

BILLY PETROLLE: THE FARGO EXPRESS AT FULL STEAM

By Mike Casey



When your nickname includes that most urgent of words, 'express', you can't afford moments of idle contemplation. The wittier scribes will soon be on your back suggesting a more leisurely moniker.

They never got that chance with Billy Petrolle, the glorious Fargo Express from North Dakota. All bells and whistles and full speed ahead was Petrolle, who jammed 163 fights into a rollicking good twelve-year career as he thundered down the track and challenged anyone to keep up with him. Shrewdly managed by Jack (Deacon) Hurley, Petrolle was a bullish, all action fighter and a great body puncher. He was teak tough into the bargain, suffering just three career losses inside schedule, two of those due to bad cuts.

Likeable Billy, who entered the ring with his prized red and green Navajo blanket as a good luck charm, didn't believe in kicking his heels or stopping to smell the roses. The whoosh of his slipstream quite probably uprooted the roses and blew them to a more peaceful place.

It's a good thing we didn't talk about 'windows in diaries' back in Petrolle's peak years of the Roaring Twenties. Billy wouldn't have had any. Check out his log for 1924, when he had 24 fights. He had 22 fights in 1925, 19 bouts in 1926, 18 scraps in 1927 and another 18 in 1928.

Was Billy just padding his record and making his numbers look attractive? Hardly. From 1922 to 1934, when he finally stopped rolling and entered a very successful retirement, Petrolle claimed the golden scalps of Jimmy Goodrich, Tony Canzoneri, Jimmy McLarnin, Battling Battalino, and handed out a terrible beating to Jack (Kid) Berg.

Petrolle also battled Sid Terris, Sammy Mandell, Barney Ross, Louis (Kid) Kaplan and a good few others. Of the aforementioned names, all but Sid Terris were lineal world champions and Sid was nobody's fool. He lost just thirteen of 111 fights.

Then there was Justo Suarez, a lesser name, a firebrand of a fighter from Argentina, who came to New York and started bombing out opponents in the way he had done back home. The only problem was that Suarez soon got homesick. With Gotham fans gasping for more, Justo went back home to South America and no amount of persuasion could entice him back.



Justo Suarez

Then Jack (Deacon) Hurley began to work his influential magic. Deacon knew that a match between his boy Petrolle and Suarez would have the fans rocking at Madison Square Garden. By the summer of 1931, when the fight took place, boxing writers were affectionately calling Billy 'the old man'. But this old express train wasn't yet ready to be taken to the junkyard and cut up...

Harry Lenny

Like Deacon Hurley, Harry Lenny was a great fight manager of the era who knew the trade and knew his fighters. Listening to Harry discussing the finer technical points of it all was a joy.

People always wanted to ask him about the wonderful fighters he had seen. Lenny was a measured man who didn't just blab without prior thought. He was a keen student of the mind and body who had a rare gift for successfully treating aching bones and muscles. At one time, he was believed to have secretly treated President Roosevelt.

When somebody once asked him about punchers and the art of punching, Lenny was typically forensic in his reply: "There are all kinds of punchers. There's the fellow who numbs you and the one who gives you a sharp shock.

"Joe Louis is what I call a bruising puncher. But he's not one of those one punch finishers. He hit Max Baer over 250 times right on the whiskers and still Max wasn't unconscious when he was counted out on one knee.

"Jack Dempsey also was a crushing puncher, but it took a lot of punches as a rule for him to finish a man.

"There have been very few one punch finishers in the ring. These birds really are the terrific hitters. Sam Langford was that kind of a walloper and there was a kid down in Baltimore years ago – George (KO) Chaney, a lightweight – who could stiffen his man with one sock.

"When Langford hit you a short, sharp jolt, the lights went out on you and that's all there was to it."

Punching

Billy Petrolle certainly wasn't in the punching league of those thunderous gents, but the Fargo Express could still break a man in half and was loved and admired by Harry Lenny for many other reasons. Reasons of heart and courage and bloody defiance. When asked to select the greatest fight he had ever seen, Harry plumped for Billy's late career epic with Justo Suarez.

"Billy Petrolle was one who possessed every aspect of a great battler," said Lenny. "Likewise, Suarez had reached the heights through punching power the likes of which no South American visitor to our shores had ever exhibited, except the Wild Bull of the Pampas, Luis Firpo.



Petrolle drops Jimmy McLarnin en route to decisive win on points.

"Suarez had gained international fame when he stopped the tough Babe Herman in Buenos Aires with one punch, and perhaps there was no fight in Petrolle's entire thrilling career in which he had to display more courage, ring science and determination – the will to win – than in this affair with Justo.

"Suarez had come to New York with a willingness to face any of our leading lightweights and it didn't take long for him to be matched with the top notchers. In quick succession he defeated Joe Glick, Herman Perlick, Bruce Flowers, Ray Miller and Louis Kid Kaplan, whose prowess is well known to followers of boxing.

"When Suarez flattened Flowers, a clever boxer who was well up among the elite, the public's eyes were opened to the fact that here was a real fighter from down below the equator, one who figured a contender for world honors. He knocked Flowers out in the sixth round, then became homesick and returned to his native land where he stopped Stanley Loyaza and Juan Carlos.

"Suarez was too good to stay in Argentina. For a time efforts were made to bring him back, but he turned down the offers until Jack Hurley, one of the best managers of all time, got busy and induced the Garden to make Suarez an offer to box Petrolle which Suarez couldn't resist.

"To bring Justo north, the Garden promised him a purse of \$200,000 to box in an outdoor world championship fight if he could succeed in defeating Petrolle, and this was too great an inducement for Suarez to ignore. He quickly returned and started training for the mill with Petrolle.

"Came the night of nights, one I shall never forget! During a half century of sports coverage, I have seen thousands of ring contests in all parts of the world. Some I have judged, others I have refereed and still others I attended as a reporter. Of the many that left a lasting impression, this bout ranked among the top ten."

Explosive

It isn't hard to see why Harry Lenny rated the explosive clash between Petrolle and Suarez so highly. The see-saw fight had all the classic ingredients of a battle that burns itself in the memory forever more. It was a bout which old man Billy Petrolle looked for all the world like losing as the dangerous and hungry Suarez tore into action from the opening bell.

Did Suarez have four fists instead of two? It must have seemed that way to Petrolle, who was quickly in danger of being swept away as the hard punching Argentine rained in hard blows. Senor Suarez quite obviously didn't hold too much stock with the 'feeling out' ritual. In Petrolle's corner, the blood appeared to be slowly draining from the face of the deeply anxious Jack Hurley. The Deacon yelled instructions at his embattled charge, but Billy was too busy getting battered by the hail of leather to give any meaningful thought to his game plan.

That torrid opening session seemed to last a lifetime for the Fargo Express. Another train had crashed head on into him. In later years, Billy would say: "I can't recall any fight in which I was hit harder and more often than in the first round of that bout."

Incredibly, Petrolle scored two knockdowns in that violent round, first with a right uppercut and then with a vicious left, yet those fleeting successes seemed almost academic in light of Justo's overwhelming dominance. Far from being discouraged, the Argentine ripped back at Billy to the extent of nearly ripping right through him.

Returning to his corner, Petrolle got a lashing of a different kind from Hurley, who was beside himself with rage. Not that Billy was too much aware of the verbal grilling. Dazed he might have been, but he was one of the toughest fighters ever at any weight and rarely lost his focus.

Petrolle was truly an individual. Even as the roof was falling in, he continued to sail along quite pleasantly in his own little world, ever light-hearted and optimistic. His inner strength was tremendous. He trotted out for the second right and trotted straight back into the same tornado. Again he survived, despite taking head shots and body punches that would have finished most other fighters.

One can only imagine how exasperated Hurley must have felt when Petrolle came back to his corner humming, *Happy Days Are Here Again*. It was too much to bear, even for a man of the Deacon's lengthy experience. Hurley's face was so white it looked as if it had been painted. "What the hell are you singing about?" he stormed at Petrolle. "You're taking a shellacking."

Dead calm and a little puzzled by all the panic going on, Billy said, "Don't worry. It's all right now. I've got him coming to me. It won't be long now. I'll get him. Don't worry."

Petrolle's canny old eye had spotted a shaft of tempting light in the storm that raged around him. Suarez was getting careless in his rush to get the job done and setting himself up for Petrolle's formidable left hook. It was Billy's best punch and one of the best in the business.

Canny

From the fourth round, the fight began to swing in favor of the Fargo Express. Billy was picking up steam and Justo was expending too much energy for his own good, edging ever closer to the left hook trap. Steely and methodical, Petrolle took control of the fight, pounding Justo's body with a steady flow of powerful left hooks.

Suddenly it was Suarez on the defensive as the painful body blows began to take their effect. He ducked and swayed and rolled in vain attempts to deflect the punishment, but Billy was now hitting him with unerring accuracy.



Petrolle sends Suarez down for the count in the ninth round. Referee Patsy Haley's count was academic.

A short way into the ninth round, Billy struck the decisive blows with immaculate timing.

A meaty left hook to the body and a right to the jaw sent Suarez into a stagger and forced him to lower his guard to leave the perfect opening. Petrolle crashed home a final right to the jaw that sent Justo down with a thump. Referee Patsy Haley's count was academic, the brave Argentine having had the resistance pounded right out of him.

It had been a bumpy and thrilling ride for the Fargo Express, but he was safely into the station and letting out the last of his steam before a well deserved rest.

A year later, Billy Petrolle got his one and only shot at the lightweight championship at Madison Square Garden. By then he was a grizzled twenty-seven year old veteran and just seven fights away from his retirement. He was outpointed by the little genius that was Tony Canzoneri, who just happened to be in the greatest form of his life that night.

You wonder what some guys have to do to get the pot of gold.

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