

Tommy Loughran: Poetry in Motion

By Mike Casey



Some fighters, the truly great fighters, transcend the boundaries of time and technique. They render academic the arguments of those who would tell us that you can draw a definitive timeline between the great and the not-so-great fighters in boxing history. The special few slice through all the doubts and debate because we instinctively know that they would have stood up and flourished on any stage in any pocket of time.

Watch Tommy Loughran on film and you will see a timeless boxer of sublime skill and elegance who could fit snugly into any era and still be the master and commander of deft skill and graceful movement among the 175-pounders. Watch him ghosting around Jim Braddock, who, we tend to forget, was being described as a sensational young contender and a terrific hitter in 1929 before being shunted into the sidings and re-emerging as the Cinderella Man.

Loughran, the maestro from Philadelphia, The Phantom as many called him, was a natural who made lesser men square up to their mirrors and wonder why they couldn't duplicate moves that seemed so ridiculously easy. Lean and athletic, fast and fluid, there was nevertheless an almost slow and casual air about the way in which Tommy jinked and danced and slotted perfect punches through the tightest of guards. He was so often referred to as a dancing master, yet he didn't have to dance that much in order to avoid incoming blows. That handsome head would shift this way or that and the blow would meander off into no man's land like an errant torpedo.

Unlike many of today's pretenders, who only seem to read half the instruction book before dangling their arms by their waists and getting smashed on the chin, Loughran held his hands low because he first learned how to avoid being hit. He drilled himself tirelessly in his quest to become as perfect a boxer as he could ever be. He berated himself for his mistakes and practised even harder. You can see it in his great balance and skilful movement and the way in which he could move forwards, backwards, sideways or suddenly go on the offensive with equal ease and grace.

How Jim Braddock tried to nail Tommy down in their Yankee Stadium battle for Loughran's world light heavyweight championship. But Jim couldn't fathom Tommy from a distance and found himself tied in knots when he tried to take the fight inside. What's he going to do next? That's what Braddock seemed to be asking himself. Loughran was equally adept at throwing shadows as he was at throwing punches. When he seemed set to fire the jab, he would lead with a fast left hook. His left-right combinations were thrown with that deceptive, lightning speed that appears almost slow and lazy to the naked eye.

Braddock, with typical honesty, would later say, "I figured I had to try to fight Tommy, not box him, because, as far as boxing goes, I would have been outclassed, and he beat me in 15 rounds easy with his boxing ability. He was a guy you could never hit with a good solid punch."

Did Tommy Loughran have a significant weakness in his boxing make-up? Well, if we are nit-picking, Tommy was no big hitter. He couldn't sock like Archie Moore, Bob Foster or the oft-forgotten Astoria Assassin, Paul Berlenbach. But such were Loughran's exceptional boxing skills, it would be somewhat trite to play up his lack of a killer punch, since he so

rarely required knockout power in his prime years as a 175-pounder. Nicolino Locche and Maxie Rosenbloom were no less adept at prospering without the big wallop. Look at their sprawling records and try to spot the KO wins without a magnifying glass.

My good friend and fellow historian, Mike Hunnicut, was all too eager to talk about Tommy Loughran. Mike owns an extensive film collection of the great fighters and has studied Tommy many times. Here's what the good Mr H says: "Loughran was just a boxing master, able to figure out and do different things all the time. He was able to consistently creep up on his opponents without them or their trainers – all of whom knew what he was doing – able to stop him doing it! He had tireless legs. If, as he was coming in, his opponent tried a barrage, Loughran was off to the sides or off to the races. He could do that for 15 rounds without too much difficulty. He was also a master at slipping, feinting and tying up opponents. This takes a lot of experience, practice and conditioning, which Loughran obviously had.

"Any light heavyweight who can post wins over Harry Greb, Max Baer, Mickey Walker and Jack Sharkey has to be something very special, which Loughran was. He fought and found ways to beat so many top class fighters of all styles, from tough sluggers and one-man riot squads to the slickest of boxers like himself. His footwork was such that at times he seemed to be skating in the ring, whilst simultaneously picking out punches in mid-air.

"Tommy was a phenomenon, who remained so due to his utter obsession to his craft. He truly did train as much as any fighter in history, with wall-to-wall mirrors to study himself, various diagrams for footwork, and analysing every single move and punch in constant preparation for his opponents and their styles, strengths and weaknesses. His trainer Joe Smith would throw fast punches at Tommy's face, while Loughran stood near a wall, to master slipping and rolling.

"Tommy Loughran was one of a kind, like Willie Pep and a few select others. Tommy is synonymous with the word 'boxing'"

Meticulous

In the early 1970s, Loughran described his painstaking pursuit of perfection to author Peter Heller. While Tommy was never one to be hindered by modesty, there is great truth in what he said: "I think that nobody has ever put in the time and effort and practising and studying boxing, doing different things, like I did. I was so meticulous about everything I did insofar as my training was concerned, my movements, my balance, my sense of co-ordination and my footwork was tied in with all the movements. Of course, I was fortunate too in having a manager who had been a fighter himself. Joe Smith had had 300 fights and he didn't have a mark on him. Very good looking.

"I worked in the basement of my home. I had a little gym fixed up there and I had mirrors and I studied myself in the mirrors, punch the bag, skip rope, shadow box, and I studied my movements in these mirrors in such a way that I knew exactly how I appeared to every fellow that I was boxing."

Loughran was born in Philadelphia in 1902 and had his first professional fight as a 17-year old in 1919. Like most fighters of his tough and competitive era, there is really no telling how many fights he had before wrapping up his career in 1937. The BoxRec database has his total standing at 174. Loughran himself claimed to have had 227 bouts, which is entirely possible. Whatever the official figure, and we might never know, it is the quality of his opposition that jump off the page and stagger the eye, most of whom Loughran vanquished or held even in the old days of newspaper decisions.

If ever a man could drop names to impress, it was Loughran. He fought Jimmy Darcy, Bryan Downey and Mike McTigue. Tommy locked horns with Harry Greb six times and gave Gene Tunney such a battle of wits and skill in their 1922 clash that Gene would never entertain the clever Philadelphian again. Loughran took on Johnny Wilson, Jack Delaney, Young Stribling, Georges Carpentier, Jimmy Slattery, Leo Lomski, Pete Latzo, Mickey Walker, Ernie Schaaf, Jim Braddock, Max Baer, Johnny Risko, Paolino Uzcudun, Jack Sharkey and Arturo Godoy.



Boxing historian Tracy Callis says of Loughran, "Tommy was a beautiful boxer to watch in the ring, a man with picture perfect form. He moved well – fast on his feet, smooth, quick, elusive – displaying the ultimate in boxing savvy. He was not a paralyzing puncher, but he did everything else well. A boxer supreme, clever Tommy could handle large men or small men with ease.

"His talent at movement and boxing tactics was admired greatly by Jim Corbett, the famous and innovative heavyweight champion, who attended many of Tommy's bouts. Many boxing

people and historians assert that Loughran perfected moves that Corbett had not yet worked on."

Loughran performed more than honourably when he graduated to the heavyweight division in an era when holding the 175lb crown was never going to make a boxer rich. That harsh fact was a great pity to some of the great men who reigned at that weight, notably Loughran, who was never better than when he was bossing his natural domain. This, then, is primarily an appraisal of Loughran the light heavyweight at his classic best.

Was Tommy a Fancy Dan? Stylistically, yes. But here was a pugnacious man of grit and huge self-belief who would fight all-comers and actually relished the chance of sparring with Jack Dempsey. Loughran wouldn't suffer the put-down from anyone, in or out of the ring. Not surprisingly, perhaps, it was Tunney who made Tommy bristle the most.

Gene's unfortunate habit of making a compliment sound like a thinly veiled insult never ceased to grate with Loughran. In 1928, former welterweight legend Jack Britton, considered to be an excellent judge of fighters, offered his opinion on Loughran. Said Jack, "There's only one fighter in the game I wouldn't bet against in a fight with Tunney. And you'll probably laugh when I mention his name. Tommy Loughran. You know, you can't knock out a fellow or beat him if you can't hit him."

To this, Tunney allegedly replied, "I understand that Tommy is a very nice fellow and a gentleman. But as to fighting – ah! That's different!"

Loughran quietly seethed over the fact that Tunney had got to the fading and distracted Jack Dempsey first in 1926. Never shy in promoting his own credentials, Tommy said, "I licked Dempsey in his training camp and I know I could have knocked him out in a real fight, but Tunney had the jump and got the chance. I came near beating Tunney when I was just a novice and I know I can take him now because all he can do is back away and counter."

As a person, Tunney impressed Loughran even less. "Who does he think he is?" Tommy barked. "He wasn't born any better than I was. He never could fight and I can. He didn't win the war and neither did I."

It seems that Loughran's nose was put out of joint when he clashed with Tunney at a classy hotel in Newark, where Gene believed he was the exclusive guest of honour. Tunney was shocked to see Loughran and a few other fighters in the lobby. The story goes that Gene approached Tommy and gave him a somewhat frosty handshake. The ensuing conversation reportedly went as follows:-

"What are you doing here, Tommy?"

"Just waiting around."

"I'm awfully glad to see you in a place like this."

"What are you talking about?"

"Why, I mean that it is good to see some of the boxers in respectable places. It will help the public get a different opinion of the business if they see boxers in places like this."

Loughran was apparently boiling by this point and replied, "You don't know how to act in a respectable place and I do. If I didn't, I'd let you have one."

Well, folks, we take this story as we will. For while Tunney's aloofness made many people quietly fume, so Loughran was just as full of himself in his own earthier way. Both men might have been more greatly admired if they had tempered their confidence with a dash of humility. Loughran told the tale of Jim Corbett marvelling at Tommy's skill and telling him he did things in the ring that Jim could only dream of doing himself. Georges Carpentier was another who apparently confided to Loughran that Tommy was the greatest thing since sliced bread. These stories might well be true, but should the recipient of such praise really shout it from the rooftops?

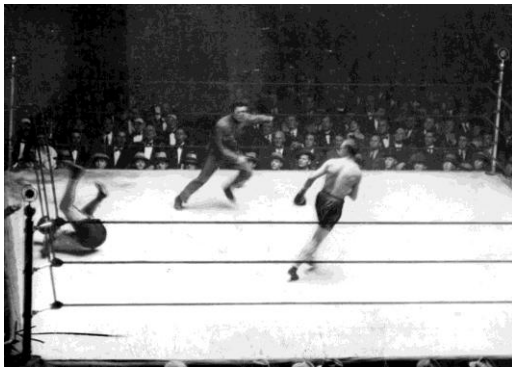
Some years ago, golfer Greg Norman walked into the press room after shooting a particularly outstanding round and declared, "I was in awe of myself out there." Now, one surely shouldn't express such thoughts out loud. Your writer immediately wanted to reach for the sick bag. Greg, the so-called Great White Shark, was promptly lambasted for this faux-pas by a famous rugby player who had jumped through far tougher hoops. One began to understand why Norman's fellow Aussie, Jack Newton, cut from tougher cloth, had re-christened Greg the Great White Fish Finger.

Loughran, likewise, could never sufficiently emphasise how he had given Jack Dempsey fits in their sparring session of 1926, as Manassa Jack prepared for his first battle with Gene Tunney. Well, I can entirely believe that the lithe and young Loughran gave the rusty Dempsey the run-around. But to hear Tommy tell it, the ring was awash with Jack's blood and broken bones: "Geez, boy, what I didn't do to him. The year before, he had had a nasal job, his nose was all shortened, and they didn't know whether it would stand up under punishment. I let him have it on the nose. Blood squirted in all directions. He stepped back and cursed me out loud and when he did, I grabbed him and turned him around and put him up against the ropes.. Geez, I poured it on him. I gave him such a beating. I hit him in the belly, hit him with uppercuts, hit him with a hook, caught him with another. I had his eyes puffy, his nose was bleeding, he was spitting out blood. I had him cut under the chin and I think his ear was bleeding. I don't know whatever held him up. He always came tearing back in, no matter how hard I hit him."

The impression is gained from this is that Dempsey was lucky to make it to the Tunney fight without the aid of a body cast. Yet within this windy tale of Tommy's is a great pearl of wisdom and truth which stood him in good stead and made him a wonderfully spirited fighter as well as a wonderful boxer. "Confidence is what it takes," he said. "Those two rounds with Dempsey gave me confidence in myself. I learned an important lesson that day: never to be defeated by fear. There are so many people that are, you know."

A Slashing 15-Rounder!

Fear and near defeat came knocking at Loughran's door in his astonishing and thrilling fight with the big-punching Leo Lomski at Madison Square Garden on January 16, 1928. Tommy was defending his light heavyweight championship for the second time, having relieved Mike McTigue of the title and seen off the challenge of the brilliantly clever but wasteful Jimmy Slattery. Lomski was a true assassin of the ring, a gifted hitter from Aberdeen, Wisconsin, who willingly engaged Loughran in what one reporter aptly described as 'a slashing 15-rounder'.



It was a torrid test of endurance that proved to be one of Loughran's finest hours. Like that other great boxing master, Benny Leonard, Tommy demonstrated that he was also a tough and pugnacious competitor who could rough it in times of crisis and battle his way back from the brink of defeat. The 15,000 people who saw the see-saw battle in the Garden shouted themselves hoarse as Lomski came out like a train in the first round and decked Loughran twice. Tommy showed outstanding powers of recuperation and fighting heart in surviving the crisis. When the fog cleared from his

brain, his agile mind worked out the answer. He realised that fancy boxing alone would not douse the fire of the rampant Lomski. Moving carefully and punching accurately, Tommy set about slowing Leo down with a tattoo of hard jabs and stinging right crosses.

It was a hugely admirable comeback, for Loughran really was clattered in that epic first round. Lomski's first knockdown punch, a crunching right to the jaw, sent Tommy crashing down by the ropes and very nearly forced him head over heels. Lomski could hit like a kicking mule – look at the man's record. He would surely run riot in today's 175lb division. Badly shaken, Loughran was up on his feet at 'six', but couldn't extract himself from the eye of the storm. Another big right to the jaw dumped him again later in the round, and it seemed that the untouchable phantom had finally solidified and become a vulnerable target.

Loughran's mind was all over the place when he got back to his corner. "What round did I knock him down in?" he asked his seconds. Yet, like all fighters touched with greatness, he found a way to re-connect his brain to his body. He held his own in the second round, lost the third, but then steadied himself up and began to show his mettle in full. Lomski, for all his formidable power, wasn't nearly Tommy's equal in either skill or versatility. Yet Tommy didn't just outwit Leo for the rest of the way. Loughran brought the Garden crowd to fever pitch by outpunching Lomski in a series of ferocious exchanges. Left hooks and right crosses sent the blood flowing from Lomski's left eye, but Leo never stopped trying and hammered back to have Loughran in fresh trouble in a thrilling sixth round.

Once again, Tommy shook the cobwebs from his head and finally assumed control of the fight. Stiff jabs and right crosses repeatedly jerked back Lomski's head as Loughran began to pull clear. Lomski, however, proved Tommy's equal in courage and persistence. Leo kept

punching away, hurting Loughran with some powerful rights to the heart in the tenth round. But the steam was going out of Lomski's punches, even though he was obviously loving every minute of the violent scrap. A smile of pleasure would often crease his face as he piled in and tried to smash down the boxing master. Despite going down to a brave points defeat, Leo had become the first man since Tunney to put Loughran on the floor.

Elite



Boxing historian and writer Mike Silver is among those who rates Loughran among the elite of master boxers. Says Mike, "Tommy was without question one of the greatest pure boxers of all time. He was a classic, stand-up defensive stylist in the mould of Jim Corbett, Mike Gibbons, Gene Tunney and Jack Delaney.

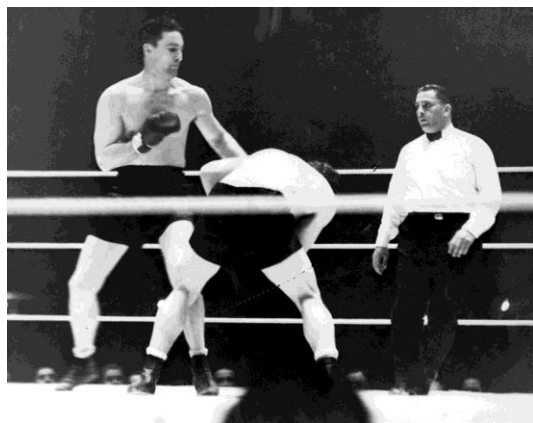
"In his prime as a light heavyweight, Loughran combined accurate left jabs with superb footwork, timing and balance, in addition to a ton of experience. He was adept at slipping, riding or blocking counter punches and tying up an opponent when necessary. Loughran

never plodded or shuffled. He bounced. His rhythmic footwork, along with that ubiquitous jab, was the key to his success. It was like watching a ballroom dancer who, through endless hours of practice, has perfected every little nuance of his art. And let's not forget that Tommy had to overcome certain limitations, specifically his oft-broken right hand, which he rarely threw. Imagine if the man could punch!

"Loughran effortlessly moved in or out and from side to side, often just a few inches out of range of his opponent's punches, but always in position to jab or counter with the occasional hook, uppercut or cross. And he did all this as a practically one-armed fighter! Loughran often seemed to become more effective in the later rounds of a fight, due mostly to his opponents becoming ever more frustrated and rankled as they failed to hit him with a solid punch. Tommy knew his profession inside out and it showed. If you want to become a fighter and improve your chances of walking away from this sport with your mind intact, copy Tommy Loughran's style."

Mike Silver believes that Loughran's great vision and foresight in the ring were among his greatest gifts. "He had great boxing 'eyes' in the sense of his awareness and perception of what was going on in the ring and what he had to do to win. Loughran knew where the next punch was coming from and he knew exactly where his own punches were going. It was as if he had some kind of boxing radar. His co-ordination of hands and feet was superb. He was a constantly moving target and was very cool under pressure or when tagged, and rarely hit with the same punch twice. Significantly, in every film available, he is never ever trapped in a corner or on the ropes. He did not have that extra dimension of being a hard puncher, which makes his consistent performances against so many quality opponents for so long all the more remarkable."

Punchers



While Loughran couldn't punch that hard, he could handle the punchers just fine. Against Mickey Walker and the young Max Baer, Loughran was the consummate matador, wrong-footing the bulls with constant movement and dazzling artistry. Walker gave it all he had in trying to take Tommy's light heavyweight crown at the Chicago Stadium on March 28, 1929. But Mick didn't have enough to beat Loughran. Referee Dave Miller somehow had Mickey winning the ten rounds battle, but the judges and neutral observers saw Loughran winning handily. Tommy's trusty jab, almost metronome-like in its reliability, kept the frustrated

Walker at bay for most of the contest. Zipping right crosses also checked Mick's advances.

As the fight neared its end in the tenth round, Tommy went through the gears with that certain assuredness and smoothness that only the true naturals possess. His slipping and ducking was exemplary. Scoring with three straight lefts, he ducked a left and right to the head, stepped inside of a right and made Walker miss with a long left. Mickey was then struck by two more lefts and two more rights to the head before finally finding Loughran with a wild shot to the jaw.

Mickey put in his usual sterling effort, but, like so many others, he found that hitting Loughran cleanly was akin to trying to pick a fly out of the air.

The still maturing Max Baer was given a rare boxing lesson by Loughran in their heavyweight ten-rounder at Madison Square Garden on February 6, 1931. Tommy's master class was watched by a fascinated audience of 12,000, the biggest of the indoor boxing season up to that point. Loughran was way ahead of the powerful and willing young Baer, stepping elegantly around the heavier man and rapping him constantly with accurate jabs. Many reporters were reminded of Tommy's classic boxing performance in retaining his light heavyweight championship 18 months before against Jim Braddock. Loughran's victory over Baer was unanimous from referee Jack Dempsey and the two judges. The Associated Press gave Tommy all ten rounds.

Loughran's speed of hand and foot against Baer was a reminder of how Tommy had ruled the 175lb division with such class and dominance. He kept Max off balance all night long with stinging jabs and whipping right uppercuts. Baer rushed and swung in an earnest effort to sweep away his smaller tormentor, but Loughran simply wouldn't be caught. Baer himself couldn't hide his admiration of Loughran's handiwork. Max often emitted a wry smile as he repeatedly winged his famous right hand wide of the target.

Only in the third and ninth rounds did Loughran get a little too full of himself. On both occasions he attempted to slug with Baer, but Tommy quickly returned to his traditional boxing after getting banged with a few lusty clouts.

Max, at just over 200 pounds, outweighed Loughran by more than seventeen-and-a-half pounds that night.

How Great?

In this writer's opinion, Tommy Loughran's place in the pantheon of the truly great light heavyweights is beyond question. On his very best night, he might just have taken all of the elite names, such as Tunney, Langford, Ezzard Charles and Archie Moore. Let us remind ourselves that Tommy was still maturing when Tunney only edged him.

I was interested to get the thoughts of the aforementioned Mike Silver on Tommy's all-time standing, and here are Mike's views: "I think he definitely ranks among the golden dozen light heavyweights of all time. Is he beating a prime Ezzard Charles or Billy Conn? I honestly can't say for sure. Tough call with John Henry Lewis too. A great boxer with a good jab and speed would have the best chance against Loughran. Tunney shaded him. But I would never count Loughran out against any other great. Archie Moore would be too slow, I think, but always dangerous with his punching power.

"But in almost 200 fights, Loughran was stopped only three times and never as a light heavyweight. I don't see Bob Foster knocking him out. Loughran is avoiding Foster's hook and outpointing him. And don't forget Loughran did much better as a heavyweight than Foster. This wasn't because Tommy had a better chin – you just couldn't nail him.

"I would love to have seen Loughran against Harold Johnson – a purist's delight. Let's face it, today Loughran would be heavyweight champion."

Now there's a debatable point to end on!

Mike Casey is a freelance journalist, author, former editor, and boxing historian who has contributed to numerous trade and consumer titles in his 30-year career. He is a former contributor to the oldest boxing weekly, "Boxing News," and has also contributed to many other boxing publications and websites.

A former editor with the Daily Mail Business Group in the UK, Mike is a member of the International Boxing Research Organization (IBRO) and an auxiliary member of the Boxing Writers Association of America. He owns an extensive collection of boxing magazines, photographs, memorabilia, and films and comes from a boxing family. He was born in Woolwich, South-East London, and lives at Romney Marsh in Kent.

(Photos courtesy of Harry Shaffer, Antiquities of the Prize Ring)