to the O'Toole Family.