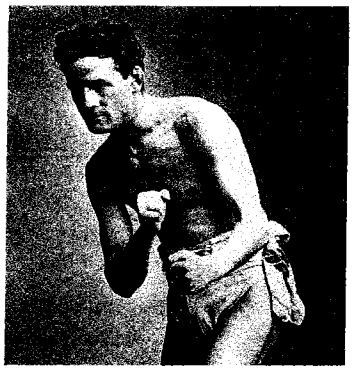
Jem Driscoll: Peerless Brilliance

By Mike Casey



Great fights are never truly forgotten. The unique strength and tapestry of boxing's jungle wire, coiling down through the decades like a great python, is too rich and enduring to ever permit oblivion.

A young man who sees a great fight will continue to talk about it for the rest of his days, which can be an awfully long time if he leads a balanced life and doesn't have a thing about practising his footwork against the mid-town traffic.

His stories are passed down the generations, embellished by the natural human tendency to exaggerate, but still serving as an invaluable and fascinating reference tool to the fans of the future.

The great boxing writers of long ago, for they were indeed great then, have left some wonderful works for our study and enjoyment; vivid and beautifully written descriptions of fighting men and fighting technique. In a more leisurely age when newspapers could afford to carry reams of copy and stacks of detail, the boxing fan was treated to comprehensive reports on the great fighters and the great fights. Many journalists were also brilliant sketchers, their long and flowing reports accompanied by vibrant and lovingly drawn images of giants like Dempsey and Ketchel.

Round-by-round, blow-by-blow accounts of the action were a regular accompaniment, since the newspapers were the only true purveyors of news. You didn't have to be at ringside to hear the crack of the blows, the yells and cheers of the immense crowds, or to smell the cigar smoke that drifted lazily on the air across one of Tex Rickard's vast arenas.

As a youngster, I had a great fascination for the surviving grand old men of the game like Nat Fleischer, Dan Daniel, Broadway Charley Rose and Sam Taub. I was a typically precocious lad who figured that any guy over twenty-five was an antique, and it boggled my mind that these gentlemen could reach back as far as seventy years when trawling their minds for golden memories.

Fleischer spoke of Dolan's Restaurant in old New York, where a dish of ham and beans could be bought for ten cents. For an extra ten cents, you could have your coffee and biscuits soaked in warm butter! Journalists would gather there and talk about the fights. And what fights they could watch in New York in those days, and at a whole host of venues! There was the National Athletic Club, the Fairmont Athletic Club, this club and that club.

When reading such stories, I would always ask myself the one question to which I knew I could never have the answer: Was it really that good back then? Had the grand old men become trapped in their golden past by way of understandable bias? They never did stop rating the fighters of their day as the greatest that boxing had ever seen. Or had those old sages truly been blessed in being able to rummage among the treasures of a Pandora's box that is now tantalisingly shut forever?

I do wonder, increasingly, if they were handed the Garden of Eden in which to roam. One fight in old New York in 1909 continues to ring like a bell through the corridors of time. It was a fight of sublime skill that Nat Fleischer would continue to celebrate in print until his death in 1972. Broadway Charley Rose would still be talking about it before joining his old pal Nat in fistic heaven two years later.

It was the contest in which Jem Driscoll and Abe Attell, two featherweight maestros of near impossible guile and artistry, clashed to determine who was the best. Now, fellas, I must bid you a fond farewell at this point if you don't have an interest in the little men of boxing. For these were not the days when the heavyweights were the be-all-and-end-all of the sport. These were the magical times when all things bright and beautiful were cherished and revered.

Jem Driscoll and Abe Attell might have been of slight physical build, but they were giants of men in their field of endeavour. Fleischer wrote of their classic duel: "Driscoll took on one of the craftiest boxers of modern times, Attell. The fight took place on February 19, 1909, and Driscoll won that handily. That bout is still discussed when old timers get together. It was a masterpiece in boxing art.

"It was a bout in which the finer points of boxing were exhibited as seldom before in New York. Attell, wily, a master feinter, a good hitter, seldom made a false move, was pitted against another crafty boxer, faster, more nimble, a sleight of hand artist. "With an official decision banned under the law then in existence in New York, Jem and Abe fought ten of the most scientific and thrilling rounds it had been the good fortune of New York fans to see. Some declared Abe had won. Others were just as certain that Driscoll had rolled up enough points to win. The Old Guard squabbled for some time over the winner. There was a preponderance of journalistic opinion in favour of Driscoll."

Broadway Charley Rose said of the fight: "It was the classic of all time. Maybe Jem won, maybe Abe had the better of it. But who won did not matter. It was the skill and the craft which these masters displayed."

Handsome

Polite, handsome, with a shock of dark, wavy hair, Jem Driscoll was the Cardiff-born Irishman who sought to prove to the world that he was the supreme featherweight. By the time of his epic contest with Attell, Jem's name was already writ large on the massively influential boxing map of old New York. Driscoll had arrived in the Empire State without fanfare, although the wise old birds of the game were familiar with his glowing reputation. They introduced him to New York society and gave him a tour of all the major clubs.

Then Driscoll went to work and nobody could beat him as he displayed his impressive wares in New York, Boston and Philadelphia. He twice bested Matty Baldwin and then administered an unforgettable boxing lesson to East Side legend Leach Cross in the Bronx.

Jem's brilliance was causing even the most hardened of journalists to salivate as they sat down at their typewriters to tap out their stories about the new wizard in their midst. None of which went down too well with Driscoll's great British rival, Owen Moran, who was more than a little peeved at all the attention Jem was getting. Growled Moran, "Jem Driscoll is a toothless old man who couldn't lick a postage stamp." It was good old gung-ho stuff from Owen, but he was a

pro's pro who knew exactly how great Driscoll was. The two men had fought a no-contest three years earlier and would later battle to a 20-rounds draw at the National Sporting Club in London.

Driscoll didn't waste time in his quest to prove himself the master of the universe. Just nine days after blinding Leach Cross with science, Jem took on Attell at the National Athletic Club. The king of the featherweights, canny Abe could not be lured into putting his title on the line against the formidable Driscoll, but Jem was still eager to prove a point. And so the scene was set for a game of fistic chess that would remain forever etched in the memories of those who saw it.

Both boys weighed 125lbs. Attell told reporters beforehand that he had never felt better, while Driscoll replied that he was fit enough to fight for a king's ransom if necessary. The odds throughout the day favoured Jem at around 10 to 7, marking the first time in many years that Abe had started as an underdog.

Attell, wearing light bandages, climbed into the ring at eleven minutes past ten in the evening, accompanied by Charley Sieger, Al Lappe, Al McMurray and Jimmie DeForest. Driscoll followed a few minutes later in the company of Jimmy Johnson, Boyo Driscoll and Charley Harvey.

Charley White was the lucky man who got the job of refereeing the two little titans of skill, and Driscoll set the pattern in the first round. This, in fact, was probably the round of the fight, the jewel in the crown that burned itself into people's memories.

Jem's craftsmanship was a thing of beauty. Attell could barely hit him. Abe missed with his opening left-right combination and Driscoll immediately rapped him to the face with three lightning jabs. Attell tried another left, missed again, and then crowded Driscoll to the ropes. Confident that he had measured his target this time, Abe fired off two punches that hit the air and caused him to stumble into the ropes. Driscoll had sidestepped the blows and darted away. Sportingly, Attell laughed at the incident.

The rounds raced by and the magic kept coming. Driscoll's slipping and boxing skills were superb, while those of Attell were only marginally less so. Jem staggered Abe in the fourth round and cut his eye, but Attell seemed to gain in strength in the later rounds as he finally found greater accuracy for his punches.

Abe staggered Jem several times, but the successes were short-lived as Driscoll's sublime skills and evasive footwork continually blunted Attell's weaponry. Every round was contested at a fast pace and the two little masters were still strong and willing as they came out for the tenth and final session. At the finish, Attell's damaged left eye and bruised nose were visible testaments to Driscoll's educated punching.

Insightful

Charlie Harvey, who was in Jem Driscoll's corner that night, was a brilliantly insightful and resourceful boxing man. It is probably fair to say that wheeling-dealing Charley was the first American manager and promoter to bring British fighters to America on a wholesale basis.

Harvey's shrewd eye for talent netted him a rich haul in the likes of Johnny Summers, Owen Moran and Ted (Kid) Lewis. But it was Jem Driscoll who held a special place in Charley's heart.

The only problem there was that Charley had to keep the bickering Driscoll and Owen Moran in separate training quarters, such was the two fighters' dislike of each other.

"Jem Driscoll was the greatest boxer the world has ever seen," Charley Harvey said. "You will recall that when Driscoll boxed Attell, he outboxed the Yankee four ways from the jack. He made Attell miss so badly that Abe almost plunged through the ropes. That will give you an idea of Jem's boxing wizardry.

"You may talk about George Dixon, Young Griffo and their likes as masters of the profession. But give me that boy Driscoll. He unquestionably is the king of them all." Erudite writer Robert Edgren couldn't get the Driscoll-Attell classic out of his mind. It just kept bouncing around in Bob's head like a wonderful melody. "Nobody who saw it will soon forget that first round," Edgren wrote. "Abe proudly started out to wind Mr Driscoll's affairs up in a hurry. Driscoll, smiling, allowed himself to be forced back to the ropes. Driscoll let Attell get just near enough to slam a terrific punch over to his jaw. Abe had his sure opening and he let it go for the knockout.

"The blow whizzed straight to the mark. Driscoll wasn't there. He wasn't even in the way when Attell, thrown off his feet by the force of his own blow, floundered headlong into the ropes and flopped to his knees. Attell wasn't used to being treated like this. Other fighters might make him miss on rare occasions, but they don't make him look foolish.

"He went after Driscoll with a cool determination. Driscoll popped in and out and jabbed Abe's head nearly off."

When Leach Got A Little Cross

Leach Cross knew what he wanted to say, but he couldn't find the appropriate words as he sat in a Turkish bath in old New York with his conqueror, Jem Driscoll.

Reflecting on the pasting he had just taken, Leach looked Jem up and down and said, "Well, I don't see how a little fellow like you can beat me. Why, I ought to stop you in a round. I didn't fight the right way."

Driscoll digested this and politely enquired, "What do you consider the right way?" Cross shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, a puzzled expression on his face. After some thought, he delivered his classic reply. "I don't know. My trainer Johnny Loftus told me not to fight you too fast or too slow, but just right – and then I'd have a good chance."

Such stories can often be misleading. Leach Cross was actually a very intelligent and dangerous lightweight who rated with the greats of his era. A dentist by profession, he still found the time to cross gloves with the mighty likes of George Dixon, Terry McGovern, Jack Britton, Harlem Tommy Murphy, Ad Wolgast, Johnny Dundee and Packey McFarland. Leach had gone into the ring at the Fairmont Athletic Club with a significant weight pull over Driscoll and been soundly thrashed. The sparkling performance spoke volumes for Jem's ability as a boxing master.

Cross, like so many men of danger, bore a highly deceptive countenance. He was a gaunt, sunken-eyed fellow who looked in constant need of a square meal and a spoonful of medicine. Leach quickly learned how best to employ his sorrowful look. It became his speciality to sucker an opponent into a false sense of security by lolling on the ropes and pretending to be hurt. Then

he would fire the sneaky right hand that garnered him many a knockout. Few ringmen were better than Leach at the ancient art of playing possum.

Famous old referee Billy Roche said of Cross: "Leach looked more like a casualty than a fighter. He fooled spectators and opponents alike into thinking that a stiff breeze could blow him over. This was his great prop and he used it to tremendous advantage. At first, even the fans resented being crossed by Cross. But they couldn't resent him long because he was such an exciting fighter to watch – when he wasn't acting."

Leach, however, couldn't beat Jem Driscoll at any kind of game. The fight between the two men aroused tremendous interest in the Bronx. The Fairmont Athletic Club had never known anything like it and was packed with its biggest ever crowd of 3,000. Outside the building, a further 3,000 card membership holders lined up for three blocks.Police commissioner Flood and 150 of his men had to bar these members from the streets leading to the clubhouse. Finally, the disenchanted trudged away, back to their homes or to some little watering hole to console themselves on their loss. How frustrated those poor folks must have felt when they read about the fight the following day! Perhaps not, since most had come to cheer on their man 'Leachie'.

Leachie's plight against Driscoll was probably best summed up by the New York Times, which reported that, "Cross, most of the time, was banging the air."

And so he was. From the first bell to the last, Driscoll was the near untouchable master of the action as he landed on Cross almost at will. Leach never stopped trying, but his return fire was dodged and deflected by a dazzling combination of brilliant footwork, slipping, ducking, feinting and blocking.

While Jem did most of the leading, the game Cross hunted him constantly, occasionally forcing Driscoll to break ground but never quite managing to trap and hit the shadow-like tormentor.

By the ninth round, Leach Cross was a perplexed and desperate man. Such a painful boxing lesson can so often be more dispiriting than a less cultured beating and certainly less merciful than a quick knockout. Leach simply didn't know where the punches were coming from next. Suddenly, he staggered on the ropes in his blind grogginess as Driscoll drilled him repeatedly with accurate and hurtful blows.

In those hard times, however, it took a lot for a referee to stop a fight and most boxers would have felt insulted by such a conclusion. Cross battled on and came back to rally with great courage and determination in the final round. But Leach was exhausted at the finish and once again swinging at thin air.

Driscoll, in the magnificent prime of his fighting life, had taken on a significantly bigger world class opponent and systematically dismantled him. Jem and Leach were not weighed for the fight, but it is reckoned that Cross held as much as a 12lb advantage. Writer Robert Edgren was once again entranced by what he had seen and wrote: "Driscoll made Cross plunge through the ropes and flop to his knees with the wasted energy of punches that missed by half an inch. He punched and jabbed and hooked and uppercut Cross until the East Side hero looked as helpless as a blind man."

Era

It was so terribly difficult to become a world champion in Jem Driscoll's era. Consider that Jem lost officially just three times in his 77 recorded professional fights, yet only gained British recognition as the world featherweight champion after his classic performance against Abe Attell.

Two of those three defeats may be taken with a pinch of salt: an ill-tempered disqualification loss to the great Freddie Welsh and a poignant exit against Frenchman Charles Ledoux in Jem's last fight.

Driscoll looked as majestic as ever against Ledoux in their London battle of 1919. Ledoux, a pastry cook by profession, was a formidable proposition and a terrific puncher. Yet, like so many before him, he could not find a way past Driscoll's gifted brilliance. Then Jem suddenly ran out of gas and was stopped in a state of exhaustion in the sixteenth round. There was something quite worrying about his sudden collapse and then the truth came out. Like his great contemporary, Joe Gans, Jem had contracted tuberculosis.

His health was never the same again and he eventually died of pneumonia in 1925. The sporting Ledoux couldn't praise the maestro enough. "Driscoll – he was marvellous. I could not hit him. I was – how you say – a novice, and he was the master."

Ledoux freely admitted that he would never have beaten Driscoll if Jem had been at his best.

But what of that ill-tempered loss to Freddie Welsh? Well, that thunderous and sometimes comical affair took place in Cardiff on the night of December 20, 1910, and Mr Driscoll did indeed lose his famously cool head – and it took a fellow Celt to make him do it.

Welsh, one of history's greatest lightweights and often saluted by historians as 'the master of the left jab', was a wonderful craftsman in his own right. He was a superb boxer and a devilish and vicious infighter. His problem was that he couldn't get anywhere near Jem Driscoll in the early rounds of their battle, a frustration that kept tickling Freddie's fiery temperament until it finally boiled over.

Jabbed silly by Driscoll over the first five rounds, Welsh finally got inside and hammered Jem with a series of withering kidney punches. Encouraged by not getting so much as a warning from referee 'Peggy' Bettinson, Freddie upped the ante as the fight rumbled on by roughing up Driscoll in the clinches with some artfully executed head butts to the chin. Still referee Bettinson would not issue a warning as the crowd hooted and jeered Welsh's foul tactics.

From ringside, Jem's reddened kidneys were clearly visible and it was clear to him that his complaints to Bettinson would continue to fall on deaf ears. For probably the only time in his professional career, Driscoll allowed his temper to fray. The red mist descended and all thoughts of science were discarded as he ripped into Welsh in a blind fury in the tenth round, pounding Freddie's ribs with a succession of steaming hooks and swings.

The comical part of all this, as only true devotees would notice in such a bedlam, was that Jem never stopped punching correctly. Such was his God-given grace, he could swing 'em in from the bleachers and still look a picture of technical perfection.

Then he gave Welsh some of his own medicine by butting him under the chin and throwing him across the ring. At long last, referee Bettinson woke up - and disqualified Jem Driscoll!

What followed, and what continued for some time, was a gorgeous brawl between irate Irishmen and Welshmen throughout the hall, until a team of Cardiff police constables finally broke it up.

Scientific

James (Jimmy) Butler, one of the great British boxing writers, was at ringside on that stormy night in Cardiff. Butler adored Jem Driscoll and later wrote of him: "As a scientific boxer, Jem Driscoll stood alone. He was incomparable – the supreme artist of glove-fighting, the perfect, polished stylist whose ringcraft and skill verged upon the uncanny."

My good pal Tracy Callis, one of the finest historians we have today, rates Jem Driscoll second only behind Henry Armstrong in the pantheon of the great featherweights. "Driscoll was one of the best featherweights of all time," says Tracy. "He was clever, quick and willing. He was also slick and elusive. When he was struck, usually it was only with a glancing blow."

Oh, my dear reader, wouldn't it be perfectly wonderful if we had our own time machine? We could journey back to the old New York of 1909 and watch Mr Driscoll fence with Mr Attell.

We would take it slow and easy of course. I thought we might start with some ham and beans at Dolan's Restaurant, followed by coffee and biscuits soaked in warm butter!

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