

Jimmy Barry: The Toughest Little Tiger

By Mike Casey



Casper Leon, the so-called Sicilian Swordfish from New York by way of Palermo, never did have a picnic against his great Chicago rival Jimmy Barry, even though the first of their six-fight series was held at the somewhat inappropriately named Picnic Grove in Lamont, Illinois.

But Casper the swordfish was a clever and fiercely determined little fighter who never stopped trying to spear Barry. For Leon knew that his place in the record books would be assured if he could achieve the unprecedented and defeat the bantamweight terror known as the Little Tiger.

Casper never did manage the feat. Nor did any other man. Jimmy Barry would hang 'em up with 70 official fights on his log and not one defeat. He drew some and he got lucky in others. There was even an old rumour that he had been knocked out in the dim and distant days of his early career when scant attention was paid to record keeping. But good fortune has always blessed undefeated fighters, just as mischievous and unproven stories have always cursed them.

As boxing students will know, it is a tough thing for a fellow of some 110lbs to get his just dues in terms of recognition. It is something else indeed when his dominance of his profession is such that he becomes a virtual legend long before his interview with St Peter at the pearly gates. Jimmy Barry attained such a status in the ring and continued to be revered long after his retirement as one of the most erudite commentators on the sport. Everyone loved the Little Tiger. He was the great unbeatable when he quit the ring in 1899, and even the mighty Jim Jeffries would eventually sacrifice that great and rare mantle.

Such has been boxing's evolution over the years, it is important to note that Jimmy Barry was actually a natural flyweight in an era when the weight classes were significantly fewer and differently aligned. Barry, in fact, would have been the dream opponent of Welsh wonder Jimmy Wilde, and historians have been arguing and salivating over the outcome of that mythical match for decades.

Pick 'Em!

Well, my dear reader, it would have been one heck of a fight between the two Jimmys. A pick 'em fight, I would venture, in which this writer would have to accord the edge to Mr Wilde for his superior hitting power and his arguable edge in all-round skill.

Not so, says my esteemed friend and fellow historian, Tracy Callis, who rates Barry as the greatest flyweight of all, with Wilde a close second. I was eager to get Tracy's reasoning and here are his thoughts on the two fabulous titans: "The two Jimmys – Jimmy Wilde and Jimmy Barry – came from the same mould. Each fought at flyweight poundage. Each was a willing banger – boy, and how! Each was very good defensively and each was durable. Each man handled men of his own weight and somewhat heavier

men too. The fighting style of each man was not as polished as those of later years, but the attacking style and stamina of their generation ranks among the best. It was a time of much spunk and energy.

"The skinny, frail-looking Wilde, at 5' 2 1/2" and between 94 and 109 1/2lbs, was a dynamite fighter with a powerful punch. He was awesome on offence – an attacking, devastating puncher who was strong and relentless in his pursuit. He applied constant pressure, his defence was good and he was durable. However, his eagerness on offence was great and this often exposed him to attack. Rarely, but every now and then, it cost him a bout. He lost only four official verdicts, being stopped three times.

"Even modern boxing fans remember Jimmy Wilde. They, and most other boxing historians, usually rate him as the top flyweight of all time. There is strong data to support this view. A look at his record on the BoxRec database reveals 139 bouts in which he had 'official' decisions, with 133 wins (99 by knockout). He scored 9-2 in title fights of one kind or another. Three of Wilde's losses were to men who were, at one time, champions.

"Jimmy Barry, at 5' 2" (some sources report 5' 3 3/4") and between 95-115lbs, was much the same type of fighter. He was a scrappy, fierce puncher, but one who fought with cautious aggression, somewhat more careful than Wilde. Always on the alert, Barry struck hard and for keeps when the opportunity presented itself, with a sharp, two-handed attack. His defence was good and his chin and durability were second to none.

"Following his bout with Walter Croot in London (Croot later died), Barry's record was 56-0-2 with 38 knockouts. Croot's death bothered the Little Tiger so badly that he refused to finish off his foes in the next ten fights. He took two by decision and had draws in the other eight. He confessed that he held back, no longer having the ambition to punish the other man. Subsequently, Jimmy retired.

"Barry fought at a time when the fight game was becoming an accepted sport but not as popular as it would be in just a few short years. In comparison, Wilde fought during those later years when boxing popularity was at a peak and with full acceptance of the fight game. In addition, various types of communication (radio, newspapers, magazines etc.) were much better than in previous years and Wilde received greater publicity that enhanced his reputation.

"No one really knows, but in the reading of articles about Wilde and Barry, it seems to me that Barry was just a little quicker and, at the same time, carried nearly the same punch as Wilde. In addition, Barry was more cautious in his aggression and his chin may have been a little more durable, although he could be put down. Physically, he was more compact than Wilde and slightly heavier by four to five pounds.

"Had Barry fought longer, surely he would have met some defeats – they all do. But likely he would have beaten all the men that Wilde beat. And remember, Barry was unbeaten in his career."

Jack Madden At Maspeth

The question of superiority for the 105-pound championship of America had to be settled. Jack Madden, from New York, was the best of his class in the east. Jimmy Barry, from Chicago, was the king of the west. The twain simply had to meet, and so they did at the Empire Athletic Club in Maspeth, New York, on October 21, 1895.

The fight between Barry and Madden quickly swelled the little venue. Around 1,100 people were already in attendance for the preliminary bouts, and that figure had risen to 2,000 by the time Jimmy and Jack entered the ring.

An eager spectator was the great John L. Sullivan, who occupied a box seat and was greatly cheered by the crowd.

Eager to prove himself the best fighter in his division, Barry wasted no time in going to work on Madden. By the third round, it was clear that Jack was fighting an uphill battle against the Little Tiger. Jimmy started the session with a right to the ribs, while Madden fell short when he tried to respond. A right and left to the head from Jimmy drove Jack to the ropes, and Barry scored with a further right as Madden tried to stem the tide and set himself.

But Jack couldn't seem to check the relentless Barry, who continued to pursue him and throw hurtful punches. Madden was knocked into the ropes again by a right hand dig to the ribs and another quick right to the jaw. Jack managed to rake Jimmy with a left to the ribs before the sound of the bell, but now Barry was close to taking the prize. He wasted no time in emphasizing his authority in the fourth round as he started fast and stunned Madden with a right to the stomach and a right and left to the head.

Jimmy kept firing in powerful punches and Jack was forced to clinch in an increasingly desperate attempt to keep himself in the fight. A right to the jaw sent him staggering into the ropes with such force that he nearly fell out of the ring. Bravely, Jack tried to rally but only walked into a hefty smash to the jaw that sent him to the canvas. Seeing that Jack could offer no further resistance, the referee stopped the fight after one minute and twenty-three seconds of the round.

The Walter Croot Tragedy

As Tracy Callis rightly observes, Jimmy Barry was deeply affected by his ultimately tragic fight with Walter Croot at the National Sporting Club in London on December 6, 1897.

The two gamecocks were battling for Jimmy's world bantamweight championship, and an earlier tragic event had already resulted in the fight being postponed from November 15 as a mark of respect to John Fleming, the manager of the National Sporting Club, who had died suddenly.

The NSC was virtually a full house when Barry and Croot finally met, with Jimmy coming into the ring at 107lbs and Walter at 104. It was a terrible irony indeed that another death would follow, that of the brave and skilful Croot. Walter put up a spirited battle against the great Barry, although Jimmy did most of the significant scoring

through the first ten rounds of the scheduled 20-rounds match. It was a fight of great skill, described as 'thoroughly scientific' by one reporter.

Croot engineered an admirable drive in the second half of the battle and had almost levelled the fight in the eyes of most by the eighteenth. Jimmy, knowing he had to find an extra boost, stepped up his attack in the nineteenth and looked much stronger than Croot by the close of the round. Then Barry really upped the pace in the fateful twentieth round, scoring with heavy punches as he forced Croot around the ring.

With just forty seconds remaining in the round, Barry connected with a heavy blow over the heart, followed by a terrific right to the jaw to send Walter down for the count. Croot's fall was a heavy one and he remained unconscious for some time until medical assistance was called for. Initially he was diagnosed as suffering from severe concussion, but in fact had suffered fatal brain injuries. He died at nine o'clock in the morning. Barry was arrested shortly after Croot died and taken to the Bow Street police station, although no charges were brought.

Years later, Harry Grayson wrote of an amusing prelude to this otherwise black event, regarding Jimmy Barry's diminutive stature. Much like Jimmy Wilde later on, Barry had some job convincing people that he was a very dangerous fighting man.

Wrote Grayson: "Jimmy was so small that when he arrived in London to fight Walter Croot in 1897, the British couldn't believe he was the Barry who held the world bantamweight championship. They suspected he was a refugee from some troupe of midgets. So the wee Chicagoan had to make things clear in a private showing.

"Seaman Tom Watson was the subject of the last fistic trial in this country (America). The Seaman had more than 200 fights on land and sea and had just repelled Nel Tarleton, favourably known on this side, when he came to engage Kid Chocolate at Madison Square Garden in January, 1933, but that didn't satisfy the august members of the New York Boxing Commission.

"So Seaman Watson first had to exhibit his wares against three capable preliminary kids before a jury of his pugilistic peers at the St Nicholas Gymnasium."

Living Legend

It is probably no exaggeration to say that Jimmy Barry was a living legend by the time of his sixth and final meeting with Casper Leon at the Tri-City Athletic Club in Davenport, Iowa, on December 29, 1898. It was to be Jimmy's penultimate professional fight.

By this time, it seemed that everybody wanted to see the Little Tiger. We are all guilty, to differing degrees, of recognising greatness too late in the day. We only truly cherish it when it begins to wane and slip over the horizon.

Such was the fascination for Barry that special trains were laid on to bring large crowds of people into Davenport. The Little Tiger had lost a few of his ferocious teeth since the Walter Croot tragedy, but Jimmy remained the little man that all other little men had to beat. It quickly became apparent that he and Casper Leon had lost none of their enthusiasm for fighting each other.

The small hall of the Tri-City Athletic Club was jammed with spectators to the point of overflowing. They were to witness a hard and fascinating battle that was closely fought throughout and ended in a popular draw decision. Some believed that Casper's superior boxing had finally earned him a win over Barry, while others were of the opinion that Jimmy's greater strength and aggression were the telling factors.

There was a long delay waiting for the arrival of the special trains that had been arranged to bring people into Davenport from different towns and cities. It was almost midnight before Barry and Leon got underway. Referee Malachy Hogan climbed into the ring at 11.30, and was quickly followed by Jimmy and Casper who were cheered loudly by the heaving and enthusiastic crowd.

Barry was accompanied by his seconds, Frank Bartley, Tommy White and Patsy Fitzgerald, while Leon was assisted by Morris Rauch, Kid Manning and Dan Leach.

It was an intriguing fight in which the scales were balanced evenly throughout. Coming out for the twentieth and final round, both boys sensed that everything was riding on the last minutes of action. It was Casper who came out with a rush in that session, catching Jimmy with a lusty right to the body. Barry returned fire with a straight blow to the face, and then the boys fell into a clinch where they mauled each other savagely and without too much attention to the rulebook.

Cries of 'Foul!' filled the little arena, but referee Hogan made no fuss since it was impossible to determine the greater culprit. Barry and Leon exchanged some really heavy blows as they raced for the finish line. Jimmy caught Casper with a big right swing to the body, but Leon was no less determined and ferocious in his bid to grab the spoils.

Barry, still a hard and vicious fighter late in his career, hustled Leon to the ropes in a final charge, but the bell prevented the champion from inflicting any further damage.

One For The Road

Boxing is a tough old game to give up. Every fighter knows it. Much like drinking, the passing of tiredness or a major hangover brings a fresh desire to return to the bar and test the old constitution.

Jimmy Barry retired briefly after his draw with Casper Leon, but the old pangs brought him back for one last hurrah on the first day of September in 1899. He squared off with the skilful Harry Harris, who would go on to become the world bantamweight champion, in a six-rounder at the Fort Dearborn Club in Chicago.

Barry hadn't lost much of his spark and cleverness. The little gem of a fight was described as one of the fastest and most scientific battles seen in the area for many years.

Harry Harris was a tall and rangy boxer and an excellent jabber. His punches would often come fast and carried a cutting edge. He was never an easy man to fight and to this day still rates a mention among many experts as one of history's finest bantamweights.

Harry was still climbing the ladder when he met the great Barry and learned plenty from the master who had reigned for so long. But Harris wasn't found wanting and was quite obviously a star in the making as he cleverly held his own.

Jimmy, as ever, was looking to mix it with his usual blend of toughness, hard punching and cunning. Harris was obviously wary of Barry, fighting a prudent battle as he jabbed at the rushing legend and only occasionally fired the right hand. Jimmy's aggression and hard hitting gave him a significant edge over the first three rounds, but then Harry grew in confidence and became more adventurous.

In the fourth session, he enjoyed some of his best moments of the fight as he rapped Jimmy with a couple of hard uppercuts and repeatedly found the mark with accurate jabs to Barry's mouth. Both men sensed that the decision would depend on who finished the stronger as they waged a fast and intense battle down the stretch. The general consensus was that there was nothing to separate them at the finish and the referee declared the fight a draw.

Spokesman

An intelligent man who was always careful with his money, Jimmy Barry became an articulate spokesman for boxing in his retirement and a fervent supporter of the controversial boxing trusts of his day. He held some very strong and defined views on the welfare of fighters, especially the smaller and lighter scrappers of the sport.

"If any friend of mine were to ask my advice about taking up boxing for a living," said Jimmy, "I would advise him to go into the hod carrying business.

"There is money in the ring for big fighters – the world's heavyweights – but for little fighters there is nothing more than a living and a precarious one at that in many instances. Still, if it was not for the men in big cities who have the pull to bring off weekly shows or exhibitions at frequent intervals during the winter season, a great many young men who had been attracted to the ring as a place for earning a living would be found out of the game.

"It does not seem like a big thing for a fighter to clear up from \$50 to \$150 a week by his prowess, but that is much more profitable than spending several months in preliminary work for a big fight and then getting enough to pay your trainers and attendants.

"If there can be a fighting trust in every large boxing center, it will be a great benefit to the bantams, lightweights and for a few quick, agile and fairly good heavyweights. The promoters get the most of the money it is true, but the large class of boxers are given the opportunity to earn a very comfortable living."

Barry was quick to rubbish stories that he had earned great amounts in his own career. "The patrons of pugilism never did care enough about the little fellows to enable the bantams and feathers to make much money. It is popularly supposed that in my career I made thousands of dollars. This is not true. A successful heavyweight could make as much in one fight as a (lighter) champion could in several world championship battles."

Jimmy Hails Terry McGovern

Always on the lookout for fresh and vibrant talent, Jimmy Barry quickly became an admirer of the storming young featherweight hitter from Brooklyn, Terry McGovern. Jimmy had prided himself on being as complete a fighter as he could be throughout his career, and recognised that McGovern possessed cunning and cleverness as well as toughness and exceptional punching power.

Said Barry: "The fighting game has been reduced to such a fine science that the clever man who hasn't the bulldog strength to back up his efforts can do little or nothing these days. Formerly the rough fellows, that is those who depended mainly upon their strength and roughing abilities to win fights, knew little or nothing of the finer points. They used to swing away for all they were worth and eventually fall under the steady clipping and hammering a clever fellow would dole out.

"All that is changed now. These rough fellows have picked up the scientific part of the game. Take McGovern, for instance. There never was a rougher or stronger boy than the Brooklyn lad, yet in his own way, he is as clever or perhaps more clever than the majority of featherweights.

"He has the advantage over any man he fights. Every time he hits, the punch carries sufficient force with it to knock out a man, while the majority of boxers usually wait until they have shorn an opponent of his strength and clear-headedness before they take any chance of leaving themselves open by trying for a knockout.

"And it's the same with all other classes of fighters. Take George Lavigne. He was lightweight champion for years merely because he could outstay and out-slug all other lightweights."

It shouldn't have come as any great surprise that Jimmy Barry had a soft spot for Terry McGovern. Little tigers always have a way of recognising each other.

Jimmy, the magnificent original, died at the age of seventy-three in 1943, a tough and astute cookie to the end.

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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.