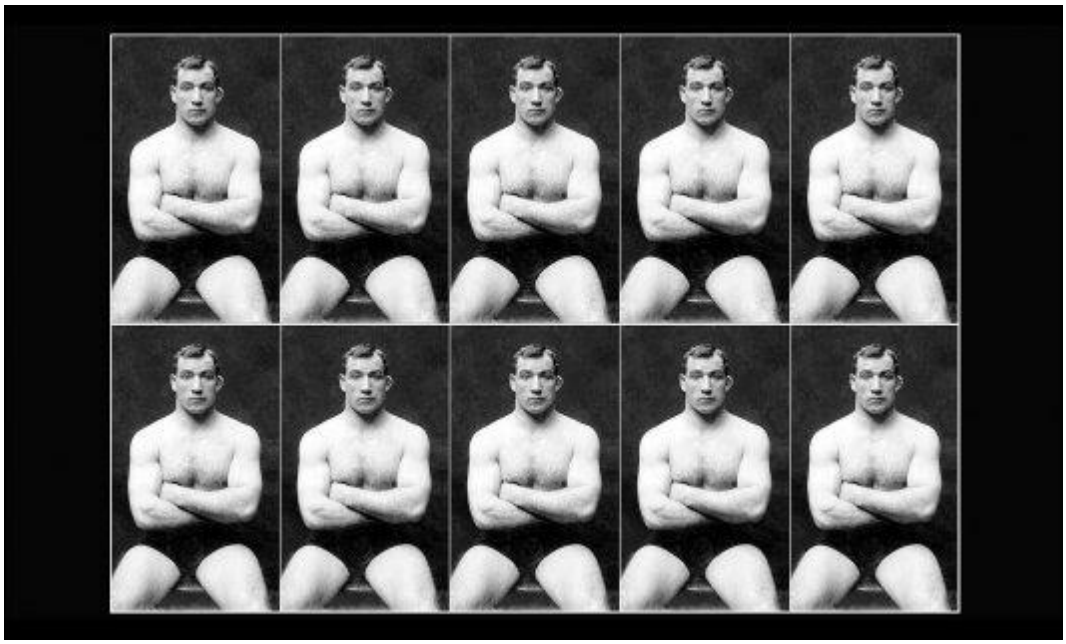
Sailor Tom Sharkey: Don't Give Up the Ship

By Mike Casey on August 2, 2014



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"The bigger they were, the better I liked it," Sailor Tom Sharkey once said. "I knew I could cut them down to my size. I made them all back away from me. I had to carry the fight to them, including Jeffries."

With dangerous, glinting eyes, a crooked nose and a cauliflower ear that attached itself to the side of his head like a giant limpet, Tom Sharkey knew all about fighting to the limit. Travelling back more than a hundred years to Tom's time, when health and safety were two separate words that didn't mean all that much, we find that everything was of a more simplistic and brutal nature.

Boxers had to fight a greater number of rounds, training themselves for distance fights that now boggle our minds in the time they lasted and in the ferocious punishment that was taken and given. Gloves were lighter and far less resilient, causing frequent facial injuries and much pain.

The rules of the ring were considerably more relaxed and referees were often incidental and corrupt. Most significantly, perhaps, the limit of a man's endurance was perceived as being frighteningly high.

We look at the faded old pictures and see the graphic marks of war: The blood-smeared faces of Abe Attell and Harlem Tommy Murphy during their vicious war of attrition at Daly City. The lumps and bruises and damaged ear of Battling Nelson in his titanic struggle with Ad Wolgast at Point Richmond.

Cauliflower ears, broken bones and smashed hands were commonplace in those days of physically tougher men and less sophisticated surgery.

Take a wander down cauliflower alley and you will see some real beauties. But perhaps the most celebrated and noticeable was the left ear of Sailor Tom Sharkey. Much to Tom's discomfort, it became one of his trademarks and continued to mushroom in size with every clout and clump from his opponents.

Writers in Sailor Tom's day could often hit as hard as fighters. One scribe compared the deformed appendage to 'a gas lantern on the flank of a coach.'

Sharkey fended off the jibes with self-effacing humor, but his embarrassment was evident. After a knockout win over Fred Russell in Denver in 1901, Tom told a reporter, "If it keeps on this way, I'll have to button it back."

Sailor Tom was one of the toughest heavyweights of all time who co-existed with some equally rugged company. He acquired his cauliflower ear from another great bruiser of the age in Gus Ruhlin, who knocked out Tom in the fifteenth round of their brawl at the Seaside Athletic Club on Coney Island in the summer of 1900.

Tom's ear swelled horribly after that fight and turned blue. The swelling eventually went down and the ear's natural color returned, but it was permanently misshapen. The story goes that Sharkey offered five thousand dollars to anyone who could repair the ear and that nearly forty doctors and would-be doctors offered their services.

By the time of the Ruhlin fight, Sailor Tom was nearing the end of a punishing career in the ring, which had been full of tough and grueling battles. But probably his toughest duel, and certainly his most memorable, was his classic championship bout with the great Jim Jeffries in the searing heat of the Coney Island Athletic Club on the night of November 3, 1899.

Ages

It was a fight for the ages, which proved in time to be so much more. It was a long, brutal confrontation that showcased outstanding talent and unrelenting courage. It forged a deep mutual respect between two of the hardiest men in the boxing universe and ultimately led to a trusting and enduring friendship.

Many years after that memorable struggle for supremacy, Tom Sharkey walked into Jim Jeffries' café in Los Angeles. Tom was drifting from job to job, having lost all the money he made in the ring. Big Jeff gave him a position and paid him a good salary. The two men quickly became friends. When the café eventually closed, Sharkey moved on and worked for promoter James Coffroth at the Tijuana racetrack. But Jeffries didn't forget Sailor Tom.

By 1926, Jeff was having money troubles of his own and began a vaudeville tour in an attempt to recoup some of his losses. He invited Sharkey to join him. Jeff had been far too trusting in loaning money to people who don't like to give it back.

Big Jeff would always talk of Sharkey with great fondness. The Sailor could fight and he never stopped coming at you. This was the man whom the clever and hard-hitting Joe Choynski had so sorely underrated in an incredible, topsy-turvy tussle in San Francisco. Twice Choynski knocked the rampaging Sharkey out of the ring.

On each occasion, Tom landed on his head, only to bounce up and clamber back. He won the fight and the result was regarded as a sensation.

James J. Corbett was no less befuddled and ruffled by Sailor Tom's tenacious onslaughts. Corbett, so often a picture of serenity, was chased and hustled for four furious rounds before police stepped in and stopped the contest.

Boxing historian Tracy Callis says of Sharkey: "At the sound of the opening bell he attacked, throwing bombs until the end. He was a tough and durable violator of rules. To him the rules were simply restrictions that kept a real fight from taking place.

"He grabbed the elusive Jim Corbett, wrestled him to the floor and began to pummel him. He pinned Jim Jeffries' left arm under his own, causing Jeff's glove to come off and when the referee stepped in to put it back on, Sharkey took a murderous swipe at big Jim. He frequently pushed referees aside and occasionally hit at them. He head-butted, hit on breaks, held and hit, hit after the bell and got away with it.

"He was short and squat with excessively broad shoulders and a huge, deep chest upon which was tattooed a colorful star and sailing ship. His motto was 'Don't give up the ship.' He used a straight-up stance but at 5' 9" he was still a low target. It is said his hands were strong enough to bend silver dollars. In style, he was aggressive and ever striding forward towards his man, throwing powerful haymakers."

The young and upcoming Tom Sharkey was a sensation of the heavyweight division as he stormed up the ladder in Tyson-like fashion, destroying all who came to battle him. Knockout, knockout. Sailor Tom just kept knocking them out. As good at taking it as he was at giving it, he must have been a terrifying man to fight.

He lost just one of his first 25 fights, that curious blip coming in his seventh contest when he was knocked out by one George Washington in Honolulu. Some sources report that Tom lost in the second round, but there seems to be no further detail of the battle. What is certain is that Sailor Tom got over it and then some. It wasn't long before he was terrorizing the top men of the division with his almost kamikaze-like style of fighting.

Jeffries told writer Robert Edgren that Sharkey was the hardest man to fight because he was quick and no amount of punishment could halt his repeated charges.

Forty-five rounds

Two men get to know each other well over 45 rounds of brutal fighting. Before Jeffries and Sharkey renewed hostilities at Coney Island, Jeff had decisioned Tom in another taxing battle at the Mechanics Pavilion in San Francisco in May 1898. Such fights and memories linger in a man's mind until he takes his final breath.

Five years ago, my fellow writer and friend Jim Carney Jr. kindly sent me a copy of his excellent biography of Jim Jeffries, Ultimate Tough Guy. Therein, Mr. Carney gives us a stirring account of that first battle between Jeff and Tom, a mighty battle in its own right in which there was blood and thunder both in and out of the ring.

In the sixth round, as Tom and Jeff went about their business, a section of the temporary seats in the gallery caved in. Hundreds of people were sliding down and getting wedged against the rail. Another section of seats then collapsed on the main floor. But that wasn't the end of the peripheral action.

Here's an abridged version of Jim Carney Jr.'s description of the fight from the ninth round to its exciting conclusion: "Tom smashed in Jeffries' nose and cut his lip. Both men's faces were bloody at the end of the round and big Jim appeared to be running out of gas. The tenth began with Sharkey rushing in and landing a hard shot to Jeffries' mouth, followed by a right to the ear. Jeff missed an uppercut and sent Tom to the ropes with a left to the eye, both fighting furiously along the ropes with Jim getting the best of it.

"Suddenly another section of seats went down in the balcony, spectators falling to the floor with some going over the railing. Although Jeffries finished the tenth the fresher of the two, Sharkey started the eleventh with two swings to the head but took a particularly painful right to the temple, sagged and fell to his knees, grabbing Jim's legs to steady himself. After a few seconds he bounced up and caught Jeff's jaw with a swing from each hand.

"Jeffries retaliated with two more lefts to the chin and Tom looked dazed when the round ended. The next seven rounds were a slugfest with both men bloodied, though Jeff seemed to solve Sharkey more than the other way around. Tom was more often backing off, swinging with the left then the right. Jeff discovered that if he could dodge the left, he could catch Tom with his own left to the jaw or right cross inside while Sharkey swung with the right.

"In the last two rounds, Tom, fighting with renewed frenzy, charged in and more or less held his own. As the verdict was announced, the crowd cheered when referee Greggains raised Jim's hand and three of the four newspapers present agreed with the verdict.. Sharkey claimed that he should have had the win or at least a draw but was not too vociferous about it.

Upon requesting a rematch, he was assured by the confident victor, who said: 'Tom, after I'm champion you'll get the first chance and we'll have a real fight.'"

When big Jeff hooked up with his old pal Nat Fleischer fifty-two years later in the summer of 1950, the two men turned the clock back half a century and recalled the Irish terror with the cauliflower ear. "They come no greater," said Jeffries of Sailor Tom. "If ever there was a game and desperate fighter, Sharkey was the man. I split his eye open with one blow in our second battle and his ear started to swell until it was almost as big as my fist. When I landed on that ear, it was like hitting a big wet sponge. Yet he wouldn't think of quitting.

"He was as game a fighter as I'd ever seen and I hated to have that bout continued, but it did. He kept coming at me like the Irish Terror he was, boring in all the time. I broke two or three of his ribs, yet he kept going after me."

Jeff admitted that Sharkey was one of only two men (the other being Joe Goddard) who was a difficult man to nail cleanly. "Tom was the toughest bird I ever fought and he gave me a lot of trouble. I never could get him just right. He was short and he rushed so fast, he made a bad target. At Coney Island, I hit Tom and knocked him halfway across the ring into a corner, and he bounced right up and ran back at me. After that I kept

snapping my right hand into Tom's body as he rushed, and broke three of his ribs, but somehow I couldn't stop him."

Coney Island, 1899

How they went at each other. Jeffries and Sharkey never let up in their Coney Island classic. The rumor had gone around that Jeff wasn't in his best shape. Some rumor. The champion announced his weight as 210 lbs. and looked superb. Sailor Tom was some 25 lbs. lighter, but gloriously chiselled, gnarled and fighting fit. Of all the toughs, Sharkey was the man you didn't want to meet in a back alley on a rough night in Dublin.

Jeff and Tom entered the ring at two minutes past ten in the evening, and they were stepping into a furnace that was being stoked by the second.

While it had been an unusually warm day for the time of year, the heat of the night within the Coney Island Athletic Club was coming from 400 arc lamps suspended just fifteen feet above the canvas. For the first time, a film of a fight was being shot in artificial light. People in the great crowd were visibly sweating as they stood tightly packed in the aisles and perched high up around the building. Among them were such giants of the day as John L. Sullivan, Jim Corbett, Kid McCoy, Peter Maher and George Dixon.

The two contestants didn't disappoint the house. In the aftermath, most of those present would be unable to recall when two heavyweights hit each other so hard and for so long. Jeffries and Sharkey fought ferociously from the opening gong, with Sailor Tom very much the rushing and fearless aggressor. Jeff got an idea of the marathon struggle that was in store for him when he dropped Sharkey to his knees in the second round with a big left hook to the jaw. Tom got up and plowed straight back into the attack, as if the setback were an aberration.

The two men hammered and jolted each other in close with tremendous blows, their durability a testament to their magnificent conditioning and inner spirit. Sharkey was cautioned several times for holding by referee George Siler, but the Irish Terror just kept charging and rushing, locked in his own private war against the one man he wanted to beat above all others.

Sailor Tom was having his finest hour. He proved himself to be a superb fighter to those who had never seen him. Big Jeff had never been so harried and hustled, yet there was a quietly frightening inevitability about the champion even in times of distress. He never stopped hunting, feinting and firing those terrific, short digs to the heart, stomach and ribs.

The one thing Sailor Tom couldn't match was Jeff's firepower, which became steadily more potent in the deep waters of the long haul.

From the twenty-second round, Jeffries came on like a train picking up steam. His uncanny judgement always seemed to tell him when the time was right for upping the stakes and going full throttle. Now he would show the audience those qualities that made him unmatched among the heavyweights for power and strength in a distance fight. A right and a left to Sharkey's jaw nearly sent him airborne and left him staggering at the bell.

Sailor Tom rallied courageously in the twenty-third round, but Jeffries was now relentless and putting every ounce of his strength and punching expertise into his blows, hurting the challenger with a pair of meaty uppercuts.

By the time they came up for the twenty-fifth and final round, shaking hands good-naturedly, Sharkey looked as wondrously bashed up and mangled as he always did, while Jeff sported splits to the eye, ear and nose. Both boys were now tired and Sailor Tom slipped to the canvas, yanking Jeff's left glove off on the way down.

Jeff was driving home powerful hooks and uppercuts to the head and chest and wobbled Sharkey with a big left hook to the jaw. At the final gong, two of the toughest men on God's earth were hovering close to exhaustion. The world champion had timed his late sprint to perfection and referee Siler raised his hand. Jeffries and Sharkey had given their all in a wonderful match that had combined all the essential and sometimes mystical elements of the noble and savage art.

Most believed the decision to be just, although Sharkey's manager Tom O'Rourke had something to say about that. "If I ever had a man win a fight, Sharkey won tonight," Tom insisted. He vowed that Sharkey would box Jeffries again and beat the champion convincingly. It was fighting talk from O'Rourke, but it didn't produce another fight between Jeff and Sailor Tom. Their great rivalry would remain baked and dried in the heat of the Coney Island Athletic Club.

Injuries

Jeff was quick to change back into his street clothes after the grand battle. His facial injuries were evident as he walked briskly from the building to join his joyous friends, but otherwise he didn't appear any worse for his ordeal. Sharkey, by contrast, looked beaten and pained as he limped away.

Describing Tom's condition in the aftermath of the Coney Island battle, Robert Edgren wrote, "Sharkey was wrecked in that fight. He had three ribs broken and never was able to take much punching afterward."

Edgren was right. Nine months later at Coney Island, the faded and far less resilient Sharkey was knocked out in two rounds by former champion Bob Fitzsimmons. But nobody would ever forget the prime version of Sailor Tom, the fire and passion he brought to the ring and his two titanic struggles with the mighty Jeffries.

It was fitting that two such soldiers of war should meet up again down the road and forge a friendship of affection and respect. Even for a man of Jeff's formidable fighting talent, having a pal like Tom Sharkey must have felt comforting.

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