

# Yesterday

by SAM MOSES

**TOMMY LOUGHRAN MAY FORGET A FIGHT, BUT NOT HIS WORKOUT WITH DEMPSEY**

When Tommy Loughran was in his prime in the late '20s, they said he could fight 15 rounds without disturbing a single wavy hair on his handsome head. Born Thomas Patrick Loughran on Nov. 29, 1902, the son of an Irish immigrant who married a Philadelphia-born woman, he was the quintessential Irish fighter and the pride of South Philadelphia. His deportment in and out of the ring was pure class; even today, oldtimers remember him as the most stylish of fighters, a beautiful boxer and the most gracious of men.

Loughran's boxing career spanned 19 years, from 1919 to 1937, and though the *Ring Record Book* lists 172 fights under his name, he probably fought a lot more than that. He won the light-heavyweight championship in 1927 and successfully defended the title six times before moving up to the heavyweight division in 1929. He fought once for the heavyweight championship, in 1934 against Primo Carnera, when the signs to retire were beginning to appear. ("When one minute between rounds isn't enough time to recuperate, then you know," he was to say later.) Although he lost on a decision, the fight went into the *Guinness Book of World Records* for having the greatest weight disparity of any heavyweight championship bout: Carnera's 270 pounds to Loughran's 184.

Loughran was an intelligent fighter and articulate, even as a schoolboy. He graduated from high school three years early, primarily because of his exceptional memory. He was also ahead of his age group in physical maturity; he joined the Marines at 14, telling the recruiter he was 23. In the Marines, they put boxing gloves on him for the first time. "They matched me with a tough Marine and what I did to him was nobody's business," Tommy says, recalling his initial boxing experience with a chuckle.

Today, at 76, Loughran lives in a veteran's home in Hollidaysburg, Pa. At 190 he is only five pounds over his last fighting weight. At 5' 11", he is an impressive physical figure, the size of a solid quarterback. His blue eyes are clear and

sharp, his voice deep and unwavering. He uses his huge hands to tell stories in such perfect coordination with the pitch of the voice and excitement of the tale that the stories seem choreographed. He has told them so often, he almost tells them by rote. While Loughran's memory of recent events is fading, much of the famous recollective powers remains, and the stories of old have endured. It is only the things he did yesterday that Tommy has trouble recalling.

The incidents of Loughran's favorite story took place on Sept. 11, 1926, 12 days before Gene Tunney took the heavyweight championship title from Jack Dempsey in Philadelphia's Sesqui-centennial Stadium before 120,757 people, the largest paid attendance ever at a boxing match.

"Dempsey was training down in Atlantic City for the fight with Tunney," recalls Loughran, "and he needed a boxer for a sparring partner. He had some other partners down there—Jimmy Delaney from St. Paul, Big Bill Tate and a fellow named Marty Burke from New Orleans, a really tall, rangy redheaded fellow—but they all knew Jack's style better than he did. They were no good to him; they were defensive fighters. They wouldn't lead or do anything offensive. Dempsey wanted to train with me because I had fought Tunney in an exhibition the year before. I knew Tunney's style, how he fought at that time. I knew what it was all about, how Dempsey should train. Dempsey needed a boxer like me.

"So Dempsey came up to Philadelphia and offered Joe Smith, my manager, \$5,000 if he would let me spar with him. Joe said, 'No, nobody's sparring with Tommy for any amount of money, not as long as I'm his manager.' Jack was terribly disappointed.

"Now, Jack and I were pretty good friends. I had lived at his hotel in Los Angeles for three months the year before, and I got to know him then. I used to study him a lot, watch his moves. I knew he had this Indian blood. Boy, I'm telling you, if there ever was a vicious person, he was it. He had these stalking methods, typical of an Indian. Jack would walk on the balls of his

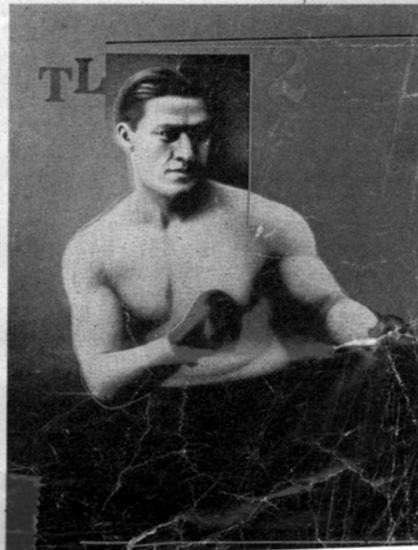
feet, not back on his heels like most.

"Yet he had the most attractive personality. You couldn't help but like him. He had a gracious smile, a good handshake, would always have something nice to say. But at the same time I knew he had this other streak in him, and boy, I'm telling you, if he had a chance, that would be it. He was the only man I was ever afraid of, and I think he knew it.

"Between the challenges from Jack and the pressure from everybody telling me he needed to box with me, my conscience was bothering me, and I finally said to my manager, 'Let's go down to Atlantic City. Let's go try Dempsey.' Joe looked at me and he said, 'Do you know what you're doing?' and I said, 'I want to find out. I want to go down there and see if he can knock me out.

"So one Saturday we drove down to Atlantic City. There was a whole caravan, Philadelphia sportswriters and a few other cars, because word had gotten around. Just as we were coming into the gate of Jack's camp, he was starting out for his workout. When he saw us, he stopped and came over and said, 'What are you guys doing down here?' My manager was a cocky little guy—he had had some 300 fights himself and didn't have a mark on him—and he said to Dempsey, 'I brought my boy Tommy down here to show you what a sucker he can make out of you.' Hohohoho! I kicked Joe in

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the shins. I said to him, 'Now wait a minute, you're liable to get this guy mad before we go in there. He might be vicious anyhow.' But Jack said, 'Gee, Tommy, I'm tickled to death. This is what I need. My sparring partners down here know my every move, they're no good to me. This is wonderful.'

"So I said, 'Go ahead with your training, Jack, we'll catch up to you.'

"'No, no, no,' he said. 'I'll come back to the locker room and wait for you while you get ready.' He did; he came back to the locker room and watched while I got dressed, so I couldn't use any excuses to change my mind. I wanted to stall, take a long time tying my shoelaces, but he was right there watching, talking to me.

"At this time Dempsey weighed about 190 pounds and I was a light heavy-weight, only about 172. But weight never made any difference to me. I used to fight heavyweights all the time. My fear of Jack had nothing to do with size. He was a tough, solid fighter, a fighter all the way through. He would take advantage at any opportunity, the slightest opportunity you gave him.

"After I got ready, we went outside. Jack started punching the bags, skipping the rope, shadowboxing, going through the various exercises. While he was doing this, a fellow in his camp, a personal friend of mine, came over and said, 'Tommy, be very careful. Don't expect anything from Jack. You're going on third, and Jack wants to be warmed up for you. He knows you're going to be trouble, and he wants to be set.' I said O.K., thinking I was frozen stiff.

"Jack went in the ring. He fought two rounds with Big Bill Tate, then he had two rounds with Marty Burke, I think it was. Then it was my turn. I'm telling you, I had been in hundreds of fights and they never bothered me. I could go in a ring as relaxed as I am sitting here talking. I was *never* tense for a fight like I was for this workout with Dempsey. I knew it wasn't going to be just a workout.

"In the corner, Joe looked at me and said, 'What the hell's the matter with you, Tommy? I can't understand you. You never get excited about fights.'

"I said, 'Joe, this isn't just a fight.'

"'Don't worry, Tommy,' he said, 'you'll knock his block off.'

"I said, 'Joe, I sure wish I had your confidence.'

"They rang the bell and we started the round. The first round I just moved away

from him and didn't throw many punches. I just made him miss me, move in, feint him, get him to throw some punches and catch them. He'd move in there, I'd back up against the ropes, he'd throw punches, I'd take them on the arms, push them aside. The crowd was in an uproar, watching it. Although I was a boxer, I could fight defensively, too; I could change my style according to the fellow I was fighting."

"We had only agreed to box one round. When we finished the round I walked to the ropes and Jack followed me. He gave me a little thump on the back, and when I turned around, he grabbed me on the forearm and looked me in the eye with a serious expression and said, 'Wait a minute, Tommy. Don't take those gloves off.'

"I said, 'What do you want, Jack?'

"He said, 'We're not through yet. I want you to go another round.'

"I said, 'Listen, Jack, I'll go six rounds with you if you think you can stand it.'

"He couldn't hit me to save his life, see, and it made him furious. Ooh, was he mad. I'd stay against the ropes and say, 'Let's see if you can hit me, Jack.' I'd go this way, then I'd go that way; next time he came at me I'd step back, he'd step forward, I'd step back another way. He didn't know what to do.

"I got back to my corner, and I said, 'Joe, I can't believe it. He can't hit me.' And Joe said, 'Then why don't you get moving?'

"In the second round I saw a left hand shooting out and shooting out and shooting out, and I realized it was mine. Then I brought over the right. I knew Jack was a hooker, of course; I'd stick out my left and slide inside and throw the right. I could tell by the way Jack looked at me he was really mad. He started fighting like a wild man. We stood toe to toe. He'd throw rights and I'd throw lefts, back and forth like that. Oh boy, how that man could sock. And he could move around fast, bobbing and weaving to make a tough target.

"But gees, 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 cussed me out loud, and when he did, I grabbed him and turned him around and put him up against the ropes. Gees, 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.

Then one of the fellows training Dempsey reached through the ropes and grabbed my leg. 'Hey,' this fellow said, 'watch the rough stuff.' I stared. 'Who, me?' I said. Then another trainer screamed. 'Cut this out! Who the hell you think you are!' They cut the round short to save him. I guess they were afraid I would beat him up so bad he wouldn't be able to fight Tunney.

"Afterward I thought the promoter for the Tunney fight was going to shoot me. He said he'd never seen Dempsey take a beating like that. I said I had to do it, we're friends and all that sort of thing but when the gloves are on it's a fight. We'll fight each other to a standstill, that's all there is to it."

The next day the headline on the sports page of a Philadelphia paper read DOWNTOWN ADONIS IN FAST BOUT WITH JACK. The subhead: "Pride of South Philadelphia Takes Champion Through Fastest Workout Titleholder Has Had Since He Went to Atlantic City to Train for Tunney."

The AP story began, "Tommy Loughran, 175-pound ring dynamo from Philadelphia, exploded a mess of fireworks right under Jack Dempsey's nose today. . . . Loughran, a masterful boxer, had no trouble in popping straight lefts into Dempsey's reddened face and shooting over rights to the chin. . . . Dempsey apparently did not enjoy the spectacle of being on the receiving end."

Twelve days later Dempsey would lose his title to Tunney. He never should have lost, they say. Some people even think Tunney didn't beat Dempsey so much as Dempsey beat himself. Some people think Dempsey lost because his spirit was broken.

"Confidence is what it takes," says Tommy Loughran. "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."

The next year Loughran would carry that confidence to the world light heavyweight championship.

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