



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California
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Steve Strelch and his Stadium

(v 10)

by Gilbert P. Gia

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In late 1940 heavyweight boxing champion Jack Dempsey toured a new sports arena on V Street and announced it was the best little stadium he'd ever seen. Henry Eissler¹ built the stadium adjacent to Highway 99, which in those days curved around the northern part of town.

But Bakersfield was not Eissler's first home. Back in 1900 the Indianan moved to San Francisco to establish a law practice, but after great earthquake he returned to Indiana and there married Mary Sargent. By 1909 the couple was living in Bakersfield, and there Eissler was erecting oil derricks for Fred Gribble Construction on the Kern River Field. In 1911 Eissler was vice-president of Bakersfield Mutual Building and Loan Association, and by 1915 he had his own construction business. Eissler was also a joiner. In 1917 he was chosen as Worshipful Master, Bakersfield Lodge No. 224, F. & A.M. He later became a 33rd Degree Scottish Rite Mason.

¹ B. 1878, Evansville, Indiana

Over the next 25 years Eissler built several schools and hundreds of homes in Kern County, and his name appears on more than 700 documents at the Kern County Hall of Records. In 1926 when Charles Bigger designed a new building on Eye Street for the Bakersfield Californian, Henry Eissler was the contractor. In 1927 Eissler built Jastro Memorial Bandstand at Jastro Park.

Eissler partnered with professional wrestler Steve Strellich, made him manager of Eissler's stadium, and a few months after the grand opening the sign read "Strellich Stadium."

Steve Strellich was born in Colorado in 1903. His mother died when he was about ten, and shortly after that he and his father moved to Croatia.² Within a few years the senior Strellich returned to America, but he left Steve with relatives. WWI broke out, eight years passed, and in 1921 a young man named Stipan Strilić arrived at New York harbor on Ship Aquitania carrying 200 other passengers from the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.³ The ship's manifest described Stipan Strilić as a *Yugoslave* Croatian from *Zagrelb*, five-foot-six, fair-haired, and blue-eyed. Strilić's ticket had been paid by his parents, who the young man's papers said lived at Bingham Canyon, Utah. The documents also stated that Strilić had once resided in the United States but now planned to become a permanent resident. The last

² B. Nov 27, 1903

³ Sep 30, 1921. *Strilić* is usually spelled *Strellich* in the US, and it is usually pronounced *STREL-ich*, but sometimes *STREL-ick*. During Steve Strellich's sports career his surname was occasionally spelled *Strilich* by newspapers.

column in the papers stated that Stipan Strilić was born at "Bingham, U.S.A."⁴ That eighteen year-old would soon be called Steve Strellich.

In the early 1900s wrestling in the US was still a traditional sport, but wrestling promoters by then had to compete for ticket sales with the boxing and baseball promoters. To boost sales they rigged matches to enhance the excitement and attract spectators.

No single point marks wrestling's change to professional showmanship, but there are several early examples. Between 1905 and 1908 an Iowa giant named Frank Gotch was an ever-frequent winner, so frequent in fact that his promoters decided to fix matches so Gotch occasionally would lose. In 1906, 28 year-old Gotch "staged a work" against Fred Beall, and after Gotch lost, his ticket sales improved. The public was not fooled for very long. In October 1909 several New York wrestlers, a Jack Carroll among them, were accused of "acting," which could mark the point at which popular wrestling was becoming a different kind of sport. Earlier wrestling matches could last hours, so to hold public interest promoters shortened matches, and new faces were rotated-in from time-to-time, but after WWI most fans wore crooked smiles when they talked about wrestling.

Steve had wrestled at county fairs in Croatia, but in 1928 at Salt Lake City he boxed as lightweight. Still, according to wrestling historian J. Michael Kenyon, even by then Strellich's name was recognized in the California wrestling circuit. In fact, Steve preferred the theatrical world of professional wrestling. At Los Angeles Olympic Auditorium on January 24,

⁴ Bingham is near Midvale, Utah, which is where Strellich's sisters Mary and Annie lived in the 1990s.

1930, 185-lb Steve Strelch, billed as the "Terrible Swede," wrestled A.D. Hermann before a packed house of 10,000 ticket holders. [Strelch's early years in wrestling and boxing have been detailed in the book Peasant in a Paper Suit, noted at the end of this paper.]

As the Depression deepened Steve accepted boxing jobs. In May 1930 in Salt Lake City he was a sparing partner with the six-foot-six Italian, Primo Carnera, the 240-lb "Ambling Alp."⁵ Some accounts say that Carnera KO'd Strelch in round one.

In 1931 the public got a look inside the wrestling game when the New York State Athletic Commission barred promoters from advertising wrestling as a contest. But its popularity grew anyway, and by 1934 promoters were managing stables of wrestlers in a coast-to-coast consortium. Promoters knew months in advance who would win and who would lose.

In 1930 Primo Carnera held the World Heavyweight boxing belt, and "Cyclone Steve" Strelch held the California Light Heavyweight wrestling title. 1933 saw a second Strelch name on Southland wrestling cards when Steve's brother Mike entered the game, and a few years later their little brother Johnny also wrestled around Southern California.⁶

⁵ Weeks earlier, the New York Athletic Commissioners had suspended Carnera from boxing competition, which might explain why the match at Salt Lake was billed an exhibition.

⁶ According to wrestling historian Kenyon, Mike's career continued until about 1940. "During that span he traveled coast-to-coast and had an extended run in the major mat centers of the Midwest, East and South. John [Johnny] Strelch, sometimes known as Jack, youngest of the lot, saw action at the Olympic a few times in 1936-37, and spent a season, 1937-38, working for the light heavyweight booking office in Tulsa, Oklahoma." (Email to the author.)

Local wrestling promoter Jack Pfeffer found himself elbowed out of that consortium. In January 1934, he told reporters that back in August 1929 certain wrestling managers had "staged a work" between Dick Shikat and Jim Londos so that Londos would win the world's title. Of course Pfeffer was merely telling the public what they already knew, but it was the way he told it that hurt: Wrestling fans were bumpkins, and so were the reporters who covered the matches.

Another black-eye to the wrestling game came in October when General John J. Phelan of the New York State Athletic Commission called it a fraud. The *Los Angeles Times* noted sarcastically that Phelan was once again ordering "a relentless investigation" of wrestling, which signaled the official start of the "annual fall silly season."

The *Times* reminded readers that a State wrestling ruling of 1931 already required professional wrestling matches to be billed as exhibitions, which, the *Times* said, proved that "in the eyes of the law wrestling was nothing but the old Phonous-Bolonous-Malarkey-Malloy; that bouts were to be taken no more seriously than puppet shows and other items manipulated by the pulling of strings."⁷ The *Times* story probably hurt New York wrestling promoters already seeing drops in ticket sales, but in the rest of the country, and particularly in Los Angeles, wrestling was still drawing large, appreciative crowds. On November 21, 1934, all 11,000 seats at Olympic Auditorium sold-out for a wrestling match.

Steve Strelch had been a regular in 1927 at Santa Monica's Muscle Beach, and his name appeared in stories about long-distance swimming and

⁷ *Los Angeles Times*, Oct 25, 1934

marathon dancing. His physique, good looks, and engaging personality landed him stunt work in movies, and in 1936 and 1938 he did walk-on parts in three Hollywood films. In November 1936, James Cagney and the cast of *Tough Guy* showed up at the Eastside Arena to support Steve Strelch who also was working on the movie with them. That night the featured main event was Steve Strelch vs. Louie Miller, and further down the card were the matches of Steve's brothers Mike and Johnny.⁸

Another brother, George Strelch, recalled that Steve had been a bodyguard for actress Mae West.⁹ Her catch line *Why don't you come up and see me sometime* and her 5-5, 120-lb, 36-26-36 figure suggest she needed a bodyguard. But maybe not. *Time Magazine* wrote, "In vaudeville, Mae West developed her figure with an acrobatic act in which she lifted a 500-lb. weight, supported by three 150-lb. male assistants."¹⁰ The Strelch-West connection came up again in 1966 when Bakersfield welterweight boxer (1961-1962) Don Crider helped Steve Strelch remove personal items from Strelch Stadium. Crider remembered that he carrying out a Mae West movie placard.¹¹

In December 1935, disgruntled sports promoter Jack Ganson threatened to hand over the dope on wrestling to the California State Athletic Commission. True to Ganson's promoter's instinct, he hooked a newspaper into printing his challenge to the Commission to subpoena him and force him to testify under oath. The Commissioners were unimpressed. Sacramento wrestling promoter Pete Visser had been making similar noises,

⁸ *Los Angeles Times*, Nov 17, 1936

⁹ Interview with the author George Strelch served in WWII. He later joined the Bakersfield Police Department (Author's interview with Kathryn Giovannetti).

¹⁰ Oct 16, 1933

¹¹ Interview with the author

too, and said the Commissioners, and Visser was "blowing hot and cold so far." They didn't expect much more out of Ganson, either.¹²

Talk about staged wrestling bouts had no affect on ticket sales. Jack Miley of the *Detroit Free Press* explained the apparent phenomenon in April 1936 when he quoted New York wrestling promoter Jack Curley:

" 'I am merely a purveyor of entertainment,' the bland, inscrutable Curley replies when somebody asks if his dodge is on the square. In all the years I've known him, I've never heard him say his pitch was a phony, nor have I heard him claim it was the McCoy. Probably half the folk who attend the Curley carnivals are hep to them. The other 50 per cent of the spectators - the foreign-born, the confirmed rassling addicts and such - are equally certain they are witnessing the genuine article. That has been the secret of Curley's success. He satisfies the scoffers and the believers, too. He has made rassling a state of mind. It is everybody to his own opinion, and nobody gets hurt - including the athletes."¹³

In the early to mid-Thirties, the Strelch brothers traveled around the West Coast for wrestling jobs. Steve wrestled in Los Angeles, Ventura, Fresno, and even as far east as Utah and Colorado. J. Michael Kenyon elaborated, "All three Strelch brothers -- at least they billed themselves as such -- worked, from time to time, in the Pacific Northwest (i.e., Oregon, Washington and British Columbia)."¹⁴ Wrestling statistics show that between 1934 and 1937 Steve - but more so his brother Mike - performed frequently in Victoria and Vancouver.

¹² *Los Angeles Times*, Dec 10, 1935

¹³ Apr 27, 1936

¹⁴ Email to the author

Steve Strelch was usually a mid-card wrestler, but Kenyon added, "He still had enough pulling-power to be featured regularly in main events. And his skills on the mat, despite his advancing years, enabled him to hold down occasional feature bouts at the Hollywood Legion Stadium, including at least one against world light heavyweight champion LeRoy McGuirk. Steve also conducted at least one, fairly lengthy tour of the Arizona-New Mexico-West Texas territory in the late '30s."¹⁵

Continued Kenyon, "Along the way, I suspect, Strelch earned the friendship of Ed 'Strangler' Lewis because in the waning days of Strelch's pro-grappling career he always seemed to have a place on the undercard when Lewis worked the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles. There are at least fifteen such occasions in the record. The last wrestling match I saw Steve Strelch in, at least according to my sketchy records, was at Fresno in early 1941 at Ryan's Auditorium. The wrestling careers of all the Strelch clan seemed to evaporate just prior to World War II."¹⁶

The *Bakersfield Californian* said Steve Strelch wrestled for the first time in Bakersfield in 1931, and an article about him appeared on March 10, 1932 in the *Blue and White*, which was Kern County Union High School's student newspaper. The story said that a few days earlier Steve the "Terrible Swede" Strelch had shown some of his wrestling moves to the High School's wrestling team and class member Chet Wenton had "taken the punishment." Strelch told the boys he wanted to start a professional San Joaquin Valley football club made up of local players. The story also

¹⁵ Email to the author

¹⁶ Email to the author

noted that Steve's brother Mike had enrolled at Bakersfield Junior College, which then was on the High School's campus.

WRESTLING
TOMORROW NIGHT
8:30 o'Clock
Double Main Event
Plenty of Action
Bakersfield Stadium
Nineteenth and V Streets

First Main Event—Two Out of Three Falls—
Two-Hour Time Limit

Steve Strolch
The Terrible Swede and New Shell of
Hollywood, at 125 Pounds

vs. The Red Devil
The Tough, Rugged Mystery Man From the
Middlewest, at 125 Pounds

Honestly, Steve Strolch has signed for another chance at The Red Devil, as he wants to convince the fans of Bakersfield that he can beat him.

Second Main Event—Two Out of Three Falls—
45-Minute Time Limit

Vick Hill
The Clever and Aggressive Boy, of Seattle,
Washington, at 125 Pounds

vs. George Sauers
Clever ex-Light Heavyweight Champion, Now
of Pasadena, Calif., at 125 Pounds

This should be a great bout as both boys are clever, strong and aggressive.

Preliminary—One Fall—20-Minute Time Limit

Oscar Scarbery
The ex-Light Heavyweight Champion of the
Marines

vs. Walt LaCore
The Flying Frenchman, Now of Seina

All Matches Sponsored by Disabled American
Veterans of World War, Bakersfield,
Chapter No. 28

BUCK BUCHANAN, Matchmaker

PRICES: Ring-side, \$1.10; Balcony, The
General Admission, 50c; Ladies and Children
Occupying Ring-side Seats, 35c, including Tax

Seats on sale at Henry Brown's Souvenir Parlor; Sarno & Sarno; El Tapan Hotel; White Star's Barber Shop; Southern Hotel; Soule Hotel; H. B. Gladin's Clear Stand; H. B. Whiting's Clear Stand, 222 State Street; Wood Side Inn, Phone 21-2-1; Four Courts, Wood Park, and E. A. S. Clear Stand, Taft. For reservations Phone 222 or 422.

Bakersfield Californian, January 2, 1935

In November 1936 Steve and Mike Strelch wrestled at Bakersfield Arena on 19th at V Street,¹⁷ and in April 1938 Steve Strelch promoted his first wrestling show there to an audience which Bakersfield Californian columnist Jax Smith said "filled the shaky gladiators' shed from the ringside to the back row of the gallery."¹⁸ The second match of the evening was noteworthy when the referee disqualified wrestler Bob Montgomery. "Bobby was plenty mad at the referee's decision," wrote Smith, "and sank his molars into the ropes just to show it." Smith devoted most of his article to the main event, describing it as a "battle royal" and a "six-man rumpus that started out like a guerrilla war." Smith wrote that one "boy" after another was pinned, leaving wrestler Pat O'Brien the last man standing and champion.¹⁹

George Strelch recalled that his brother Johnny was working in Los Angeles at the time he and Steve relocated to Bakersfield. In 1939 they opened a storefront at 1708 K Street under a sign that read "Strelch Brothers Conditioning Club--Steve and John Strelch."²⁰ Because the club was just east of Hotel El Tejon and kitty-corner from the six-story Haberfelde office building, it attracted a lot of walk-in customers. In July, Bakersfield's Dante Alighieri Lodge held their annual picnic at El Tejon Park on the grounds of the hotel, and while Charles "The Barbecue King" Castro roasted the beeves and Don's Melody Boys tuned-up, Steve Strelch and Pat

¹⁷ The building was a sports venue after WWI. The name *Bakersfield Athletic Club Stadium* first appeared in the *Bakersfield City Directory* in 1920 but without an address. In 1928 it was listed at *1920 V Street, at 20th.*

¹⁸ *Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 20, 1938

¹⁹ As if the male melodramatists of the square ring didn't provide action enough for Bakersfield audiences, in Apr 1939 Strelch brought in women's wrestling.

²⁰ Interview with the author

O'Brien gave a wrestling demonstration for the benefit of the Italian-American club.

Steve Strelch was operating a health club and promoting boxing and wrestling matches, but he also was still in the ring. In October 1938 he mixed it up with Abe Goldberg at Hollywood Legion Stadium, and in March 1940 he faced-off against Johnny Demchuk at the Coliseum. Strelch also fed Bakersfield's cravings for boxing and wrestling, but the tin walls of old Athletic Club Stadium were cold in the winter, hot in the summer, and its wood-plank benches were getting more and more splintery and out of date.

Fans didn't have to go far to see a wrestling show. In 1939 the California State Athletic Commission authorized eight wrestling licenses in Los Angeles, five in San Francisco, two each for the cities of Oakland, Sacramento, and Fresno, and one each for San Diego, Santa Barbara, Visalia, Modesto, Stockton, Chico, San Jose, Vallejo, and Redwood City. In 1940, new applications for permits were filed for Eureka, Ukiah, Redding, Petaluma, Grass Valley, Hanford, and Bakersfield, and to explain why Bakersfield was on the list, one first has to know about George Haberfelde.

In 1940 George Karl Haberfelde was 68 and had been in business in Bakersfield for 43 years. He'd started out as a door-to-door salesman for the Singer Sewing Machine Company, but by 1940 he owned a ranch on Highway 65, a furniture store, a rooming house, the Ford dealership, the six-story Haberfelde Office Building and probably was an investor in the Hotel El Tejon. Haberfelde also had been Mayor of Bakersfield. In 1940 he lived on a two-acre estate facing prestigious Oleander Street just south of Kern County Union High School.

In 1940 Haberfelde took out a \$35,000 building permit for a new ice skating rink at 425 Golden State Avenue.²¹ When Steve Strelch heard about that he could see a professional ice hockey team for Bakersfield, and because his health club was across the street from the Haberfelde Building, Strelch was well-positioned to meet Haberfelde and present the hockey team idea. But when they finally met there was no electricity. Maybe the difference in age and personality between the German and the Slav was just too great.

The ice rink went up slowly. Meanwhile, the careers of Henry Eissler and Steve Strelch were in change. Sixty-three year-old Henry Eissler and his son Sargent incorporated as Henry Eissler & Son, and Mr. and Mrs. Henry Eissler left on vacation to explore Mayan ruins and visit Havana and Miami.²² Upon their return, Eissler found out that Strelch's dream for a hockey team was out, and Haberfelde's ice skating rink at the bend of Highway 99 just east of Garces Circle was still under construction. Eissler also heard that Strelch had other ideas.

E.L. Solomon who owned a glass shop on 19th Street was a member of the Strelch Brothers Conditioning Club. After Solomon talked to Strelch about the need for a new sports stadium, Solomon introduced Steve Strelch and Henry Eissler.²³ Popularity of wrestling convinced Eissler that a new sports stadium would be a money-maker. After all, Strelch was already a proven, successful manger, and Eissler trusted lodge member E.L.

²¹ Feb 3, 1940

²² *Daily* (Bakersfield) *Record*, Apr 18, 1940

²³ Interview with the author

Solomon's recommendation.²⁴ The result was Eissler would build the stadium, and Strelch would manage it.



Bakersfield Californian, January 7, 1941

In October 1940 Eissler filed a \$20,000 building permit for a sports center on 20th at 2201 V Street, which was exactly two blocks north of the old stadium²⁵ and on one of Eissler's vacant lots. Perhaps coincidentally, that location was a stone's throw across Mill Creek canal from Haberfelde's unfinished skating rink.

Eissler commenced to build, and Strelch continued the boxing and wrestling shows at the old stadium where Bakersfield enjoyed LeRoy McGuirk, "the world junior heavy-weight title holder," as he hit the mat with local wrestling favorite Billie Weidner.

²⁴ In February 1955 when Strelch applied for membership in Bakersfield Masonic Lodge, his sponsors were Henry Eissler and Strelch's optometrist George C. Poloynis.

²⁵ *Daily (Bakersfield) Report*, Oct 1940

The new stadium was a reinforced concrete, circular shell with a domed roof. Its architect is unknown today, but the dome's laminated, "Arch-Rib," wood trusses were from the materials company of Civil Engineer Francis W. Kimble. Eissler's arena was not unique, as it had a strong resemblance to the Calexico Club, a sports arena in the Imperial Valley that was built in 1928-29 and demolished in the mid 1960s. Today, Eissler's arena, called The Dome today, is probably the last existing small stadium of its kind in the country.



Left to right, Steve Strelch, Jack Dempsey, Henry Eissler
Bakersfield Californian, January 7, 1941

Haberfelde's *Skate Palace Ice Arena* was under construction for 12 months; Eissler's arena took two months to build. Nearly every day before its grand opening the *Californian* followed the progress. In one article observed that Steve Strelch "was running around like a big blond bear in a

mobile trance" and that fans "will find a card of grunt-and-grimace aces that has never before been equaled."

On January 8, 1941 a howling wind was blowing outside the stadium, but inside the grand opening was like a Hollywood premiere. At 8:30 pm Master of Ceremonies, and veteran motion-picture comedian, Slim Summerville strolled to the center of the mat, welcomed the audience and made introductions. Sitting in the first row at ringside was owner and builder Henry Eissler, State Athletic Commissioner Harry Saunders, Roy Rogers the singing cowboy (who later borrowed a banjo and sang,) and Jack Earle of Texas, called the world's tallest man. His 7-ft, 6-1/2-in frame barely fit the seat.

High in the press box was announcer Bill Powers, and below him sat the capacity crowd of 2,000. Tickets were \$1.10 for ringside, seventy-five cents balcony, and fifty-cent gallery. To the surprise of all, Summerville pulled off his coat, removed his tie, and "in the mannerisms of the professional brethren of the bruise" started wrestling the beaming Steve Strellich.

Opening matches on the bottom of the card were Gus Johnson vs. Ace Freeman, and Dave Lavine (former heavyweight champion) vs. Gene Blacky. Strellich's "Four Main Events," in order, were (1) Whitey Wahlberg of Minnesota and Jesse "The Greek Adonis" James; (2) two red-headed wrestlers, Wild Red Berry of Kansas and Red Lyons of Texas; (3) "Bakersfield's own" Dick Raines vs. Rowdy Rudy "The Villainous Hungarian" LaDitzi; and (4) a four-corner team event, which the Californian deemed "always a great comedy attraction." They were Dude Chick and Danny

Savage vs. Mike Nazarian and Tiger "The Bad Boy Bulgarian" Taskoff. Strellich's old friend Ed "Strangler" Lewis refereed one bout.²⁶ At the end of the night, Strellich sent his congratulatory flowers to local hospitals.

A week later Strellich switched the show to four-round amateur boxing with a "quadruple main event." On the first night, local boxer Eddie Sierras touched gloves with Al Robinson, a tough, black boxer from Fresno who'd driven to Bakersfield with five other fighters from the northern valley. Twenty-year-old Sierras, Strellich's California Golden Gloves protégée, was a man on his way up in the boxing game. Californian sports reporter Jim Day wrote that Sierras, under Strellich's banner, had "battered his way" to the California Golden Gloves lightweight championship in Hollywood and had gone on to win the Pacific Coast Golden Gloves.

Other bouts that night were Jimmy Kidd of Fresno vs. Julio Franco of Bakersfield, who also fought California Golden Gloves; Ray Chavez of Fresno vs. Rito Barajas, who held the San Joaquin Valley amateur bantamweight crown; Johnny Mendoza of Visalia vs. George Dosier of Bakersfield; Rubber Rowan of Wasco vs. Sam Nagel of Fresno; Dusty Rhoads of Old River vs. Marion Roberts of Fresno; and Johnny Rodriques vs. Sandy Mendoza, both fighters from Bakersfield.

A week later Strellich brought back wrestling, and that show repeated many of the first-night's players with their "hundreds of pounds of grunting and grimacing beef on the hoof," as Jim Day phrased it. To keep crowds enthralled, Strellich pitted Danny Savage against Silent Rattah, who the

²⁶ Few present knew that Lewis was fighting his own personal battle against blindness.

paper said was "a deaf and dumb rasseler." By this time, Bakersfield fans knew exactly where to go for boxing and professional wrestling.

The new sports arena crept into Bakersfield's language and into its collective memory. In the mid to late-Forties, a high school boy might remark about an athletic-looking girl, "She's Strelch material," or "She goes to the Strelch school of charm." Californian sports writer Larry Press recalled Strelch's stadium, "My acquaintance with the good-hearted character dates only to 1953, when I came to Bakersfield and -- would you believe -- I actually covered the weekly 'rassling' matches at Strelch Stadium, that most perfect, virtually art deco example of sports theater in the round. The blend of odors of beer, popcorn, hotdogs, onions, etc., is difficult to forget."²⁷

In 1949, Johnny E. Loustalot, Kern County Sheriff spoke at the Lamont Lions' Club where he presented Steve Strelch with the club's humanitarian award. Loustalot pointed to Strelch and said, "He is a man who could have been very wealthy, but has always elected to help his fellow man. Steve is a swell guy and a real asset to our community. I am deeply grateful for the privilege of being allowed to help honor so fine a person." Everyone present knew what Loustalot was talking about. Eleven months after the stadium opened, America had declared war, and Steve Strelch's contribution on the home front was exemplary.

Steve's brothers were in the armed services. Here in Bakersfield, 40 year-old Steve Strelch's boxing and wrestling shows generated millions in war bonds. During one seven-week period in February and March of

²⁷ Email to the author

1942, Strellich's Wednesday night wrestling cards featured Kenny Ackles, Paul Bozzel, Wes Crothers, George Dusette, Yukon Jake, Sammy Kohen, Charley Laye, Mike London, Jimmy Lott, Danny McShain, Milt Olson, Prince Omar, Gorilla Ramos, George Saleem, Billy Varga, George Wagner, and Billy Weidner. The shows brought in fans and money.



Bakersfield Californian, June 1, 1944

Four of Strellich's shows sold \$4,000,000 in war bonds, which is equivalent today to about \$50,000,000. In 1970 *Californian* reporter Cec Wilder recalled, "The price of a seat was a \$1,000 war bond. I remember once S.L. Camp coughed up \$50,000 for a pair of ringside seats. Bakersfield people were always quick to respond." During the war Kern County opened its wallet so many times and handed over so much money that in 1944 Los Angeles Times editor Braven Dyer challenged sports promoters there to match what Steve Strellich was doing in Bakersfield.²⁸

²⁸ *Los Angeles Times*, Jun 15, 1944. During WWI, Kern County residents bought more bonds per capita than citizens of any other area.

Some of Strelch's wrestling shows were beyond outlandish. "Max Mayhem" a Bakersfield Californian sports writer who almost certainly was Jim Day having a little fun describing this match in 1942.

"For downright action, underhanded buffoonery and athletic promenading, there is nothing like a tag-team match... There was no wrestling to it but a great deal of shenanigans in the corners and a complete disregard for decorum or referee Allen's authority. Sergeant Bob Kenniston won both falls of the main event over Wild Red Berry in less than 15 minutes, due to the careful deliberation and almost as deliberate myopia of Mr. Allen. The crowd stood on the benches and howled for nearly 30 minutes about it but Steve Strelch, the genial and heartwarming promoter, promised to protest to the State Commission and thus mollified them somewhat."²⁹

After the war Strelch continued raising funds, but this time it was for March of Dimes. In support of polio research Strelch auctioned off a ham for \$640 and sold turkeys for \$150 each. Not limited to philanthropy at home, he also sent boxing and wrestling supplies to war-torn Yugoslavia. For all of those things he received the Americanism Award of the American Legion, the Humanitarian Award of the Lamont Lions Club, an Outstanding Sportsman trophy from the Kern Wildlife Federation, and in 1971 Steve Strelch was elected to the Bob Elias Hall of Fame.

J. Michael Kenyon recalled meeting Strelch. "We became close when he came down to ask me to put on a few boxing shows at his arena. What a character! Steve, in his prime, had often boxed in one bout and wrestled in

²⁹ Bakersfield Californian Mar 26, 1942

another on the same show! And he did a great improv of old actor Will Rogers, hair-over-one-eye and all. I really liked the man. He was honest, generous, and could have been mayor in Bakersfield, as he was very popular."³⁰

In September 1962 Steve and Loretta Strelch sold the stadium for \$100,000 to William J. Griffiths, Jerry Hill, and Jules Strongbow, who had a 38-year association with Los Angeles Olympic Auditorium as wrestler, announcer, and matchmaker. The buyers renamed the building Strongbow Stadium.



Steve

Steve Strelch -- swimmer, boxer, wrestler, bullfighter, movie actor, promoter, fund raiser, good-will ambassador, (possibly also sky diver and race car driver), and who played Santa Claus for handicapped youngsters -- died of cancer on Saturday morning, June 26, 1971. Monsignor Patrick Leddy read the Rosary, and Mayor Don Hart delivered a eulogy.

³⁰ Email to the author

In the process of researching Strelich's story, I contacted former Californian sports writer Larry Press. He wrote, "One of Steve's special gifts was the ability to meet people and establish an informal rapport in moments, ranging from government and business leaders to the 'common folk.' Steve didn't ask any sympathy. When he realized his condition, he kept telling his friends that he had lived a long, full, interesting and exciting life. That he certainly did. But when a good man goes, it always seems too short. And a good man has gone."

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Subsequently ...

Some years after I wrote this story about Steve and his stadium, writer Gerry Haslam told me that his friend Eddie Lopez, former sports writer for the Bakersfield Californian, had met Steve Strelich and wrote his life story. I wrote Lopez and learned he had 200 typewritten pages of Steve's memories. Those included stories about Croatia, Steve's youth in the Twenties and Thirties in Utah and California, his promoting years in Bakersfield, and his visits with Marshall Tito of Yugoslavia. In 2007 Lopez and I set about reworking the interviews into a book-length manuscript, and in 2011 the Strelich family published it in paperback as *Peasant In A Paper Suit: The Life of Steve Strelich Athlete, Actor and Ambassador of Goodwill (1903-1971.)* Strelich's memories define Bakersfield, and his first-

person narrative makes it unique among local biographies. The book is available at

<http://www.amazon.com/Peasant-Paper-Suit-Ambassador-1903-1971/dp/1466464941>



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"Peasant in a Paper Suit" Rips

By Mary E. McCorkle

Bakersfield is filled with characters working to spin gold from oil, agriculture, music, and each other, but only one was the Pied Piper, a boxing and wrestling promoter who became a World War II patriot and a town that handed bushels of gold to him to help others.

"Peasant in a Paper Suit," tells the story of Steve Strelch's rise from wooden shoes, hunger and sauerkraut suppers to prominence in the rugged West. How did he do it?

"I still remember an expression we used many times. It boiled down to two words: Mutual trust. A friendly handshake was all that was needed to seal a deal, because wrestling was hot. People could smell the money.

"San Joaquin Valley wrestling shows were pulling in the fans like crazy. I was sure that with a larger and nicer arena, I could make a good living in this business," Strelch, owner of Strelch Stadium, told author and retired newspaperman Eddie Lopez.

Strelch became a legend when the people of Bakersfield responded with overwhelming generosity to his promotion of sporting events to support war bond purchases and to aid the Shriners in their quest to help crippled children. Children all over town would run up to him for hugs.

How this book happened to be published at all is a story in itself. Eddie Lopez, the first Latino reporter in Central California, covered sports for the Bakersfield Californian between 1949 and 1961 including a four-year break when he enlisted in the Air Force. When he returned to Bakersfield he asked Strelch if he could interview him about his life. The resulting interviews stayed buried in the busy writer's files until recently when he was asked about them by San Joaquin Valley historian Gilbert Gia. And how did Gia think to ask?

"He had just completed a history of Strelch Stadium," Lopez said, and mentioned it to an acquaintance of his, professor emeritus and author Gerald Haslam. Lopez had helped Haslam, then 19, with his early writing career and Haslam after more than half a century remembered that Lopez was working on a manuscript about Strelch titled "Peasant in a Paper Suit," at the time. Gia Googled Lopez, then contacted him and a book was born.

The author's note reads: "This is a chronicle of the true and life-affirming adventures of boxer, wrestler and actor Steve Strelch. My name appears as the author, but in reality there are four authors: Eddie Lopez, the young reporter who interviewed Steve Strelch in the 1950s; Steve Strelch, in his own words; Gilbert Gia, writer and historian, and Eddie Lopez, now a retired newspaperman."

Lopez, who lives in coastal Los Osos with his wife Angie, retired from the Fresno Bee. He is also author of "Iok in My Veins" and "Marching to the Sound of Mariachi."

Fans of boxing, wrestling, California history, Mae West, Roy Rogers, Marshal Tito, peasants and immigrant success against overwhelming odds will love this book, but the people of Bakersfield will treasure it. Gia said the book is a monument in works about Bakersfield.

"Peasant in a Paper Suit" is available from Amazon.com for \$12.99. Read it yourself to learn why it has such an unusual title.

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