

## Gems of the Ring, Guarded by a Professor in Boxing Gloves

By GLENN COLLINS

A now yellowing, handwritten letter from a feisty former lightweight boxer known as the Napoleon of the Ring—Jack McAuliffe by name—was sent in 1924 to the Hoosier Flash, an Indianapolis pugilist named Sid Glick. “My letters to you may be worth a fortune when I am dead,” McAuliffe wrote to Glick. “Just keep them. I don’t write to many.”

Someone did keep them: Hank Kaplan, widely regarded as the nation’s foremost boxing historian when he died in 2007 at age 88 in Florida.

Now his vast boxing archive, amassed over half a century, has arrived in the borough of his birth, at the Brooklyn College Library. And if the McAuliffe letters are not worth a fortune, that is hardly true of the archive, believed to be worth nearly \$3 million.

For years, many worried that “the collection would be lost in a hurricane, or broken up after Hank passed away,” said Anthony M. Cucchiara, professor of archival management at Brooklyn College. “The collection survived out of Hank’s love and devotion, and a bit of sheer luck.”

Luck? Yes: Professor Cucchiara, whose title is archivist and head of distinctive collections, is something else: a boxer.

At age 57, he works out every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at Gleason’s Gym in Brooklyn with Hector Rocca, who trained the fighter Arturo Gatti and the actress Hilary Swank for her role in the film “Million Dollar Baby.”

And so the boxing archive and the sparring archivist were introduced, and a match was made.

As yet unavailable to researchers, the collection—so far publicly confined to a small exhibition area in the library—consumes a 10-foot-high chamber in the Archives and Special Collections Division.

Crammed into the space are 2,600 books, 200,000 rare prints and negatives, 790 boxes of newspaper clippings from 1890 to 2007, 300 tapes of fights and interviews, reams of correspondence and hundreds of items of memorabilia, including belt buckles, trading cards and signed boxing gloves. Among the treasures is a heavy punching bag pounded by Cassius Clay in Miami before he renamed himself Muhammad Ali.

Although it might seem incongruous for an academic institution to devote space to a boxing collection,



Andrew Henderson/The New York Times

**Professor Anthony Cucchiara, right, who boxes at Brooklyn’s Gleason’s Gym three times a week, shepherded the boxing historian and borough native Hank Kaplan’s vast archive to the Brooklyn College Library.**

Professor Cucchiara said he hoped the Kaplan collection would be “a valuable archeological dig” for scholars. “I suppose some people would want to turn their noses up at a boxing collection,” he said. “But the story of America is in this archive. Boxing is a prism for our cultural history, and is important for its associations with immigration, ethnicity, class, race and nationalism.”

The Kaplan collection-Cucchiara connection was made through David Smith, a supervising librarian at the New York Public Library in Manhattan who regularly works with authors. He learned about the Kaplan archive from the writer David Margolick, who was researching his 2005 book, “Beyond Glory: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling, and a World on the Brink.”

“For boxing writers, visiting the Kaplan collection was like going to Mecca,” Mr. Smith said. When he read about Professor Cucchiara in a 2005 article in *The New York Times* that mentioned his avocation, “I got in touch with Tony and told him, ‘there’s a boxing archive in Miami you might be interested in,’” Mr. Smith said, adding that he asked Mr. Margolick to tell Kaplan about Professor Cucchiara.

Soon, then, the Brooklyn archivist headed to Kendall Park in Florida to inspect the collection in 2006, “and when I first saw it, it was overwhelming,” Professor Cucchiara recalled. “It completely filled Hank’s house and two-car garage. I was stunned.”

The collection is valued at \$2.94 million, “and probably it’s worth much more,” said its appraiser, Larry E. Sullivan, a professor of criminal justice at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan, who was chief of the rare book and special collections division of the Library of Congress.

Though Kaplan’s day job was to toil for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Miami, he had longtime friendships with trainers like Angelo Dundee and fighters including Muhammad Ali and Sonny Liston, Kid Gavilan and Ezzard Charles. He collected much of their memorabilia, “preserving it all on the fly,” Professor Cucchiara said.

A 6-footer who was once a boxer, Kaplan was a pipe-smoking original known as “the human encyclopedia,” who commonly used sonorous phrases like “fistic arcana” to describe his meticulously organized life’s work.

Soft-spoken with a dense Brooklyn accent, and scholarly in a rough-hewn way, “he would sit at a table piled with publications, and he clipped away every night for 40 or 50 years, filing it all away,” Mr. Margolick recalled.

Kaplan maintained information on virtually every professional boxer and trainer—and even judges and announcers—and documented 1,200 boxing deaths. He reveled in compiling curious dossiers, like Jewish boxers who adopted disparate ethnic pseudonyms.

After Kaplan’s death, Professor Cucchiara was surprised to get a call

from his family telling him that the entire valuable collection had been willed as a gift to Brooklyn College.

“I think Hank liked the idea that the collection would be coming to Brooklyn,” Professor Cucchiara said, noting that Kaplan was born in Williamsburg. “And it could be that he thought—since I’m both an academician and a boxer—that I would not let him down.”

Boxing was once a mass entertainment more popular than baseball and football in an era when it was not unusual for much of the populace to tune radios to championship fights, Dr. Sullivan said. But the sport was gradually marginalized because of the decline of the neighborhood zeitgeist that supported local gyms, the toll of debilitating injuries and deaths, the competition from team sports that provided other, less punishing, options for youths, and boxing’s connection with organized crime, he said.

Today, “boxing is a niche sport, abandoned by network television and playing to an enthusiastic following locked in to cable television and pay-per-view championship bouts,” Professor Cucchiara said. The collection—a bonanza of high-value artifacts, primary-source records and eccentric oddments—traces many social trends, Professor Cucchiara said, including the waves of immigration that fed the boxing beast. It reveals the competitiveness of ethnic groups as well as the power of boxing to uplift, or destroy, those newcomers.

There are 150 ringed binders of correspondence, tickets and ephemera, as well as telegrams, souvenir programs, fight cards, boxing licenses, contracts and 1,000 broadsides and posters.

The collection encompasses photographs of Joe Louis; a gold-plated cigarette case given by Max Baer to his trainer, Issy Kline; Ali’s training trunks for the Leon Spinks fight; and sketches by Ali, an inveterate doodler. “And you have the actual photo signed by Liston,” Dr. Sullivan said, “who didn’t sign a lot of photos. His wife did.”

Professor Cucchiara is raising \$200,000 to house the collection in acid-free storage, and to study and catalog it. “I felt so sad when the door came down on that garage,” he said, recalling supervising the removal of the collection from Kaplan’s house in February.

“It seemed,” he said, “like the punctuation of Hank’s life.”