

OWENS, JOHNNY RICHARD (JOHNNY OWEN) (1956-1980), boxer

Name: Johnny Richard Owens
Pseudonym: Johnny Owen
Date of birth: 1956
Date of death: 1980
Gender: Male
Occupation: boxer
Area of activity: Sports and Leisure Pursuits
Author: Mel Williams

Johnny Owen was born in Gwaunfarren Hospital in Merthyr Tydfil on 7 January 1956, the fourth of eight children of Dick Owens (1927-2013) and his wife Edith (née Hale, born 1927). He was baptized Johnny Richard Owens. The family home was at 12 Heol Bryn Selu, a rented council house on the large Gellideg estate.

He took up boxing at the age of eight, frequenting the Merthyr Amateur Club with his brother Vivian, and his father became his trainer. By 1970 and 1973 he had won Welsh School championships; he represented Wales seventeen times, losing only twice.

With all his successes as an amateur boxer, the time came for him to move on. When registering as a professional he was keen to use a Welsh form of his name, Sion Rhisiart Owain, but he was persuaded to adopt the name Johnny Owen because of some idea that a Welsh name would not be politically acceptable within the profession.

He turned professional on 1 September 1976, with the former boxer Dai Gardiner as his manager, and began his training programme in the New Tredegar Gym in the Rhymney Valley, a few miles from his home in Merthyr. In his first professional fight on 30 September 1976, he defeated his fellow Welshman George Sutton from Cardiff on points over eight rounds to win his first title, Bantamweight Champion of Wales.

Johnny's thin and fragile-looking frame earned him the nickname 'matchstick man', and this is how he was often promoted on posters. One of his greatest strengths as a boxer was his remarkable stamina which enabled him to hound opponents relentlessly over many rounds.

In his ninth professional bout on 29 November 1977 he had the opportunity to take on Paddy Maguire for the British title. The fight was stopped in the eleventh round and Johnny became British Bantamweight Champion, the first Welshman in 64 years to win that title. The boy from Merthyr was on his way to the top.

Seven months later, with fifteen wins and one draw behind him, Johnny Owen stepped into the ring in Ebbw Vale to face Paul Ferreri, an Australian with an international reputation. In an extremely tough fight Johnny pursued him around the ring with great skill for fifteen rounds. By a clear verdict Johnny Owen was pronounced the new Commonwealth Bantamweight Champion.

The natural next step was to aim for the European title. So Johnny travelled to Almeria in Spain, accompanied by his devoted supporters, to challenge the European Champion Juan Francisco Rodriguez. This was Johnny's eighteenth contest and the first time that he had fought abroad. Although he clearly outfought his opponent, he lost a controversial contest marred by claims of foul play by the Spaniard. The decision was an insult to the good name of boxing. This was the first time in his professional career that Johnny had lost.

On 13 June 1979 he successfully defended his British title for the third time by defeating Dave Smith in the twelfth round, and thus won the Lonsdale Belt outright. The chance came to gain revenge on Juan Francisco Rodriguez in Ebbw Vale on 28 February 1980, when Johnny won on points by a unanimous decision, and was proclaimed the new Bantamweight Champion of Europe.

He defended his British title again on 28 June, beating John Feeney on points over fifteen rounds. Immediately after that bout, the news came through Mickey Duff, the prominent boxing promoter from London, of an opportunity to fight for the WBC World Bantamweight title in America against (Guada)lupe Pintor from Mexico. The bout was arranged for 19 September in Los Angeles.

Johnny Owen, the matchstick man as he was known, stepped into the ring in a hostile and volatile atmosphere, ready to go after the crowd's hero, Lupe Pintor, from the first moment. By round eight Johnny was ahead. In the ninth round he was knocked to the floor for the first time in his professional career, but got back to his feet in a flash.

In the twelfth round, however, he was knocked down again, this time unconscious. Johnny did not respond to treatment, and he was immediately taken to hospital. He remained in a coma and died 46 days later in a hospital in Los Angeles, on the night of Saturday 4 November 1980. It appears that Johnny's death was the result of a particularly fragile skull.

In his attempt to win the world crown against Lupe Pintor, he lost not only the fight, but his life as well. Johnny's family never blamed Lupe Pintor for his death, and indeed Johnny's father urged him to continue boxing.

Johnny Owen was buried in Pant Cemetery, above the town of Merthyr. A thousand mourners lined the road from Merthyr in the cold rain to pay their last respects to one of the town's children. The affection for Johnny was evident in the tributes which came from people all over the world, including Muhammad Ali and Tom Jones.

His gravestone has an inscription in Welsh under his name, 'Gwir Fab o Gymru' (A True Son of Wales). Twenty years later a statue of Johnny Owen was erected in Merthyr Shopping Centre, facing towards his home in Gellideg. Lupe Pintor was present at the unveiling to pay a final tribute.

Johnny Owen fought twenty-eight bouts, losing only two with one drawn.

Author

Mel Williams

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Further Reading

Rick Broadbent, *The big if: the life and death of Johnny Owen* (London 2006)

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