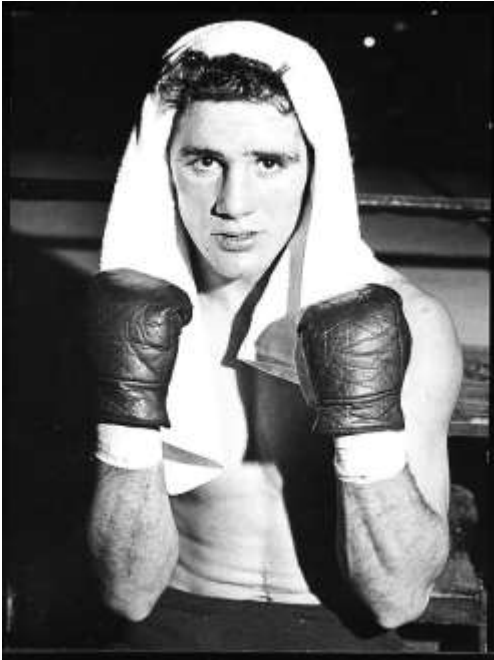


# Sometimes a great notion: Billy Conn

By Mike Casey



We all have great ideas. The perfect excuse to pinch a day off work that loses its credibility the second we get on the phone to the boss. The get-rich-quick scheme that melts into reality as soon as we've mailed the letter and sobered up.

Billy Conn had a far grander notion. He got it into his head that he could knock out Joe Louis; and as ace announcer Don Dunphy famously said, "He was a cocky young kid from Pittsburgh who very nearly did."

Now we see Billy Conn trotting down a staircase in a rare old photograph, looking handsome and dapper in one of the snazzy, snappy outfits of the day. The striking face beams contentedly, the lean and muscular body tapers down into an almost womanly waist, the great and wide shoulders bust out east and west like Jimmy Caan as Sonny Corleone.

As a pin-up, Billy knocked Paul Newman, Robert Redford and Brad Pitt into the proverbial cocked hat. Fighters aren't supposed to look that good, but when Billy hung 'em up after 77 fights against some of the toughest guys on the block, that mischievous matinee idol face was still intact.

That achievement had a lot to do with the fact that Conn, at his sublime and evasive best, was near impossible to hit. Some achievement indeed for a guy who was born in Pittsburgh in the rough old days of 1917 and got into scraps virtually from the time he could stand up.

Boxing writer and analyst Mike Silver, who penned the excellent book, *The Arc of Boxing: The Rise and Decline of the Sweet Science*, says: "In any discussion of Conn I think it's important to mention Johnny Ray, who was Conn's trainer/manager throughout his career.

"They made a great team, this former outstanding Jewish featherweight contender and the great Irish light heavyweight he helped to develop into one of the greatest fighters of all time. Johnny Ray had about 150 pro fights during his own career some 20 years earlier. He not only knew the game inside out—he knew how to teach it.

"Thinking about Conn and his trainer also reminded me of a line on the first page of Hemmingway's classic novel *The Sun Also Rises*: 'Spider Kelly taught all his young gentlemen to box like featherweights, no matter whether they weighed one hundred and five or two hundred and five pounds.'

"Spider Kelly was a real person. He was a legendary boxing coach at Princeton University during the 1920s and 1930s (when inter-collegiate boxing was in full flower). I have no doubt that Hemmingway knew him personally. I associate the line in the book to Conn's spectacular performance in his first fight against Joe Louis because the Pittsburgh Kid had to use his nifty

footwork and busy left jab just like a supersized version of Willie Pep in order to survive for 12 rounds against the greatest puncher and finisher in boxing history.

“But what impressed me also in that great fight was Conn’s ruggedness and his infighting ability. The man was the complete package. Not just a superb boxer but someone who was willing to fight and mix it up time and again—even against Louis. Billy was a real combination fighter. I would have loved to have seen him against Gene Tunney or Ezzard Charles.

“After the Louis fight there was that famous quote by Conn: ‘What’s the use of being Irish if you can’t be stupid?’, in explaining why he tried for the KO. But without that cocky Irish attitude and his audacious, somewhat crazy belief that he actually could knock out the great Brown Bomber, we would not have been witness to a fight for the ages.”

Mike Silver asked his friend Mike Capriano Jr., a true boxing expert, and the only person he know who actually saw Conn fight in his prime, what he thought of Billy. Here is what Capriano Jr. said: “I was only 13 years old when I saw Conn fight Tony Zale in Madison Square Garden. This was about eight months after his fight with Louis. What I remember is a great boxer with a good chin who was an exciting guy to watch because of his maneuvers. Conn had fantastic instincts. He was built for the business.



“Against Zale he blocked punches, countered, and moved the middleweight champion around like he was an ordinary fighter. He was too good for Zale. Nobody figured it would be that one sided a fight. It appeared to me that he did not want to knock out Zale, although he hit him with clean punches. Conn was like a mechanic in taking Zale apart. He just had him so outclassed. That was my memory of the fight.

“Conn had so much drive and desire when he fought Louis. Joe knocked out a great boxer in Billy Conn—that’s how great Joe Louis was.”

Billy never did stop swinging. At the age of seventy-two, three years before his premature death from pneumonia, the Pittsburgh Kid was taking a coffee and glancing at the newspaper stand at his local convenience store in Pittsburgh’s Squirrel Hill area. When a robber suddenly punched the store manager, Conn answered the clang of the bell and did his bit. He slugged and wrestled the young robber to the floor and was still giving a pretty decent account of himself when the invader thought better of mixing it any further with the old timer and made his escape.

Oh well, you can’t take the Irish out of an Irishman. Joe Louis tried his best on that famous night at the Polo Grounds, but telling Billy Conn not to be brave or reckless was akin to telling Stuart ‘The Kid’ Ungar not to play cards.

## Rifling

It is too bad that the only film ever shown of Billy Conn in compilation clips these days is of the Brown Bomber rifling him to the deck with that series of deadly shots that sent Billy into dreamland in slow and almost theatrical fashion.

Conn was an unbeatable light-heavyweight at his glorious peak. Folks in the know will also tell you that he could have been one of the great middleweights if fate and biology hadn't shaped a different destiny for him.

It was nigh impossible for Billy to follow any other path than that of a professional boxer. Before beginning to ply his trade in the more traditional roped square, he had fought and scrapped in the biggest ring of all, a sprawling ring of irony whose ethnical boundary lines served as irresistible challenges for every fighting young tough who wanted to test his fists and his mettle against opponents of every colour and creed. This was the ring of Pittsburgh and Conn was an Irish-American with the usual fiery tendencies. The backdrop was tailor-made, the script was perfect.

Billy, by his own modest admission, couldn't even fight when he started brawling for the first time. But he enjoyed the cut-and-thrust of a good battle and was eager to learn more. He also possessed the curiously lovable logic of a fighting man. Why work for a living when you could grind and sweat in the toughest game of all?

Conn didn't want to spend his life sitting in an office or toiling for a pittance in a factory. He wanted to become the best boxer he could possibly be and move himself into the far distant world of big money, nice clothes and all the other pleasant luxuries that come from success. Billy wanted it fast too and regarded amateur boxing as nothing more than an inconvenient roadblock. He bypassed it completely after trying out at his local gym and making the decision to commit to a professional career.

Billy quite literally made it up as he went along in his virgin soldier years. He was sixteen when he joined the paid ranks and was playing a brave game of bluff against older and tougher opponents. He knew that he needed experience and would have to take some hard knocks before breaking free from the launch pad.

He dropped a decision in his pro debut to Dick Woodward at Fairmont in West Virginia, a place of poor people living in quiet desperation. Conn was determined not to be knocked off the ladder and settle for that kind of life. He knew he would improve if he kept punching and learning and mixing with the best opponents his manager and trainer Johnny Ray could find. Ray coached Billy constantly on the road and the youngster couldn't have been in safer hands. Ray had been a good class Pittsburgh lightweight who had crossed swords with such titans of the game as Johnny Dundee, George (KO) Chaney and Johnny Kilbane.

Conn lost seven of his first fifteen fights as he soaked up Johnny Ray's wisdom and tried to transfer the knowledge into fluid and instinctive moves. But Billy was getting noticed as a skilful and willing youngster who couldn't hit with great force but could fight like a tiger when the going got tough. He won a decision over Johnny Birek in a cracking six rounder at the Motor Square Garden in Pittsburgh in January 1935, the year in which Conn really began to take off.

Like a prisoner busting free of his chains, Billy shrugged off his novice's garb and suddenly became a consistent winner. In 1936, he won a couple of thrilling decisions over Louis Cook at the Northside Arena and followed up with another quality win over General Burrows, which drew the attention of the local media.

Conn was beginning to be hailed as a genuine talent who would go far. He was maturing into a very clever boxer, who could move quickly and adroitly, possessed a fine repertoire of

moves and punches and had an excellent defence. He was speedy with his fists and a very adept sharpshooter at his best. When Billy scored the first of five career victories over the tough Honey Boy Jones at Greenlee Park, he seemed to come of age as a fighter and was moving rapidly into the major league.

### **Playing the piano with Fritzie**

Fritzie Zivic, future welterweight champion and a fellow Pittsburgher of Conn, Harry Greb and a few other famous gents from that town, once famously said, "I used to bang 'em pretty good. You're not playing the piano."

In 1936, Fritzie was already banging 'em pretty good, even though he was still five years away from dethroning the great Henry Armstrong.

When Zivic met Conn at Duquesne Gardens in Pittsburgh, eighteen-year old Billy was introduced to one of life's classic individuals. With that wry affection that old fighters reserve for each other, Conn would later recall that Zivic did everything but kick him. Fritzie, one of the all-time great tough nuts, certainly saw nothing untoward in taking the handsome youngster's face and creatively smashing it in. Zivic also re-arranged any other part of Conn that he could reach with the assorted implements of his mischievous toolbox. In thirty frenetic minutes, Billy was given an entire university course on boxing by an old-fashioned lecturer who worked to the theory that students learned much faster if they were repeatedly beaten about the head and verbally abused.

Amazingly, Conn retained enough of his vital parts to win a split decision.

Billy was moving up fast and now mixing with the cream of a truly golden age in boxing. He posted a couple of close but important decisions over Vince Dundee and the wonderfully talented Teddy Yarosz, but the going got tougher as the quality of opposition became richer. Billy always had trouble with Yarosz. He pipped Teddy in a return match over fifteen rounds at Duquesne Gardens, rallying strongly over the last three rounds, but the fans didn't appreciate the decision. Teddy got his own back, winning a twelve-rounder at Forbes Field in the final encounter between the two men.

The deep waters of a mightily impressive ocean of talent were providing Conn with a tough but priceless boxing education. Billy was decked and outpointed by the sorely underrated Young Corbett III in August 1937, but the Pittsburgh Kid learned from his mistakes and clearly mastered Corbett in a return.

Then came another wise, bruising ring mechanic in Solly Krieger, who knocked Billy down in the eighth round and won a wide decision in the first match of their trilogy. Billy was always annoyed with himself over that one. He wasn't in shape and Krieger just banged on The Kid all night long. Solly could take a shot as well as he could give one, and Conn could only take his punishment and chalk it up to experience.

But Billy was almost there. He was knocking at the door loudly and he wouldn't be kept out for much longer. From November 1938 to May 1939, he impressively won a quartet of fights that would lead to a bout with Melio Bettina for the vacant NBA light-heavyweight championship.

Conn avenged the loss to Krieger by winning a comfortable decision and then engaged in two successive fights with the man he rated as his toughest opponent: the clever boxing bell hop from San Francisco, Fred Apostoli. The fights were staged at Madison Square Garden and Billy won them both by decision, but these are only the bare and respectable facts.

Conn had all the time in the world for Apostoli. He saw a man in clever Freddie who could box, punch and do it all. After their second fight, a bruising fifteen rounder, Billy needed five days in hospital to recuperate.

In the gloriously rich and candid language of more innocent and democratic times, Conn described that battle to writer Peter Heller: "The thing I remember with Apostoli, in the second fight I got in an argument with him. We stepped back and called each other all the names. I said, 'Listen, you dago bastard, keep your thumb out of my eye!'. He says, 'Listen, you Irish son of a bitch, quit beefin' and c'mon and fight!' We were hot at one another. I had two paisans in my corner and a drunken Jew.

"So Apostoli hit me a left hook in the stomach just before the bell, and I go back to the corner. They start hollering at me for calling Apostoli names. The put the microphone under the ring because they could hear us swearing for nineteen rows back. It was being short-waved around the world. I says, 'Hey, listen. This dago just broke my spine. Do me a favour. Take this drunken Jew and the whole three of you go over to that bastard's corner and let me alone'. Oh boy, he (Apostoli) beat the piss out of me. He could really fight!"

Billy Conn was the complete fighter by the time he completed his next assignment by notching his second victory over Solly Krieger. Conn gave a brilliant exhibition of boxing as he did pretty much as he pleased and almost pitched a shutout. The Pittsburgh Kid was about to wear the crown.

## Champion

It seems hard to believe that the battle hardened Billy Conn was still only twenty-one years of age when he ruled the light-heavyweight roost after outpointing the tough Melio Bettina. But there was no money to be made in the graveyard of that division and Billy knew it. He also knew that he was in the form of his life and might as well go fishing for the sharks. And he wanted the biggest shark out there in the mighty Joe Louis.



Conn was very confident of his chances against the heavyweights and he continued on his merry way, a fighter on a roll. He decided on Bettina again, made two defences against the tough Gus Lesnevich, then moved up to tackle the dreadnoughts.

Billy moved within the Brown Bomber's sights with a thirteenth round knockout of speedy Bob Pastor and an emphatic points win over Lee Savold. All the hard work had paid off. Now there was only one clear and tempting target on the horizon, one simple and impudent ambition. Billy would take down the man himself and rock the boxing world.

There is a gorgeous precocity to youth. We have all felt its wonderful rush at the time, yet we see its frightening danger as older men. A kid at the wheel of a car plays chicken with a truck coming the other way and only the worldly can see the imminent crash.

When Billy Conn climbed into the ring at the Polo Grounds on June 18 1941, he saw only one winner and it wasn't the truck. The truck was too slow, too methodical. Cocky Billy had said it many times in his training, taunting Louis with predictions about how the fight would go. He would tire Joe and then he would knock him out. Louis took it all with his typical and ominous stoicism. Pretty boy Billy may have had his boxing and his silky skills, but Joe had been gifted with a pair of fists that could devastatingly cancel out most inconveniences.

## The Fight

For all his youthful gung-ho, Billy Conn was not a foolish man in his judgement of fellow fighters, most especially the great Joe Louis. Billy had the utmost respect for Joe, which was clearly apparent in the early going. The popular misconception of the fight is that Conn sailed away from Joe from the opening bell and was a country mile ahead when the guillotine dropped in the fateful thirteenth. This was not the case.

It is also a myth that Louis could not have won the fight on points. Billy was ahead by scores of 7-5, 7-4-1 and 6-6 at the finish. A Louis sweep of the last three rounds would have got Joe home by 8-7, 9-6 and 7-7-1.

In the first two rounds, it seemed that Conn might not get through five sessions. Billy could always move, but how he moved in those opening six minutes. For all the reports that Joe had looked sluggish in his training, the Bomber was all business as he forced Conn to beat a hasty retreat. A big right from Louis at the end of the first round seemed to be a harbinger of imminent doom for the challenger.

In the second, Billy's nimble footwork couldn't keep him away from Joe's left hook, but it was a right to the stomach from Louis that brought a gasp from the ringsiders. It was a painful, perfectly placed punch, and Conn bent from its terrific force. Trainer Johnny Ray was urging Billy to stick to his boxing, but the fancy stuff was getting the kid nowhere. Catching fire from his frustration, Conn rattled Joe with a quick combination. It didn't seem like much at the time, but thereafter the pattern of the fight shifted dramatically in the brave challenger's favour.

Billy was through with running. It simply hadn't worked. In the following rounds, he stood his ground more and placed his faith in his reflexes and quick punching. In effect, he became the aggressor, but with careful thought and intelligence

Conn brought a very effective uppercut into play, which repeatedly caught Joe and clearly threw him off his course. The champion realised the seriousness of his situation and knew that he couldn't afford to allow Billy too much more slack. Joe attacked earnestly in the sixth, bringing out the heavy artillery to cut



Conn and kept him under pressure.

Noticeably, however, the cocky Pittsburgh Kid was not only standing up to the punishment but also making Louis look ponderous and awkward. Joe was missing widely at times and being outfought on the inside. It was a wonderfully intriguing and exciting battle, all action and effort from two very contrasting craftsmen.

The crowd was seeing what every crowd loves to see. David was beating Goliath and edging his way ever more tantalisingly towards the finish line. He was doing it in style too. Conn was fearless. It was as if the gods themselves had given him the green light and told him that nothing could go wrong.

In the eleventh and twelfth rounds, Louis seemed to be doubting his ability to lasso the cheeky kid who was threatening to bump him off the throne. Joe was hesitant and unsure, anything but the punching machine that had blasted and chopped its way through a succession of other hopefuls. Billy just kept scoring with his stream of educated shots as the crowd's approval thundered around the Polo Grounds.

When Conn came out for the thirteenth, it was with three simple words from Johnny Ray in his ears: "Don't get careless." And of course Billy did get careless. He simply couldn't help himself. He had been punching prudently, but suddenly he was just punching, convinced he could take out one of the greats.

Louis, whether alert or snoozing, could always sniff out a man in distress. Billy had strayed out of safe distance and Joe took the incoming fire and awaited his moment. He drove Conn back with a powerful left hook and the final act began to play out. What normal people don't see, fighters do. Louis had seen the suddenly uncertain look in Billy's eyes, the uncertain little jig of his legs as he retreated.



Joe opened up and Conn responded with one last defiant burst of fighting courage. But it was over for Billy. He had stumbled into the minefield and he could no longer tiptoe around the sleeping explosions. Suddenly, he wavered and wobbled, hit by a paralysing left to the stomach. He seemed to hang there forever until Louis snapped his strings and put him to sleep with a thunderous right to the jaw.

Years later, Billy Conn reflected on the curtain coming down on his great dream. Older, wiser and more philosophical, he could even manage a chuckle as he spread his hands and said, "I was doing it until wise guy me got fresh and tried to knock him out."

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