

# Tunney vs Greb I

By Sam Gregory

On May 23, 1922 “The Fighting Marine” Gene Tunney fought Harry Greb, “The Pittsburgh Windmill” in a 15 round title bout for Tunney’s Light Heavyweight Championship of America for the first time. They would fight four more times. It would be the first and only loss in Tunney’s otherwise undefeated pro career. Gene Tunney had just won the Light Heavyweight title from Battling Levinsky four months earlier.



This fight between Harry Greb and Gene Tunney went down in pugilistic history as one of the most brutal and bloodiest battles ever fought under the Marquee of Queensberry rules. After this fight Gene Tunney’s chief second, Doc Bagley was of the opinion that “Tunney would never be the same again after being cut to pieces by the whirring blades of the Pittsburgh Windmill.”

From the opening bell “The Pittsburgh Windmill” was true to his name and hammered Tunney with flurries of punches from every angle imaginable. Tunney later told a Pittsburgh Post reporter, ‘Greb was like fighting an octopus.’ Greb bobbed and weaved causing Tunney to miss with many of his punches; this left Tunney open for the Pittsburgher to counter with vicious shots to the body and head. The 5’8” tall Greb was not beyond fighting dirty on his way to winning a title. He used head-butts, punched on the break, jammed his thumb in Tunney’s eye and landed low blows. Greb was an expert at the tactic of raking the laces of his gloves across his opponent’s eyes. If he could get away with popping his opponent in the nose or eye with his elbow he’d do that too.

At the end of 15 rounds Tunney was a bloody mess. His nose had been broken in two places; his lips were busted open and he had severally bleeding gashes over both eyes. It was later estimated that Tunney lost 2 quarts of blood during the fight. During the later rounds of the fight Tunney drank from a homemade concoction of brandy and orange juice he thought would give him energy, it only proved to make him nauseous.

Years after the fight Tunney recalled how these and other problems started for him in preparation for this title bout. ”Whilst training for the Greb match, which took place just four months after the Battling Levinsky match, I had the worst possible kind of luck. My left eyebrow was opened and both hands were sorely injured. I had a partial reappearance of the old left elbow trouble, which prevented my using a left jab.

Dr Robert J Shea who was a close friend of Tunney’s and also served as his training camp doctor, administered hypodermic injections of adrenaline chloride over Tunney’s left eye. He did this in an attempt to prevent bleeding when the cut was reopened by Greb. At Tunney’s request he also injected a solution of Novocain into the knuckles of both hands before the fight.

According to Tunney, “We locked the dressing room door while this was going on. George Engle, Greb’s manager wanted to watch the bandage being put on; when he came over to my dressing room he found the door bolted. He shouted and banged. We could not let him in until the doctor finished his work. Getting in finally, he insisted I remove all the bandages so that he could see whether I had any unlawful substances under them. I refused. He made an awful squawk, ranting in and out of the room. I became angry.

Eventually I realized Engle was only trying to protect his fighter, and if I let it get my goat that was my hard luck. Moreover, his not being allowed into the dressing room made the situation look suspicious. I unwound the bandages from my hands and satisfied George that all was well.”

Actually all was not well as Tunney's real problems had just begun to manifest themselves. First of all the injections Tunney was given by his personal training room doctor only served to endanger the light heavyweight champ even more when his challenger, Harry Greb unleashed with his first flurry of punches. As Tunney tumbled headfirst into the fistic nightmare he recalled in detail, "In the first exchange in the first round, I sustained a double fracture of the nose, which bled continually to the finish. Toward the end of the first round, my left eyebrow was laid open four inches. I am convinced that the adrenaline solution that had been injected so softened the tissue that the first blow or butt I received cut the flesh right to the bone".

### **New York Times report round 1**

"In the first round Greb leaped in with a right to the jaw and at close quarters mugged Tunney up. Greb landed a left hook on the nose which drew blood. In a clinch Greb pounded the stomach with hands. Tunney upper-cutted a right to the face as Greb came in. Tunney caught Greb coming in with a right and a left to the stomach. Greb tore in with rights and lefts to the face. The men were splattered with blood from Tunney's nose and were clinching on the ropes at the bell."

### **New York Times report round 2**

"In the second round Greb landed two left jabs to the face. Greb jabbed another left to the face and in a clinch Tunney landed a left and a right to the body. Greb tore into Tunney and battered him with both hands to the face and body. Greb missed a right which landed on the neck and Tunney drove a right to the body. Tunney held Greb at close quarters. Greb missed with a short right to the jaw but forced Tunney to the ropes with rights and lefts".

### **Tunney later recalled of round 3**

"In the third round another cut over the right eye left me looking through a red film. For the best part of 12 rounds, I saw this red phantom-like form dancing before me. I had provided myself with a fifty per cent mixture of brandy and orange juice to take between rounds in the event I became weak from loss of blood. I had never taken anything during a fight up to that time. Nor did I ever again".

Tunney continued, "It is impossible to describe the bloodiness of this fight. My seconds were unable to stop either the bleeding from the cut over my left eye, which involved a severed artery, or the bleeding consequent to the nose fractures. Doc Bagley, who was my chief second, made futile attempts to congeal the nose bleeding by pouring adrenaline into his hand and having me snuff it up my nose. This I did round after round. The adrenaline, instead of coming out through the nose again, ran down my throat with the blood and into my stomach".

According to the New York Times, Greb continued to land solid combinations to the head and body of the champ. Mid way through the fourth round Tunney landed a shot that rocked Greb's head back as he dug hard into the challenger's body. In the fifth Tunney beat Greb to the punch landing a solid right to Greb's mid section. At one point in the fifth Greb slipped to the canvas but was on his feet in an instant; there was no knockdown scored.

Greb led with a left to the face at the opening of the sixth round. In an attempt to muscle their opponent to the canvas both men nearly fell out of the ring mid way through the sixth round. Both men were furiously fighting toe to toe through the seventh round. In a clinch Greb was nearly wrestled to the floor; when the referee attempted to separate the two from the clinch Greb landed a punch above Tunney's eye that caused the crowd to erupt in a chorus of boos. The punch landed hard and ripped open another cut above Tunney's right eye.

In the eleventh round Tunney dug deep with uppercuts to Greb's midsection; at the same time Greb head butted the champ opening yet another cut on Tunney's forehead. Through the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> rounds punches

were being thrown hard and furious by both men but Greb had clearly taken control dictating the offensive flow of the fight from the 11<sup>th</sup> round on.

Tunney could feel the change of momentum and the direction the fight was going; he knew Greb had taken control after the 10<sup>th</sup> round. Tunney wanted to help himself get through the final five rounds but he ended up causing himself more problems.

In Tunney's own words he recalled, "At the end of the twelfth round, I believed it was a good time to take a swallow of the brandy and orange juice. It had hardly gotten to my stomach when the ring started whirling around. The bell rang for the thirteenth round; the seconds pushed me from my chair. I actually saw two red opponents. How I survived the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth rounds is still a mystery to me. At any rate, the only consciousness I had was to keep trying. I knew if I ever relaxed, I would either collapse or the referee would stop the brutality."

When the bell sounded ending the 15<sup>th</sup> and final round Tunney in his own words described what happened next: "I shook hands with Greb and mumbled through my smashed and swollen lips, 'Well Harry, you were the better man, to-night!' And I meant that literally."

In his dressing room Tunney collapsed from a loss of blood and exhaustion after the fight. It was written that Tunney refused to go home for two weeks after the fight. In spite of his physical condition, Tunney managed to drag himself to the athletic commissions office the second day after the fight. Rather than protest Greb's numerous fouls throughout the fight Tunney was there to secure a rematch.

Gene Tunney fought Harry Greb four more times and never lost another fight.

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*Exerts, quotes and dates were supplied by May 24, 1922 Nashville Tennessean, New York Times and Pittsburgh Post.*

*Photo courtesy of Bill Paxton, author "The Fearless Harry Greb: Biography of a Tragic Hero of Boxing".*  
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