



Minnesota Unraveled

## Episode 203 Ringside: Histories of Boxing in the Twin Cities

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### **Chantel Rodríguez:**

Just off of I-35W at East Hennepin Avenue in Northeast Minneapolis, there is a revitalized industrial block with a cider brewery, athletic gyms, and other shops. I'm at a coffee shop on that block meeting a friend after work. As I wait in the interior hallway, I hear chaotic sounds from around the corner. I walk down to investigate and discover a wide open door to a boxing gym called Circle of Discipline. It is a large, loud space that looks like a warehouse, with workout equipment along the walls and two boxing rings. Young adults of all ages and genders are hard at work. Jump ropes slap the floor and fists make contact with heavy bags and sparring opponents as they jab and punch. The ding of an electronic bell rings intermittently. And trainers challenge participants to focus and work harder. Hanging from the ceiling a rainbow of flags from around the world.

I'd never been in a boxing gym before. I was overwhelmed by the sounds and movement. As I turned to leave, a small bronze plaque on the wall caught my eye. It read, "Harry Davis, 1975. Golden Gloves of America Hall of Fame." This got me thinking. This building looked fairly new. But clearly there was a longer history of boxing here.

### **How did boxing develop in the Twin Cities? And how has it impacted communities over the years?**

Welcome to *Minnesota Unraveled*, I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez.

To answer these questions, I spoke with guests from two different boxing communities.

### **Lisa Bauch:**

My name is Lisa Bauch. I own and operated Uppercut Boxing Gym for just over 23 years. I'm currently the president and director of operations for the

Upper Midwest Golden Gloves, which is a franchise of Golden Gloves of America and also Secretary to USA Boxing LBC Minnesota 30. So I'm kind of in the thick of it right now, just at a different space. Instead of owning the gym now I've organized officiate and do all that other fun stuff behind the scenes.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

I also spoke with two lifelong family friends who run Circle of Discipline.

**Sankara Frazier:**

My name is Sankara Frazier. I'm the CEO of the Circle of Discipline, mainly the founder.

**Harry Davis Jr.:**

Well, I'm Harry Davis Jr. Born and raised in Minneapolis. I graduated from Central High School in '64 from UMD in '68. I had a football career that provided me the economic means to get a degree because they paid for everything. I've met some great people through athletics and through my post year I finally retired, oh, lemme see, 11. I was 66 when I retired. So I've been out since that time and I've had a ball. I do a lot of fundraising for the Circle of Discipline.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

And for historical context I spoke with a sports historian.

**Gerald Gems:**

My name is Gerald Gems. I am a retired full professor from North Central College, which is in Naperville, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. So I've done a lot of writing on history and sociology of sport.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

I'll admit, I know almost nothing about boxing, so in preparation for speaking with my guests I did a little bit of research on the fundamentals of the sport. Stance, footwork, balance, and form are all key boxing skills. There are basic punches like the hook, jab, cross hook, and uppercut. Boxers also have to learn defensive maneuvers like blocking, weaving, and slipping. Breath work and core engagement are also critical. I asked Lisa to share how she explains the sport of boxing to people like me who are first getting into it.

**Lisa Bauch:**

It's really the hand-eye coordination and your distance. I used to tell people that I would first start training, it's like a dance. If you look at boxers in the ring, and it's also like a chess match, they're thinking probably three steps ahead before anything actually happens. And a lot of that is distance. As soon as somebody comes in a certain amount of distance, you're in fighting range. What are you going to do now? Hand-eye coordination: something's being thrown at you have a reaction instead of standing there. And also it's hard, and I try to explain this especially to the women, no one likes to get hit. Is it possible you're going to get hit? Yes. By something, some, whatever it is, if you've never been hit before, your reaction is going to be to cower away or be so stunned and not be able to react.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

I like the way that you described boxing as a dance. I've heard it described as an art form in many ways, and so I'm wondering if you might be able to share with me, perhaps, what happens when you step into the ring and you're facing an opponent? Take us into your mind and what you start thinking about. What are you looking for? How are you planning your moves? What are you considering when you do that?

**Lisa Bauch:**

Well, the first thing I thought of is well, here we go, and the guys and girls I used to train and I'm on the outside watching them step in the ring. I think the same thing. I'm like, here we go. And the main thing is to not get intimidated by the look of your opponent.

Because you never know how tall they're going to be. You know weight plays a deal, but that's how we match, make, and make sure everybody's safe that way. And you just take a couple deep breaths and you'll know usually within the first 15 seconds, maybe 20 seconds, once that bell rings, the first bell, what you're in for, how they're going to move. Do they have a jab? Do they have any power? Are they sitting down on their hits? It's all a quick check, check, check, check, check. But for the first couple bouts that a boxer has, that's the hard part. That's where the coach comes in. So when they get that minute break and they're back, and actually the coach has 45 seconds by the time they sit on that stool and the coach is going to tell 'em they don't have a jab, they're off balance. Their legs are too close together, they can't move, do this, this,

and this. You have to be very precise, very calm. Because you got to get 'em back in the ring as fast as you can, and then hopefully the boxer can start to see, okay, yeah, they don't have a jab, so I'm going to keep sticking my jab. I keep scoring and yeah, they're off balance, so I'm going to move this way. And that's what you train for, the calmness and the focus. Of course you're going to get hit, it's part of the deal, but now how are you going to react to it?

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

It sounds like those first few bouts are about assessing your opponent and their strengths and weaknesses, and then the coach comes in who obviously has a better sense, can see the dance from afar, and then it's about moves and counter moves,

**Lisa Bauch:**

Correct. Yeah. Sometimes you're only as good as your corner because once you start to freak out, and if you just focus, the boxer just focuses on, oh, I'm losing, or Oh, then you're losing them and you're pulling 'em back in and it's like, look, nope, you got to stay focused on this, this, this and this.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

As Lisa described it, the role of the coach plays a big part in the ring too. Clearly there is more to this sport than meets the eye. To learn more, I spoke with Professor Gerald Gems.

**Gerald Gems:**

The way that it transpires in the United States, it is brought over by English immigrants, but it develops in a very different pattern in the frontier areas and gradually in the far West as that becomes populated with American settlers, But in the frontier, even in the early bouts there weren't many rules unless you agreed on rules ahead of time. So typical means of winning. What the men would do, they would grow their fingernails long, harden them in the fire and sharpen them like knives.

Biting, gouging were typical techniques to use. They would gouge out another's eye, and that would usually be the end of the match. These were typical things to determine the pecking order in frontier communities. These types of things occurred throughout the late 18th century and into the early 19th century as well.

Almost all boxers are from the working class or from backgrounds of poverty. People who are more educated and have more opportunities certainly find better ways to make a living. So it's very much a class-based sport, much more than any other sport. Although many of the early professional sports were, the teams were populated largely by working class athletes.

### **Chantel Rodríguez:**

By the 1880s, boxing's popularity was on the rise in the Twin Cities. Several St. Paul venues—like the Olympic Theater and the Exposition Center—hosted regular fights. Fights also took place in the back rooms of saloons, alleyways, and well-shaded spots along rivers. The specific rules of fights were determined by the fighters or their promoters. Gloves were of different sizes and sometimes not used at all. And the number of rounds and the length of those rounds varied.

Fighters from across the country fought in the Twin Cities. But there were also local boxers from every weight class making names for themselves. One of the most famous boxers was an African American named Harris Martin. He went by the moniker, “The Black Pearl.” At 5 foot 6 and 150 pounds, he became the first “Colored Middleweight Champion of the World” in 1887. Other important Twin Cities fighters of the late 1800s include Oscar Gardner, the lightweight champion of the Northwest. And Charlie Kemmick—who was considered one of the best welterweights in the world in the 1880s.

While boxers themselves were usually working-class, the people watching the fights were from all walks of life.

### **Gerald Gems:**

This was kind of like the saloon in this bachelor subculture where, I mean, ringside, you would see, especially Muhammad Ali fights or any championship fight is filled with Hollywood stars and big businessmen, millionaires and the working classes all over in the cheap seats. But they all were interested in these particular bouts. So it was something that kind of crossed class lines. And part of it, I think, is still this idea that men have to have some type of physical ability to be a true man, as crazy as that might sound. That was still something that a lot of men adhered to in terms of gender. Boxing in itself is a public display of masculinity.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

As boxing grew in popularity so too did opposition to the sport. The Progressive movement was gaining steam in the 1880s. It promoted broad social and political reforms in response to the issues caused by rapid industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and political corruption. Progressive reformers, including many religious leaders, led a nationwide crusade to ban boxing. They viewed the sport, and its association with organized crime and gambling, as immoral. The ban was a way to control and moralize the leisure activities of the working class.

**Gerald Gems:**

Well, they wanted to ban it largely because of the gambling going on, also, the brutality of the sport. As I said, people fighting a hundred rounds and people are getting killed in some of these bouts. And so there was also the religious or moral impetus to try to civilize these different groups into the morays and the standards of the upper class, which is still going on today.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Minnesota passed legislation to ban boxing in 1890. This law was widely ignored until 1892 when a large fight was planned between Cornish boxer Bob Fitzsimmons and Australian boxer Jim Hall in St. Paul. Progressives succeeded in pressuring Minnesota's governor to enforce the law and stop the fight.

But the statewide ban didn't mean that boxing stopped in Minnesota. Promoters and fighters still found ways to put on clandestine fights. These might have taken place in remote locations like on a steamboat on the Mississippi. There was no shortage of boxing fans at these events. Professor Gems explained that the prohibition of boxing also led to the creation of clubs where upper class and working class fights took place.

**Gerald Gems:**

A club wasn't illegal, a boxing match was. So what they did was they, people paid admission to the club. So that was considered their dues, this gave them admission as a member of the club. And then two boxers would put on a so-called exhibition. There was no judgment as to who the winner was, but the way they bet and collected their bets was the next day, the journalists

wrote up the whole fight, punched by punch. The next day in the newspaper, they would determine who the winners were.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Because masculinity and physicality appeared to be so central to the sport at the turn of the 20th century, it made me wonder if there were any women boxers. I was surprised to learn from Professor Gems that women boxers were in the spotlight in the 1800s.

**Gerald Gems:**

Well, by 1865, we have female bouts in the USA already by the 1880s, you have women who are promoted or declared champions. One of the reasons for that was, it's called the Bible of the bachelor subculture was the National Police Gazette, which was a weekly kind of magazine that was put out, which not only gave you accounts of these fights with women, but also pictures. And so this was very exciting stuff, especially in barbershops and saloons and things like this, which promoted women's fights and declared champions. So there were a number of them. The women also made names for themselves by boxing at vaudeville shows, which after about 1880 through about early 1920s, becomes a major form of entertainment. So women would challenge men in the audience to fight and often win. So they would make names for themselves. And then there were matches arranged between women themselves.

But women themselves throughout the 20th century are really shunned in the boxing world from this time when they were very active in the late 19th century. And so they have a tough time trying to get a boxing license, it's not until the 1970s.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Women's fights may have been popular, but they were viewed by many in mainstream society as a disruption of gender norms. They expected women to exhibit feminine traits—like gentleness, gracefulness, empathy, and sensitivity. Boxing was, in this context, incompatible with femininity. Women boxers were primarily from the working class, but there were some who came from the upper class as well.

Boxing in the Twin Cities experienced a resurgence in the 1910s thanks to St. Paul native, Michael Gibbons. He gained national prominence in fights on the east coast where the ban against boxing had been lifted. States struggled to enforce boxing bans so they decided that heavy regulation was the best way to ensure state control over the sport of professional boxing. Wisconsin reinstated boxing in 1913. Minnesota followed in 1915.

Between 1915 and 1930 boxing experienced a “golden age” in the Twin Cities. There was great interest in locally grown fights between immigrant communities, especially the German and Irish. Fighters like the previously mentioned Michael Gibbons, his younger brother Tommy, Mike O’Dowd, and Jack Dempsey became household names.

### **Gerald Gems:**

Minnesota had some prominent boxers in the 1920s. In fact, you had two boxers on the 1924 Olympic team, a guy named Ray Fee who actually was the flyweight bronze medalist, and another guy named Edgar Christensen who did not win a medal. But you had another guy, Al Hostak, who was middleweight champ from 1938 to 1940, not in the Olympics, but he was a professional fighter, and the other one I came across was Harris Martin, whose nickname was The Black Pearl, was the very first black middle weight champion.

### **Chantel Rodríguez:**

Professional boxing was solidified as a regulated and organized sport in the 1920s with the founding of sanctioning bodies. For instance, the National Boxing Association was established in 1921 to oversee and ensure the fairness of title fights.

The 1920s also saw the growth of amateur boxing through the Golden Gloves of America. Sports writers at the *Chicago Tribune* and other newspapers promoted charity boxing tournaments starting in 1923. The largest was in 1928. These tournaments were ultimately organized nationwide and became the Golden Gloves organization. Its mission was – and is – to promote youth participation in boxing.



### **Gerald Gems:**

Amateurs are not supposed to take money for, but in fact, there are always ways around it. What they did was they won a trophy or some commodity instead of money, they simply went to the pawn shop and traded it in anyway. But anybody could join the amateurs. The fact that these amateur bouts that were fights between New York and Chicago eventually were broadened to incorporate anybody who wanted to box in the whole United States.

### **Chantel Rodríguez:**

The Twin Cities produced many Golden Gloves champions starting in the 1940s. The reason for this was Harry Davis Senior – the person whose plaque I saw on the wall of Circle of Discipline at the top of the episode. I spoke with his son, Harry Davis Junior, about how his dad got into boxing.

### **Harry Davis Jr.:**

My father was one of the unfortunate children in 1920 – he was born in '23... in 1926. He was complaining to my grandmother about his leg. One of his legs hurt all the time and he would limp.

So she didn't know what to do. So they took him to the hospital and they identified that he had an infantile disease called polio. They hadn't named it yet. So polio attacks the good muscles in your body and you can't walk. So they didn't know what to do. So they put his leg in a cast and sent him home for three years. His right leg started shrinking. And luckily my grandmother used hot packs and stuff to kind of save some of the ligaments and tendons in his leg. But he was a polio victim and they had no special steps for him in school. His brother had to carry him on his shoulders. They had no ramps for wheelchair. So he had no accessibility to anything.

I saw my dad's foot and it shrunk where he had to put paper in the front. His right foot was smaller. He'd wear a nine shoe and one foot and eight and a half in the other. So I had my little job. I'd tear the paper out the newspaper and the magazines and put 'em in dad's toe so his foot would fit the shoe. Even to this day before he passed away, he limped the rest of his life.

So dad got in boxing because he, unfortunately, when you have polio and you're on crutches as a kid, you get teased. And sometimes dad'd say he'd be walking to class and kick the crutches from and he'd fall down. They thought

it was funny. Now, the story was, and I don't know, sometimes if the story gets bigger while I listen to it, that Dixie came home and was staying with one of dad's sisters, and he saw him and he said, little Harry, why you got all these bumps on your head and you've got bruises all over the place?

He said, well, uncle Dixie, the kids would tease me at school because I was on crutches or I couldn't go up the steps the way I wanted to. And sometime they'd kick the crutches out and sometime they'd pick on me. He says, okay, and the next time I'm in town, I'm healin' I'm going to teach you how to defend yourself. And that was him. So he got him involved in boxing as a metro of self preservation and self-defense.

He had to find a sport that could use your upper body strength more and your legs as a compliment to it. So he swam a lot. He was a lifeguard, but then he just didn't want to be a lifeguard in Minnesota because he only had three months out of the year to be a lifeguard. So he decided to get into boxing because the schools, fortunately for them, had boxing as an interscholastic program at the schools.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Harry Senior joined the boxing team at North High School in Minneapolis, where he won the city lightweight championship and earned his letter in 1941. Harry Junior showed me his father's royal blue letter 'N' for North High School with a cream colored boxing glove that says "champ."

**Harry Davis Jr.:**

This is quite old, but it looks pretty. This is one of the things my grandmother would keep in her cedar chest. So he got on the boxing team and he worked, he was very strong in the upper body, but his legs were not that good, this one leg. But he found a way to fight and use his upper body movement to help him to survive other guys.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

In 1944, Harry Senior was offered a coaching job at Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House in Minneapolis. Established in 1924, Phyllis Wheatley provided social services for the growing black population in the area and quickly became an important anchor for the community. It offered recreation,

education, a library, day care, medical clinic, and lodging. Harry Senior had been involved with programs at Phyllis Wheatley since his youth.

### **Harry Davis Jr.:**

He taught sportsmanship. He taught conditioning. If two of you and if I put on a record and told you to dance around in here for three minutes and carry gloves and try to get out of the way of somebody hitting you, that's difficult. You can stand and fight all day long, but you're supposed to move and you get a lot of ability to move your upper body. So because he had that one bad leg, his right leg, boxing was a blessing for him because he could move around with limited ability.

But he used to tell all his boxing guys. He said – now my dad was only five foot six and weighed 130 pounds – he said, if you think you can beat me, go outside and practice falling down, then come back in here and we'll see what you're made out of. And that temperament and that attitude reduced these guys that thought they were all that and a bag of chips when the coach just comes under your chin, but he can knock you out in five minutes just like that. They learn respect, but they learn the art of boxing and the art of boxing is self-defense: not to get hit. That's what they judge you on.

### **Chantel Rodríguez:**

Harry Senior coached 150 young men in his first year at Phyllis Wheatley, where they trained in a boxing ring in the basement of the building. Between 1945 and 1960, Harry Senior's amateur boxers at Phyllis Wheatley dominated the Golden Gloves tournament. They won most of the boxing championships for the Upper Midwest region that included Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

### **Harry Davis Jr.:**

He practiced what he preached. When he told those kids they had to do their running, just get in shape or boxing, he would run with them. He didn't drive the car behind them like you see Rocky running the guy in the car, speed up, speed up. No, dad didn't do that. He ran with you, the best he could and the guys respect him because he practiced what he preached. So his career went from city of Minneapolis director Golden Gloves onto the State Boxing Commission board. And then he went to the School Board and stayed on

there for 21 years. And then he retired from the School Board and mom and him enjoyed their life after that.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

One of the many boxers Harry Senior coached at Phyllis Wheatley was Stanely Frazier. Stanley's family moved to Minneapolis from Fergus Falls in 1942. Their families and kids grew close. I spoke to Sankara Frazier about his father Stanely and his family's connections to boxing.

**Sankara Frazier:**

When they came here, they were looking for things to do. All of 'em were very athletic, swimming, basketball, track and field. They did the whole thing. My dad is the one that kind of pulled him into the whole boxing thing and it helped all of 'em because of that discipline that you need. That's one of the reasons why I pushed it like that, because it helped me like that. And it's always been a poor man's sport, you didn't need a whole lot to get involved. You need some gloves, some shoes, a mouthpiece, head gear, and you could get involved. So it means a lot more to somebody like that. And it is not just my family, it was a lot of other poor families from way back with some of the greats, Jack Dempsey and all of that, the same principle. And that's how they really got started and stuck with it. They loved it.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

How did he get into boxing, your father?

**Sankara Frazier:**

We never really talked about exactly how he started, whether he, I'm sure he didn't get beat up. I hope he didn't, I'm sure that he was about 12 years old when he started. We did talk about that and he stayed in it all the way until he turned professional and he was torn between boxing and the church

And he decided that he would rather go for the church and I asked him about that too. I said, dad, you had an opportunity to really go out there and make it. They knew that you had the ability to be a champion. And he said, yeah, one day I was just looking around the ring after the boxing match and he said it seemed like I was in some kind of arena in Rome and the people weren't never satisfied. I mean, how bad am I supposed to beat this guy? And he said, I made up my mind then that I don't know if I want to continue to do this, I'd

rather go with the church. And that's what he did. That was a different arena, as he found out. But yeah, that's what he did and he did a magnificent job. It's funny because me and I followed my father almost in everything that he did. My life was almost parallel except for the ministry, which they thought I was going to do.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

For Sankara, boxing was an intergenerational experience. He recalled one of his fondest memories of watching a black and white television program called “Gillette Cavalcade of Sports.”

Sankara remembers it as “Ringside with Gillette.”

**Sankara Frazier:**

My uncles would all get together every Friday night at this thing, I call it At the Ringside with Gillette and I had to be there. I'm sitting there looking and I'm seeing the great fighters of that time. Ezra Charles and Sugar Ray Robinson, which is my man. And they're hollering, they're going on and I'm looking – trying to, I wasn't really understanding all of the techniques and stuff, but I knew this guy was hitting this guy and so on and so forth. And they were rough on me as a little boy. I mean, not rough. They didn't beat me up or nothing. I think I hit the floor a couple times. They knocked me down. But that's when I really started to learn and understand something about it. Then they would take me to the gym and I would see dad and them get in there and they're skipping the rope or whatever.

I do remember, it's fragmented, but I do remember watching my uncle Mike fighting actually in a boxing match. And I remember my grandfather, my great-grandfather. That was a blessing to be able to be with him. But he was there and all the rest of the family was there. And I remember looking at the ring and watching him work and he was good and I was still really young when I'd seen that, but I do remember that part. I don't remember seeing my father fight.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Sankara played several sports, but boxing was something he started because of trouble he was having at school.

### **Sankara Frazier:**

I was always kicked out of school either for a week to a month, so I'm missing a lot of important time in school, mathematics especially. I hate math right to today. And so they finally decided, no, he has to do something. He has to get in that ring. He has to box, he has to do something, do something with it. And that's one of the reasons why they really put me in there. Once I started really boxing and training and doing the whole thing and started getting better at it, I didn't feel like I had to fight like that no more. Plus everybody was showing a lot of respect. I'm talking about the older ones, the ones that were a lot older. No, he's with us, he's with us. They want to be friends. And that started to help change me.

### **Chantel Rodríguez:**

The more Sankara got into boxing, the more he felt like he was living in his father's boxing shadow.

### **Sankara Frazier:**

I was hearing so much about my father and how good he was and oh, he was just so beautiful. He was beautiful to watch. Every time I get in the ring and perform, I'd have to hear this story. And so I came home one day and I said, okay, I got to see this for myself. And I didn't go to the gym. I took the gloves out and I laid him out and I heard him come in and he said, oh, you didn't go to the gym? I said, no, I'm just down here working on it a little bit. He said, oh, let's see what you look like. And he came down the stairs and he's standing looking and I said, he sees those gloves. I know he sees those gloves. And he looked up and he, "oh, I see some gloves over here." Here he comes. This is going to be it right here. I was never going to try and hit my father, but I had to see this for myself. So he came down and he put 'em on. He said, had his work clothes on. I see what you're doing. And he started moving around a little bit and I said, okay, this is it. I'm all tensed up. He moved his head a little bit. He said, alright, let me show you something.

My eyes got big and he started moving and I'm looking at this movement and it was so beautiful and it was kind of like ballet or something. He said, alright, all right. And he feinted me and he went under and he hit me three times with one hand, boom, boom, boom. And all I remember was falling and I hit the floor and he said, oh man, I'm getting old. And he said, you got to watch that. Watch what, Obi-Wan Kenobi?! And that's when I realized that there's a

big difference in just going there, pounding on somebody and putting it together in an art form.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Harry Junior recalls that Sankara was a “natural” boxer.

**Harry Davis Jr.:**

Sakara moved in a way that was natural. Like Muhammad Ali, he does stuff that’s unprecedented in boxing. He was doing stuff – Sankara and I would say – now he can't be backing up on a left hook, but he did it. So Sankara made up the art of boxing more as an art, instead of blood and guts. So we used to watch him and my dad called me one time when I was in college and he said, “I got another Frazier down here fighting” now I'm up. I said, “what one is that?” He said, “well that's Neil's son. He boxed just like his dad” because dad had coached his father. So that dad was, Sankara was carrying on that legacy just like it was nothing to it. But he had talent that was more natural than hardcore. You see, some people just do stuff like “float like a butterfly, and sting like a bee.” That's where he was. It was easy, and it was easy teasing him because he and my brother were always up to something.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

How do you feel hearing that story from Harry reflecting on your artistic boxing ability?

**Sankara Frazier:**

Well, he's told it to me before because to me, and we talked about this, it's always been an art form. They call it science, the science, sweet science. But it was always the art. You want to be able to do things exact. I know you probably know exactly what I'm talking about, but it takes a lot of training if you're going to develop it to that level.

I told my father, I said, Hey dad. I said, think it's about time. I think I'm going to quit school. I'm done. I'm going to go, you know they wanted me to go with Angelo Dundee, and I said, I think I'm going to go out here with Dundee. He said, “what? You're not quitting school. You're not good enough to turn. What? Did he really just say that to me? Oh no, he didn't.” And I said, oh, he should have never said that, man. I was in the gym every day. I was running, I was doing the whole thing. So finally, long story short, he came to watch me

in the Minneapolis Auditorium, and I beat this kid with some beautiful combinations, left him laying right in the middle of the ring, spread out, and dad was there and he saw it. So I got down, I was real quiet. I didn't say nothing. We went and got in the car – and my father was never really, just had a lot of emotion he never showed – he never showed a lot of emotion. “Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful son!” I'm sitting in the car, I'm like, this “man, you reminded me of myself out there. Just beautiful combinations.” I said, oh, he's getting excited. He's excited.

“Son, I haven't seen you fight in a long time. I did not know you were that good.” He said, I don't want you to quit school, but anything you want to do, I'll support it. And he said that. And it was like, I graduated. That's it. I'm going to school and finish my education. All I wanted to do was hear him say that. I kept my line in the family. That's how important it is! I kept my line in the family. He believes in me now. He knows I can do it. I struggled. I showed him. I proved it. That's how important it is. I think it's really important for a young man to be able to look up to someone.

### **Chantel Rodríguez:**

According to the history books, boxing nationwide went into decline in the 1970s. One of the reasons is that other professional sports like football, basketball, baseball, and hockey drew larger viewership on television. There are also several different associations that regulate boxing. Each name their own champion in every weight class. So being a champion doesn't have the same meaning as it used to.

But boxing didn't go away. It continued to thrive and evolve in the Twin Cities. This was especially true for women's boxing. In April 1978, Judy Klammer of Minneapolis was appointed to the state boxing commission. That same year, the first amateur bout between women in Minnesota took place in the bantamweight division of the state Amateur Athletic Union's boxing tournament in Anoka. Almost 20 years later, Lisa Bauch started boxing and opened her own gym in Minneapolis.

### **Lisa Bauch:**

I was born in Baltimore, Maryland and landed in Bloomington, Minnesota. My father was in the Army and then became an engineer, so we landed here. And so I pretty much grew up here and my first expertise was probably



bartending? Nightclub business for 10, 15 years and then for some reason just discovered boxing and was like a dog on a bone and just wanted to do something about it.

I don't know if people remember Ken speak, he was a news reporter for Channel 11 back in the day and he did a report on a boxing gym that I saw on TV, no computers back then, no cell phones, no beepers even. And I called the station and he was nice enough to call me back. And I've tried to seek out the gym and gyms back then could actually tell you we do not allow women in this gym. They could say it out loud. So there was a lot of running around trying to find a gym that would train me way back.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

In 1992, Lisa began training at the Minnesota Kali Group.

**Lisa Bauch:**

They had a coach that was an ex-boxer and I was working in a nightclub not far from them. So I used to walk there and train and he was nice enough to train me and then go to work. And I traded nightclubs for boxing. And Rick Fay, who still owns it, he's a good friend of mine and mentor. I appreciate Rick for giving me the opportunity. He was very welcoming and I talked to him before I opened the gym because it was out of respect and I wanted to make sure it wasn't a surprise. And he was more than gracious and wished me luck and we talked back and forth. So he's a great mentor.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Lisa opened Uppercut Boxing Gym in 1996. It started out on Lyndale and Lake Street in Minneapolis and then moved into the Hyatt Regency downtown. But rent kept going up and Lisa made plans to close the gym. Luckily, her sister helped find the perfect location, a warehouse on Quincy Street in Northeast Minneapolis.

**Lisa Bauch:**

It's a big warehouse. The ceilings were all the way up. It was crazy how there were large cranes there. So they would lift engines out of buses and trucks and you name it. So you walk in and it's just windows, which all the heat left the first three years I had that building, it was crazy. I just looked at it and I'm like, this is beautiful. It'll fit rings, multiple boxing rings. I can put locker rooms

in, which I never knew were insanely expensive. It had a beautiful courtyard so we could go outside and train outside. People in Minnesota want to be outside when it's nice out, I do. It had a huge garage door. I'm like, perfect. We'll open the door. People can feel like they're outside and do the training. It just all made sense when I walked in and I guess it's like when people see a house or when you walk in your first one and you think, yep, this is it. I can do this. Just picturing it.

And training in my gym, it was 13,000 square feet. We had two boxing rings, chaos going on all the time, yelling, screaming, bells going off, da-da-da-da-da. And he said, this is the perfect place to train because you can stay focused and get rid of everything else and focus on what's happening, with chaos going on, to be able to hopefully defend yourself. I thought that was an important part of the training as well.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

For Lisa, it was important that Uppercut welcomed all fitness and skill levels.

**Lisa Bauch:**

We always offered a free intro class for people so they could try it and see and get the basics and you would get all walks of life, white collar, blue collar people that needed to lose weight. A lot of females that would come in and say, I want to learn how to defend myself, but I actually would stop 'em and say, wait a minute, this is not for, you're not going to go in. If somebody's coming at you and go in for a fight, you'll have a reaction. Hopefully your hand eye coordination will be better, but better off you kick 'em and run than try to stand there and fight with somebody. That was kind of our deal. We've helped a lot of kids, a lot of teens. The parents would always drag 'em in on Saturday mornings and tell us what was going on in their school and how they're being bullied. And again, I'd say this isn't for fighting. And it can get a little tricky, but you have to have some basics. You have to know that if something's coming at you to get it away or move or just that basic skill is a hundred percent worth the training.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Lisa's philosophy at Uppercut stood apart from the longheld tradition of gyms training boxers to compete.

**Lisa Bauch:**

I did get a lot of flack from some of the gyms that were active boxing gyms that were active because they looked at it as a fitness gym. And I'm like, it's not a fitness gym. Not everybody that comes in is going to compete. But I never worked as a nonprofit. It was always a business, so it was a for-profit, so it didn't take any of the grants or anything. And I'm like, yeah, I'm going to run it as a business because I can see the memberships are going to help the boxers that can't pay membership. Boxers are going to compete. These people will be spectators and talk great about boxing. And then it just comes together. And now 25 years later, because I sold the gym in 2019, everybody's doing it. I mean, I have a couple trainers that spawned off and they do the exact same thing.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

And when you moved Uppercut to the Northeast and during those 20 years of operation, were there other boxing gyms in the neighborhood or did you see more boxing gyms grow during that period in that particular neighborhood?

**Lisa Bauch:**

Good question. No, not in that neighborhood. They started popping up in other areas, but not in that neighborhood. And then after COVID, everybody was on the struggle bus after COVID, and then about a year – now we're keep growing. All of a sudden I'll look at a sheet if we're making matches for a show, then we have all these new gyms. I'm like, that's great. So they're out there. They're actually everywhere now. We've grown quite a few. I think we almost have 50 gyms in Minnesota, from when I was around, I think it was maybe 20.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Lisa's connection to the boxing community goes beyond Uppercut Gym. She also works with Golden Gloves.

**Lisa Bauch:**

I have worked with the Upper Midwest School gloves for over 20 years, and I served as the Region 1 director. What that means is I am the Minneapolis representative of the gyms in the franchise. I am the President now and also the Director of Operations. So I put on the tournaments, the Golden Glove

Tournament here, which feeds into the National Golden Gloves, work at that tournament as well. I work club shows every weekend.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Do you feel like upper Midwest Golden Gloves in any way, shape or form impacted the sport of boxing here in Minnesota in terms of helping it to grow or bringing more people into the sport? Or did it have maybe some other kind of effect business or structure-wise?

**Lisa Bauch:**

Definitely. Definitely did. Again, because Golden Gloves is recognizable here, Golden Gloves, everybody knows what that means. And it brings up the sport of boxing in our community because we went from 20 gyms, like I said before, to I think almost 50, which is a really good accomplishment for the upper Midwest. We're so spanned out. Upper Midwest is Minnesota, North Dakota, and parts of South Dakota instead of otherwise, we'd be Minnesota Golden Gloves.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

And you sort of talked about your early journey in the nineties, being a female boxer and feeling like I'm marginalized, there's not a space for me, but 30 years later you've run Uppercut, and I'm wondering how in your experience, and for the folks that you worked with, did you feel like things changed for female boxers in terms of accessibility, in terms of how they feel either included or not included as part of the community?

**Lisa Bauch:**

I think they're included now in the gyms, definitely. And had a ton of female trainers, go figure both female and male, but we had quite a few female trainers and boxers out of our gym. I always say our gym because I would never have had the gym without the great trainers that I had.

So it just put it forward and they have the confidence to go out and they're doing training and some of them are making a career out of it, like good for you. That's the way it should be on a national level. When I go to national tournaments, you still look at the brackets and the girls are still behind, which is not surprising.

Has it gotten any better? I think a little bit. I see more females in the corner on a national level than before, so there has to be some things working. Do I think it'll ever be matched? No, absolutely not. But at least we're a little step ahead.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

While boxing slowly opened up for women in the Twin Cities, Sankara and Harry Davis Junior's boxing journey was impacted by urban renewal. In 1970 Phyllis Wheatley was torn down to make way for interstate 94.

**Sankara Frazier:**

Man, don't even get me started. What happened on Phyllis Wheatley? I got to tell this part because we were at Phyllis Wheatley and I wore the same capes and everything my father and them were wearing, and Phyllis Wheatley was just kind of a little small place. I mean the actual gym itself, there was a big building. That building should be historical right now. That's where all the people stayed. When they came in to entertain. They couldn't stay in the hotels. They had to stay at Phyllis Wheatley. And we left Phyllis Wheatley, I think it was that Tuesday or something. And we came back to train and the whole building was just tore down bricks, trophies, books from the library. Everything was just laying on the ground.

That was devastating. It was devastating. I cried. I cried while I was picking up books. I always liked saving books. I was picking up books and trophies over there. I mean, it was like, man, it's almost like they came in at night and did it and the thing was gone. So naturally we were sitting up here wondering what we're going to do next, where we're going to work next. And we started finding little different places to practice. That's what started me on my quest to put something on the South Side, right in the neighborhood, which was pretty difficult to do. Like you said, you have to come with the money, you got to get a building, you got to do whole thing. So I was teaching people everywhere. We were at the Boys Club, we were in the parking lot, them running them in the morning and doing the whole thing, and we're still participating, but it still wasn't like us having our spot.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

In 1993, Sankara founded Circle of Discipline, which moved to its current location in Northeast Minneapolis in 2021. He works with Harry Junior to fundraise and support the gym.

**Harry Davis Jr.:**

Our common goal is boxing is an art and something that teaches discipline. That's one of the reasons we have Circle of Discipline here.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Sankara shared with me what inspired him to create it.

**Sankara Frazier:**

A dream. Literally a dream. I woke up with the name. The Circle of Discipline. Wow. Well that pretty much says everything except for what I'm going to emphasize inside of the circle, which is going to be the three things that we pretty much live by: the mind, body and the spirit. 360 degrees of that. You're going to reach that? You can't. The circle is infinite, so it makes you keep going.

So I rolled over in the middle of the night and I woke up in the morning and I was looking at what I had wrote and I couldn't even figure it out. What the heck was I talking about? And then I figured it out and I said, yeah, this is it. This is powerful.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

For Sankara, protecting the health and safety of his boxers comes first.

**Sankara Frazier:**

If the person is hurt in here and you've never been hurt, what are you going to tell this person that's been hurt? You don't even know what it feels like to turn around and be going back to the wrong corner. They're hurt. They asked me in one of the fights about Jamal, well, what do you think? Is he okay? I said, I looked at him, he stopped right in the middle of the fight. I said, are you okay? He said, "I'm good." I said, he's good. He said, "yeah, because you're going to stop it. You're right in the ring." I said, yeah, if it's not right, I'm stopping it. I don't care what's on the line. I didn't put him in here to get hurt. I'm stopping it. Well, that's the people that's behind you that care about you. It's a tough

sport and you can die in there. I've seen it and I get very, very serious and protective about that. If we can't make it anymore, hey, we better think about doing something else. That's the depth of what I'm talking about compared to what I've seen.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Sankara works with a number of people, including his son Adonis, at Circle of Discipline. But there is one person who unexpectedly came into his life and became an important part of the gym as the cut person or the person responsible for preventing and treating physical wounds between rounds. Her name was Diana Spiess.

**Sankara Frazier:**

She was the one that was getting the stuff painted on – hell of an artist. She was getting her stuff painted on the window and we were coming up with all our logos and everything else.

She was in the gym and she came in and she saw I was doing all of this stuff by myself. She said, “I can help.” I said, well, come on then. Next thing you know, I got her in the ring and I got pictures of her. She could work. And I said, well, why don't you start working on these cuts? She got the cut medicine, she started, her fingers were so good that she could just seal it.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Diana's work was recognized internationally when she became the first woman to work the world championship in Paris. She passed away in 2015. But her legacy lives on through the Circle of Discipline.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Sankara's commitment to the art of boxing and the community speaks for itself. He is the first coach to have two professional boxers win Championship Belts on the same night in August 2020 during the COVID pandemic. He has trained 18 professional boxers including: the WBA Welterweight Champion, Jamal “Shango” James.

And the WBA Middleweight Champion, David Morrell. Sankara also coached the USA Boxing Team in Azerbaijan. These accomplishments, Harry Junior tells me, help to support the success of Circle of Discipline.

### **Harry Davis Jr.:**

He and I agreed that there's a part of the Circle that's fundraising, that's reality. Somebody got to pay for all this. You need people at all levels with trust in the program.

It's easier for me to make money because I have references. I'm not going up there lying about this place. The Circle of Discipline means something to people. So he and I talk all the time about boxing and fundraising. I always throw this one. I got one up my sleeve now already. The thing that I'm going to use now is that if you would've visited the original Circle of Discipline, little hole in the wall on Chicago Avenue and 37th Street, across the street from a funeral home. Now the boxing program, you're talking about this guy, laying over there in the coffin. What happens to my job with Sankara? One of the things I've committed to him because of the program is to have financial stability so that he can pay for the lights and doors always open. It's easier for me to fundraise money when I have facts, not fiction, facts and results in front of me. He delivers results.

So he doesn't call me about boxing. He calls me about fundraising. That's what he's supposed to do. I know what he's doing in boxing. I can't box, I'm too old and slow. I'll take on any 80-year-old man, you can pick up the pieces.

But on a serious note, when you raise money as people trust what you're doing with their money is real. All of you have seen this. If you've seen the beginning, you wouldn't believe what the beginning looked like compared to this.

### **Chantel Rodríguez:**

You spoke about community being really important to why you even started doing Circle of Discipline. What do you feel like the impact of Circle of Discipline has been on the community in these years that you've been running the organization?

### **Sankara Frazier:**

A very, very strong impact. Whether they box or not, like I told you, it was just the tool. They went off in different directions, done some outstanding things, whether it was musician wise, whether they wind up getting off into TV and all those types of things, whether they went into law, whatever it was. But all



the walks of life, they come in and they might do their working out, but they just need that discipline and they need that confidence.

They gave me that award, the Abbott Northwestern Award. I received that for working with the community. That's why I'm saying it had such a strong impact over the community itself. And it's not something I'm just out looking for. If you do it, fine, if you don't do it, I'm just going to do my job. And it did help a lot. It helped a lot of people.

I said, I really appreciate the fact that I don't have to look back and see that I didn't do anything. That's a bad feeling to me. I know I put my best out there. I went through some serious stuff here medically. Almost didn't make it. And now that I look at that and I think, man, even if I wouldn't have made it, I know what I tried to do genuinely. Not perfect. No perfection. Trying just like everybody else. Fall short, pick yourself up, try and do it again. Make mistakes, try and get it right just like people should be doing all of the time. But we get sidetracked many times and we make mistakes. You get over it and you keep trying. That's where I'm at.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

For Lisa, creating a boxing community is equally as important. But her vision of community expands beyond the boxers themselves.

**Lisa Bauch:**

And I think we're learning that different techniques and different opportunities create more of a boxing community. And that community, even though they don't want to get in the ring and box, they can support your gym by learning fitness and then they're the ones that are going to come to the shows and participate that way. And it makes the sport less scary for people. Everybody thinks, oh my, you're just sitting and hitting each other. And there's so much more that goes on behind the scenes in the sport of boxing besides having it be just a great conditioning as well. Hand-eye coordination, discipline, everything else.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

And lastly, what is the one thing that you hope listeners will learn about boxing from our conversation? Like the one thing you hope they walk away with.

**Lisa Bauch:**

Be open-minded. And it's not scary and it's not barbaric. You have to understand everything that goes behind it, to in front of it. And if you don't experience it on any level, and that's why training is so important that it opens, it shows you what everything has to happen in order for this to happen, that it's, it's just not that scary. There's a lot of people looking out for the best of the boxers that get into the ring. I think that would be my main suggestion.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

As I watch Sankara working with a class at Circle of Discipline, I am starting to see what my guests were talking about. Boxing is not purely a physical sport. It is an art form, a dance. that requires mastery of technique and discipline of both body and mind. And a dedicated team of coaches, trainers, and support staff.

From the early days of boxing along the river, to the rings at the Phyllis Wheatley Center and Uppercut gym, boxing has been an important part of Minnesota History – a history that is alive today at Circle of Discipline. Each of my guests have their own stories to tell about boxing and its impact on their lives and communities. They are just a few of the many threads that make up the tapestry of Minnesota's boxing history, with many more yet to be unraveled.

Do you have a personal story about boxing's impact? Share your story by tagging us on social media with #MNUnraveled.

Special thanks to A'nia Nicole Rae, Adonis Frazier, Elba Frazier, and Jeanne Montrese for their help on this episode.

You've been listening to *Minnesota Unraveled: pulling on the threads of Minnesota history*. I'm your host Dr. Chantel Rodríguez.

You can find more information on this episode, including transcripts, bibliographic resources and MNopedia articles at our website [mnhs.org/unraveled](https://mnhs.org/unraveled)



Minnesota Unraveled is produced by the Minnesota Historical Society in partnership with Rose Productions. Our research team is Ari Fields, Alex Magnolia, Hayden Nelson and me, Chantel Rodriguez. Our production team is Brett Baldwin and Meghan Buttner, with recording, sound design and editing by Chris Heagle and Zack Rose.

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Thank you for listening. Until next time, stay curious, and remember, the tapestries of history are all around you, just waiting to be unraveled.