

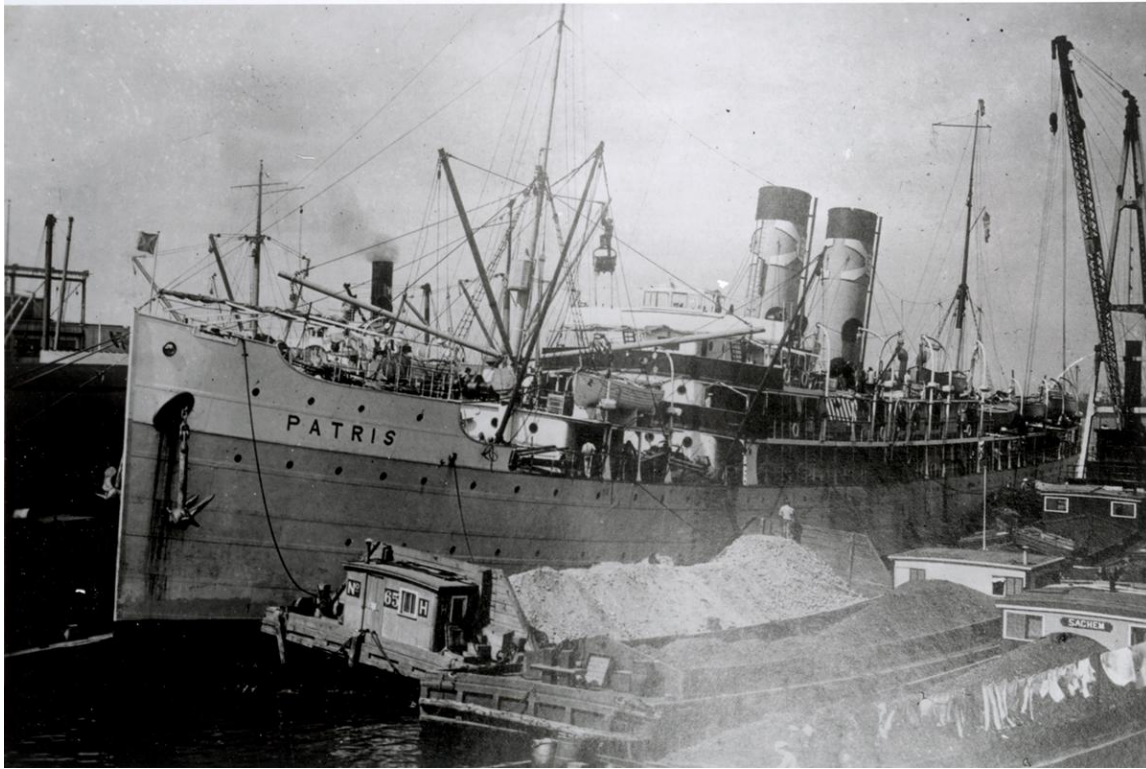


# Jim Londos: The Golden Greek of Professional Wrestling

- ▶ “What exactly is this Jim Londos anyway? Is he an ‘industry’ or the embodiment of Greek power? ... When a victory of his is announced, the Greeks everywhere tremble with excitement. Londos represents their longing, their national symbol, and their national pride.”
- ▶ *-Macedonia, 1936*



# ‘Always as a child, I was the unruly one’

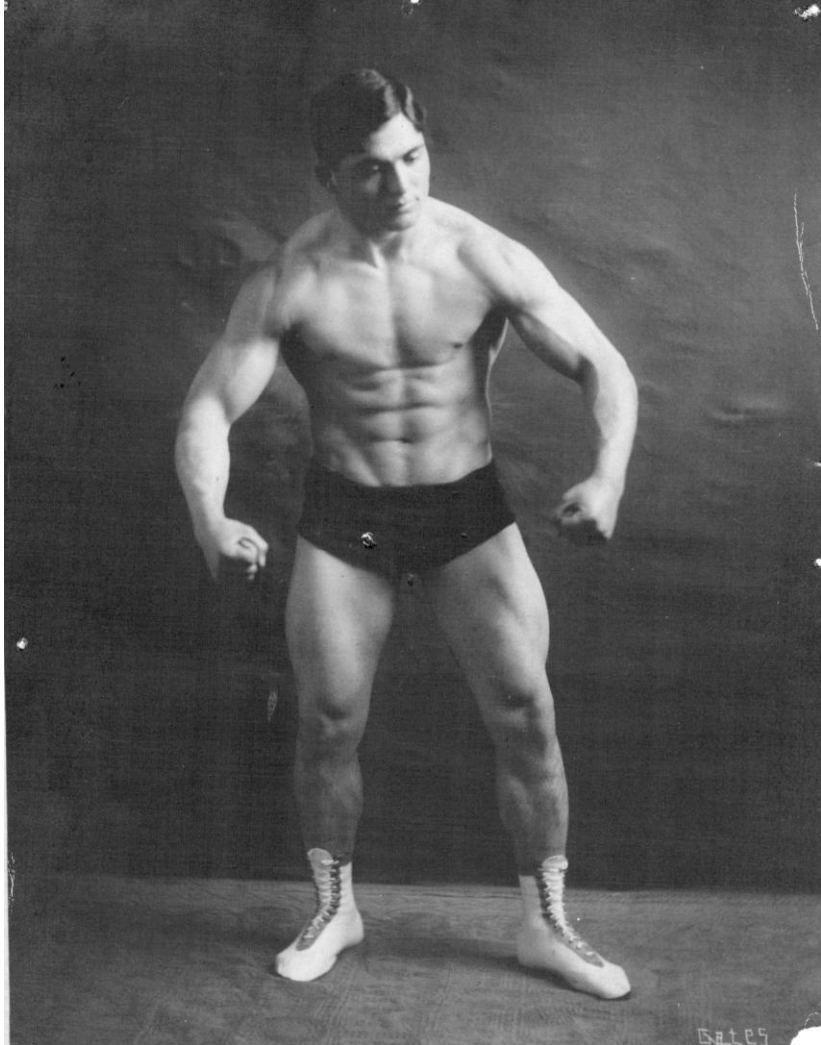


*Londos was 15 when he departed in steerage class in 1909 aboard Patris to escape a demanding father.*

- ▶ Born Christos Theofilou in 1894 in Koutsopodi, Greece to farm family.
- ▶ Greece struggled in his formative years; conflict over Crete, loss of currant market, bankruptcy.
- ▶ Immigration to U.S. became common; 390,000 to U.S. between 1920 and 1921; one-seventh of population.



# What did Greeks do in America?

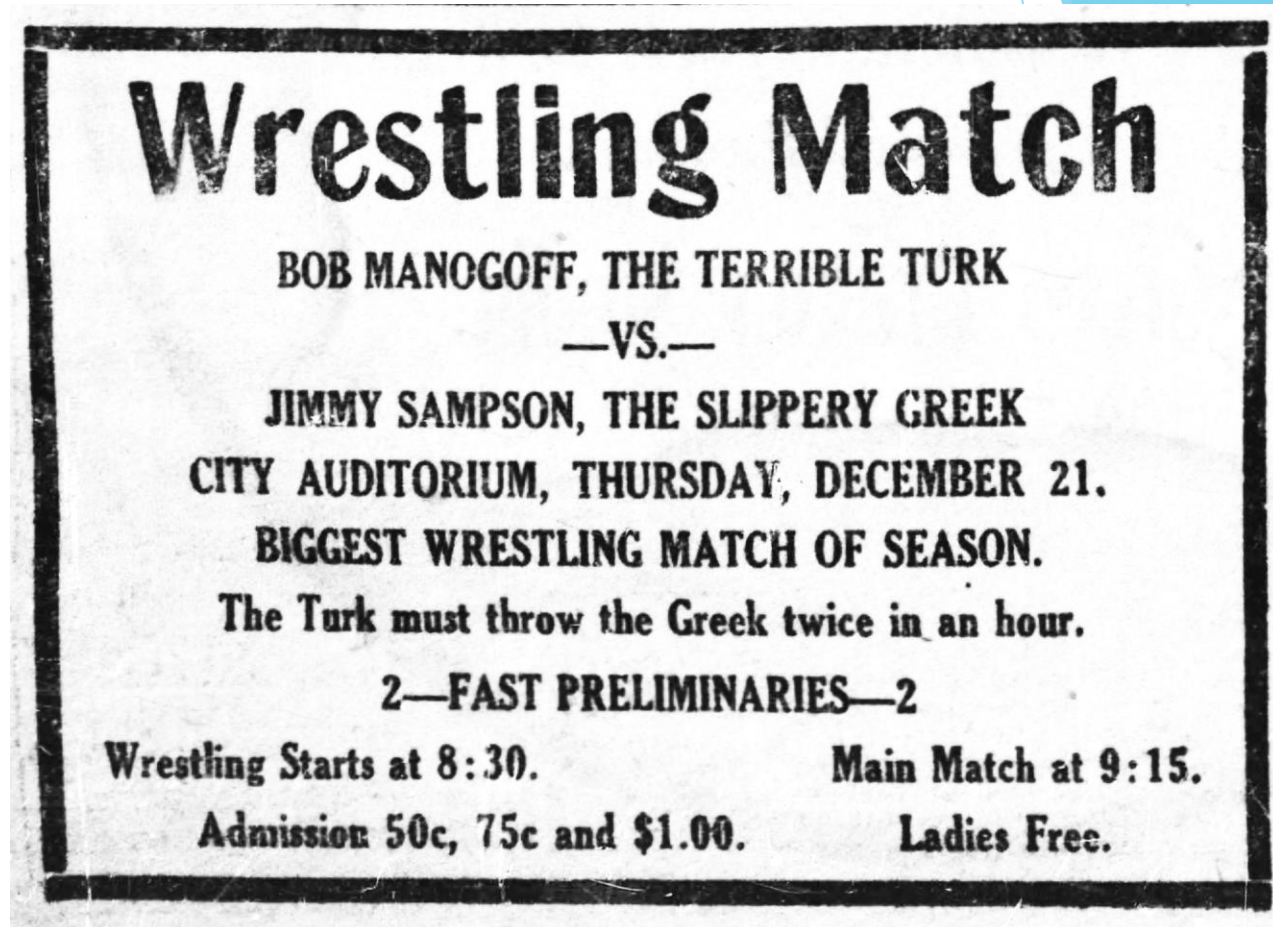


*Posed for art classes at Berkeley*

- ▶ Many were street peddlers with candy and fruit, confections.
- ▶ 50,000 in textile mills in New England.
- ▶ Railroad laborers; Londos started as water boy in Utah and moved to California.
- ▶ Became active in bodybuilding, posing and vaudeville.

# Greek influence in wrestling

- ▶ First match Londos sees is Greek vs Pole (Demetral vs Zbyszko) in 1912 in San Francisco.
- ▶ Many Greek promoters in boxing and wrestling - Contos, Packs, Tofalos, Buzukos.
- ▶ Theophelos becomes pro in 1914; disowned by father, he changed name to Londos.
- ▶ Prejudice remained - “slippery Greek” and assumed names are used. Early AHEPA lifetime member.



# Struggling to reach the top



*With Joe Stecher, the scissors king*

- ▶ Champions of era dominated by Midwest farm boys (Lewis, Stecher, Gotch).
- ▶ Undersized at 5-8, 195-200 pounds.
- ▶ Was his own booker, manager and advocate in a very political business.
- ▶ Failed to win any of his first 11 title challenges.



# The first trip to Greece - 1928



*1928 trip made him understand his role in Greece and need to win title for father, country and self*

- ▶ Greece self-esteem shattered by Asia Minor catastrophe and political unrest.
- ▶ Venizelos: We are lucky to have you as representative of Greeks.
- ▶ Battled severe case of dengue fever, lost 14 pounds.
- ▶ First pro match in Panathenaic Stadium drew 40,000. "Zito Londos."

# 'The rebirth of wrestling'

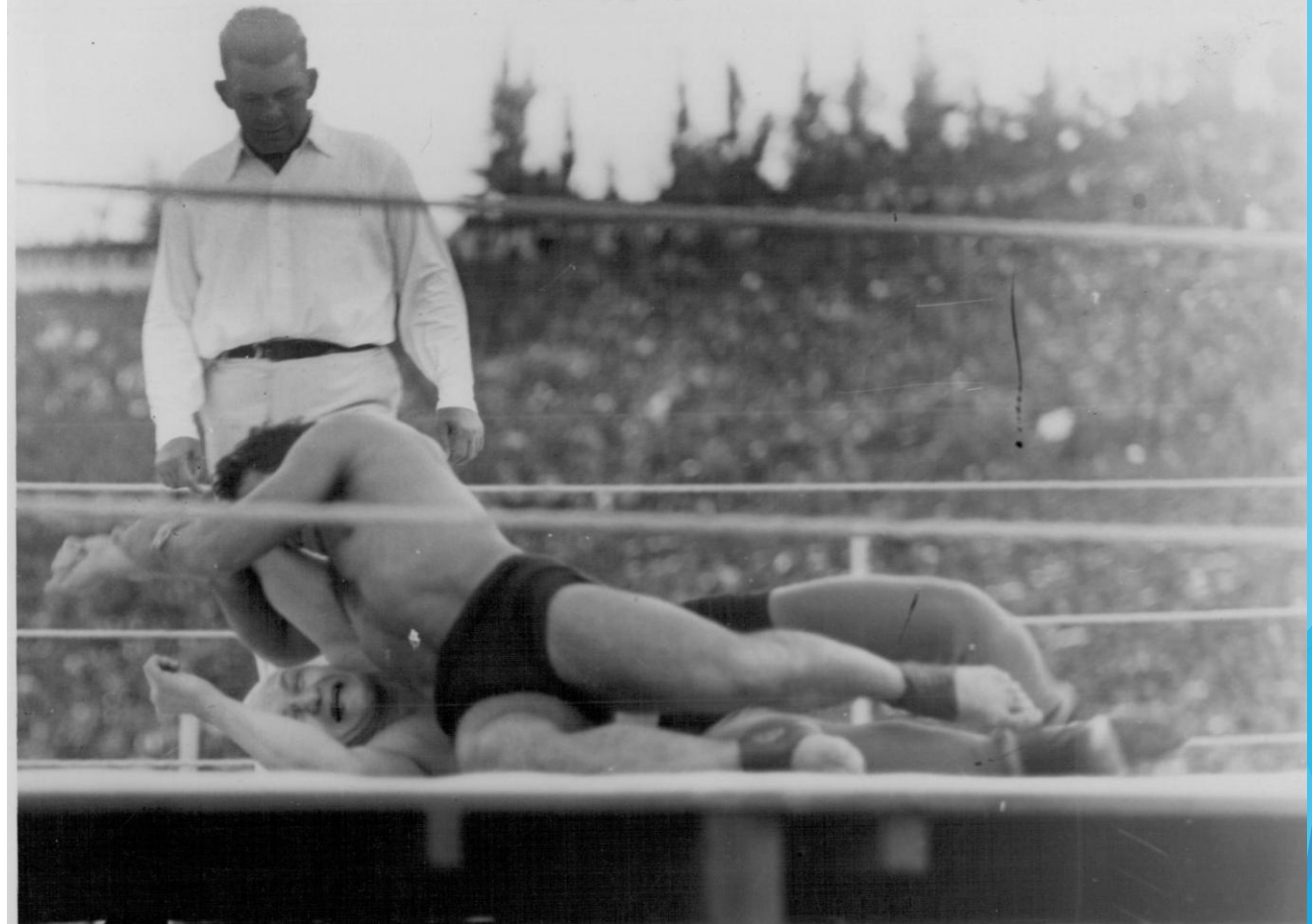
- ▶ Londos defeats Dick Shikat on June 6, 1930, at Phillies Stadium. AHEPA magazine covers him.
- ▶ Pa. commissioner: "Wrestling has come back into its own."
- ▶ Wrestling factions are aligned (if only temporarily).
- ▶ First four shows at MSG draw 20,000-plus fans.





# The second trip to Greece - 1933

- ▶ Greeted as conquering hero at a time at a rough time for Greece.
- ▶ “And on Sunday evening, the valleys and the mountains, the lakes and the seas, the hillsides and the mountain tops will resound with the triumphant thunder of the Greek victory. Londos is Greece. And the people of this Greece will be crying ‘Long Live Londos’ and ‘Long Live Greece.’”
- ▶ Estimated 70,000 in stadium and 20,000 on hillside



*Versus Kola Kwariani in Athens, George Tragos referee*

# Greatest drawing card of his time

- ▶ First wrestler to draw crowds of 40,000, 50,000 and 60,000. Athens record held for 50 years until WrestleMania 3.



- ▶ 1926-1934: drew 10,000-plus on 62 occasions, runner-up (Sonnenberg) had 16. Only three buildings held 20,000.
- ▶ January 1934, three world championship matches in one week in Detroit, Chicago and St. Louis drew 52,000 total
- ▶ Gate for 1931 estimated at \$1.5 million (\$32 million today); for 1930-34, estimated at \$5 million (\$106 million today)

# Doing this without TV, social media or federation



- ▶ 1935 Minneapolis: three appearances averaged 8,900 fans. Other 26 shows in MPLS averaged 3,100.
- ▶ 1937-38, drew 21,000 and \$40,000 in two shows; Nagurski (as champ) drew \$2,000 in same venue.
- ▶ Walk-in access to Hoover White House, featured at Congressional baseball game.
- ▶ Immortal match with Ed Lewis, 1934 in Chicago: 35,625 fans at Wrigley Field, gate of \$96,302 (\$2.25 million today), not topped for 18 years



# The world tour - 1937-1938



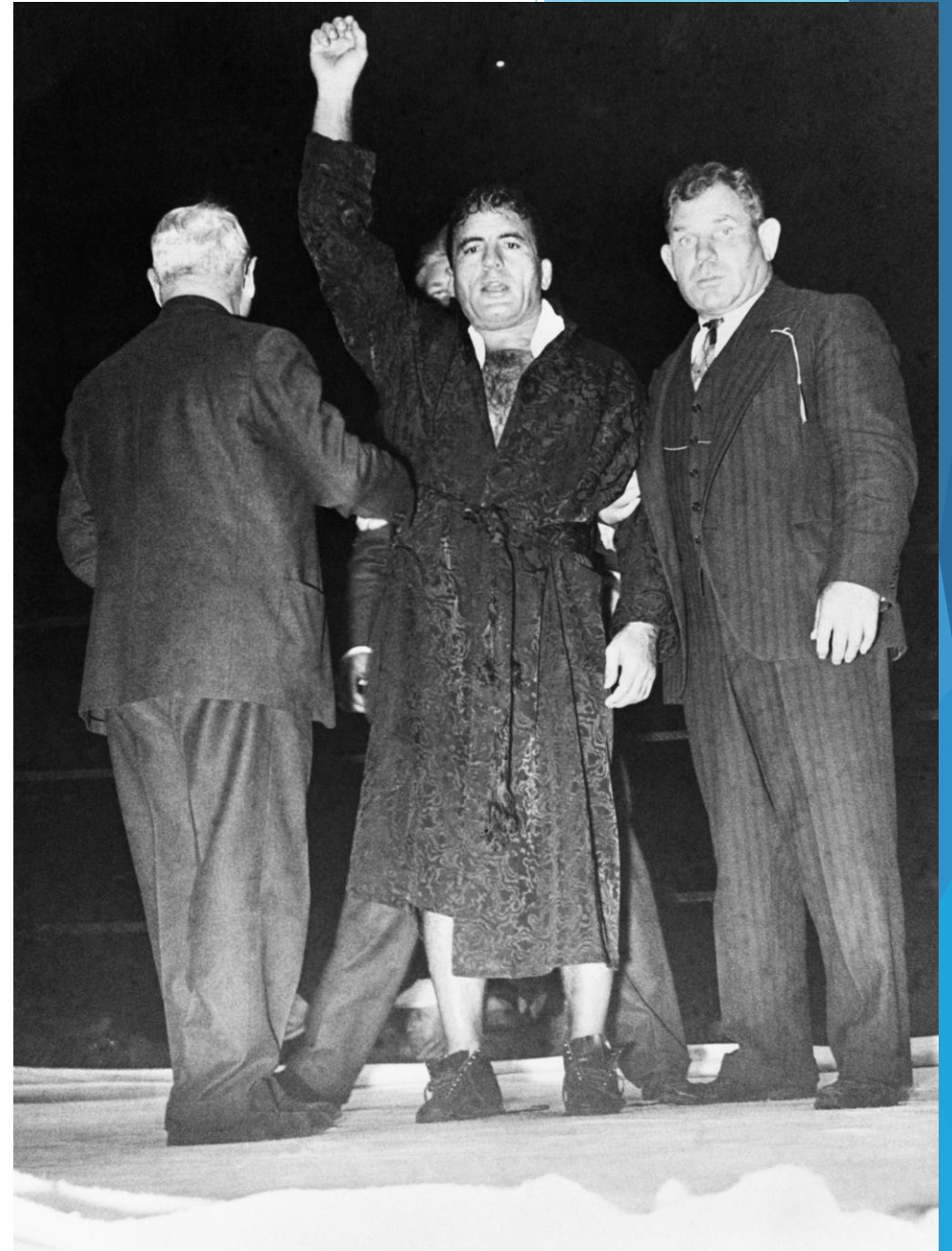
*Regained world title upon return to America in 1938.*

- ▶ Sought out by Greek premiers Venizelos, Tsaldaris and Metaxas.
- ▶ Toured nine countries in 18 months as most well-known athlete in the world.
- ▶ Was in Greece for father's death and ultimate reconciliation.
- ▶ 1937 tour of Cyprus gave hope to a country in iron grip of British rule.

# What made him special?

- ▶ Blue-collar and underdog appeal with immigrant back story.
- ▶ Impressive physique, first true matinee idol - important then as now in wrestling.
- ▶ Dignity and bearing, respect for opponents and the business, never badmouthed anyone.
- ▶ Exciting style. “Frank Gotch, dead these many years, could have thrown Londos all night long. But Londos, in being thrown, would have been more interesting to watch.” - *Damon Runyon*

**BUT MOST OF ALL ...**





# He made people care - and that's different than believing

- ▶ Rope-a-dope and counterholds - a smaller man thinks his way out of trouble. "You taught us tonight how to be the master of the situation you create." - *George Lee*
- ▶ Audience connection - create a story in which they are invested. Give them an outlet to cheer or boo. Make them feel better about themselves. Do it with excellence and commitment so they take a lesson home.
- ▶ "Acrobats, athletes, body-builders, performers. It's a contest and it's a play. It's a performance and it's a show. It's theater but it's real. It's true that way."  
- *Jim Londos*
- ▶ *More at [LondosBook.com](http://LondosBook.com)*

