

## THE NIGHT ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE IN THE CHICAGO COLISEUM

### I. Fields-Thompson

A crowd of 10,000 spectators were jammed into the Chicago Coliseum the night of March 25, 1929, watching the exciting world welterweight championship match between Jackie Fields and Young Jack Thompson. For seven rounds the two fighters had waged an intense battle and had thrilled the crowd repeatedly with their hectic action.

The crowd noise heightened all during the fight, as first one and then the other had staged decisive rallies. The fighters' respective fans roared at the frequent exchanges of blows and shouted encouragement and advice to their favorite.

Fields, a Jewish boy born and raised on Chicago's West Side, had won the gold medal in the 1924 Olympics at Paris in the 126 pound class and had turned professional in September, 1924. He had since won 44 fights, losing just four times, and had come into the match against Thompson on the heels of a fourteen bout winning streak. Fields had just turned 21 years of age on February 9, 1929.

Thompson was a 25 year old black from California, who had been fighting as a professional since 1922. He had won 43 of his bouts, losing twelve, and one of his losses had been to Fields, on October 1, 1928 at San Francisco, on a ten round decision.

For the first seven rounds Fields had command of the fight, shaking Thompson in the opening round and having him groggy from a series of lefts and rights. In the second round Fields again punched Thompson groggy, but the California fighter fought back furiously.

Thompson kept his adherents confident when he staged a spirited rally in the third round, scoring with several vicious right crosses which forced Fields on the retreat. For a few brief moments it seemed he would decisively turn the tide by knocking out his opponent, but Fields survived the round.

For the next several rounds, through round six, Fields piled up points and shot home stiff left jabs and left hooks, interspersed with right crosses. At the same time, Jackie very cleverly was catching Thompson's blows with his gloves and forearms and nullifying Young Jack's determined efforts by remaining continually on the move.

Thompson rallied again in the seventh, breaking through Fields' defense with another series of hard right crosses to

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have Jackie again in distress.

The eighth round found Thompson attempting to pursue the advantage he had momentarily gained in round seven, but Fields seemed to be again in command, picking off Young Jack's by now desperate punching attempts and at the same time landing his own telling blows.

The crowd noise was still intense, a steady roar which rose and fell as the action in the ring continued. The round had gone about two minutes when a different thunder of sound arose in the arena.

In a matter of seconds, screams and shouts of terror reverberated throughout the arena. The screams and shouts appeared to be heaviest in the vicinity of the south balcony and were followed by cries of "Fire! Fire!" and "The building's collapsing!"

Several crashing noises followed, punctuated by what sounded like a series of gun shots. With the arena in almost total darkness, the only illumination coming from the lights over the ring, in the center of the main floor, hundreds of spectators stampeded and rushed for the exits. Another storm of people rushed toward the ring, the only illuminated area, some even climbing into the ring, in their effort to escape whatever unknown horror had been unleashed in their midst.

In a few brief moments the two fighters stopped their efforts and looked wildly about as spectators were excitedly climbing through the ropes. Referee Ed Purdy grabbed the arms of both fighters, "Get under the ring," he commanded. Fields and Thompson hurried to comply and found themselves joined by sports writers and ringside spectators, all bewildered by the sudden turn of events.

The arena's electricians, busy watching the thrilling fight, were unable immediately to get back to the house lights control panel, caught in the crush of humanity scurrying helter-skelter around the arena, madly seeking safety. Within a few minutes however, after what seemed an eternity of confused and jumbled time, all of the house lights finally came on.

The scene of the wild disorder that had ensued now became sickeningly evident. A section of the south balcony railing had been torn loose, tumbling several panic-stricken spectators down onto the persons sitting underneath on the main floor.

Those on the main floor, terrorized by bodies falling on them out of the darkness, had risen from their seats in

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panic, upsetting row-on-row of the collapsible wooden chairs, trying to escape the sudden calamity that had come from above. Frightened shouts and screams only added to the pandemonium, as the panic spread in the arena.

Bodies were strewn on the main floor as several spectators had jumped or been pushed out of the balcony. Others had fallen, or been tripped and trampled underfoot as everyone tried to flee in mindless confusion.

Fortunately, two police officers at ringside, Deputy Police Commissioner John Stege and Detective Chief John Egan had acted quickly to stem the panic and restore order. Stege had fought his way through the milling crowd, with one of the arena's electricians, and saw that all of the lights were turned on. Egan had commandeered a press telephone at ringside and ordered police riot squads and ambulances to rush to the Coliseum.

Also, radio station WGN was broadcasting the fight from ringside and the announcer was able to communicate what was happening, alerting listeners and radio equipped police squad cars and fire equipment to respond. The station had just recently been appointed by the City of Chicago to broadcast police messages, and within a few minutes three ambulances, six fire companies and a dozen police squad cars were at the Coliseum.

With the emergency rescue forces streaming into the arena, the injured were quickly ministered to and removed to nearby St. Luke's Hospital, just two blocks away. Thirty-five persons, including three women, many of whom were unconscious, were taken to St. Luke's. Nine persons suffered serious injury, with one man, Herman Landfield, a 42 year old milliner who resided at 907 E. 53rd Street, suffering a fractured skull.

Landfield had been one of two men who had been hurled, or pushed out of the balcony. He died of his injuries a day later. The other man falling from the balcony was Andrew Stout, who resided at 5820 S. Prairie Avenue. Stout suffered serious internal injuries and was considered by St. Luke's physicians to be on the critical list.

Besides the two men, eight other spectators suffered broken limbs or internal injuries. Included in the list of seriously injured were two policemen and prominent Chicago auto dealer, Emil Denemark, who was also a member of the Illinois boxing commission. Denemark had been kicked and knocked down several times, as he was attempting to quell the panic and restore order.

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Unbelievably, the Fields-Thompson bout was resumed shortly after a semblance of order was accomplished, even while the injured were still being carried from the arena.

The boxers completed the remaining minute of the eighth round and then continued to emulate their earlier efforts, even in the face of the cataclysmic events which had earlier interrupted their contest. Fields continued his dominance of Thompson in the final two rounds, who strove desperately for a knockout. Fields, too, tried for a knockout, so as to leave no doubt of his superiority over Thompson.

The decision at the end of ten rounds was unanimous, the referee and two judges announcing Fields the winner. Sports writers at ringside gave Fields seven rounds, Thompson two, with one even. When the winner was heralded, he was presented with a \$5,000 diamond-studded belt, donated by the fight's promoter, Jim Mullen, as emblematic of the title. The presentation of the belt was made by Paul Prehn, president of the National Boxing Association and chairman of the Illinois State Athletic Commission. The National Boxing Association had previously ruled that the welterweight championship was vacant and that the Fields-Thompson winner would be proclaimed the new champion.

Six other bouts were presented that night, five of them taking place before the main event and one being presented after the conclusion of the Fields-Thompson battle. In the opening bout, Harry Schuman, local lightweight and Young Jack Kearns, of Omaha, fought a four round draw. One of those seriously injured in the ensuing panic was the brother of opening bout boxer Harry Schuman, Samuel Schuman suffering fractures of both legs.

Years later Jackie Fields recalled his experience at the Chicago Coliseum that night of March 25, 1929. "In the middle of the eighth round it sounded like gun shots were coming from the rear of the building. Both Thompson and myself hesitated in our fighting and then the referee stepped between us and told us to get under the ring."

"It was pitch dark down there and there's a lot of other guys under the ring, too. We could hear people screaming and hollering and running in all directions. It must have been a good half hour before they got things quieted down and we were told to continue the fight."

Two separate investigations, to determine how the riot started, were launched the following day. The Illinois Boxing Commission opened its own investigation while Alderman John Toman, of the 23rd ward introduced a city council resolution calling for another investigation.



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Along with the effort to find who, or what, started the panic in the arena, questions were raised regarding whether city building code safety regulations had been overlooked, or circumvented. However, City of Chicago building commissioner Chris Paschen was emphatic that none of the safety code regulations had been violated. Alderman Toman insisted that the aisles were too narrow and that the collapse of the temporary seats had trapped a portion of the crowd, leaving many to be crushed or trampled.

Later, on the day after the fight, it was determined that the riot started as the result of an altercation in the south-east stands. During the eighth round a fan of Jackie Fields shouted an insulting remark alluding to Young Jack Thompson's color.

Two black men nearby objected and one drew a gun, and they both advanced on the person who had shouted the racial remark. A woman seated close by saw the pistol and screamed, "He's got a gun!" Other spectators in the section sprang to their feet, anxious to flee from what looked like a very nasty situation.

The rumble of overturned seats cannonaded and rose to a roar. Attempting to escape, a few persons, mostly men, were jostled or pushed over the balcony rails and fell among the crowd in the seats below. At almost the same instant came the boom and flash of a newspaper photographer's camera and shouts of "fire!" rang out. Billows of smoke from the camera's flash rose up, adding more frenzied cries of "fire!" Within a few seconds a stampede spread and the resulting din and hue and cry affected the sanity of the crowd.

On Thursday, March 28, police arrested Kenneth Taylor, a black man, at his home at 5044 S. Michigan Avenue, on suspicion that he had been involved in the Monday night dispute that had precipitated the riot and panic. Captain John Prendergast, commander of Chicago's State Street Police District, made the arrest and said he would have several witnesses on hand to confront Taylor.

On the next day, Friday, March 29, Taylor was identified by spectators of the fight, as the person who flourished the gun during the eighth round which provoked the panic and started the headlong rush for safety causing one death and injuries to thirty-five others. Taylor was booked on charges of manslaughter, inciting a riot, and carrying concealed weapons. The 45 year old Taylor was arraigned before Judge Peter H. Schwaba, on Saturday, March 30, in South State Street Court.

Two measures were inaugurated immediately, as a

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consequence of the riot. Building Commissioner Paschen announced that hereafter at all boxing bouts an electrician would be delegated to remain constantly at the panel controlling all illumination, to insure that lights could be turned on immediately in case of emergency.

The other measure concerned future "mixed" matches in the Coliseum. C.R. Hall, president of the Coliseum Corporation, announced an immediate ban on "contests between white and colored boxers in the future."

### II - History of the Coliseum

Prior to July, 1926 boxing bouts had been illegal in Chicago, but with the passage of a bill in the late spring of 1926, boxing became legal in the Windy City once more. From that time on, boxing shows were held two and three times per month in the Coliseum.

The Chicago Coliseum had been the city's premier indoor arena since its opening in 1900. However, the building had begun its Chicago existence eleven years previously. In 1883, the original Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia that was used to house Union prisoners during the Civil War, was dismantled and transported to Chicago. The prison was re-assembled, brick by brick and stone by stone, into its original contours and erected once more on the site between Fourteenth and Sixteenth Streets on Wabash Avenue. Reconstruction took several years and the building was finally opened as the Libby Prison Museum in 1889.

After serving as a museum for ten years, until 1899, it was rebuilt once more and opened in 1900 as the Chicago Coliseum.

The Chicago Coliseum became the focal point of nationwide interest in its first year of existence. In 1900 the first national auto show, showcasing a dazzling array of "horseless carriages", made its debut in the Coliseum. This initial showing was followed by repeat annual auto shows, up until the early 1930s.

The Republican Party utilized the Coliseum for five consecutive national conventions: in 1904, when they nominated Theodore Roosevelt; in 1908, when they nominated William Howard Taft; in 1912, when Taft was re-nominated; in 1916, when Charles Evans Hughes was named their standard bearer; and in 1920, when Warren G. Harding won the nomination.

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The historic building also housed other events: circuses, wild west shows, travel expositions, etc. Virtually every conceivable kind of attraction played the Chicago Coliseum.

Spectacular events from the world of sport were big features in the building. Six day bicycle races were a popular, twice yearly attraction. Wrestling matches, featuring legends of the mat world, were presented regularly. Chicago fans were able to see great champions George Hackenschmidt, Frank Gotch and Strangler Lewis wrestle at the Coliseum. Hackenschmidt, Europe's champion matman, made his Chicago debut in the Coliseum on April 15, 1911 and threw his foe in two falls before a capacity audience.

Professional hockey made its initial Chicago appearance, at the Coliseum, on Wednesday, November 17, 1926, with the newly formed Chicago Black Hawks defeating the Toronto St. Patricks, 4 to 1, before a crowd of 7,000. The Black Hawks used the Chicago Coliseum as their home arena for the next four hockey seasons, before switching to the newer and larger Chicago Stadium.

A little over two weeks later, after the Black Hawks made their hockey debut, the Coliseum resounded to another type of cheers as the first world championship boxing match ever held in the arena took place. On December 3, 1926, Mickey Walker won the middleweight title by outpointing then champion Tiger Flowers in ten rounds. Starting in 1926, boxing became one of the most popular and frequent events held in the Coliseum.

The roster of great-name fighters who fought in the Chicago Coliseum, from 1926 on, is almost endless, with approximately thirty present, former, or future world champions in action in the arena's ring. Titleholders from every weight class, flyweight to heavyweight, graced the Coliseum ring. The fabled Brown Bomber, Joe Louis, achieved his first national acclaim when he knocked out Charley Massera in the third round at the Coliseum, on November 30, 1934.

The building was popular with boxing promoters well into the 1940s, but with the advent of television the Coliseum lost favor as a Chicago boxing mecca. Most of the other events that the building once hosted regularly, also departed.

For over thirty years the building stood empty and unused. Traffic traveling back and forth in front of 1513 South Wabash Avenue, the Chicago Coliseum's official post office address, passed the old structure without so much as a

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curious glance. The building's historical significance, and its glorious years of past existence, meant nothing to the persons in the autos hurrying by.

Within the historic outer walls of the Chicago Coliseum, which once enclosed thousands of Civil War Union Army prisoners and absorbed their groans; then been steeped in the reverent awe of the millions who toured it when it was known as the Libby Prison Museum; and then echoed and re-echoed to the cheers and shouts of thousands of spectators at events of every description; there was now just deep silence and the whisperings of ghosts.

But even the silence and fretful meanderings of the many ghosts trapped within those ancient walls, came to a bitter end in early 1982 when a plea to have the venerable structure preserved as one of the State of Illinois' historic buildings was turned down. The wrecking crews then quickly saw to the embarrassing death of the more than century old edifice.

With all of the events, and all of the historic attractions once housed in the old arena, no day, or night in its 100 year history equalled the furor and terror that occurred within its great walls that eventful night of Monday, March 25, 1929 - THE NIGHT ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE IN THE CHICAGO COLISEUM.

Bob Soderman



SPECIAL BOXING NOTES REGARDING CHICAGO COLISEUM

There appears to have been three world championship bouts held in the Chicago Coliseum:

1. Dec. 3, 1926 Middleweight title  
Mickey Walker beat Tiger Flowers - 10  
referee - Benny Yanger.
2. Mar. 26, 1927 Bantamweight title  
Bud Taylor vs. Tony Canzoneri - Draw 10  
referee - Joe Choynski
3. Mar. 25, 1929 Welterweight title (NBA version)  
Jackie Fields beat Yg. Jack Thompson - 10  
referee - Ed Purdy

Champions who apparently fought in the Coliseum  
(Note-where venue is in some doubt, ? appears after the date)

Champion	Date	Opponent
<b>Heavyweights</b>		
Jimmy Braddock	1-17-30	Leo Lomski
Joe Louis	11-30-34	Charley Massera
<b>Light Heavyweights</b>		
Mike McTigue	11- 1-27	Mickey Walker
"	9-27-28 ?	Tuffy Griffith
Paul Berlenbach	11-25-27	Mickey Walker
"	12- 9-27	Jack Delaney
Jack Delaney	12- 9-27	Paul Berlenbach
<b>Middleweights</b>		
Jock Malone	10-28-27	Walcott Langford
Tiger Flowers	11-22-26	Eddie Huffman
"	12- 3-26	Mickey Walker
Mickey Walker	12- 3-26	Tiger Flowers
"	11- 1-27	Mike McTigue
"	11-25-27	Paul Berlenbach
"	11-28-30	K.O. Christner
<b>Welterweights</b>		
Dave Shade	2-24-27	Walcott Langford
Pete Latzo	3-10-27	Joe Simonich
Barney Ross	1-10-30 ?	Louie New
Jackie Fields	2-23-28	Sammy Mandell
"	3-25-29	Young Jack Thompson
Young Jack Thompson	3-25-29	Jackie Fields
Tommy Freeman	11-25-27	My Sullivan
"	2-18-29 ?	Joe Simonich
Jimmy McLarnin	10-18-27	Louis Kid Kaplan

SPECIAL BOXING NOTES REGARDING CHICAGO COLISEUM

Champion	Date	Opponent
Welterweights (cont.)		
Fritzie Zivic	12-27-39	Milt Aron
"	3-14-40	Johnny Barbara
"	2-27-42	Tony Motisi
Jr. Welterweights		
Mushy Callahan	2-10-27	Spug Myers
Lightweights		
Jimmy Goodrich	10- 8-26	Baby Joe Gans
Sammy Mandell	2-23-28	Jackie Fields
Tony Canzoneri	3-26-27	Bud Taylor
"	5- 3-27	Ray Rychell
"	1-18-29	Armando Santiago
"	2- 6-29	Joey Sangor
"	2-26-29	Ignacio Fernandez
"	5-10-29	Andre Routis
Jr. Lightweights		
Tod Morgan	9-20-27	Stan Loayza
Featherweights		
Louis Kid Kaplan	10-18-27	Jimmy McLarnin
Honeyboy Finnegan	4-26-29 ?	Eddie Anderson
"	5-10-29 ?	Armando Santiago
Benny Bass	2-11-29 ?	Harry Forbes
"	9-27-29 ?	Johnny Datto
Andre Routis	3-17-27	Henry Lenard
"	5-10-29	Tony Canzoneri
Leo Rodak	12-29-38	Leone Efrati
Bantamweights		
Abe Goldstein	3-26-27	Pete Sarmiento
"	5- 3-27	Bud Taylor
Bud Taylor	2-24-27	Eddie Shea
"	3-26-27	Tony Canzoneri
"	5- 3-27	Abe Goldstein
"	2- 9-28 ?	Joey Sangor
Flyweights		
Newsboy Brown	3-26-27	Ernie Peters

Total - 29 champions, if Ross, Finnegan and Bass are resolved

(ed. note - Bob Olin and Solly Kreiger also appeared in the Chicago Coliseum as amateurs during the Intercity Golden Gloves finals on March 24, 1928).

Note also - Jack Dempsey was the promoter for the Chicago Coliseum in 1929-30.