

JOHNSON didn't DUMP IT!

By **SIDNEY JENNINGS** as told to **RAY ROBINSON**

●● It was 110 degrees in the shade the afternoon, 37 years ago, that Jess Willard knocked out Jack Johnson in Havana, Cuba. The controversy, ever since that day, about whether or not the great Johnson lost his heavy-weight title to Willard on a "tank" job has been just as hot.

I was at Havana's Oriental Race Track, where the fight was staged on April 5, 1915. I was seated next to the aisle, fourth row from the ring, and had an excellent view of the entire 26 rounds. In my opinion, despite all the reports that have been passed down through the years, Jack Johnson did *not* throw that fight!

I'll tell you how I happened to be in Havana for that famous brawl. In September, 1914, the Columbia, South Carolina *Gazette*, then owned by the U. S. Minister to Cuba, offered a position as chauffeur for the American Legation in Cuba. I learned of the job through a friend connected with the paper, got it and agreed to stay one year. Only 23 years old at the time, I was delighted with the prospect of working in another country.

I worked for eight months before the big bout, and during that time I travelled around Cuba quite extensively with the American Legation's footman-interpreter, James DeSolo.

In 1915, Johnson, who had held the world heavyweight title since 1908, was not the most popular athlete in existence. That was the era of the so-called "White Hope" search, an unfortunate period when men were judging a man's ability by the color of his skin. Since Jack was a Negro, and a very intelligent one, some people couldn't wait for a "White Hope" to come along and knock the title off his head. To add to the problem, Jack got into trouble with American authorities in 1912. He was railroaded into a Mann Act trial, and fled from the United States.

Thereafter he fought in Europe and South America, never daring to return to his native land. When Jack arrived in Havana, a few weeks prior to the fight with Willard, he visited the legation on several occasions. I had the opportunity of meeting him personally, and was greatly impressed by his physical condition. I've read, since, that Johnson was supposed to be hog-fat for that fight. That just isn't so. I'd say he was well-fed, but sleek, and in good shape for a man of 37.

I had little doubt that Johnson would win the fight. Public opinion also favored Johnson, on the basis of his past record and the fact that Willard, a giant of a man from Kansas, was not well known in Cuba at that time. The odds varied from 8 to 5 down to 6 to 5 on Johnson, but there wasn't much big betting.

Public interest, however, really was worked up over the fight. But at no time before the bout did I hear talk of either man throwing the fight. Today, of course, some people claim that Johnson, anxious to come back to America, was willing to permit "White Hope" Willard to

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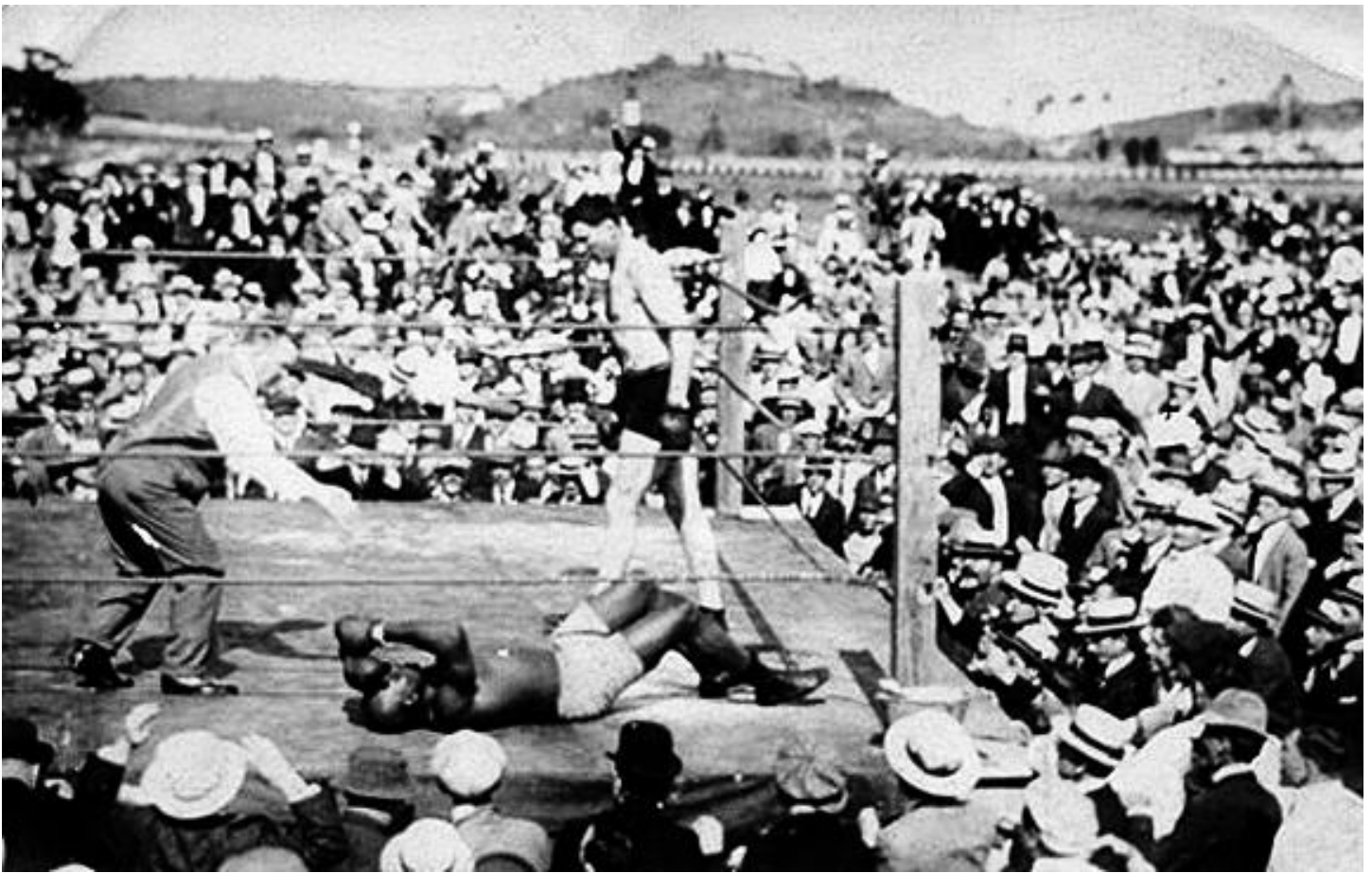
Dan, I think Sidney Jennings eyewitness account of the Willard-Johnson fight is a good story and it rings true to what really went on in those 26 rounds.

Nothing was said in the newspapers that hinted at a dive. Mike Gibbons was at ringside and he swore it was legit.

Pal JJ, Johnston

They've been calling the Willard-Johnson bout a "dive" for 38 years. But this eye-witness observer of that famous heavy-weight fight gives the lie to an ever-recurrent rumor

It has been popular, in recent years, to say that Jack Johnson "dumped" his heavyweight crown to Jess Willard in 1915. BOXING wanted to check on this Havana, Cuba, brawl, but of the estimated 20,000 people who saw that fight almost four decades ago, many are dead and others were too young to know what they saw. In addition, we weren't looking for an "informed" opinion from one of the fight crowd, many of whom were there and are still alive. We wanted the word of a typical fight fan. Here's how we got it. We ran a three-line ad under the commercial notices' section of a New York newspaper: "Looking for a boxing fan who attended Johnson-Willard fight in Havana, 1915. If you were there, call . . ." Seven phone calls came in. We finally settled on the story of Sidney Jennings, a gentleman from Connecticut, who tells, on these pages, his story of that fight and what he was doing so far from home in 1915.





LARGEST man Johnson ever met in ring, Jess Willard weighed 230 pounds, was 6'6" in socks. Jess reigned as champ 'til 1919.

win the championship, with the understanding that once he didn't own the title any longer he could re-enter the U. S. without the fear of being thrown into prison. But there's never been any proof; nobody knows with whom the deal was made; and the fact remains that Johnson waged a good fight for over 20 rounds before being knocked out. That doesn't sound like a "deal" to me—and it didn't look fake when I saw it from just a few feet away.

The fight was held a few miles outside of Havana, and there were about 15,000 to 20,000 people sitting in the intense heat of the tropical sun. Another 5,000 or so viewed the fight from the distant slopes and hills. Cubans made up a large percentage of the crowd. But a good-sized group of Americans had arrived in Havana in the first days of April to see the contest. Many Cuban and American women were present, as well as most of the big notables on the island.

I thought that the 110-degree heat wouldn't bother Johnson too much, and might actually give him a considerable advantage, because he had been living in the extreme heat of Buenos Aires and the Barbados before coming to Havana. James DeSolo, my friend from the legation who was sitting next to me, agreed with me. But it didn't work out that way.

Willard weighed over 230 pounds that day, and at 6' 6" he was probably the biggest man Johnson had ever faced in his life. Jess was 32 years old. Johnson, just a quarter of an inch over six feet, weighed 205½.

Johnson had been guaranteed \$30,000 plus European and South American rights to the motion pictures of the fight, which was scheduled for 45 rounds.

AT the start, both men appeared to be in top-notch condition. From the first round to the 16th the fight was Johnson's all the way. He did most of the leading, and seemed to possess all of his shiftiness and speed. Jack was smothering most of Willard's returns and tying him up badly in the in-fighting. He drew Willard's guard down several times and landed squarely on the big man's chin and head. He pounded away at Willard's face and head, and it seemed to me that blood was dripping from Willard's ears. Most of the time Johnson delivered ten blows to Willard's face and body to every one Jess landed in retaliation. The crowd was rather tense, expecting Willard to go down at any minute. But he didn't, despite the most terrific punishment I have ever seen any man take in the ring.

During the 17th round I noticed Johnson's wife get up and leave the race track arena. She was crying. Perhaps it was woman's intuition, for her husband's luck began to

take a real turn for the worse.

Willard, surviving most of Johnson's best blows, then put on his rally. From the 17th round on, it was Willard's fight. Johnson hardly seemed able to defend himself. The pounding that he had given Willard seemed to have wasted his reserve energy. His famous grin was wiped off his sweaty face.

I have read stories saying the first 25 rounds of the fight were sluggish. That is inaccurate and unfair, and made up by people who weren't present that afternoon.

In the 25th round, Willard, completing his wearing-down process, unleashed a terrific right-hand swing into the area of Johnson's heart. The glove was almost buried in flesh, and Jack's knees sagged—a look of agony replaced his tired smile. Certainly that was the beginning of the end of Jack Johnson.

A few rounds before that blow Johnson had stopped leading, and the battle had slowed to a walk. Willard seemed confident then that it was just a matter of time before one of his wild-swinging rights would knock the remaining air out of his rival. And that punch came in the 25th round.

JOHNSON was slow answering the gong for the 26th round. He was seemingly out on his feet, and looked completely dazed. Willard, on the other hand, appeared fresh. He met Johnson practically in his own corner, and delivered a series of quick punches—first to the head, then to the stomach, and then a final crushing right to the jaw. The last blow lifted Jack right off his feet, landed him flat on his back, and knocked him out cold.

At this point, of course, the crowd went wild and started throwing seats and tearing down the ring for souvenirs. The remaining details in the ring remain rather obscure, for I was too busy defending myself from this hysterical mob. The celebration carried on throughout the night in traditional Spanish fashion.

After returning to the U. S. a few months later, I was very surprised to hear the talk about Johnson throwing the fight. But I firmly believe Johnson tried to win with all his might, and for as long as his endurance held up.

What many of the skeptics point to, in taking the position that Johnson "went into the tank," is a photograph of the end of that fight showing Jack on his back, with his knees flexed, and his gloves apparently shielding his eyes from the scalding rays of the Cuban sun.

THERE is no reason to believe that Johnson was shading his eyes from the sun as he waited for Referee Jack Welch to toll off the count of 10. It was more likely a sure indication that he was exhausted and stunned. In addition, at the moment the picture was taken, Jack's hands might have been passing over his eyes ultimately to rest next to his chin or further down his body.

I will never believe what the scandalmongers say about the finish of this fight, because it is something I saw with my own eyes. Johnson was a beaten, tired man, five years older than Willard. Willard had paced himself for just such an ending, had hit Johnson hard and often in the last two rounds, and had completed the job with as heavy a right-hand punch as you will ever see.

That was no Cuban Dive on April 5, 1915. ★

Readers: If you have any favorite old-time fight that you would like to have us "cover" for you—just as it happened many years ago—please write to The Editor, Boxing, 270 Park Ave., New York City.