

WILLIE MEEHAN: THE FAT

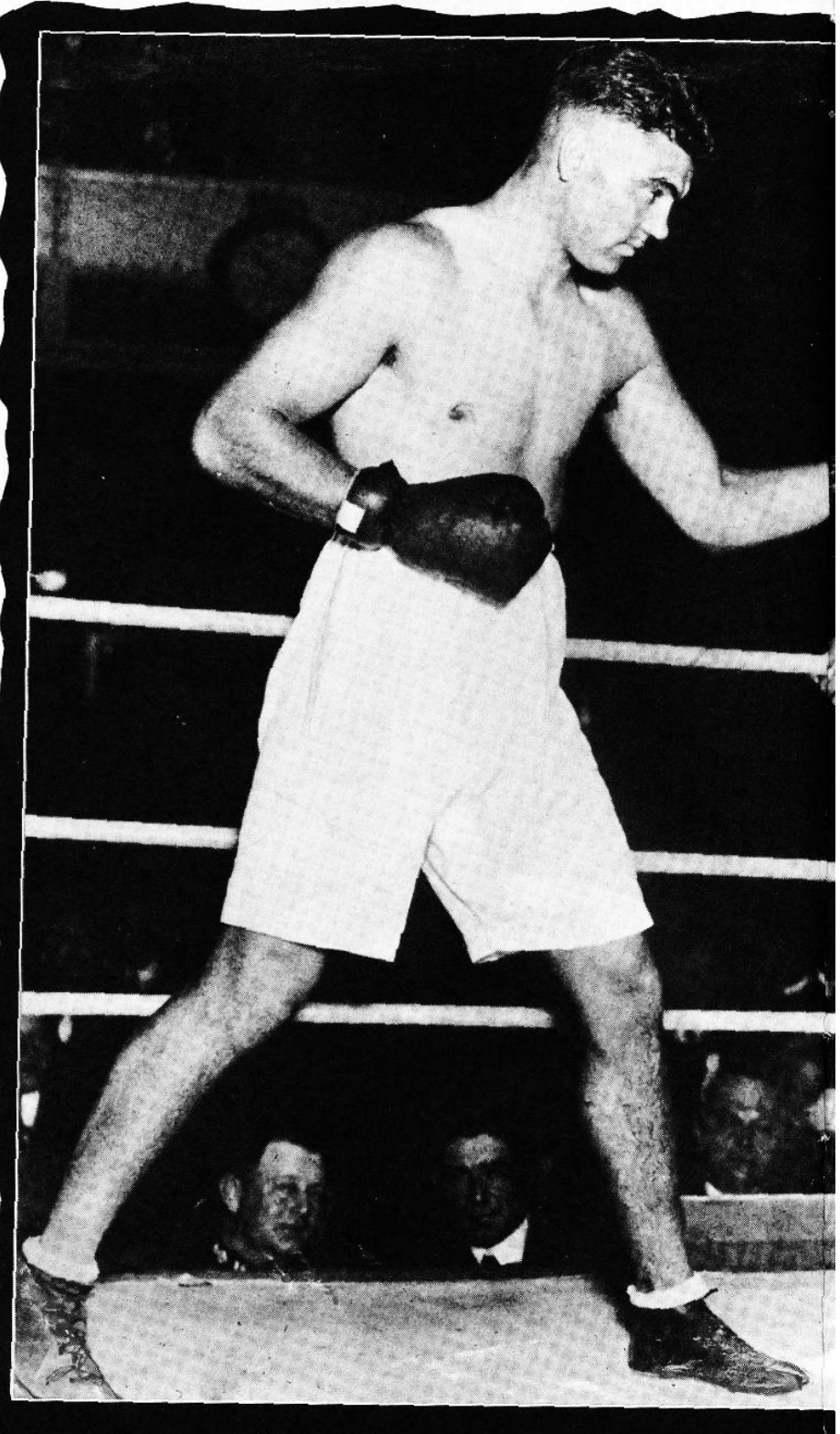
By Peter Ehrmann

Perhaps nobody in ring history provided more heart-stopping thrills than Jack Dempsey. The savagery and controversy of his fights with Jess Willard, Georges Carpentier, Luis Firpo, and Gene Tunney still resonate more than six decades after they gripped the attention of the world. But not so well-recalled is a Dempsey fight so stunning that it even knocked a whole world war off the front pages.

"One of the most famous naval engagements of the [First World] War," is what the newspapers called the September 14, 1918, meeting between Dempsey, then riding a crest toward the heavyweight title, and a squat, blubbery, cauliflowered pug named Willie Meehan. The sportswriters were being hyperbolic, but only a little, for the Dempsey-Meehan fight, conceived as just a means of keeping the young "Manassa Mauler" loose for an impending fight with Battling Levinsky, became the center of controversy throughout the war-weary country. That's because Meehan, a jukebox on feet, won the decision.

Less than a month earlier, Dempsey had become the number-one contender for Jess Willard's crown by taking apart 6'7" Fred Fulton in just 18 seconds. "Jack The Giant Killer" they called him after that, and when he entered the ring with Meehan in the San Francisco Civic Center to fight a four-round bout for the benefit of the U.S. Army and Navy Physical Education Fund, it was considered the biggest mismatch in the Bay City since San Francisco lost to the earthquake.

Trouble was, Willie was no giant, at least not lengthwise. Born on Christmas Day in 1893, Meehan, whose real name was Eugene Walcott, had grown up to resemble Santa Claus. While Dempsey had picked up several ferocious ring nicknames, Willie's was "Fat Boy." He had actually started his boxing career in 1909 as a flyweight, but within a year had grown into a featherweight and then ascended through all of the other divisions until



BOY WHO BEAT DEMPSEY

Dempsey squares off with the short, rounded Meehan before their famous California four-rounder in 1918. Referee Eddie Graney looks on.



he was a 5'9" heavyweight. Awkward and slow, Willie was not without durability, and nobody (including Jack Dempsey in two previous encounters, one a Dempsey win on points, the other a draw) had knocked him out.

At the time of their third meeting, the Fat Boy was a member of the U.S. Navy, teaching boxing to recruits at the Naval Reserve Training Station at San Pedro, California. A lot of fighters pulled similar light duty in the war, but Dempsey was not in the service at all and later would be acquitted of charges that he was a "slacker."

Boxing matches in California then were limited to four rounds, and in the second round, Dempsey dumped Meehan on the canvas with a left hook. Jack's punch caught Willie in his doughy breadbasket, and as he felt its impact, the Fat Boy made a famous announcement to his antagonist: "I'm going down, Mr. Dempsey, but I'll be right back up."

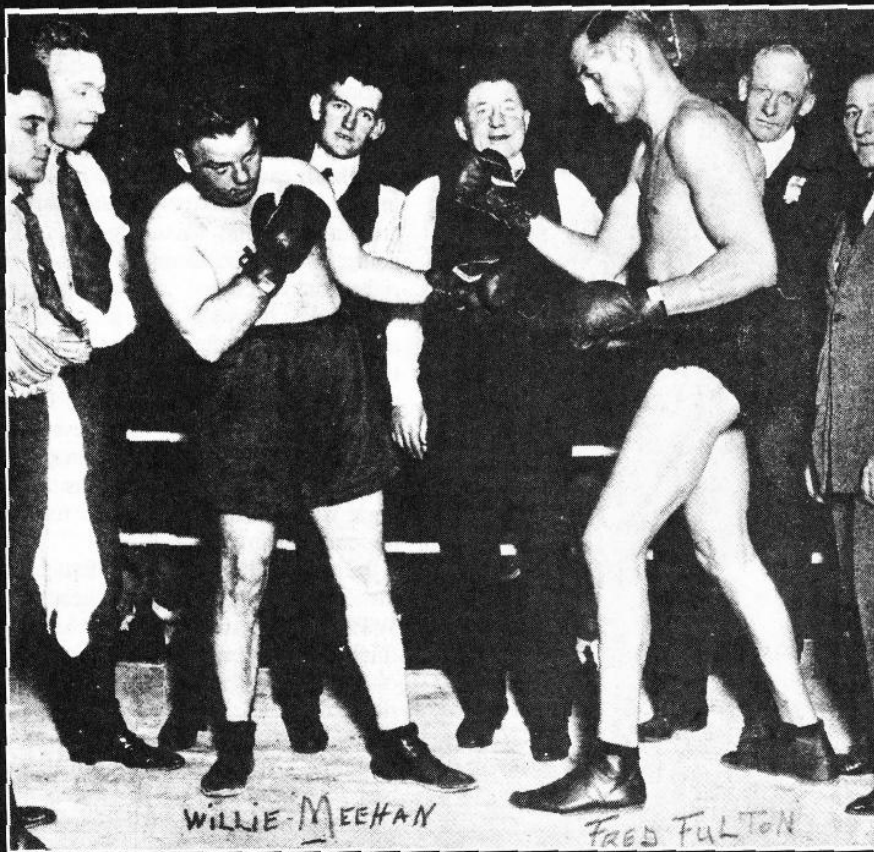
And so he was, and a newspaper account of the fight states that "the third round found Willie fully recuperated . . . and he fairly tore at Dempsey, swinging his arms from every angle. He startled Dempsey with his comeback, and the latter was forced back to the ropes before he regained his equilibrium."

In the final round, Jack banged up his left fist on Meehan's head, and Willie resumed the initiative. After the final bell rang, reported the *San Francisco Bulletin*, "amid the wildest enthusiasm that has greeted a pair of boxers in the local ring in several years, referee Eddie Graney awarded Willie Meehan the decision . . ."

The result caused an uproar in boxing circles, and Dempsey's manager, Jack "Doc" Kearns, howled the loudest, although the debacle was largely his fault, since so confident had he been of a Dempsey knockout victory that he had let pass a chance beforehand to make the fight a no-decision affair. Thanks to Graney's poor judgment, railed Kearns, Dempsey's reputation as a coming champion had suffered a crippling blow. (So had Jack's



During World War I, Meehan taught boxing in the Navy (above left). While employed in a grocery after his retirement (above right), did Willie eat the profits? Squaring off with huge Fred Fulton in 1918 (below).



left hand, and his fight with Levinsky was cancelled.)

When word of Kearns' tantrum reached referee Graney, he discerned something downright unpatriotic, if not even seditious, in it.

"All the boys who boxed last Friday night," he said in a statement issued to the press, "were expected to forget all

about themselves and their professional futures and give their services freely and wholeheartedly to a benefit intended to make the men of the U.S. Army and Navy more physically fit to fight their country's battles. Yet, in spite of this, it is now stated that by reason of the decision against Dempsey, he has lost his chances to make money as the

man who has the best claim to a championship contest.

"But what about Meehan? He enlisted in the Navy when his country called him, and he will go on, cheerfully facing death daily at \$35 per month. All that he takes from his victory over Dempsey is the glory of it and the memory of the applause of 10,000 people that followed him from the ring. Lion-hearted men like Willie Meehan are winning the fight for the liberty of the world today—and without such men the fight could not be won."

That sounded good to Willie, even though the closest he had ever come to "cheerfully facing death" in the line of duty was when an overenthusiastic swabbie got too boisterous during a lesson with the gloves. In no time, the Fat Boy's photograph, in full Navy dress and with two black eyes, blossomed in newspapers everywhere, accompanied by the announcement of his newest fighting ambition:

"Having polished off the toughest of 'em on this side of the water," read the caption, "he wants to go after the meanest of them all on the other side. 'Now,' he says, 'let me get a crack at the Kaiser!'"

However, Fat Willie and Kaiser Bill never did come to scratch. In fact, the closest Meehan got to the war in Europe was Minneapolis, where a couple of weeks after the Dempsey fight he showed up to start a vaudeville tour. (This was typical of the boxers of that era, who would rake in heavy shekels between ring engagements by sparring a few rounds in theaters and favoring audiences with speeches about the virtues of clean living.)

Willie's sudden reputation as a heavyweight phenomenon brought out big audiences, but they went home scratching their heads in puzzlement at his win over the great Dempsey. Said one newspaper account after Willie's opening sparring matinee with Kid Mc-

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WILLIE MEEHAN

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Coy: “. . . He did not make a particularly glowing impression on the fistic fans of the Mill Town. Fat and flabby, actually awkward in the ring, he does not appear to be a man who could do the things he has against the top-notchers. It is his boast that he has not trained a day in his life—and his appearance bears out that statement.”

The Fat Boy's frankness about his carefree lifestyle cancelled out the speech on clean living, in lieu of which his manager, Joe McCloskey, decided to have Willie stand in the footlights and sing. The popular song of the time (at least in military encampments), “Oh, How I Hate To Get Up In The Morning!” was chosen by McCloskey, and as the train pulled out from San Francisco for Minnesota, Meehan set about learning the words. The trip took several days, and nobody aboard the train got any sleep as Willie rehearsed at the top of his prodigious lungs at least 50 times a day.

“By the time we reached Minneapolis,” recalled McCloskey later, “Willie knew the song. The first thing I did when we arrived at the showhouse was to see that Willie remembered it. So I called the piano player and had them put it on. He went through it in grand style.

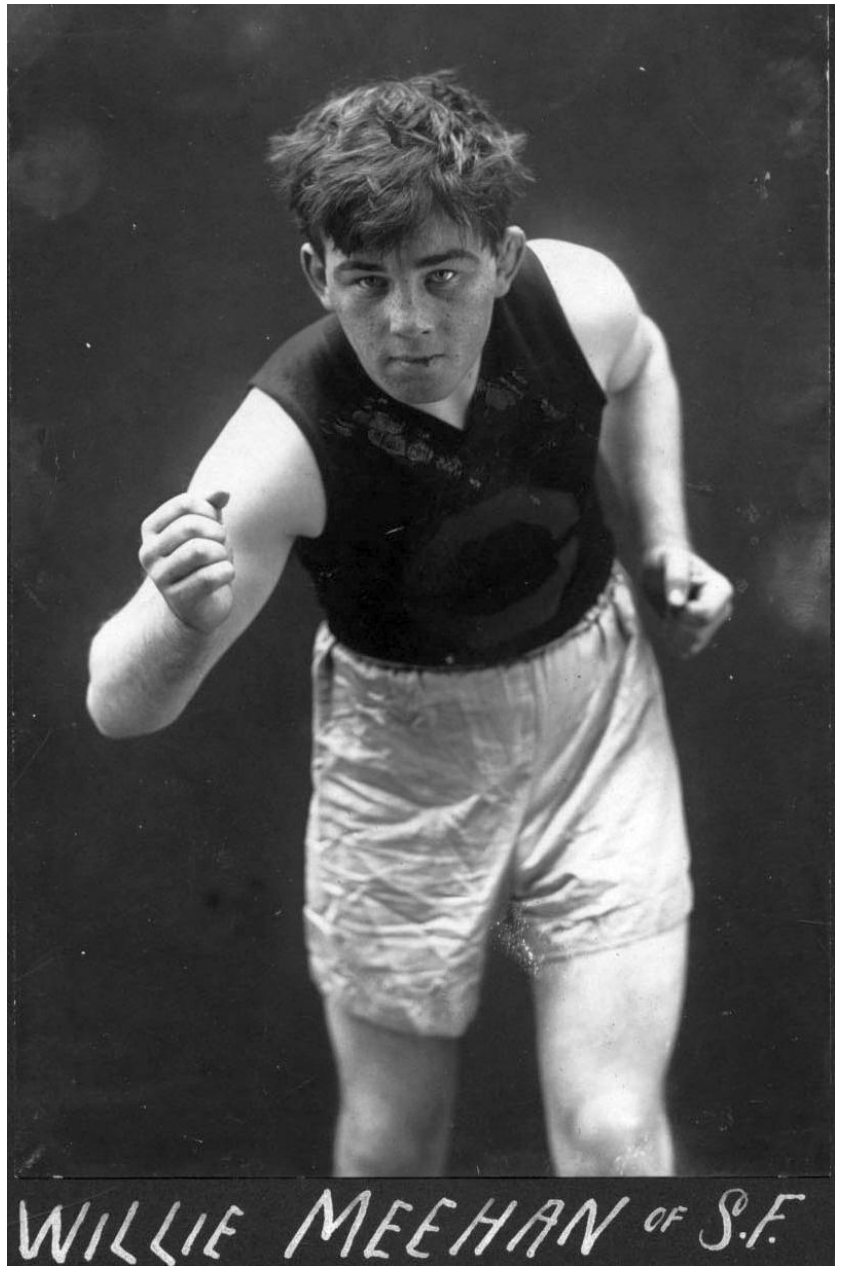
“Two hours later, Willie was introduced to the audience in sailor togs, and the orchestra started the tune of ‘Oh, How I Hate To Get Up In The Morning!’ And Willie stepped up to the footlights to sing.

“But would you believe it—he had forgotten the words and had to leave the stage. Could anyone beat that?”

Only Kid McCoy. A day later he broke two of Meehan's ribs in a sparring session, and Willie's vaudeville career was over.

He returned to California, and just over a month later, the national spotlight went out on him altogether when Meehan lost badly to previous Dempsey victim Fulton. Meehan fought on until 1923, but his boxing career had reached its zenith with that astounding win over Dempsey, who, of course, survived that ignominy and became champion in 1919 and a ring immortal.

Willie Meehan died in obscurity at age 62, on February 9, 1953, but he, too, lives on, if for no other reason than today there are more Fat Boys out there than Dempseys. ■



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