



THE MARVELOUS JACK BRITTON

by Johnny Brannigan

Portrait of a champion whose remarkable record of 400 fights over a span of 27 years made him one of ringdom's immortals

TWO MEMORABLE THINGS happened in the year 1928; the stock market was knocked for a loop, and so was a second rate fist fighter named Meyer Cohen. Today, more than 30 years later, nobody remembers Cohen; however the stock market and the man who licked Meyer those long years ago are still favorite topics of conversation. Let's skip the stock market and talk about the man. The whole world knows him as Jack Britton, one of the two or three master welterweight fighters of all time.

In its own peculiar way that Meyer Cohen fight was a classic, one of the many Jack Britton fought during a 27-year career which included almost 400 battles. In all that time he was stopped but once and lost only 20 decisions. Unfortunately, Britton's finest years — 1910 to 1920—occurred during the ridiculous era of "ND's," when you either knocked out your opponent or got another one of those ND's plastered on your record.

The Cohen affair took place in the twilight of Britton's career. Tunney was heavyweight champion, Jack Sharkey, Maxie Rosenbloom, Max Schmeling and Max Baer were on or about to come onto the scene, and a sad-eyed kid named Joseph Louis Barrow was digging the sport pages out of waste baskets to find out what his heroes were doing.

One of those heroes must surely have been Jack Britton, former welterweight champion; here's what he was doing in Holyoke, Massachusetts that night back in 1928; with most of the eye-witness account coming from Bill Miller, an old-time fight manager and publicity man.

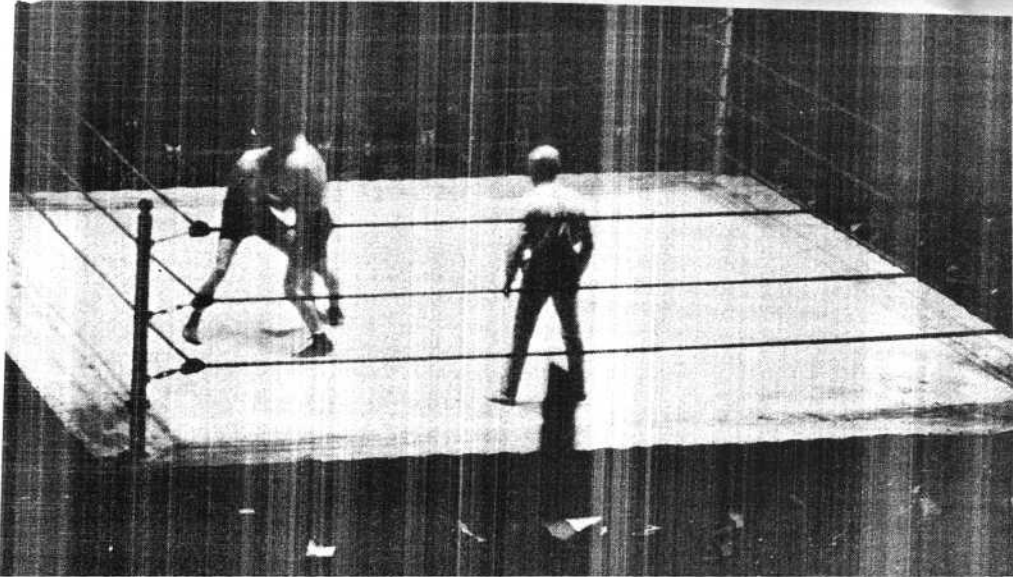
"Jimmy Bronson and I were handling about fourteen fighters at the time," Miller began, "and one of them was this rugged, Galento-type welterweight named Meyer Cohen. He wasn't a top fighter, but he was a good puncher and he had some pretty good wins on his record. Well, one day an old friend of mine, 'Dumb' Dan Morgan, walked into my office and said that he would like to see a match between my Meyer Cohen and his Jack Britton."

As Miller tells it, he and Jimmy Bronson were glad to take the fight. After all, Britton had been champion of the world from 1919 to 1922, and it took a Mickey Walker to finally lick him even after he was finished as a star. Now 43 years old, Britton had lost practically all his savings in the big Florida real estate crash. He was in desperate need of a stake, that's why he was in Holyoke to fight that Meyer Cohen in 1928.

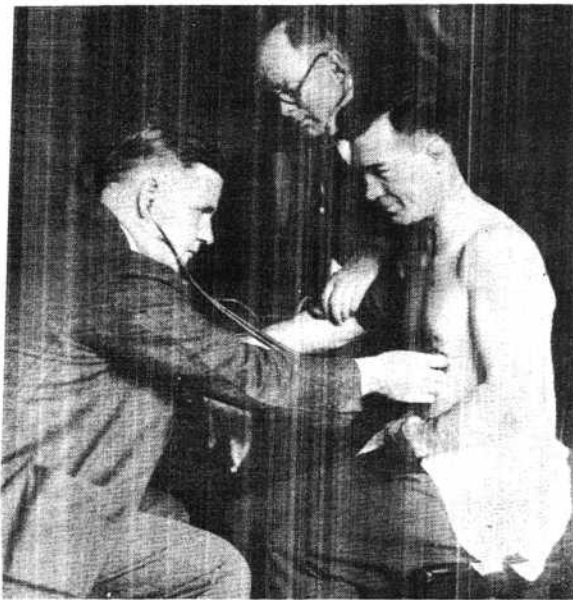
"In the dressing room before the bout," Miller recounts fondly, "I took Cohen aside and spoke to him like a
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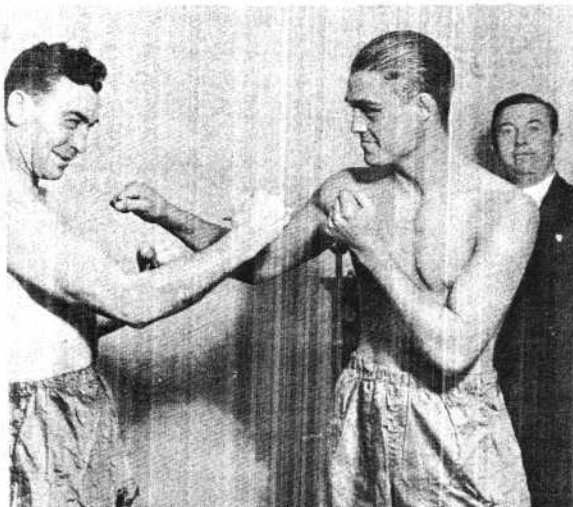
Square off prior to Britton-Benny Leonard fight in 1922. Jack won on a foul.



The Jack Britton-Mickey Walker fight in New York, November 1, 1922. Jack, age 37, lost 15 round decision and his welterweight crown. Britton is on left.



Britton is examined by doctors prior to bout with Ted "Kid" Lewis.



Britton, left, was 42 when he lost a decision to Hilario Martinez in 1927.

father. Like Britton's father. I told him that Jack was an old man and it would be nice he didn't bust him up too much. 'Don't hurt him, Meyer,' I said.

"Do you know what he said? He said, 'if that old guy don't get fresh, maybe I'll let up on him. But if he gets outta line I'll lower the boom on him!' I looked at him for a second then I spit at his feet. 'You dirty lowlife!' I said. Then I walked out of the room, steaming mad."

So the fight went on. Meanwhile Miller and Bronson were busy in the box office counting the take. All the time Miller was cursing his own fighter, Meyer Cohen, under his breath, convinced that at that very moment the shell of the once great Jack Britton was being cruelly broken into little bits. It wasn't until along about the eighth round that Bill Miller finally finished counting the loot and had amassed enough courage to look into the arena.

"Well," laughs Bill, "there was Cohen. His face was a mess, his nose gushing blood a cut over one eye, his mouth gashed. And there was Britton, as immaculate as he had been when he entered the ring! With his unerring left hand, he was writing his name and address on poor Meyer's map, while Cohen was winging and swinging with both hands, but hitting only air.

"There was no question about the verdict—Britton by a landslide! And when Cohen went by me toward the dressing room, I couldn't help but say, 'Gee, Meyer, thanks a million! It was swell of you to carry the old man, and I'll never forget it, kid!' He just glared at me and said something like how the hell can you beat a man with six left hands."

That was Jack Britton at the age of 43. He actually went on to fight another two years, and even when he retired for good he was mentally and physically

sound as a dollar—a *million* dollars—and still *is!*

What was he like during his heyday? He was a master, a ring master and a boxing stylist, the kind who comes along only once or twice in a generation. In number of battles fought and won, and in the length of his active career, he may have been unique. As a matter of fact, Jack's real career never started until he'd been fighting for close to ten years—the entire boxing life of the average fighter these days! That was when he met Dan Morgan—"Dumb" Dan, who was about as dumb as an nuclear physicist and a lot sharper—and Jack and Dan stayed partners throughout the years ahead.

No doubt Britton would have been a top-notch fighter with or without Morgan, but it's unlikely that he ever would have become champ. It was Morgan who, with Jimmy Johnston, the equally cagey manager of Ted "Kid" Lewis of England, arranged a series of "grudge" matches between Britton and Lewis whose like was never seen before or since. This "road show," begun in 1915 during the height of the infamous No-Decision days, lasted through 22 fights and six years. During this time Lewis was crowned welterweight champion; he beat Britton to keep the title then was knocked out by Jack with the only kayo registered by either in their entire series.

During this incredible era of boxing, such things as this happened: Since it was illegal to name a "winner" of a bout at ringside, except in the event of a knockout, the next day's newspapers carried the decision according to the way the individual boxing writers saw it. The morning editions might, in fact, claim the victory for one of the fighters; then, in the afternoon papers, the other man might be named "winner." After each of the Lewis-Britton bouts, reporters would scurry for the telegraph offices to file their judgments. And so would Morgan and Johnston, managers of the fighters.

More than once the managers would send simultaneous wires to the same bewildered sports editor of a New York paper. One telegram would read, "Britton gave Lewis awful beating. Had him down four times in fifth round. Lewis bleeding badly at end, Britton untouched.

Dan Morgan."

The other wire might say: "Britton barely escaped with his life. Lewis had him on the floor twice in the fourth. Both Britton's eyes closed at finish and Lewis not even breathing hard.

Jimmy Johnston."

Although such conduct does not speak well for the ethics of the boxing industry, it doesn't take away from the genuine quality of every Lewis-Britton fight.

It is generally agreed that not once did either fighter take a dive, nor was there any hint of underhandedness. There didn't have to be. Luckily, both fighters were marvelous craftsmen, well matched—and hated each other's guts! A situation like this makes dishonesty unnecessary. For this reason, the famous series goes into the books as one of boxing's greatest all-time road shows.

No one doubts but that Jack Britton would have been not only the greatest welterweight, but possibly the *greatest of all fighters*, if he had possessed just one more thing: a punch. His knockout of Lewis, when he took the title, was one of the few he ever scored. And in a way, this was all right. When you went to see Jack Britton fight, you went to see an artist work—you didn't expect to see a knockout. Novices and pre-elim boys could learn more by watching a single Britton fight than by training in a local gym for months.

Along with Jack's weak punch was a strong jaw. When his opponent was lucky enough to tag him with an occasional chiller, Jack would shake it off and stall long enough to get his wits back. So magical was his ability to avoid punches that the following anecdote is told by marvelling old timers:

Jack was fighting a nonentity in Scranton one night, and the guy slapped a gold tooth right out of Britton's mouth, "While Jack was counting the house," as Dan Morgan told it. Well, Jack saw where the tooth fell into the sawdust box near the front row, and since it was valuable, he wanted it back. For the next several minutes he kept giving directions to Dan as to where to find it.

Standing flat-footed in the corner, Jack kept shouting, "To your left, Dan—now a little to the right! That's it—now dig for it!" "And all the while, the other fellow, seeing a chance to flatten the great Britton, threw a hundred punches at him. As for Jack, he watched the guy from the corner of his eye, bobbing and weaving and hardly moving, while he gave directions to Morgan.

Dan found the tooth.

Born William J. Breslin, a pretty good name itself, Jack was christened with his fighting pseudonym in a casual way. Having spent all of his boyhood in New Britain, Connecticut, it was still home town to him even when he moved to Chicago. There the kids called him "Britain," and when he substituted for a local boxer one night on a neighborhood card, he gave his name as Jack Britain, although he could never figure why. In the papers, next day, it came out "Jack Britton"—and stayed that way for half a century . . . By the way, Jack Britton beat Johnny Earle in his first fight, that day in Chicago in 1905 and

he was so sick when he came out of the ring, he resolved never to fight again. Never was a resolution so thoroughly broken!

Jack wasn't knocked out until his tenth fight, and then for the first and last time. For almost ten years after that his record was a very good but unspectacular one. He was such an artist that everybody he fought looked bad, so that few of his fights were really interesting until the time Dum Dan spotted him. Dan saw that here was a true great—if handled right. What Britton needed was color, excitement!

And so, when the chance came to stage the first Lewis-Britton bout, Dan saw it for what it was—a gold mine. It was lucky that, in Jimmy Johnston, the "Boy Bandit" of pugilism, Dan was dealing with a manager as shrewd as he was. They got along just fine together, even if their fighters didn't. Which is



Britton is pictured with his two sons in 1919—year he won the welter crown.

the way it had to be.

The situation that prevailed was tailor-made for a smart operator, or two of them. In 1915 Mike Glover was recognized as the welterweight champion after a long dispute over the title. When Britton defeated Glover he claimed the championship, but this too was contested. It was during this period that Lewis and Britton fought for the first time. The fight began with an argument when Britton noticed that Lewis was wearing a rubber mouthpiece, a device not yet sanctioned by boxing commissions. On the other hand, Lewis argued, it hadn't been banned, had it? After fifteen minutes of shouting and hair pulling, the mouthpiece was hurled—apparently by Morgan—far into the crowd. Lewis had the last word when he defeated Britton for their "personal welterweight title."

For nearly five years the two battled like caged tigers, back and forth across the country from Boston to New Orleans, and since no knockouts were registered, it was impossible to say who was the actual champion! That's how ridiculous the situation was. And not until 1919 when Britton succeeded in knocking Lewis out in the ninth round was he finally and decisively acknowledged the welterweight champion of the world. Although he and Lewis continued to stage wild brawls up until 1921, no other knockout took place. As a result, Britton wore the crown until Mickey Walker knocked it off in '22.

When classic bouts are recalled, the Britton-Walker title fight takes precedence over most of them, including the more famous heavyweight matches. For here was not only a superb exhibition of the boxing art, but a living tribute to a man's enormous courage. Whatever we choose to call that quality known as "heart," there will never be a more exciting demonstration of it than was seen in Madison Square Garden on the evening of November 1, 1922.

The 21-year-old Walker, from Elizabeth, New Jersey, was one of the most superbly-built fighters of all time. This little pit terrier, who was to earn most of his enduring fame as a middleweight, was then a brawling, never-stop-punching mauler who could also box, but only when necessary. He had justifiably earned a shot at Britton's title, and was held in such esteem by the bookies that they made him a 2-1 favorite at ringtime, although the betting had favored Jack at 3-1 earlier in the day.

As for Jack Britton, the gallant old champ was 37 and had been fighting for 17 long gruelling years. Early in the fight he was the legendary dancing master who had humbled the likes of Frankie Burns, Eddie Hanlon, Joe Thomas, Charley White, Mike O'Dowd, Glover, Jock Malone, Phil Kaplan, Johnny Griffiths—even Benny Leonard, on a foul—and countless others. His fabulous left could do no wrong, and his footwork was breathtaking, as was his "rolling off" of Walker's block-busting punches.

But this time his inability to follow up with a knockout right proved Jack's undoing during a crucial fight. For as the bout progressed it became more and more obvious that Britton could not hold off Walker's surging attacks. Walker's boring-in tactics could have only one result: they forced Jack to the defensive, thus tiring him and making his legs rubbery. In other words, it was not Mickey Walker who robbed Britton of his crown that night, but Father Time. For no one doubts that Jack fought a far more masterful fight than his slugging young opponent.

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JACK BRITTON

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From the sixth round, after Jack had given Mickey a rare boxing lesson, he began to lose the vital points that were his only means of possible salvation. By the ninth there was no remote chance of a win for the ancient gladiator. His blows lacked the power of a ten-year-old boy, and his arms were held up by will-power alone. His shuffling feet hardly left the canvas; only his bobbing head, always the most elusive target in boxing, kept Walker's knockout punches from doing their work.

When the inevitable decision was announced by the estimable Joe Humphreys, there took place one of the most memorable, and touching, rituals ever seen in the prize ring. As battered Jack Britton, bloody but proudly smiling, crossed the ring to congratulate the youthful new champion, Humphreys was seized by a noble inspiration. "Wait a minute!" he called to the throng of 13,000, already on their way out of the arena. He raised his hand for silence.

"Here's to the old champion, boys—three rousing cheers!" and Humphreys led the loudest cheering ever heard in the great Garden. Nearly an hour later, as Jack Britton walked slowly out of his dressing room, he was surrounded by a loyal group of well-wishers who again raised three heartfelt cheers for one of the most beloved champions of all time.

A real square guy who deserved such inspired adoration. ● end

QUIZ ANSWERS

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- 1—Sammy Mandell.
- 2—Freddie "Red" Cochrane.
- 3—Al Davis.
- 4—Bill Brennan.
- 5—Tony DeMarco.
- 6—Frank Moran.
- 7—Jack Root.
- 8—Stanley Ketchel, left, and Jack Johnson.
- 9—Battling Levinsky.
- 10—False. Louis won on points.

BUBI SCHOLZ

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here or abroad now doubted his ability to stand up against any middleweight in the world. Even the blase Americans had to like him, for they have always been partial to come-from-behind boys.

In November of '57 they liked him even more, for it was then that he fought his third American opponent. Until the Al Andrews affair, the only American to face Bubi had been Baby Day. Now he met Arizona's Jimmy Martinez, a very good middleweight. American observers said, "This is no petal-punching Al Andrews—Martinez can hit! We'll see how good Scholz really is now."

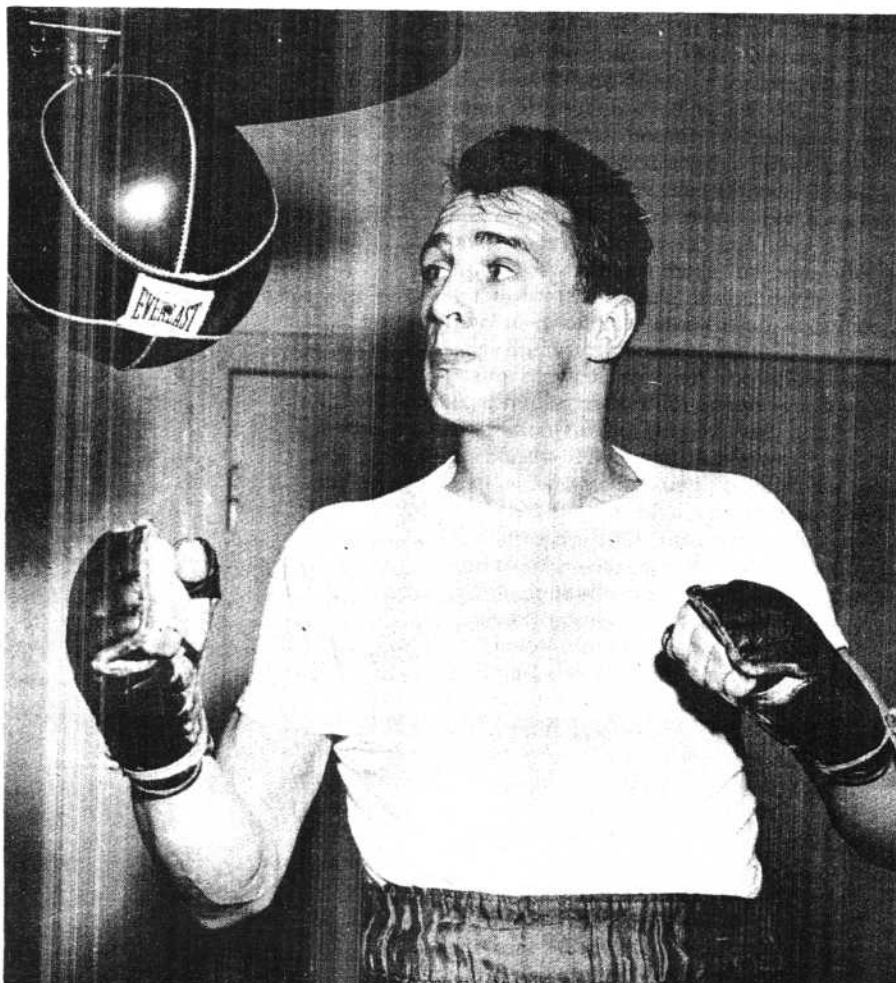
They saw him fight Martinez to a draw in one of the best middleweight bouts staged in Germany in a long time. The clamor arose all across Europe: "Match Bubi with Humez!"

It was done. Thus, in March of 1958 there took place the first Humez-Scholz fight for the European middleweight championship. Scholz, perhaps over-anxious, was decided by the rough-house style of the Frenchman. That, a lot of people decided, was that—the game Bubi was all right for run-of-the-mill opponents around Europe and the States, but he would never be fit for really first-class competition; his two-year bout with TB had seen to that. It had taken the starch out of him for good. He was written off as world championship material.

It was a mistake. For the Humez defeat was Bubi's first in 69 professional bouts! Luckily boxing people kept their heads. Scholz and Humez were re-matched in October, last year. By now Bubi, no longer a natural middleweight, had to train hard to get his weight down to 160. Because of the necessary slim diet—wine and one egg for breakfast, a steak and green salad at 5 P. M.—it was feared by the betting public that he would lose his strength. His chances against the very rugged Humez, already his conqueror, were rated very low by fight time.

The two men made up the ideal fight, for they were as unlike as any two men can be. Humez, an ex-miner, has craggy features and fights like a bar-room brawler, with all the appearance of a fiddler carb. Bubi Scholz is a stand-up fighter of the Tunney type, but with a punch. He wins no psychological battles by scaring his opponents at the beginning of a fight. Even when he's knocking you out, Bubi looks so gentle and inoffensive that you can't believe it's happening until you watch them raise his hand in victory.

The return Humez-Scholz bout took place in the 100,000 seat stadium that



BUBI SCHOLZ