



Johnny Ertle & The Great Eastern Schism of 1915

The world of professional prizefighting has always been one filled with controversies; some big, and some small; and a few even sinister. Even today, the sport is largely unregulated, and operates under the auspices of whichever banana republic organization is overseeing a particular bout. Clouding the sport even more, has been the existence of certain managers and promoters whose money, influence, and connections have affected the making of matches, and the unmaking of them as well. Never more has this been evident than in world title fights. All too often, having the right kind of influential connections in the game has shaped world title fights, and sometimes, even the results; turning history into heresy, and robbing certain fighters of their just due. It is the opinion of this author, that the story of little Johnny Ertle, is just such a story.

In 1915, professional boxing was rapidly ascending as the nation's most popular sport. Minnesota had only recently re-legalized prizefighting in the spring of that year, and yet the state could already boast of such leading contenders as: Mike & Tommy Gibbons, Mike O'Dowd, Billy Miske, and big Fred Fulton. Add to that list, a fiery, little Bantamweight by the name of Johnny Ertle. Ertle, who stood just 4' 11" tall, was nicknamed, "Kewpie" after the little baby-faced Kewpie dolls that were immensely popular among children and collectors of the day. Despite his height, Ertle was a rather well put-together fellow with a strong frame and perhaps the quickest hands in his division. Having started his career at the age of 16 on illegal "sneak fight" cards in St. Paul, Johnny won his first 25 contests, via either KO's or newspaper decisions. Managed

by well-known boxing aficionado, Mike McNulty; Ertle had progressed into a bona-fide contender for the Bantamweight crown. His loss to fellow contender, Memphis Pal Moore in 1915 didn't hurt his laurels a bit, as he bounced back with three consecutive wins, including two back-to-back victories over Eddie Coulon. Newspaper verdicts included, Ertle was now a fantastic 28-1 and known across the country as a leading challenger for the Bantamweight crown held by Kid Williams of Baltimore, Maryland.

Mike McNulty had been in contact with Sam Harris, the manager of Williams, for close to a year before the two parties finally came to terms on August 22nd. The fight was contracted to be in St. Paul for ten rounds for Williams' title. It was advertized often as being, "the first world title fight in Minnesota in 28 years". This was true, as Minnesota had banned prizefighting since 1892, and had not seen a title fight on its soil since the great John L. Sullivan had come there to defend his crown against Patsy Cardiff in 1887. The state was abuzz in excitement. Not only was Ertle getting a chance at the world title, but fellow townsman Mike Gibbons, was preparing for a huge showdown with the legendary Packey McFarland.

Harris and Williams had heard of Johnny Ertle, but stated that they had never seen him fight. They had read of his quick hands and feet, but felt that they had little to fear from the small 18 year-old fighter. Nevertheless, they arrived plenty early in town to set up camp, with Harris using big cash to lure away Johnny's long-time friends and sparring partners in Saph McKenna and Jimmy Cashill for Williams to use while training at the Gibbons' Brothers gym in downtown St. Paul. Ertle trained just a few blocks away at Woods' Gym, putting in rounds with his brother Mike, as well as with Kid Izzo and Billy Whelan.

The fight was a furious one, with both Minneapolis and St. Paul newspapers all reporting that the first two rounds were even ones, with Williams focusing on Ertle's body, and Ertle connecting often with flurries to the champion's head. Williams was cut in the third by an Ertle right hand, but came storming back with a series of two-fisted attacks that earned him the round, despite being warned by the respected referee, George Barton for repeated elbows, head butts, and low blows. The fourth was similar in that Williams was having a dominating round, but just as he had delivered a solid blow to Ertle's stomach that hurt the challenger, and even buckled his knees, Williams then struck him low, dropping Ertle on the foul. Ertle arose and complained, as did the crowd when they shouted, "Foul!" Barton agreed, and warned the champ again to watch his foul tactics. Williams agreed. In the fifth setto, Williams and Ertle were trading furiously in the center of the ring, when Williams parked a strong uppercut straight to the groin of Ertle, sending him staggering backwards in pain. Cries of "Foul!" were heard from Johnny's corner immediately, and Barton agreed, calling over the ringside physician, Dr. R.A. Plankers to examine Ertle more closely. Dr. Plankers told Barton that indeed Ertle had been fouled, pointing to his dented aluminum supporter as evidence. Barton then disqualified the champion on the spot. It was over with. Eddy Reddy of the Capitol City Athletic club then had the announcer inform the crowd via the PA system that Williams had been disqualified, and Ertle was the new Bantamweight Champion of the world. Kid Williams had lost the fight by DQ. Immediately, Sam Harris jumped into the ring and began to cause a riot. "*Would you try and rob a boy of his title on a blow to the stomach?*" he cried to Barton. Williams was recorded by St. Paul reporter Ed Shave, as being dumfounded in the center of the ring, and shedding tears while saying, "*I did not*

hit him low. I did not hit him low.” He then turned to Harris and was heard saying, “*Can they take my title away from me like this?*” Harris’ complaints on the fairness of the blow fell on deaf ears to referee Barton and the Minnesota Boxing Commission, who was seated ringside. Harris then did something that would later come back to discredit his forthcoming claims, when to quote fight reporter E.R. Hosking of the Saint Paul Pioneer Press on September 11, 1915, “*Sam Harris, Williams’ manager, while contending that the decision was the rankest robbery in the history of the ring in this country, admitted that technically at least, Ertle is the champion and, with tears in his eyes, he begged Mike McNulty for a return match in the near future*”. Harris also gave the public statement to reporters that, “*I only hope Ertle will give the Kid a return match and it won’t take him long to show who is the real champion.*” These two comments and others like them would later work against the influential east coast manager. Needless to say, the controversy had only just begun.

George Barton, one of the most respected referees in the history of the sport, stated to the Press that Williams had repeatedly used his elbows as well as butted Ertle throughout the five-round affair, saying, “*I warned him between the second and third rounds that these tactics were putting him in danger of being disqualified, but he persisted and he got what was coming to him. It was entirely unnecessary for Williams to resort to such work, for in my opinion, he was showing the class to be expected of a champion.*”

After the fight, Harris met with McNulty in an attempt to secure a rematch, and though McNulty accepted, stated that he was not inclined to grant it in the immediate future. Just as Williams had opted for more than a few “soft” title defenses during his reign as champion, McNulty and Ertle too, also were interested in making some money with their new title, and although they consented to facing Williams again, Williams would not be their first title defense. Harris and Williams were reported by the St. Paul newspapers to have been enraged, and then took their concerns to the Minnesota Boxing Commission before heading back east. It wasn’t long after their return home to Baltimore that Harris and Williams began exerting their influence wherever they went. One has to remember, that this was in the days of slow moving communications. There was no television, email, or internet to easily monitor the words and actions of others. Harris took advantage of that reality, telling all who would listen to him his versions and reasons of what had happened in St. Paul. And as one of the more famous boxing managers in the country, virtually ALL of his long-time friends at the major newspapers appear to have taken every word he told them as gospel truth. Harris made many excuses as to how they were robbed in Minnesota, ranging from Minnesota’s no-decision boxing laws to weight issues, to every other reason under the sun. He even fabricated that Williams had Ertle down on the canvas a handful of times and that Ertle was nearly knocked out, hence his copout of claiming a foul. Clever guy, that Harris fellow. Ertle was never down in the fight other than from a foul in the fourth and again in the fifth—and Harris above all people knew this. But people believed him.

To be completely clear on what the Minnesota sporting community felt about the Ertle-Williams affair, is to say that they felt bad about it. Most fight reporters even expressed that much in their articles describing the fight. They had all wanted to see a title lost by the champion going out on his back, not on a foul; but that’s not what happened. The Minnesota reporters even described the event as, “a blow to the game,”

and “an unfortunate ending”. But these were sentiments expressed to describe their feelings that they felt bad about Williams having lost his title on a foul that most felt was probably not intentional. Many even predicted that Ertle’s new title would be scrutinized by the boxing community, but none denied that he was the new champion of the world, as all knew that one could lose fights on a foul.

So why has history only acknowledged Johnny Ertle as a “title claimant” and not the linear Bantamweight champion? That’s a good question, and a tough one to answer, particularly if you are Harris or Williams. Just as a champion can lose his title today by getting knocked out or disqualified, the same applied then. It would seem then, that history did indeed get it wrong, in by-passing Johnny Ertle as a lineal recognized world champion; instead of relegating him to a small font asterisk in the history books. Though the case for Ertle seems overwhelming, and in an effort of two-sided fairness to Williams, let us run through the reasons cited by his supporters and those that history tried to use to leave the Kid’s name etched over the St. Paul Kewpie’s.

- 1. The weight limit for the fight was 118 lbs ringside. The weight limit would have had to have been 116 lbs ringside for it to be a title fight.*** Not true. There were no “set in stone” rules in 1915 regarding the weight limits in the United States. In fact, in many cases the champion stated the weight; just as both Bob Fitzsimmons and Joe Gans had done in prior years. Just as the champion always holds the cards in granting the conditions of a title defense (which was true even more in 1915 than today), it was Harris and Williams that consented to the title being at stake, and they who also told Ertle and McNulty the terms regarding weight, not the other way around (which should come at no surprise, as Williams had a terrible time making even the 118 lbs for the Ertle fight). Ertle and McNulty wanted 116 for the smaller Kewpie’s advantage, thus forcing the much larger Williams to diet down. Harris and Williams stated 118 ringside. Also, one of the only authoritative bodies that anyone in the boxing world at this time listened to was the National Sporting Club (NSC) out of London, England. In 1909 the NSC fixed limits on the eight weight classes, with Bantamweight changing from 116 to 118 pounds. Finally, Sam Harris was reported by the United Press as having attended the summit held in Cleveland, Ohio on 8/21/15 hosted by the National Association of Boxing Promoters, at which they specifically consented to honoring the new Bantamweight limit of 118 lbs. in the U.S. Oddly enough, whether one agrees that Williams was right to keep claiming that he was the champ or not, he never did fight again at 116 pounds as far as this author is aware of. In fact, when he ignored Ertle’s claim and lost his alleged title to the general public against Pete Herman in January of 1917, he weighed 118 pounds. On a final note regarding this false argument, it should interest the reader to know that even the staunchest supporters of this version of history like to try and point out that the issue of weight class limits was not “officially” settled in the U.S. until the passing of the Walker Law in 1920. Oh, really? Well then, Kid Williams and Sam Harris should be more relieved than anyone, as that would then mean that Williams did not have to lose his title to Pete Herman in 1917, as that fight was at 118 (at the champion’s choosing I assume), and yet no one (including Harris and Williams) ever even

tried to spin the 116 vs. 118 argument out of that situation. It doesn't quite add up, does it? The spin on supposed weight limits for the Ertle title defense was just that—spin and yarn.

2. ***The disqualification of Williams cannot take his title under the laws governing boxing in Minnesota at that time, which stated that no decisions could be rendered. Hence, Williams cannot lose his title.*** This argument was allegedly started by Sam Harris as well, but in reality, Harris knew better. He and Williams didn't leave the state of Minnesota until after first meeting with the Minnesota Boxing Commission chairman (Frank Thompson) and the rest of his commissioners to protest referee George Barton's actions. Harris argued that according to Minnesota laws, that no decision could be rendered. Harris knew all along of course, that his argument was a weak one, for most states that banned official decisions also honored wins by knockout or disqualification, as those were the only two results a fight could end up with where it would be impossible to ignore the definitive ending of the bout. Harris tried his best to say the laws did not say one could win by knockout or by foul, but again Harris knew better. He and Williams had fought in many states that had identical laws, and those states also held that wins were indeed allowed by KO or DQ. The commission admitted that those words were not specifically listed in the verbiage of the law, and offered at their very next meeting to include those words for clarification, but Thompson went on to clarify that wins by knockout and disqualification were always meant to be covered under Minnesota law, otherwise no one would take the state seriously if they were to deny someone a win when they had knocked another man out, and then stated that if they did not allow someone to lose via disqualification, then there would be nothing to deter any dirty antics in the ring, as no punishment could be rendered.

All of these explanations were nothing more than a formality. Harris knew the fight game. He had been around longer than most, and had been a part of many important fights in many different states. This is one of the spots that I alluded to earlier that would prove to give Harris trouble in the credibility department. He had already been on the record as having admitted that he knew that Ertle was "technically the champion". He would not have made that statement if he was not well-versed in the laws governing the fight. The commission also used precedence on their side to justify their upholding of Barton's actions, citing that when Matt Brock stopped hometown favorite Billie De Foe, just a week earlier over in Minneapolis, they honored that as an official decision as a KO for Brock. On a larger scale, they reminded Harris of Ad Wolgast losing his world title on a foul in his fight against Willie Ritchie in 1912. Harris had no legs to stand on, and so he and Williams left town to tell their tales out east to those that could not check his facts.

3. ***The title was never on the line in this fight.*** Is that so? Then everyone else (including Harris) must have gotten confused for about three weeks, as they did nothing but speak of the title defense against Ertle. This argument was made by

a few of Harris' best friends in the New York media. The only people that bought into this argument were those that wanted to believe it, as everyone in Minnesota and the surrounding states such as Wisconsin, knew full-well that this was a world title fight. Williams had even helped the Capitol City Athletic Club and its promoters help sell the fight by performing public sparring sessions at the Gibbons' Brothers Gym for the Twin Cities' Press. Incidentally, both the Minneapolis and St. Paul newspapers ran large advertisements clearly stating that this fight was for Williams' world title. Yet, no cries of false advertising ever came from Williams or Harris. The fact that it was a world title fight was the main reason Eddy Reddy used to justify his high ticket prices when grilled by reporters upon the announcement of the fight in late August. Not to mention the fact that Williams and Harris stayed at the St. Paul Hotel in downtown St. Paul, just a few blocks down the same street as the site of the fight, the St. Paul Auditorium; which bore large signs on the outside of its walls advertising the world title fight. And if none of this were enough, Harris had already gone on record upon arrival to St. Paul in August when he and Williams first got off of the train. They were asked by St. Paul reporters if Williams was going to play it safe just to keep the title, or if he would mix and make a fight of it. Harris' answer? He assured the Press that there would be no stalling from Williams in the fight and stated, "*We are here to fight. We shall not play safe simply to defend the title. Williams will knock Ertle out if possible.*" Minnesotans knew this comment well, as it only appeared in no less than three different newspapers. But Harris must have known that those out east didn't read Minnesota newspapers, and he conveniently never mentioned his repeated acknowledgments of the title defense. Once again, Harris falls greatly short.

4. ***It was only a 10 round fight; not a 12, 15, or 20 rounder which were typical of a world championship fight.*** Typical maybe, but by no means the rule. If it was, then Harris and Williams need to greatly cut short their claim of the Kid's number of title defenses. In fact, they'd have to say that they never defended it at all prior to Ertle, given the fact that Kid Williams had never fought a single fight longer than 10 rounds since winning the title from Johnny Coulon a year earlier. Those that perpetuated this argument showed little knowledge of Minnesota boxing laws, and what's worse, demonstrated a lack of basic journalistic due diligence, as they had obviously not even contacted the Minnesota Boxing Commission to check their facts before printing their stories. If they had, they would have easily learned that Minnesota law capped boxing matches at 10 rounds maximum; world title fight or not. This is why in 1919 when world Middleweight champion Mike O'Dowd defended his title against Mike Gibbons in St. Paul, the fight was limited to the same 10 rounds; yet, no one in the world disputed whether or not O'Dowd's title was on the line in that fight, as everyone in the fight game knew it was.

In the weeks and months following the Ertle victory, newspapers (mostly out east) began writing articles that seemed more like essays, describing "why" Williams was still the champion. One writer in particular, who went by the alias "Ringside" and wrote for

the Lima News in Ohio, tried his best to point to the weight issue as well as the Minnesota boxing laws. He also used the well-exposed propaganda from Harris that Ertle had been knocked down a handful of times in the fight and was looking for a way out. He even went so far as to claim that the ringside doctor who had examined Ertle on the fateful foul, was an “intimate friend” of Ertle’s manager Mike McNulty. If you lived in Ohio in 1915 and had no access to the newspapers of Minnesota, nor knew any eye-witnesses to the affair, you would have found Ringside’s article to be quite amusing, and no doubt, would have accepted his exegesis as truth. You too, may have brushed off Ertle’s claim and left Kid Williams to enjoy his championship laurels. For way over in Ohio, one would have had no way of knowing Ringside’s arguments had holes in them far too large for any band-aid to cover.

We’ve already went over the Minnesota boxing laws, for which no one knew them better than the Minnesota Boxing Commission themselves, and they had in great detail, already explained to Harris why the Kid’s title was indeed lost. We’ve already addressed the weight issue, exposing that the fight was indeed a championship bout with Williams’ title on the line at the weight of his choosing (Funny, how Ringside never wrote an article claiming that Williams’ title was not at stake when he lost it to Pete Herman in 1917, which was also at 118 pounds.) Lastly, and this really points to evidence that someone from the Williams camp had polluted the mind of that writer, is Ringside’s claim that Dr. Plankers was “intimate friend” of Mike McNulty. What a shameful claim. Harris, who was not only one of the most well-known managers in the land, but logically speaking, was much more likely to have been close friends with his regularly employed ringside physicians out in Baltimore, than McNulty was with Plankers in St. Paul, as boxing had only been legal for a few short months in Minnesota, and less than a handful of legal fights had even been staged during that time. It might have interested the Ohio readers to know that Dr. Plankers was not a close friend of Mike McNulty. In fact, Dr. Plankers wasn’t a close friend of anyone in the fight game, as he was brand new to it, with this having been only his second official fight card assigned to him by the commission. Yes, that fact might have interested his readers, had he chosen to mention it to them.

Articles like these explain precisely why Ertle was not universally recognized as the legitimate world champion, which by rights and legalities, he should have been. And so a great chasm began to form, causing a fracture in the Bantamweight division that should never have been, and its effects on the lineal title have lasted all the way up to today. Sam Harris had a right to disagree with the call made in regards to whether or not his fighter had indeed committed a foul. Bad calls happen all the time and still do today, and the truth is that no one alive today saw the Ertle-Williams fight to tell us. And even if one were to be alive, we would only have his or her opinion, and still not necessarily the facts. The only thing anyone can do is honor the referee’s call, in this case a disqualification due to a foul. George Barton was one of boxing most noted referees and figures, even once heading up the NBA in his later years. His opinion and refereeing skills were well-noted by anyone associated to the boxing game. There is little reason to doubt him. Harris, though possessing a right to disagree, did not have the right to change the course of history with his influence and absurd stories—no one does. But because he could not get an immediate rematch with Ertle in an attempt to regain the title for Williams, he simply played it off as if it never happened at all.

When news of all of the lies and innuendo that Harris and Williams were spreading about the Ertle fight reached back to Minnesota, the once friendly sports writers of Minneapolis and St. Paul who had only a few weeks earlier expressed their empathy for the difficult circumstances in which Harris and Williams had lost their title, had now turned to disgust and ridicule. They blasted Harris for his false versions of what had happened, and they faulted Williams as well, as they felt that he should have at least acknowledged certain bold-faced falsities that Harris had put forth, such as the one about him knocking Ertle down several times in the fight, and making the foul claim seem like a way out for Ertle. The once charitable reporters now lampooned Williams, as they claimed that they had expected more integrity from a world champion than to falsify happenings from one of his fights. There were slightly over 4,000 witnesses to testify that Williams never once scored a knockdown. Nevertheless, the damage had been done by Harris and Williams. Harris, the once respected long-time manager had let his disgust and pride get the better of him, concocting stories and yielding the full might of his axis of power in the game. A man, who acting out of contempt for a legitimate ruling in a world title fight involving his beloved little champion, had forever caused a schism in the history of the Bantamweight division, and unfairly tainted the recognition deserved upon a man whose ring-worn remains lie forgotten in a Stillwater, Minnesota cemetery.

In an ironic twist, Ertle did give Williams a rematch, even granting Williams and Harris the luxury of having it on their home turf this time. Despite dropping Williams three times in the fight, Ertle was reported to have smiled and laughed it off upon his arrival back in St. Paul, saying that he wasn't surprised that he only received a Draw for his efforts while in Baltimore. To his credit, Williams later evened the score by giving Johnny a nice trimming in their third bout.

After boxing, Johnny retired with an official record of 20 wins, 12 losses, and 4 draws. If you include the newspaper decision bouts across the country, his record jumps to 60 wins, 20 losses, and 8 draws. He later opened a boxing gym and billiard hall in Stillwater, Minnesota with his brother Mike, before operating a saloon in his later years. He had maintained that he was the legitimate world's bantamweight champion all of his life. He shouldn't have had to. History should have done that for him. When he passed away on October 15, 1976, it went largely unnoticed. He was 79 years-old.

While boxing has never been a sport whose dignity has won it accolades, it has however, prided itself on righting wrongs of years past. We've acknowledged the racism shown to Jack Johnson, and have apologized for it. And we've rightly removed the dark cloud which hung over Jack Dempsey's demolition of Jess Willard, thanks to another powerful and influential manager in Jack Kearns, whose name yielded him credibility, and with that, power. His split as Dempsey's manager was well publicized and his contempt for Dempsey was well-noted. His claim that Dempsey had loaded his gloves with Plaster of Paris wraps for the Willard fight was neatly disproved when the magazine, *Boxing Illustrated* challenged this theory mimicking the debacle with Cleveland Williams being the stuntman, and showing just how difficult that would have been. History was righted that day, with most historians then passing off the jealous Kearns' tale fueled by his influence in fistiana as nothing more than that—a jealous laden claim. Will history do the same justice for Johnny "Kewpie" Ertle? Or...will he remain relegated to one of boxing history's mere "title claimant" categories? We shall see.