

### John W. Corns - Professional Fighter

John W. Corns was a member of the Greater Cleveland Sports Hall of Fame. He was a sports figure in both boxing and football in Cleveland, Ohio, and beginning on the national scale in boxing during the 1910 to 1916 era; a husband, father, athlete and a veteran of World War II.

He was born in 1889 on the East Side of Cleveland, Ohio. As was the custom in industrial cities at that time, when in the sixth grade he was given the choice of continuing in school or going to work. He chose to go to work and started out as a blacksmiths helper. Fighting was also a way of life in that era, and he became very handy with his fists to the point when still a young teen-ager he could whip any of the burly blacksmiths. When a new man was hired, he was invited to put on the gloves with the kid and the new employee would end up losing the fight.

About the time he was 20 years old, he was a roller in the steel mill and he began to take a more active role in prize fighting in Cleveland. He was 6'1" and weighed about 180 pounds. He was considered fast with his hands and feet, beating some of the leading professional heavyweight fighters of his day. He fought Mike McLaughton in a six round show. He kayoed Jack Clancy, New York heavyweight. He knocked out Hank Harter, the "Sundusky Giant" and leading Ohio Contender for the world heavyweight championship, in 55 seconds of the first round, according to the newspaper account of November 21, 1911. Cleveland Leader sports article reports him winner over "Big George Rogers" on February 3, 1914. About this time, he became Heavyweight Champion of Ohio and Ohio's leading contender for the heavyweight championship held by Jack Johnson.

About the time Joe Louis won the championship, I read an article in the Cleveland News in which the sports writer wrote that everybody was looking for a white hope to fight Louis and it reminded him of a generation ago when Jack Johnson was champion and there was a heavyweight fighter from Sundusky, Ohio, named Hank Harter, the "Sundusky Giant", who according to the article made an agreement with his manager to take on and beat any and all heavyweight contenders right up to Jack Johnson. The article went on to say that he was doing just that, beating all of his opponents, until he met Jack Corns from Cleveland, Ohio, and was knocked out in 55 seconds of the first round. Jack told me the story of the fight that night as follows: Their fight was the main event, and the first time he met Harter was at the weighing in and Jack saw that Harter was a head and shoulders taller than he was. When they parted after the weighing in Harter said,

"Well, Corns may the best man win." Jack thought this guy isn't too sure of himself. During the preliminaries Jack said he sat in the back row watching then and wondering what he had gotten himself into. When they parted after they received instructions from the referee just before the bell for the first round, Harter once again said, "Well, Corns, may the best man win."

When they met in the center of the ring at the opening bell, Harter shot after Jack's face. He said he felt like his nose had been taken off, but at the same time he came up with an uppercut landing squarely on Harter's jaw. Harter went down and when he got back up, Jack knocked him through the ropes. He got back into the ring and Jack knocked him out in 55 seconds of the first round. They carried Harter to his dressing room and he was out and groggy for 10 minutes. The next day the newspapers called him "Jack the Giant Killer". Art Simms, the "Artful Dodger", former Ohio lightweight champion, was Jack's manager at the time. An uncle of mine said that Damon Runyon was in the audience that night and referred to that fight in one of his stories.

Jack began to achieve national prominence when he fought Terry Keller in Madison Square Garden. All the champions from all the states were invited to New York to form a fight card. Jack drew Terry Keller, Champion of New York State. Jack's training camp was located in Waterbury, Connecticut. The New York reporters said that Jack Corns looked more like a minister than a fighter, so they dubbed him "Fighting Billy Sunday" and that is how they referred to him in some of the accounts of his fight with Keller. Deller had been Dempsey's sidekick in Dempsey's earlier fighting days out west, and Dempsey was in Keller's corner that night. Jack beat Keller and he told me at the end of the ninth round as he was walking back to his corner, after having given Keller a rough time of it, he happened to look in Keller's corner. He always retained a visual image of Dempsey yelling at Keller, "What the hells wrong with you." This was just before Dempsey came into public prominence.

He was beginning to fight in various cities while still working full time in the steel mill. He fought "Battling Rambaud" in Massillon, Ohio, March 16, 1916, at which time he was and had been Heavyweight Champion of Ohio.

After the Rambaud fight, he had to make a decision about a full time career in boxing. My older brother was born about that time and my mother put alot of pressure on him to quit, so he gave up his boxing career in 1916 to concentrate on raising a family. However, he continued his association with boxing as a trainer of fighters and refereed many fights at the Al Koran Shrine boxing show.

During his early athletic career, he also played pro football with the original Cleveland Indians football team. During this time, he also took correspondence courses to get his high school education. He tried to enlist in the army during World War I but was rejected because he was a family man and had a family to raise, which was the ruling at that time.

During the 1920's he sold automobiles and became a leading salesman for the Hupmobile Company, winning a very publicized national contest. It was right after Lindberg had flown the Atlantic, and each Hupmobile salesman throughout the country had a replica airplane on a large United States to Europe flight map that would advance on the New York to Paris trip for every car sold. When he won the contest for theoretically arriving first in Paris, he received telegrams of congratulations from all over the country. It was as if he had actually made a flight.

Like many families, they had difficult times during the Depression years. He had various selling jobs during the time to keep the family together, and finally was employed by the City of Cleveland.

In 1927, my mother, his childhood sweetheart, passed away and he had to be both a father and mother to my brother, sister, and me. He was a great father and a good pal to all of us. He could sing, was a great story teller, had a good mind, and enjoyed contributing to the fun of the family get togethers.

When World War II started, my brother and I went into the service. Jack couldn't stay out of the war, so he tried to enlist in the Navy, Army and Marines, but each time his age held him back. He was fifty-four years old and the age limit was forty nine. He always kept in good shape. I played many games of hand ball with him and he worked out at the Cleveland Y.M.C.A. As far back as I can remember we had a gym in the attic along with a heavy punching bag and had a light speed bag in the basement. He displayed some of his fight posters and many cartoons by Jim Lavery, Cleveland newspaper sport cartoonist on our garage walls. He always said that exercise was the Fountain of Youth.

Dad finally met a Navy officer who heard of his background and used it as a public relations war interest story, "Old-Time Fighter Comes Out for One Last Fight." This enabled him to bypass the red tape and in July of 1943 he was on his way to Sheepshead Bay for the rigorous training to become a Merchant Marine. He had written to Jack Dempsey and got a letter back with a offer to be a physical instructor in the Coast Guard or the Merchant Marine, but turned them both down for the adventure on the high seas. He sailed to almost

every theater of the war on his various voyages. Occasionally, he was assigned to an ammunition ship "coffin corner", which was put in the far corner of the convoy, so that in the event it was torpedoed it would not blow up any ships around it. He was an able bodied seaman working on the navy gun on the loader crew.

He met my brother in England on one voyage before the D-Day invasion, and met him again in France after the Normandy invasion during another voyage, traveling on everything on wheels in the middle of winter to get there, which provided the background for the accompanying story, "The Pot-Bellied Stove." He always tried to get a ship to see me in the China-Burma-India Theater, where I served as a flight engineer on C47's and C46's, flying the hump rout from India to China, but never was able to make it there. He did get to Japan during the Army of Occupation, and spent some time with his nephew. There he stayed in the barracks with the fellows, and was known by all as "Uncle Johnny."

He was very active in the Cleveland Al Koran Shrine during these years. Just before his enlistment, as President of the Veterans Patrol, he was leading them in a Shrine Parade down Euclid Avenue on a war bond selling drive. A few months later, he was on a convoy in the North Atlantic helping in the war effort to keep the supply lines open to our embattled allies. Whatever ship he was on, he would organize a boxing team. He worked out every day on board ship, punching the heavy bag, skipping rope, running, etc. and was in very good shape. The fellows on board ship were of course aware of his former boxing days and it came to pass that one of the young heavyweight boxers challenged him to a fight in a ring that they had set up on deck. He knew it was coming some day, so he put on his tennis shoes and boxing trunks and climbed into the ring with the aspiring young fighter. He said he just kept shooting his left in the opponents face, keeping him off balance. At the end of one round, the fighter asked his buddy in his corner to tell him how many left hands Jack had.

His voyages took him to England several times and at one time on May 2, 1945, his ship was surrounded by enemy subs for six days with accompanying allied destroyer escorts dropping depth charges day and night. He also sailed to France, Archangel-Russia, South America, and South Sea Islands and after the war, to Japan. During the war, when he would come home from a voyage, he gave talks on his experiences to the Shrine Club. He was interviewed at one time in New York by the Associated Press about how he had found conditions in Russia. In his letters to family members, he always had a positive outlook; his letters were very inspirational.

After the war he settled on the West Side of Cleveland. He remarried and moved to Strongsville, a suburb of Cleveland. He kept in shape and had a strong interest in

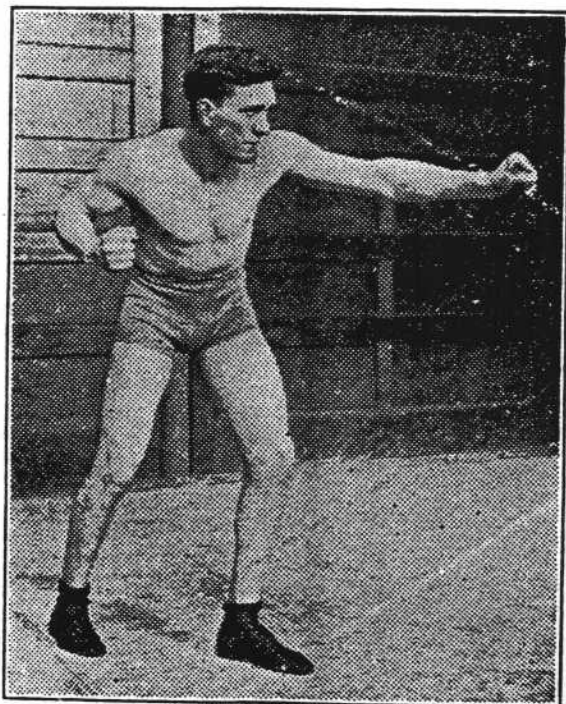
bowling and horseshoe pitching. I played handball with him until he was well into his sixties, and he was still a good player.

One night on the way to a bowling match he was in an automobile accident and severely injured. He lost a kneecap and was partially blind as a result of the accident, but he continued as a pretty good bowler if somebody would tell him which pins were left up.

He passed away at age seventy-nine, indirectly from the after effects of the accident.

Written by Jack Corns

**JOHN F. BARTELT, Mgr.**  
7828 St. Clair Ave. Cleveland, O.



John Corns, Heavy Weight

