

History of Boxing in the 1920's

One could say that the 1920's signaled when boxing emerged from the stone ages. The sport's popularity skyrocketed—creating genuine boxing superstars who transcended their sport. The best boxers were among the most famous people in the world and the biggest matches became mega-events. The growing sophistication of motion film cameras helped bring footage to millions, as radios helped spread the good word. This signified the beginning of the golden ages of boxing.

Where Boxing Stood in the 1920's

To understand the boom in boxing during this period, one should picture the idea of the roaring twenties—a festive time where money was in lush supply. The United States was coming off a momentous victory in World War I. Boxing was able to attract the entertainment dollar with legendary fighters and great fights.

Not all was peaches during this period. First of all, it is impossible to imagine how many future champions were snuffed out by a war with unfathomable numbers of casualties. While the WWI gave a boost to returning fighters who were championed as war heroes, many a potentially great fighter were not as fortunate. Nevertheless, top fighters from the United States and Europe were in no shortage during this period.

This period was also characterized by overt racism toward black fighters. Perhaps still reeling from the negativity associated with having the sketchy Jack Johnson as the first prominent black boxer, the boxing establishment locked out many deserving fighters, especially big men like Harry Wills. Jack Dempsey dominated the decade and became boxing's first superhero. Most fight films before Dempsey came around were archaic, often times featuring very little in the way of pleasing action. Fans were awestruck watching the footage of the great "Manassa Mauler." He brought a new brutality and savagery into the sport, creating a template of the ideal

heavyweight champion. In the process, he became perhaps the biggest celebrity in the land.

The 1920's also saw the beginning of the end for the original 8 weight classes. Title bouts at junior lightweight and junior welterweight began taking place. These divisions were afterthoughts and would be considered so for decades to come, but the blueprint was created.

When looking back, one can begin to notice the shaping of the sport's power structure that still somewhat exists to this day. The promoter became central to the event, an overly visible, meddlesome, and corruptible influence. Tex Rickard, one of the original super-promoters, ruled the sport with an iron fist and began the troubling trend where the major shot-callers in the sport are not objective arbiters, but those with a major financial stake in the actual proceedings of the sport itself.

The problems with not having a singular officiating body like most major sports crystallized during this period. Promoters were in cahoots with sanctioning bodies. Deserving fighters could be ignored for years, as promoters jockeyed to avoid them in order to preserve their meal tickets. Boxing became the only sport (this still exists) where it's all about who you know. In other sports, an athlete could show his skills and advance up the ladder in a manner that was commensurate with his ability. In boxing, a fighter's success would often be tied to his willingness to "play ball" with unscrupulous individuals.

Not that these unpleasant elements didn't exist before, but by the 1920's, one could see some of the negative parts of the sport begin to manifest. The shady side of the business began to take form, with endless boxers fleeced by the sport. Old boxers dying early or losing their mental faculties were rampantly evident. The immense popularity of the professional fight game exposed what a great sport boxing is, but also unveiled some of the things that still cause people to look at it as a dirty business.

Best Fighters and Champions of the 1920's

- **Benny Leonard:** Considered by many to be the greatest lightweight of all time. Highly clever and skilled, Leonard was virtually untouchable as lightweight champion, reigning from 1917-1924 without ever having been beaten as a lightweight. Merely had one disqualification loss from 1912-1932.
 - **Harry Greb:** The great Middleweight Champion retired in 1926, but still managed to put together an incredible resume during this period. Beat Hall of Famers, such as 39-0-1 Tommy Gibbons, 41-0-1 Gene Tunney, Tommy Loughran, Tiger Flowers, Mickey Walker, as well as untold amounts of newspaper decisions over other greats in this decade. "The Pittsburgh Windmill" was the real deal.
 - **Jimmy Wilde:** "The Mighty Atom" had begun fraying at the edges as the twenties began, but still defended his flyweight title until losing to Pancho Villa in 1923. The uncanny Wilde was frail and tiny, often well below the 112-pound limit, but made up for it with prodigious power. At 134-4-2 (100 KOs), considered by many to be the hardest pound-for-pound puncher of all time.
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- **Gene Tunney:** Known massively for his two wins over heavyweight champ Jack Dempsey, Tunney retired as champion with a sterling mark of 66-1-1 (48 KOs). The well-educated boxer with a polished and highly-technical style also beat Georges Carpentier and repeatedly avenged his only career loss to Harry Greb.
 - **Jack Dempsey:** The most influential fighter on this list. His fights became major pillars of the lore of the game following his 1919 destruction of Jess Willard, including the crazy brawl with Luis Firpo and the "long count" fight with Gene Tunney. Dempsey defended against Billy Miske, in an effort to help his friend who was suffering with Bright's disease. His title defense win over Tommy Gibbons nearly bankrupted the city of Shelby, Montana. The image of Dempsey in tow with his manager and promoter on a train with suitcases of cash leaving Shelby in tatters is one of the more iconic boxing tales. Came back after the Tunney loss and knocked future heavyweight champion Jack Sharkey out cold as Sharkey complained to the referee about a low blow. Despite being a sometimes

dormant champion, his fights were some of the most unforgettable in boxing history.

- **Mickey Walker:** One of the original weight-jumpers, “The Toy Bulldog” won the Welterweight Title over the excellent veteran Jack Britton in 1922. Later captured the Middleweight crown, beating Tiger Flowers in 1926. Went on to defeat many ranking light heavyweights and heavyweights later in his career.
- **Tony Canzoneri:** Major attraction began laying the foundation of his great career toward the latter half of the decade. After two close title tries at bantamweight, moved up and captured the featherweight title. The heroic fighting machine defeated a dozen world champions and would later capture titles at 135 and 140.
- **Tommy Loughran:** Light heavyweight great won a decision over Harry Greb at age 20 in 1923. Fought a ton of great fighters, winning some and losing some, until hitting his stride in the second half of the decade, winning 31 straight against the likes of Georges Carpentier, Jimmy Delaney, Young Stribling, Mike McTigue, Jimmy Slattery, Mickey Walker, and Jimmy Braddock. Loughran was a very technical and advanced boxing study. Defeated 3 Heavyweight Champions.
- **Panama Al Brown:** The first Hispanic world champion. Brown was an anomaly due to being a nearly 6-foot bantamweight with an amazing 76-inch reach—the same reach as Joe Louis and Max Schmeling. Despite giving up 100 pounds, Brown had a longer reach than Joe Frazier, Mike Tyson, Jersey Joe Walcott, and Jack Johnson. One of the first of the great bantamweights.

Biggest Fights on the 1920's

- **Greb vs. Tunney:** Tunney fought a great fight, but this was vintage Greb—all over his opponent and roughing him up with every punch and trick in the book. The sheer pace and ferocity in which Greb performed was too much for most fighters and it certainly proved to be the antidote to Tunney's exquisite skills. This 1922 victory in a big feather in the career of

this middleweight great, especially considering that Tunney would later retire as World Heavyweight Champion, with this being his only defeat.

- **Greb vs. Walker:** In a battle of strong-willed future Hall-of-Famers, Greb won a decision over Walker, whose skills and spirit kept him in good stead with the “Pittsburgh Windmill.” Legend has it that the night after the fight, Walker and Greb met at a speakeasy and duked it out again, with Greb getting the knockout this time.
- **Villa vs. Wilde:** The passing of the torch. Wilde wasn’t what he used to be, losing by 7th-round knockout to young Pancho Villa. In scoring this landmark win, Villa became the first Filipino boxing hero. Sadly passed away 10 days after dropping a non-title decision to future welterweight champion Jimmy McLarnin. Was only 23 years old.
- **Dempsey vs. Carpentier:** The public clamored for this bout and shelled out almost \$2-million in gate receipts in this mega-event. Over 80,000 fans paid to see this Jersey City blockbuster, the first heavyweight title fight to be broadcast on radio. The game Carpentier, one of the best light heavies of the era, lacked the power to compete with Dempsey and absorbed a battering en route to a 4th-round knockout.
- **Dempsey vs. Firpo:** One of the first quick-ending super-brawls in the sport’s history. Dempsey tore into Firpo in the first, dropping the strong Argentine 7 times. Firpo showed his worth by also dropping the champion with a body shot. Later in the round, the assault continued. Firpo, on the verge of a stoppage loss, rushed Dempsey and landed a big right. With a little help from Firpo’s sheer physicality, Dempsey spilled out of the ring with a terrific thud. Writers at ringside helped Dempsey back into the ring just in time. In the 2nd, Dempsey landed a fast 1-2 to put Firpo down for the count. Radio broadcast was also available in Argentina, where the streets were packed to listen to this incredible brawl.
- **Tunney vs. Dempsey I:** The end of an era. Dempsey had taken 3 years off after the Firpo fight, not living the Spartan lifestyle. This proved to be horrible preparation for the precise and highly-technical boxing style of Gene Tunney. Before an incredible 120,000+ at Sesquicentennial Stadium in Philadelphia, Tunney used his jab and movement to confound Dempsey and cruise to a decision and put in name in the history books.

- **Tunney vs. Dempsey II:** The famous “long count” fight. Fans missing the brutality and aggression of their old champion hoped Dempsey would reclaim the crown. However, “The Manassa Mauler” was outboxed for long stretches. Almost 105,000 packed into Soldier Field in Chicago and paid nearly \$3-million to see this historic bout. Illinois had recently passed a new rule that mandated that fighters who scored a knockdown would be sent to a neutral corner. In the 7th, Dempsey scored a series of blows, dropping Tunney. Rather than go to a neutral corner, Dempsey was confused, costing himself valuable seconds as Tunney tried to regain his senses. The referee didn’t pick up the right count, affording Tunney 14 seconds to recuperate. Whether he could have risen without the extra time was a source of debate for decades. Tunney rose at nine and went on to outbox the aging great, even dropping Dempsey in the next round.

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