

# Gene Tunney: The King Of Cool

By Mike Casey



It might surprise some of our readers to know that this Jack Dempsey supporter has never harboured a degree of resentment against Gene Tunney. Not that one has to be a Dempsey acolyte to bristle at the sound of Gene's name.

Tunney was a man apart in more ways than one, and that was his unfortunate problem. He wasn't a fighter's fighter to some and he wasn't a fan's fighter to most. As a general rule, he was acknowledged for his exceptional talent through gritted teeth and with awkward shrugs of reservation. Your average fight fan in your average bar might sum it up thus: "Yes, he was great, but there was just something about the guy."

Quite simply, Gene Tunney just didn't fit most people's perception of a fighting man, and for the usual trite and unfair reasons. The major gripe was that he was aloof and regarded himself as being above his somewhat primitive profession. The guys in the bar could poke gentle fun at him because it was a pretty safe bet that Gene wouldn't be there to quaff beer and show off his muscles. He would more likely be at a high society dinner party, rambling at some length about the meaning of life. I do not entirely exaggerate. Tunney did have a grating tendency to pontificate, inducing the average Joe to emit a quiet sigh and glance at his watch.

Throw in Gene's clean-cut handsomeness and that classic shock of hair that a hurricane couldn't disturb, and he might have been bullied very frequently if he had been a timid librarian instead of a deceptively tough and iron-willed boxer. To cap it all, the New York smoothie went and beat Jack Dempsey twice, which really was a quite horrendous crime to the blinkered and the prejudiced. If ever a man deceived us by his appearance, it was Gene the Fighting Marine. He was indeed an intelligent and analytical soul, even if he tried a little too hard to prove it. But along with the brains and the scientific mastery of boxing came tremendous courage, resilience and determination. It is a great pity that he continues to be so misunderstood.

Many moons ago, Paul Gallico wrote of Tunney: "Anyone checking his rise from humble beginning to wealth and fame would find a man of duty, self-confidence, initiative, burning ambition, indomitable courage and complete and utter fearlessness.

"Added to this, by intelligence, study and practice, he made himself into one of the best exponents of the so-called manly art of self-defence who ever laced on the red leather gloves. He was the absolute 'ne plus ultra' of what a boxer ought to be.

"Theoretically, the perfect boxer would emerge from every test unscathed, even untouched by any blow, while leaving the opponent bleeding and unconscious on the canvas. Again, in every theory, with speed of foot, hand and eye, it is possible to avoid every hook, cross or uppercut by blocking them with gloves or arm, or slipping, ducking, pulling out of range, making the hitter miss. No one was ever that good at the game, but among the heavyweights, Gene Tunney probably came closest to it.

"When we should have been cheering him to the echo for the perfection of his profession, we hated him instead for practicing his deceitful arts upon that hero image of ourselves, caveman Dempsey."

**Admire**

Why does this writer continue to admire Gene Tunney? For all the good reasons that Paul Gallico gave us. I love thinking fighters who dedicate their lives to educating their minds and honing their bodies in pursuit of that most elusive and impossible of all human qualities: perfection. It was often written of Tunney that he regarded boxing as a means to an end, which is quite true. But rare indeed is the man like Gene who gives a lesser love his total commitment and dedication. When the heart isn't in it, it is very easy to jump off the bus when it starts thundering down a slope. Tunney never wavered when the going got tough, not even after receiving a brutal lacing from the great Pittsburgh Windmill, Harry Greb. Gene might just as well have been tossed into a threshing machine on that torrid New York night in the spring of 1922, the only time he was officially beaten in his 87 recorded battles against excellent opposition.

It would be no exaggeration to describe Tunney's defeat as a pulping, for he was horribly cut and mauled as he reeled as much from the combined effects of adrenaline and alcohol poisoning in his stomach as from Greb's ferocious attack.

As Gene would recall in later years, the problems started in the run-up to the fight. "Whilst training for the Greb match, which took place just four months after the Battling Levinsky match, I had the worst possible kind of luck. My left eyebrow was opened and both hands were sorely injured. I had a partial reappearance of the old left elbow trouble, which prevented my using a left jab. Dr Robert J Shea, a close friend who took care of me during my training, thought that a hypodermic injection of adrenaline chloride over the left eye would prevent bleeding when the cut was re-opened by Greb. At my request he injected a hypodermic solution of novocaine into the knuckles of both hands as well. We locked the dressing room door during this performance.

"George Engle, Greb's manager, wanting to watch the bandages being put on, came over to my dressing room and found the door bolted. He shouted and banged. We could not allow him in until the doctor had finished his work. Getting in finally, he insisted that I remove all the bandages so that he could see whether I had any unlawful substance under them. I refused. He made an awful squawk, ranting in and out of the room. I became angry. Eventually I realised Engle was only trying to protect his fighter, and if I let it get my goat that was my hard luck. Moreover, his not being allowed into the dressing room made the situation look suspicious. I unwound the bandages from my hands and satisfied George that all was well."

All was not well, however. Tunney's problems had just begun and the doctor's injections only served to endanger Gene even more when the perpetual motion machine that was Harry Greb started firing. Tunney quickly stumbled into a nightmare, as he would recall in typically clinical detail: "In the first exchange in the first round, I sustained a double fracture of the nose, which bled continually until the finish. Toward the end of the first round, my left eyebrow was laid open four inches. I am convinced that the adrenaline solution that had been injected so softened the tissue that the first blow or butt I received cut the flesh right to the bone.

"In the third round another cut over the right eye left me looking through a red film. For the best part of twelve rounds, I saw this red phantom-like form dancing before me. I had provided myself with a fifty per cent mixture of brandy and orange juice to take between rounds in the event I became weak from loss of blood. I had never taken anything during a fight up to that time. Nor did I ever again.

"It is impossible to describe the bloodiness of this fight. My seconds were unable to stop either the bleeding from the cut over my left eye, which involved a severed artery, or the bleeding consequent to the nose fractures. Doc Bagley, who was my chief second, made futile attempts to congeal the nose bleeding by pouring adrenaline into his hand and having me snuff it up my nose. This I did round after round. The adrenaline, instead of coming out through the nose again, ran down my throat with the blood and into my stomach.

“At the end of the twelfth round, I believed it was a good time to take a swallow of this brandy and orange juice. It had hardly gotten to my stomach when the ring started whirling around. The bell rang for the thirteenth round; the seconds pushed me from my chair. I actually saw two red opponents. How I ever survived the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth rounds is still a mystery to me. At any rate, the only consciousness I had was to keep trying. I knew if I ever relaxed, I would either collapse or the referee would stop the brutality.”

The punishing loss to Greb produced what was probably the greatest example of Gene’s single-mindedness. Taking to his sick bed, he plotted a way to beat Harry with all the attention to detail of a pernickety draughtsman. There was no room for self-pity in Tunney’s game plan for climbing life’s ladder. One wonders if Gene even understood that emotion. “Well, Harry you were the better man tonight,” he told Greb after their classic first encounter. Tunney’s use of the word ‘tonight’ was quite intentional. As he later admitted with quiet coldness, “I meant that literally.” The two titans of the ring would clash four more times, and while it is something of a myth to say that Gene mastered Harry, Tunney was certainly the overall victor. Greb would later say, “I have boxed Dempsey and Tunney. You never know how good Tunney is until you box him.”

After the Greb mauling, Gene’s chief second and manager, Doc Bagley, made a decision that must surely rank with Gene Klein’s famous refusal to take a slice of the Beatles cake. Mr Klein, some will recall, felt that the Fab Four were nothing more than a fleeting fad. Doc Bagley was of the opinion that Tunney would never be the same again after being cut to pieces by the whirring blades of the Pittsburgh Windmill. One wonders if the Doc ever sat down and engaged in the masochistic exercise of estimating his lost fortune.

Somebody else thought differently. Canny old boxing stalwart Billy Roche sidled up to British reporter Jimmy Butler one day in Paris and said to him, “This youngster Tunney has got brains, Jimmy. Mark my words, he’s going to be a crackerjack – and one of these days he’s going to lick Dempsey!”

## **Thinkers**

Boxing has spawned some great thinkers through the years, and I speak here of the special men who considered every aspect of the game and studied its every intricacy. Bob Fitzsimmons was probably the greatest of all at being able to successfully marry scientific theory to action. He learned to punch with deadly precision and dexterity and conserved his energy by studying the behaviour of animals. Joe Gans and Kid McCoy were similarly gifted and similarly blessed with naturally inquisitive minds. Tunney, in my opinion, ranks very high in that company in his ability to assimilate and analyse data and effectively act upon it. If Gene were with us today, I would wager a fair few pennies that he would be making his millions from the computer industry.

My fellow historian, Tracy Callis, says of Tunney: “He was one of the most intelligent fighters in boxing history. He fought primarily as a light heavyweight but tangled regularly with bigger men. He was patient, light on his feet, carried a beautiful left jab and a stinging right hand punch. He usually moved away from an attacker but was known to tie up his foe in a clinch if the adversary got too close. Gene rarely engaged in toe-to-toe exchanges.

“He studied his opponents in depth and knew their every move before he entered the ring. He worked up a plan for each fight and followed it to the letter.

“Fighting in an era of lighter heavyweights, who tended to be quicker and slicker than those seen today, Tunney bested some of the greatest all-round boxers ever in Battling Levinsky, Harry Greb, Tommy Loughran, Jack Delaney, Jeff Smith, Tommy Gibbons and Jack Dempsey.”

Hawaiian historian Curt Narimatsu, an excellent analyst of boxing styles and technique, says, “Gene Tunney, to his credit, always praised Jack Dempsey. Gene said that if Dempsey got inside Joe Louis, Jack wins. If Louis keeps Dempsey outside, Joe wins. By implication, Gene accedes to the superhuman strengths of Dempsey and Louis over his own legacy.

“Gene’s greatest strength was his defence. Legendary fight trainer Ray Arcel worshipped Gene and talked tons about Tunney’s mental strength and acumen. As with any contact sport, defence is what triggers offence. Naturally, Gene stands among the greatest ever counter punchers. The best mirror image of Tunney is Benny Leonard, whose vaunted defence actuated his great offence and counter punching. It’s no surprise that Gene, Benny and Ray Arcel were bosom buddies, synergetic triplets born from the same advent.”

Some time ago, I was eager to probe the lively and knowledgeable mind of sports writer and fellow IBRO member, Mike Silver, on how Tunney would have fared against Larry Holmes. Mike didn’t need long to think about it. “Tunney was smarter than Holmes and would have outpointed him. I mean, who is smarter than Tunney? The guy thought out every single move. Anybody that can figure out how to beat Harry Greb is tops in my book. Nobody is outsmarting Tunney. He was a methodical, brilliant tactician who would have studied Holmes in one fight and figured him out.

“I’m taking nothing away from Holmes, who had one of the best left jabs in heavyweight history. But he benefited from an extremely weak division. Holmes was not as consistent as Tunney, nor was he as well rounded a boxer. Other than Norton and Cooney, all of Holmes’ fights were against second and third rate opposition. I can see Holmes in the top twenty, but not in the first ten. Too much consistent talent there.”

## **Hours**

My good friend, Mike Hunnicut, who has studied countless hours of film of the great fighters, is no less generous in his assessment of Tunney’s ability and mettle. Mike is convinced that Jack Dempsey remains the heavyweight for all seasons, but rates Tunney very close behind.

Here is Mike’s reasoning on Jack, Gene and a few others: “If the fate of the world depended on a 15-round fight against some alien pugilist, the road leads to Dempsey as the man you would want to do the job. Jeffries would be a bit too slow and a catcher. Johnson would be too defensive. Max Baer wouldn’t be serious enough. Marciano would have problems with his short arms and lack of height. Liston would be too slow and might quit. Ali would be too open to the left hook and too light a puncher. Holmes would have too limited a repertoire and not the greatest of chins. Tyson might simply quit and was never the body puncher he should have been.

“Dempsey had maniacal determination, hit hard, had a great chin and fought to the death. That’s the guy I want in there if the fate of the world depended on it.

“Gene Tunney, though, scores very highly for me. He was an upright boxer and his defence could be porous. But he was probably the greatest technical boxer the heavyweights ever saw. Aside from his skills and ring intelligence, he was one of the toughest ever in body and mind. For me, he was the greatest light heavyweight ever bar none and the third greatest heavyweight ever. By the second Dempsey fight, when Gene was finally filling out, he would have defeated more of the top 500 heavyweight fighters in history over the 15-round limit than anyone – with the possible exceptions of Dempsey and Louis.

“A must buy for any historian is the complete film of Tunney’s last fight against Tom Heeney. From any boxing standpoint, Gene did as much as could possibly be done in that battle. For cleverness and all round ability, he was above even Tommy Loughran or anyone else among the light heavies or heavies. Gene’s conditioning was fantastic and he was always in shape from the many fights he’d had. His speed

over the long stretch and his ability to recover from adversity were admirable. The glowing testaments of so many fighters and trainers also attest to Gene's stature as a great boxer and fighter."

Mike Hunnicut's reference to Tunney's excellent recuperative powers brings an eternally fascinating old chestnut back into play. The perennial question concerning that memorable Battle of the Long Count at Soldier Field is whether Tunney couldn't have beaten the traditional toll of ten seconds after taking that rapid fire blitz of punches from Dempsey in the seventh round. I have never believed so and I simply point to the film of the fight as the evidence. Gene was glassy-eyed and shattered and I strongly dispute the claim that he knew exactly where he was and what he was doing from the time he hit the deck.

Tunney needed that extra time and Jack obliged him by blowing a golden chance of unexpected glory. Gene got the big break that all champions get at some point in their careers and calmed his racing brain to take full advantage of the precious extra seconds. Let us not accuse him of being a lucky so-and-so. Dempsey, ever the instinctive lion, needed to get back into his agreed cage of the neutral corner and was too consumed by the smell of fresh meat to do so.

What Gene showed in that memorable encounter was his mental and physical toughness. He wasn't fragile of chin, jaw, fighting spirit or anything else. He proved that repeatedly and emphatically during his thirteen years in the professional ring. Had he carried the definitive knockout wallop, he might just have been the perfect heavyweight, the all-time ace. Not that Tunney's punching power should be dismissed. He could still clout with jarring authority when his tail was up. He knocked out or stopped 48 of his opponents during a near perfect career in which he defeated the very cream of the light heavyweight division and then set about conquering the heavyweights with equal efficiency.

The final victory over Tom Heeney was a classic example of Gene at his very best. When the brakes were off and the punches were truly flowing, there was a machine-like and quite frightening precision to his work. New Zealander Heeney, the so-called Hard Rock from Down Under, was a tough and extraordinarily brave man faced with the task of trying to trap a ghost carrying two hammers. Avoiding Tom's rushes with speedy and elegant grace, Tunney darted in and out and ripped his challenger with ramrod jabs and thudding straight rights. Hardened observers winced as Heeney's head was repeatedly snapped back on his shoulders. Only in the far more tolerant days of 1928 would that battle have been allowed to go into the eleventh round. In 22 more fights before his retirement, Tom was able to notch only five wins.

## **Interest**

My interest in Gene Tunney began in earnest many years ago after programming my tape machine to record a documentary on Jake LaMotta in the early hours of the morning. To my delight, the channel slipped in a following bonus hour of Tunney's fights against Georges Carpentier and Tommy Gibbons. It was akin to stumbling into an Aladdin's Cave. I had read much about Gene, but now I was actually seeing his sublime skills, his precise punching and his fleetness of foot. At the time, Muhammad Ali was being described as a 'unique' heavyweight for his speed of hand and foot. Had everyone missed Tunney? Had they simply forgotten about him? Gene was as fast as Muhammad, if not faster, and he was certainly more skilful and scientific.

Tunney was simply brilliant in his quietly ruthless dismantling of French ace Georges Carpentier at the old Polo Grounds in New York. Reporter Jimmy Butler wrote: "The pair put up one of the finest and most thrilling displays ever seen in America. Tunney that day was a man of ice. A calm, emotionless, sphinx-like fighter against whose rock-like defence the Frenchman's brilliance shattered into a thousand pieces.

"And as the fire flickered out of Carpentier's attack and his speed began to slacken, Tunney, meticulous, prim and precise, began to weaken him with copybook punches. Gene hardly made a single mistake. His

long left, rigid as a bar of iron and just about as unpleasant to encounter, kept poking itself into his opponent's face, and for round after round he played on a deep cut over the French fighter's right eye."

Carpentier was floored four times in the tenth round of that fight, the end eventually coming in the fifteenth when Gene disabled the game Frenchman with a short jolt to the solar plexus.

With typical foresight and calculated planning, Gene Tunney had been tracking Jack Dempsey for some time. For five years in fact. When Jack knocked out Georges Carpentier at Boyle's Thirty Acres in July 1921, a young Tunney watched Dempsey's every move from ringside. Gene had fought on the undercard and been booed for a very poor performance against the crude and free-swinging Soldier Jones. Despite halting Jones in the seventh round, Tunney hardly shaped up as a threat to Dempsey.

But Gene would entertain no negative thoughts, even though he knew he would have to hurdle many more obstacles before booking what every hopeful contender both wanted and feared – a fiery dance with the Manassa Mauler. Patiently and methodically, Tunney set about climbing the long ladder. In his spare time, he studied Dempsey's fighting style in great depth and acquired every available film of Jack's fights. Again and again, Gene practised the straight, crashing right that he believed to be the key to taking the steam out of Dempsey's attack.

There were mental barriers to overcome too, and here was where Tunney demonstrated his incredible strength of mind. It is impossible to understand now just how much Jack Dempsey put the fear of God into prospective opponents. Gene's demons came to get him, as they so often do, in the dead of night when all his positive thoughts were suddenly smashed by Dempsey's chilling spectre.

Recalled Tunney, "One night, in a lonely cottage on Mount Pleasant, I had a nightmare. I was in the ring with Dempsey. He was battering me frightfully. I was bloody and only half conscious and he came at me snarling He knocked me down. I got up and he began pummelling me again. The referee stopped the fight. I woke up. The bed was shaking. I was practically out of it. After that, I stopped reading the newspapers and maintained a calm approach to the fight."

Like all great men, Tunney found his 'four o'clock courage' and executed his battle plan with icy resolve when he challenged Dempsey at the Sequicentennial Stadium in Philadelphia on a rainy night in September 1926.

British sportswriter, Denzil Batchelor, who produced an engrossing book called *Big Fight* in 1954, wrote the following of Gene's performance: "It was typical of Tunney that he should have won his most important fight in so cool and calculating a manner. It was not his way to stand toe-to-toe slogging it out in the tradition descended from Belcher and embraced by most of the latter day past masters all the way up to Dempsey. Tunney was the Moltke of heavyweights, if not the Schlieffen.

"He was probably inferior to several of the men he fought when it came to a hammering match at close quarters; therefore he saw to it that his fights never came to such a pass. He kept his men at long range with punches which, in spite of his brittle hands, were still power-driven at the very limit of his considerable reach. He used his feet to frisk around the maulers and man-handlers. Above all, he used his head."

Some forty years before Steve McQueen hit his glorious peak as a steely movie icon, Gene Tunney was the King of Cool. It just wasn't cool to say it, and perhaps it never will be. A man can have it all and still have something missing through no great fault of his own.

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