



INSIDE THE GAME

THE STORIES BEHIND NOVA SCOTIA'S SPORTS HEADLINES

- Somebeachsomewhere's remarkable run
- The rise and demise of the Colleen Jones rink
- Saint Mary's Huskies, Danton finally become winners

CHRIS COCHRANE

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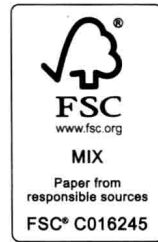
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PREFACE

Life was plenty slow growing up on a farm on the Noel Shore area of Hants County in the 1960s and early '70s. Back then, much of the entertainment was provided by community get-togethers, quite a few of which were held at my mother and father's home. Visitors of all ages would gather nightly, often packing the front room, to swap stories on recent happenings and rekindle old debates.

For me and my older brother, Laurie, it was one of the few times as kids when we were content to sit quietly and listen. Even at a young age we loved hearing the adults try to top each other with their stories. Most of the stories were true even if they were coloured up a bit to make them more enticing. The best of the storytellers spoke to a silent room, with everyone waiting to see how the tale would end.

During the past few years as a sports columnist I've noticed how many notable Nova Scotia sports stories were never entirely told, at least not to the extent they deserved. When an old friend in the boxing community became ill a few years ago, it struck me that when he eventually passes away, many great boxing tales will go with him because many of his best stories were never recorded in any form. Keeping

great local stories alive—some only a year or two old and others more than three decades old—was my incentive for writing this book. The ten stories I selected deserve to be told in greater detail and recorded for everyone to share.

The Chris Clarke–Clyde Gray Commonwealth title fights is a story I've long wanted to explore. Little is available on the two fights that quickly sold out a then-brand-new Halifax Metro Centre. Their legendary battles are benchmarks in Nova Scotia sports history and a reflection of the times in which they took place.

Billy Riley's battle to make it to the NHL is the story of a proud and determined black man trying to break down racial barriers, both in the NHL and in the communities in which he played.

The International Wrestling tale, and all its colourful characters, is a reminder of a much more innocent time in Nova Scotia.

The Halifax–Cole Harbour junior hockey battles bring us back to a time when attitudes within and outside the game were in sharp contrast to what they are today.

Snooker champ Ken Shea tells about the choices he had to make in order to balance the security of family life and a steady job with the thrill of being a professional in a sport burgeoning into social acceptance.

Other stories are about internal challenges. Boxing champion Darrell Pee Wee Flint's toughest battles weren't against ring opponents but illegal drugs. The Andrew Haley tale isn't so much about his accomplishments as a world-calibre swimmer as it is about the spirit and strength of character that enabled him to reach that level.

A few more recent stories—the Saint Mary's Huskies' CIS hockey title, the career of Colleen Jones and the other members of her world championship rink, and the amazing ride that super-horse Somebeachsomewhere gave a group of Nova Scotian investors—are so compelling I had to explore them in greater depth.

Simply put, these are great Nova Scotia sport stories that became even better when the people involved opened up and talked about

what was happening behind the headlines. I appreciated, and I hope you will as well, the honesty of these athletes in telling their stories. They gave me more than a glimpse into their world and, in many cases, delved into topics to a depth they'd never before gone publicly.

That level of co-operation and honesty makes for the best stories.

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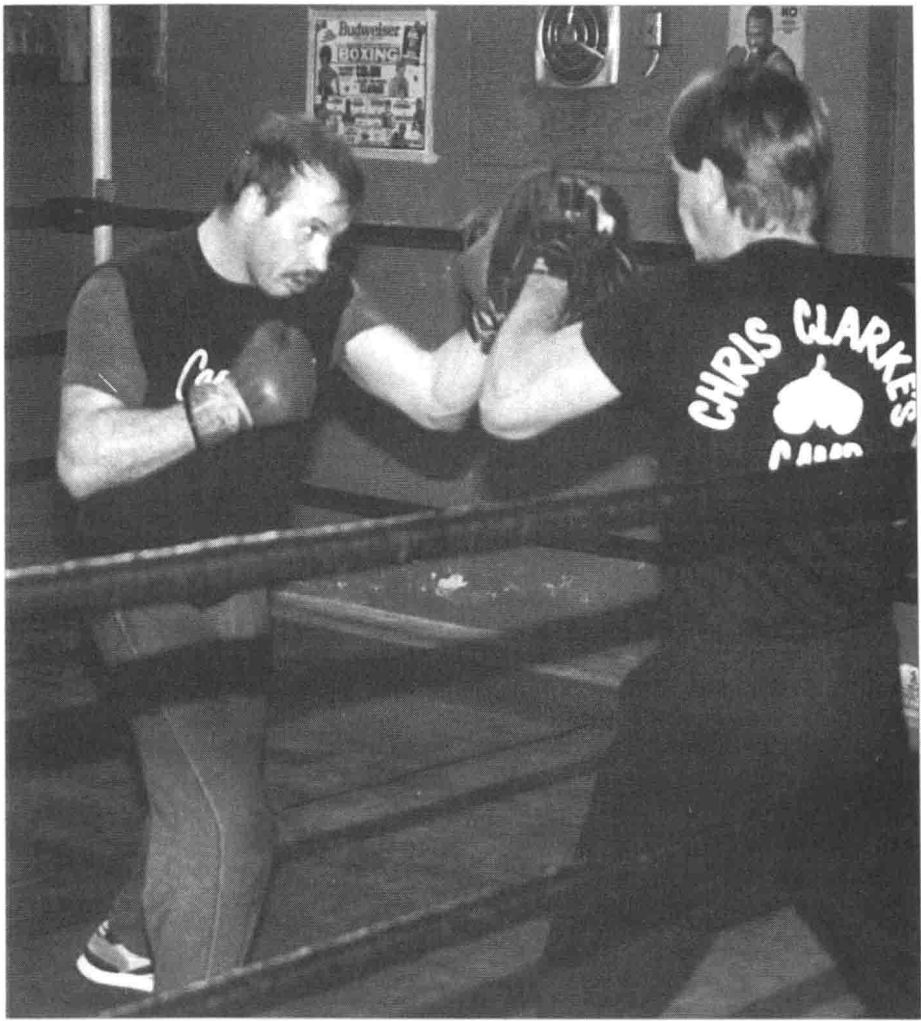
CHAPTER 1

AS GOOD AS IT GOT: GRAY VS. CLARKE

Chris Clarke stands amid the paying customers at Palooka's Gym in downtown Halifax, intently watching the fight unfold and occasionally shaking his head in disgust as the combatants reveal flaws that most in the crowd can't recognize.

The fifty-four-year-old former boxing champion sees all the mistakes. He has always had a knack for that. After watching a couple of rounds of mediocre action, he becomes bored. His on-the-spot animation, as he whips his hands about to show what the fighters are doing wrong, draws annoyed stares from a couple of young fans. Clarke pays them no mind, and spotting a familiar face, he moves on to another group. "Got a fin?" a thirsty Clarke asks. The trademark slow grin spreads across his face as his friend reaches into his pocket.

It's more than thirty years since Clarke was the king of boxing in Halifax, over three decades since he stopped the great Clyde Gray in the first of two memorable 1979 clashes at the Halifax Metro Centre. That first fight—a true display of talent, stamina, and grit—was the pinnacle of Clarke's boxing career. And, all these years later, it's the reason so many boxing fans still reach for a five-dollar bill when the aging warrior flashes a smile.



A veteran Chris Clarke, left, works out in preparation for a 1986 fight.

Clarke has always had a love affair with his hometown. Never has a Halifax athlete with such huge international potential allowed the course of his career to be so dictated by an allegiance to his birthplace. By the end of his career, that devotion had cost Clarke dearly. But it was the road he chose. He was loyal to what he knew best, and for much of his boxing life, he remained stubbornly resistant to anything different.

Growing up in the working class section of north end Halifax, Clarke's life was far from luxurious. Boxing, popular in Halifax in the late 1960s, was the best way this tough kid could see to become somebody special, somebody who would be remembered. He was one of three brothers in a family living near the Halifax Forum. At that time, the Forum hosted the biggest boxing cards in Nova Scotia. A connecting building housing the Nova Scotia Sport Hall of Fame also helped shape his goals as a kid.

"I used to walk by there all the time and wonder what that place was for," Clarke told *Halifax Chronicle Herald* sports columnist Hugh Townsend before his 2006 induction into the Nova Scotia Sport Hall of Fame. "I was told it was for people who were outstanding in boxing and stuff like that. I said: 'I'm going to be there. I'm going to be there one of these days.'"

For the boy with big dreams, boxing was the obvious way to achieve his life goals. "I was ten years old. It was the cheapest thing to get into. I couldn't afford hockey skates. All I needed was a pair of boxing trunks and I already had a pair of sneakers. I fell in love with it automatically—the leather, the gym, the people around it. I loved everything to do with boxing. It was great."

His search for money and fame may have helped steer Clarke toward boxing, but it was his recognition of his own special talent that made it easy for him to stay with the sport. He was a natural. That term has always been tossed around freely in boxing circles, but in Clarke's case it was legitimate. When he laced on the gloves, trainers marvelled at what he brought to the gym—his knack for slipping body punches, his ability to make his opponent miss an exposed chin by the slightest of margins, and his skill in finding an opening even when his opponent went into defensive mode. His talent confounded even boxing veterans.

At eleven, Clarke beat a sixteen-year-old in his first amateur bout. As word of his ability spread, he had no problem weaving a support

system. Every trainer who dreamed of working with a special fighter could see that young Clarke had traits that set him apart from all the other novices in the gym. Eventually, they would all want to work with him—to be the trainer who took him pro. Their words of praise were no doubt intoxicating to a young Clarke.

Far more naturally gifted than his opponents, he piled up awards in his teenage years. First, he was Maritime champion, then Canada Games champion, and by age eighteen he had won gold at the prestigious Pan American Games. It was there he beat future world pro champion Aaron Pryor and established his amateur credentials internationally. Everyone told him he was on his way to the big time.

When the 1976 Summer Olympics came to Montreal, a brash Clarke was clearly the best Canadian amateur in his weight class. Expectations were high, and so was the tension. There was considerable speculation about an eventual gold-medal showdown with American media sensation Sugar Ray Leonard who, like Pryor, would go on to become one of the all-time great pro world champions.

But Clarke never advanced to face Leonard. He enjoyed an easy win in his first fight and was winning his second when his opponent head-butted him. A nasty cut stopped the battle, and because Olympic officials didn't deem the butt intentional, Clarke's dream of Olympic fame died. With that loss went Clarke's chance to test himself against Leonard.

Though the Olympics didn't turn out as he had hoped, Clarke had gained all he could from a dominating amateur career. His unquestioned skills stood as his resumé. Taylor Gordon, then coach of the Canadian national amateur team, rated Clarke a more skilful amateur boxer than either Willie de Wit or Shawn O'Sullivan, both of whom became Canadian sports heroes due to their international amateur victories.

"Chris wasn't a big puncher in the amateurs but he was very difficult to hit," Gordon recalled in a 1987 interview with *Herald* reporter Steve

MacLeod. "In being able to go through a fight without being hit and to hit his opponent, he was much superior to either of them."

Different numbers float around about Clarke's amateur record. All the tallies, give or take a couple of wins or losses, are at or near a record of one hundred wins and five losses. Whatever the precise figures, his record was certainly enough to establish his amateur credentials as impeccable, even without an Olympic medal.

"I wanted to be a professional and be a champion," Clarke says of his hunger to turn pro after the Olympics. "I was amateur champion six or seven times. I knew I could draw here. Being a white boy from north end Halifax, that was all it was about."

He started his pro career immediately after the 1976 Olympics. The opponents fell as fast as Clarke's new manager-trainer Dave Singer could line them up. Singer, a Halifax firefighter who had a knack for dealing with the sometimes petulant Clarke, secured the right opponents to build a record. From late 1976 to late 1978, Clarke compiled a 16-0 record, with all but two of his pro fights being held in Nova Scotia against carefully selected opponents.

There were calls for Clarke to test himself against better opposition. He and Singer didn't have to look beyond Nova Scotia to find that test. In June 1979, he was put in the ring with Stellarton's Lawrence Hafey, a former Canadian champion and a solid international campaigner with a 47-19-2 record. Clarke took care of Hafey over a ten-round unanimous decision. In July, he knocked out Benji Goldstone in the first round of a Halifax Forum main event to become 18-0.

For a young fighter on such a roll, nothing must have seemed too big a challenge. The highest-profile and most lucrative test out there was a showdown with the most prominent of all Nova Scotia boxers. The consensus was that the unbeaten Clarke was ready to face the great Clyde Gray.

CLYDE GRAY

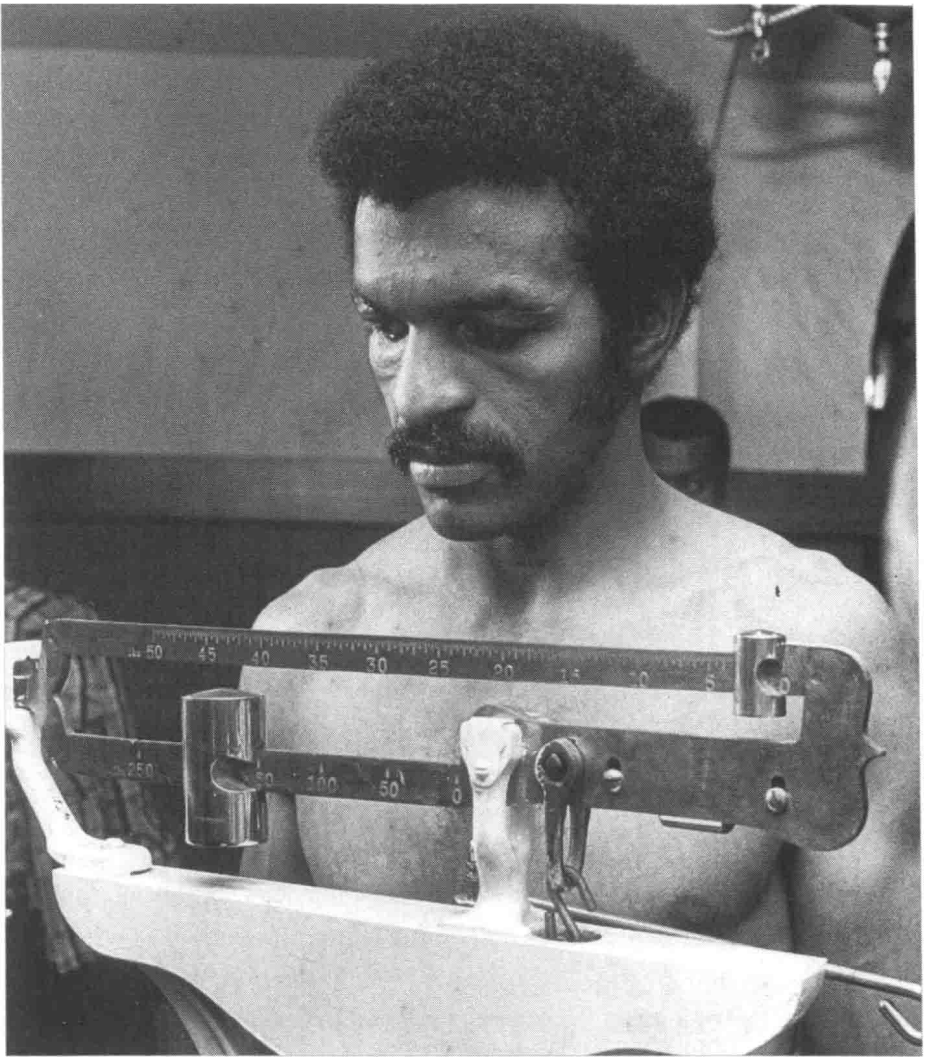
Unlike Clarke, Gray didn't grow up with plans to become a pro boxing star. As one of thirteen children in a Three Mile Plains household, he couldn't afford the luxury of dreaming big. He was too grounded for that. At fifteen, he left Nova Scotia to join family members who had already made the one-way trip to Toronto in search of work. Even at such a young age, finding a steady job was Gray's priority.

"I had some family there, two sisters were there, and my brother was there," he recalls. "At the time, that was something that everybody did. You either went to Montreal, you went to Toronto, or you went out west to look for work. At the beginning, it was scary. The city was something new to me."

Gray soon became acclimatized to Toronto, at least to that part of the city that offered the jobs nobody else wanted to do. "I just worked odd jobs. I worked in a car wash. The longest job I had was working in a place where they made coffins. I worked as a dishwasher at U of T [University of Toronto] for a while."

Before arriving in Toronto, Gray had never boxed. It was something he fell into by tagging along with his older brother Stewart, who was making a name for himself in Toronto amateur boxing circles. "Stu [Stewart] was the one who actually got me involved in boxing. I was just going to the gym for something to do, just to keep him company."

Where Stu went, Clyde followed. So it wasn't surprising when, at age sixteen, the younger Gray brother took up the sport. He rose quickly through the amateur ranks and compiled a strong record competing in regional tournaments in Canada and the United States. For Gray, it was all about gaining the necessary experience to join his brother as a pro fighter. He eventually made his 1968 pro debut in Toronto against the 9-2-1 Julie Mandell. It was an ambitious start for a novice fighter, but no problem for Gray. His eight-round unanimous decision had officially started a special career.



Clyde Gray checks his weight in preparation for a fight in Halifax. Though a world title contender, Gray often returned home to headline pro cards.

Like Clarke, Gray became addicted to the sport. “The money wasn’t great, about a hundred dollars per round, maybe five hundred for a four-rounder. I didn’t make any decent money until I won the [Canadian] title. It was the feeling you’d get when you scored a victory, the people screaming. It was all part of it. I was pretty much committed to it. It became like a job.”

And Gray did it well. He won his first sixteen pro fights before losing to the 55–14–2 Eddie Perkins in Chicago in 1970. He moved to 20–1 in 1971 when he pounded out a majority decision over local favourite Donato Paduano before a hostile crowd at the Montreal Forum to win the Canadian welterweight title. But his triumphant early rise to pro prominence was soon mixed with tragedy.

In early 1972, Clyde was in an upbeat mood, having just returned from a win in France over 55–3–2 Marcel Cerdan, Jr. He would then travel to Winnipeg, where brother Stu was fighting Al Sparks for the Canadian light-heavyweight title. In one of Canadian boxing's most well-known tragedies, Stu was knocked out by Sparks in the seventh round and died the following day from a brain injury.

"I was in the corner," Gray recalls. "That night, all I can remember is it almost seemed like it wasn't real. After the fight, [Stu] went to the hospital. He seemed like he was okay. He came to, he was alert. But he went back into a coma."

You can hear the emotion in Gray's voice when he recalls his brother's death. This was family, the older brother he had emulated in so many ways. With Stu gone, Gray had a decision to make: He could let the memories of Stu's final fight drive him from the sport, or he could throw himself into his career with even greater determination. Though his father, Tom, and mother, Cora, tried to persuade him to walk away from boxing, Gray stayed with it and embarked on what was to be the most meaningful series of fights in his career.

He won the vacant Commonwealth welterweight title at Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens in a fifteen-round unanimous decision over Eddie Blay early in 1973. He got his first world title crack later in the year, losing a fifteen-round unanimous decision in Toronto to the great José Nápoles for the WBA and WBC welterweight titles. He received another shot at the WBA welterweight title in 1975 in Puerto Rico against Angel Espada—another fifteen-round decision loss. In between those world title

losses, there was a string of successful fights in defence of his Canadian and Commonwealth titles. In 1977, he got his third attempt at a world title, this time against Pipino Cuevas in Los Angeles with the WBA welterweight crown on the line. Cuevas stopped Gray in the second round.

Despite losing the biggest fights of his career, Gray had established himself as one of the best boxers Canada had ever produced. Throughout those years of battling with the world's best, Gray would occasionally return to Nova Scotia and headline cards in Halifax. But after losing a 1979 bout to unbeaten young hotshot Thomas Hearns, a future world champion, and then being stopped by the 44-3-1 Pete Ranzany, Gray knew his time in the top ranks was almost over.

Gray may have been close to retirement after the Ranzany fight, but he still listened when money talked. The reality of boxing in those days was the bulk of the purse went to the heavier weights. Gray had done well financially but he wasn't rich. His biggest purse was about sixty-five thousand dollars for his third world title fight, the Cuevas challenge in Los Angeles. And so after getting a call from veteran Halifax promoters Al Brown and Gussie MacLellan to face the upstart Clarke for a decent purse—one he recalls being in the twenty-five-thousand-dollar range—he decided it was time to come home to settle some boxing business.

THE FIGHTS

Once the date for the first fight—August 28, 1979—was determined, reality set in for the twenty-two-year-old Clarke. He concedes the thought of fighting Gray, arguably the most accomplished Canadian boxer of that era, was daunting. The purse for the fight—Clarke recalls receiving twenty-five thousand dollars—far exceeded anything he had received for a single previous fight. Also, Gray held the Commonwealth welterweight title, a coveted prize in those days. And there were signs