



Joe Shugrue did the impossible — he knocked out Benny Leonard. He also whipped the great Freddy Welsh, as well as many another cherished pugilistic name. Joe is remembered as the . . .

CHAMPION WITHOUT A CROWN

BY EDWARD BRENNAN
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Shugrue as he looked in his prime. A brilliant boxer with trigger-fast reflexes, he also had a good punch and matchless courage.

THE SNOW on New York's West 23rd Street was banked high on both sides.

It was March 5, 1912, a bitter cold night. Blanketed horses, harnessed to wagons and sleighs, made an erie sight as white wisps of smoke puffed from their nostrils.

The swirling wind bit hard at the faces of passersby and halfway up the block the roar of men's voices poured from Brown's Gymnasium as the main event was about to begin. In one corner Benny Leonard, a good-looking Jewish kid off New York's Lower East Side, danced up and down on his toes. Facing him from across the ring was Joe Shugrue, an Irish kid out of Jersey City whose future address was to be "Heartbreak Street."

It was a big betting fight because both Shugrue and Leonard were the best prospects in the lightweight division. Both were undefeated, skilled boxers who could hit with the authority of a policeman's club.

Leonard was the betting favorite because he had the backing of his Ghetto pals, plus all the "smart" Broadway money. Shugrue money came from big, strapping Irishmen who had laid bricks all day and then turned the Hoboken Ferry into an excursion boat for the trip across the icy Hudson River to New York and the scene of battle.

The bell rang and referee Bill Brown waved the fighters to action. Benny stabbed Joe's face with a stinging left, then speared his belly with a wicked left hook. Sensing an advantage, Leonard started to bring up a right, but Shugrue, who could make more weird moves than a woman getting dressed, fainted Benny out of position and jolted his head back with a jarring jab. Then he split Leonard's nose with a ripping right cross.

The blood gushed down Leonard's body and he was never in the fight after that. Benny fought back desperately, trying to get out of danger, but the agile Shugrue slipped the punches and forced Leonard to retreat with

hard jabs and with hooks he threw off the jabs.

This is the way it went in the first three rounds. Cunning Joe Shugrue was showing Leonard his left hand, but that was only window dressing because it was his right that Joe wanted to get home. The Jersey City Irishman finally got the opportunity in the fourth. Shugrue, who had more combinations than a short order cook, switched his left to the mid-section and then one of his rights streaked through a tiny opening and cracked against Benny's chin.

The blow had Leonard going the wrong way on a one way street. But the man who was to become one of the greatest champions of all time hung in there with his tormentor, whom fate had destined for obscurity, sadness and a world of darkness in the years ahead.

By now, the loud-lunged Irishmen in the crowd, some of whom were still wearing their clodhoppers work shoes, yelled for Shugrue to finish Benny. Joe heard their call and answered it mid-way in the fourth when he drove a right under Leonard's heart then hit him on the chin with a whistling left hook. Benny went down. When he got up he looked like a man who had just been attacked by Apaches.

Shugrue moved in, feinted with his left, then smashed over a right to the face. Leonard took a nine count, then staggered to his feet. But referee Brown took one look at the game Jewish kid and stopped the slaughter.

It was the first time Leonard had ever been knocked out.

An hour later Barney Foley's Saloon at the corner of Grove and Second Streets in Jersey City was rocking with singing Irishmen. In those days there were more Irishmen in Jersey City than there were in Dublin. It seemed like every Irishman in Jersey City was in Foley's. They sang and danced and busted each other's heads because they were so happy. And why shouldn't they be! After all, their Joe had knocked out that Jew boy from New York. They were having more fun than at an old fashioned Irish wake.

This is the way it always was

at Foley's after Shugrue won a fight. The only thing missing was Shugrue. There were two things Joe never bothered with—whiskey and fast dames.

Shugrue's stunning victory over Leonard came in his third year as a fighter, so there had been many previous celebrations at Foley's, and there were to be many more in the next two years. There's no telling what might have happened to Foley's if Joe hadn't suffered injuries to both eyes. Some people say that if Shugrue had continued fighting, Barney Foley would have become the political boss of Jersey City instead of Frank Hague.

Joe used to say that his eye trouble began when he fought little Banty Lewis in Newark in 1911. "Lewis was a short guy," Shugrue explained, "he got in close and banged at your body. When you dropped your guard to protect your belly, he shifted his attack to your head. I stayed in tight with him, because I didn't want to give him room to punch. So he started bringing his hands straight up into my face with the same motion a man swings a hammer. I don't say he did it intentionally, but there were times when Banty forgot to pull in his thumbs and I caught the impact of those blows from his thumbs."

Joe Shugrue was never a man to bemoan personal misfortune. He didn't hold any grudge against Banty Lewis, nor did his ailment, which grew progressively worse, seem to interfere with his ring work. When he hung up his gloves for good, in November 1915, he had engaged in 126 fights, lost only five, with one draw. But what was more important, they called Joe Shugrue the "Uncrowned Lightweight Champion of the World."

He fought all over the globe; from Sydney, Australia to Waterbury, Connecticut. Joe liked Waterbury so well that he moved there in 1914 and stayed ten years before returning to Jersey City.

He faced the best of his time, and more often than not, Shugrue wound up giving them boxing lessons. He was an uncanny craftsman with his small fists. He could slip an opponent's lead and



Early picture of Shugrue shows him as a hefty (for a featherweight) youth with sparkling eyes, broad shoulders and a pair of lightning-fast hands. His dream was to someday become a world champion.

counter with barrages of his own before the victim had an opportunity to regain his composure. Even the great ones bore this out; men like Leach Cross, Owen Moran, Charley White, Willie Beecher and Freddy Welsh.

Shugrue was dubbed "Uncrowned Lightweight Champion" after his two memorable fights with then reigning 135-pound champion Freddy Welsh. Both were fought in Madison Square Garden, and Joe was the winner in both battles.

Unfortunately for the Jersey City Irishman, however, his two punch parties with Welsh came during the era of no-decisions and during that time a man had to knockout the titleholder to become champion. Welsh was clever enough to go the distance both times, thereby depriving Shugrue of the crown.

Shugrue and Welsh first exchanged leather on Dec. 2, 1914. It was a fairly close bout. But on Feb. 9, 1915, Joe handled Welsh like an Army drill sergeant handles recruits. When the bell rang ending the tenth round Welsh looked like a man who had been hit across the face with a ketchup bottle.

Shugrue was on the shadowy side of his career when he fought Welsh, and four months after their return bout, Joe hung up his gloves. Shugrue was completely blind in his left eye by then, and had only a pin-point vision in his "good" eye with which to see the world.

But Joe had the two things that most Irishman have — love for a good fight and wit — and it was the latter that kept him going during his later life. Joe's humor was as sparkling as a baby after a bath and he was as clever an after dinner speaker as he was with his fists in the ring. Shugrue was so gifted a speaker that a professional group, composed of doctors and dentists, in Waterbury took him in as a member and gave him the sobriquet of "Dr. Toby Lyons" to make his membership official.

Joe always was the main event talker at their affairs. But Shug, as he was affectionately known back in his hometown, never forgot that he came off the cobble-

stone streets of Jersey City and he made as many appearances for the local butcher and sports-writers in the backrooms as he did for his ritzy pals.

I know this because one night my friends in Jersey City gave me a testimonial dinner and Shugrue and Tony Canzoneri and a lot of other big names from the boxing world were there. They all were good speakers, especially some of those Jersey City politicians. But none came close to Joe Shugrue. He had them in stitches with stories like this:

Joe regaled the crowd with:

"One day I brought home my report card, which showed I got 56 in English. My father, who liked to keep his throat moist at all times, looked at the 56 and said: 'What's this 56 Joseph me bye?' And I replied, Oh, that's the temperature of the room, Pop."

Shugrue had more good lines than Marilyn Monroe and his opening line that night was as good as the refund on your income tax. Joe told the audience he couldn't see:

"My mother always said, 'In bed or in the ring, he's never up before ten.'"

That got them all laughing and before Shugrue left the microphone, Canzoneri and everybody else in the place were wiping tears of laughter off their cheeks. Five weeks later some of those same people were crying tears of sorrow as they looked at Canzoneri in his bier.

A little more than a year after that dinner they stood in front of Shugrue's coffin in Jersey City and wept for him. They cried because they knew he had died with a broken heart because the city he had put on the map had long since forgotten him and demoted him from the job of Assistant Chief Attendance Officer to that of caretaker.

Joe never had ten counted over him until the Maker of all mankind tolled the fatal count over his body last year in the Jersey City Medical Center.

But always remember this — Joe Shugrue is one of the greatest fighters of all time. He was a Champion without a title. ⁵³