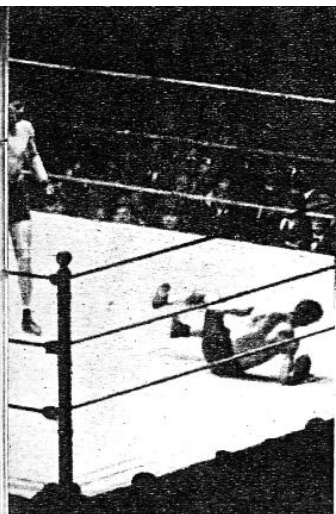


THE FABULOUS



INP

Overworked legends cloud many episodes in the lusty career of this remarkable fist-fighter but the records prove he was one of the greats

HARRY GREB sat on a trunk backstage at Hurtig and Seamon's Theatre in Harlem, where he was appearing with a burlesque show. It was an afternoon in . . . what, 1923 or 1924? He was the middle-weight champion of the world. He had been, although he weighed no more than 160 pounds at most, the American light-heavyweight champion, winning the title from Gene Tunney and then losing it back to him later on.

There were many who thought that, pound for pound, he was the greatest fighter they had ever seen. Pound for pound? How about the pounds he gave away to Tunney and Loughran and Tommy Gibbons and all the other light-heavyweights and heavyweights they threw at him? Jack Dempsey was the heavyweight champion. There were some who thought that Greb, because of his speed and whirlwind style of fighting, would close Dempsey's eyes and cut his face to pieces.

Now, this afternoon in the burlesque house, he sat on a trunk talking to a sportswriter. They had talked about one thing and another and the writer asked:

"Would you like to fight Dempsey?"

"How many rounds?" said Greb.

"I don't know. Just fight him."

He shook his head. "I could raise hell with Jack . . . for a little while," he said. "Six rounds . . . eight rounds. After that it might not be much fun. When he began to catch up with me and belt me . . ."

He shook his head again and then he laughed. "Tell Jack when you see him again," he said, "that I'll fight him six or eight rounds. We could make a lot of money."

Well, that was that. But the legend persists that Greb wanted to fight Dempsey for the heavyweight championship—over the 15-round route, of course—but that Jack Kearns, then managing Dempsey, wanted no part of such a match. As a matter of fact, Kearns has "admitted" that to friends and admirers of Greb, knowing they would like to hear him say he was afraid Harry would have clawed his tiger, and being a very obliging fellow when it suits him so. Dempsey, no doubt, has also contributed to the legend. Listen to him for a while on the subject of his own ring career and you might come away wondering how he licked anybody. And as for men he never fought—well, Joe Louis, for instance. He'll tell you he was lucky he wasn't around when Joe was fighting.

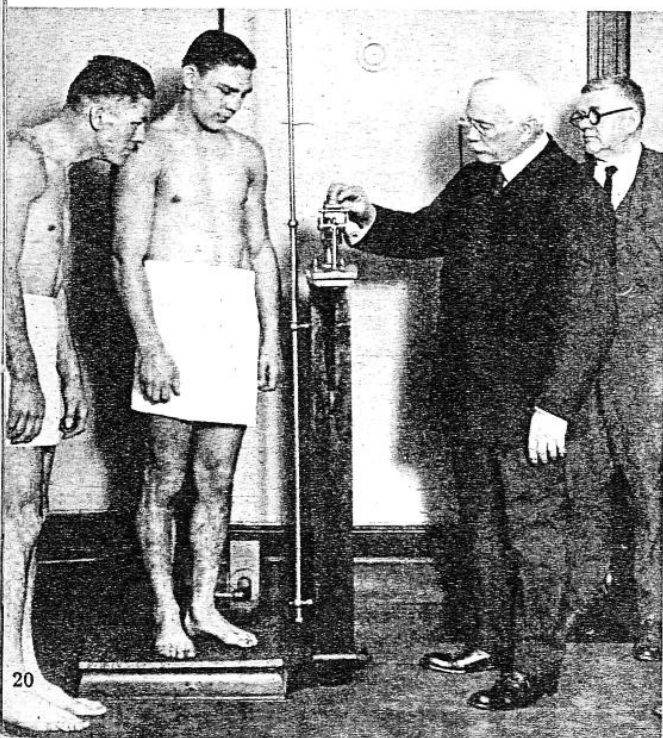
Another of the innumerable Greb legends is that he never trained in a gym and never went on the road but got himself in shape—when he was in shape—doing his roadwork on dance floors and playing handball with wine glasses against saloon mirrors. No one who knew him would deny that he was pretty close to the top among the playboys of the pugilists and that when he was rolling he rolled very high indeed. And that not only did he frequently go from a fight to a party, he occasionally went from a party to a fight. There was, for instance, the story his manager, Reddy Mason, once told of the prelude to one of his several fights with Gibbons.

"They are fighting in the Garden," Reddy said, "and we check in at the Pennsylvania Hotel in the morning. That afternoon, about three o'clock, we were hanging around the lobby and Harry says, 'I think I'll go up to the room and take a nap. Why don't you take a walk?'"

"Thinking nothing of it, I say, 'That's a good idea.

INP

The first time they met, Greb gave Gene Tunney (left) an artistic beating and lifted his American light-heavy title.



20

SPORT

Harry Greb

By
FRANK GRAHAM

I'll be back in about an hour.' When I get back, I go up to the room and there is no Greb. I figure I must have missed him in the lobby and I go down and look around but I can't find him. One of the elevator boys says to me, 'You looking for Greb?'

" 'Yes,' I says. 'I just been up to the room but he ain't there.'

" 'He ain't been there,' the boy says.

" 'Why,' I says, 'he tells me he is going to take a nap and I see him get into the elevator.'

"The boy says: 'I know you do. But you don't see him get out of it. He tells me to let him off at the mezzanine. There are some people waiting there for him and they all go downstairs and out the 33rd Street door. I know, because I am watching him.'

"I know where some of his favorite spots are and I go up to the room and start calling up, but he hasn't been to any of the spots and nobody has seen him. I wait up there. I have my dinner sent up to the room because I don't want to take a chance on missing him again by going out. We are supposed to be at the Garden at eight o'clock and I wait until a quarter to eight and then I hop a cab up there. I am afraid he won't be there and he ain't. It gets to be eight-thirty and then nine o'clock and, finally, he breezes in about nine-thirty.

" 'Hello,' he says.

"He takes off his coat and he is undoing his tie and I say to him, 'Hello! This is a fine time to say hello. Do you know what time it is?'

"He says, 'Sure. It's nine-thirty. But what's the hurry? We don't go on until ten o'clock.'

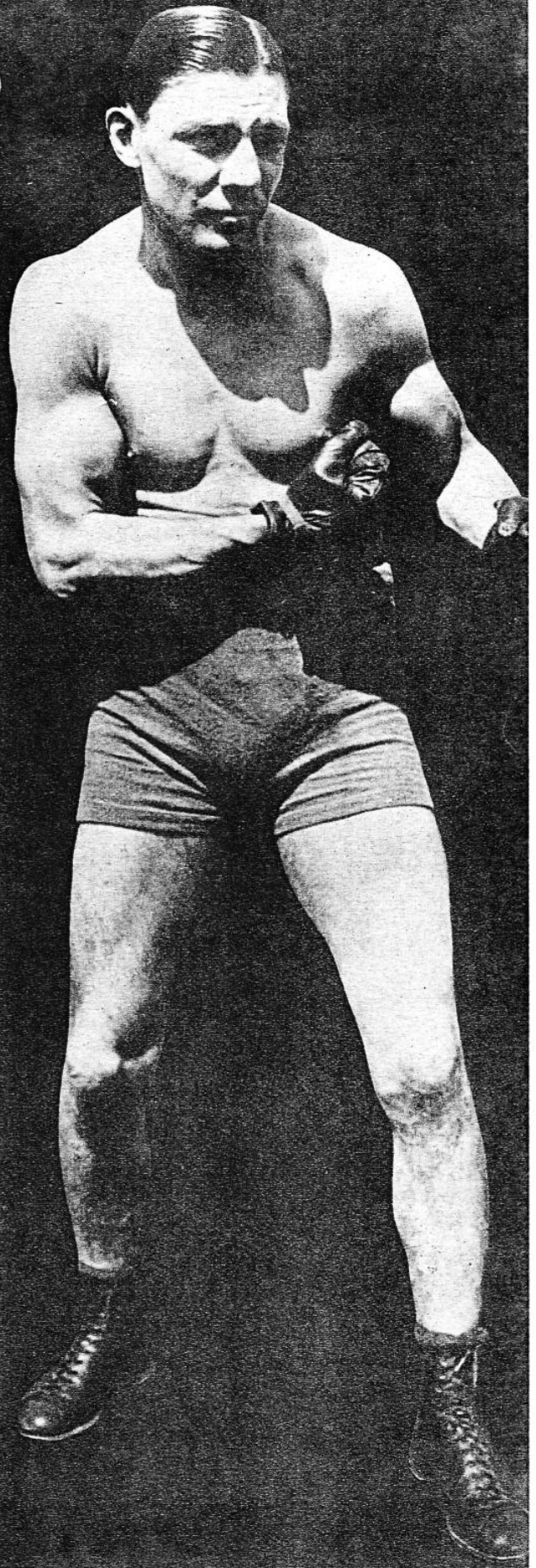
"There is no use in arguing with him or even asking him where he has been. He looks all right and, in fact, he is, and he goes in there and beats Gibbons in a tough 15-round fight."

That was the way it was that night. That was the way it must have been on other nights. But obviously, it couldn't have been that way as often as the weavers of the legend would have you believe. For some curious reason, they try to put their hero away as a thoroughly dissolute character whose pursuit of (→ TO PAGE 89)

INP

Greb was a natural middleweight but he fought anyone and everyone in the 288 bouts he had in 13 years.

MAY '52



The Fabulous Harry Greb

(Continued from page 21)

pleasure was so intense as to approximate insanity, and whose body and mind must have been wrecked by the excesses they ascribe to him.

The truth is that Harry Greb, setting out at the age of 17 in 1913, fought for some 13 years. That he had 288 fights—42 of them in 1919 alone. That, starting from Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, where he had his first fight, he traveled hundreds of thousands of miles, scarcely skipping a fight club from Los Angeles to New York and from New Orleans to Toronto. That, for example, between the 15th and the 31st of January in 1919, he fought Leo Houck in Boston, Young Fisher in Syracuse, Paul Sampson in Pittsburgh, Soldier Bartfield in Columbus and Tommy Robson in Cleveland—a total of 54 rounds against five tough opponents in 16 days. And that seven years later, in the last year of his fighting career and of his life, between the 11th and the 29th of January, he fought Roland Todd in Toronto, Joe Lohmon in Omaha, Ted Moore in Los Angeles and Buck Holy in Hollywood.

He rarely was seen in a gymnasium or running on the road because, obviously, for most of his fights he did his boxing in the ring and his roadwork in Pullmans. But for his big fights, he worked in training camps and hit the road every morning.

Do you suppose that, if he hadn't been in shape, he could have fought those fights, traveled those miles and beaten the men he did—welterweights, middleweights, light-heavyweights and heavyweights? That he could have fought at the pace he did, round after round, swinging punches from every angle, never letting up—using, between times, his elbows, his shoulders, his thumbs and the top of his head to inflict punishment on his opponents? Oh, yes, he did that, too. There never was a rougher, fouler fighter. He had no apology to offer for his tactics. Only an explanation: Fighting, he said, was a rough business. The only thing, then, was to be rougher than the other guy.

He could be, too.

He gave Tunney a frightful mauling in the Garden the first time they met. He never could do it again, although they fought four times more. But that first night, he gave Gene the full treatment.

"I sickened on my own blood," Gene once said.

He did the same to Tommy Loughran . . . to Gibbons . . . and to all the others he fought, including his favorite opponent, Chuck Wiggins. Chuck, a heavyweight out of Indianapolis, was a cop-fighter who did his roadwork in patrol wagons and, when it came to brawling in the ring, he and Harry were kindred souls. To each, the crash of his skull against the other's was sweet music, the scratch of the laces across the face a feeling sublime. They were two of a kind.

The high points of Greb's astonishing 13-year campaign of violence were his winning of the American light-heavyweight championship from Tunney in 1922, of the world middleweight championship from Johnny Wilson—although Wilson was a very ordinary fighter—in 1923, and his 15-round decision over Mickey Walker in 1925, when he put his middleweight title on the line for Mickey, who, at the time, was the welterweight champion. Another legend goes with that, by the way.

It is said that an hour or so after their fight in the ring, they had another on the sidewalk in front of Bill Duffy's Silver Slipper, one of New York's plush-lined speakeasies. The legend is that, arriving simultaneously at the joint, they met as they stepped out of their taxicabs and Walker turned to him and said:

"You may have licked me in the ring but you can't do it here!"

That Greb said: "The hell I can't."

That they fought, toe to toe, as a quickly gathering crowd formed a ring about them. That it was a better fight than the cash customers had seen and that one—or the other—scored a knockdown. There is . . . as there always is in things like this . . . another version of what happened. It is that Harry and Mickey did arrive in front of the Slipper at the same time and that they did snarl at each other but that the cop on the beat walked between them and said: "All right all right, break it up!" And that they broke it up and went to separate tables in the bar.

The notion here is that the latter version is the right one. But someone once figured that, on the basis of the number of first-hand stories he'd had of the sidewalk combat, at least 20,000 must have seen it. You don't suppose, do you, that 20,000 night-prowlers could be wrong?

Harry Greb's last fight was that in which he lost the middleweight championship to Tiger Flowers in New York on August 19, 1926. Through 13 rugged years, he had taken almost as many punches as he had thrown and countless retaliatory thumbs had been jammed into his eyes. For at least a year, he had been completely blind in one eye. Now the sight of the other was fading fast. An operation for the removal of the one eye was deemed necessary to save the other. He underwent the operation but did not recover from it. On October 26, he died, aged 31 years and two months.

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