

ILLUMINATING THE PAST

Greg Page of Louisville, Ky., knocked out Gerrie Coetzee in 1984 to become the WBA heavyweight champion. Who was the first heavyweight champion from Louisville? Wrong.

Muhammad Ali was the second. The first was Marvin Hart. That bears mention because of a book by Adam Pollack entitled *In the Ring with Marvin Hart*.

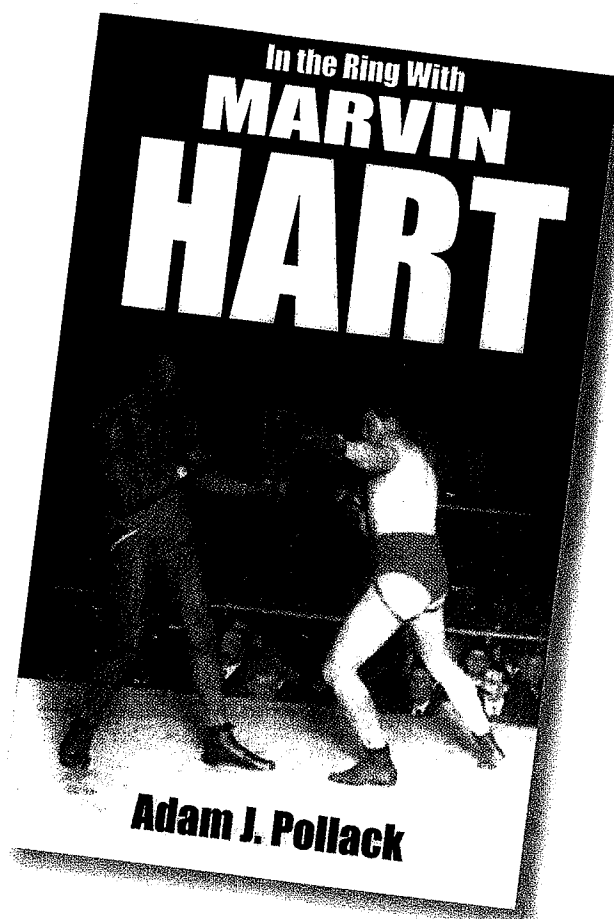
Pollack is an Iowa attorney who is illuminating an era by writing biographies about boxing's early gloved champions. Books about John L. Sullivan, James J. Corbett, Bob Fitzsimmons and James J. Jeffries preceded his work on Hart. In each instance, Pollack draws heavily on contemporaneous newspaper and magazine accounts of fights. At times, the writing seems repetitive with fight report after fight report. But Pollack's world comes to life when he focuses on the big fights contested by his subjects.

Hart is the least known of boxing's gloved heavyweight champions. When James J. Jeffries retired undefeated in 1905, Marvelous Marvin (yes, that was his nickname) was matched against Jack Root in a bout that was refereed by Jeffries and promoted as a contest for the "championship" of the world. Hart was given the honor of competing for the title because, 10 weeks earlier in San Francisco, he'd been awarded a 20-round decision over Jack Johnson. Root was the designated opponent because, three years earlier, he'd bested Hart.

Hart-Root was contested in Reno, Nev., on July 3, 1905. By contract, it was a "fight to the finish." That is, the fight would continue until one of the combatants was knocked out. The two men battled in 120-degree heat with an edge to Root until one punch ended matters in the 12th round.

As recounted by Pollack, Root missed with a left hook to the jaw. Then ...

"Hart stepped in close and ripped a terrific right uppercut that landed under and a little to the left of Root's heart, near the short ribs, possibly in the solar plexus. The sound of the punch could be heard in every part of the arena. Root dropped to the ground



and began writhing. His face wore an expression of extreme pain. Jack rolled over and grasped the lower rope. He tried to pull himself up but was too feeble. He sank back to the floor and was counted out. A new world champion was proclaimed."

Hart was never fully accepted as champion by the public because Jeffries had retired undefeated and Hart hadn't beaten The Man to become The Man. His place in boxing history was further diminished when he lost in his first championship defense to Tommy Burns.

But in Pollack's words, "Hart was a very entertaining fighter who was never in a dull fight. He could be hit and hurt, but he always came forward, always hit hard, and he could keep it up. He was a fan's delight, deserving of more recognition than history has given him."

One might add that, in a quirk of fate, Hart's signature is now more valuable than the known existing signature of any other fighter. Once, it was of minimal value. But noted boxing memorabilia dealer Craig Hamilton says that, because of its scarcity, a well-documented Marvin Hart signature in good condition is now worth between \$10,000 and \$12,000. ■