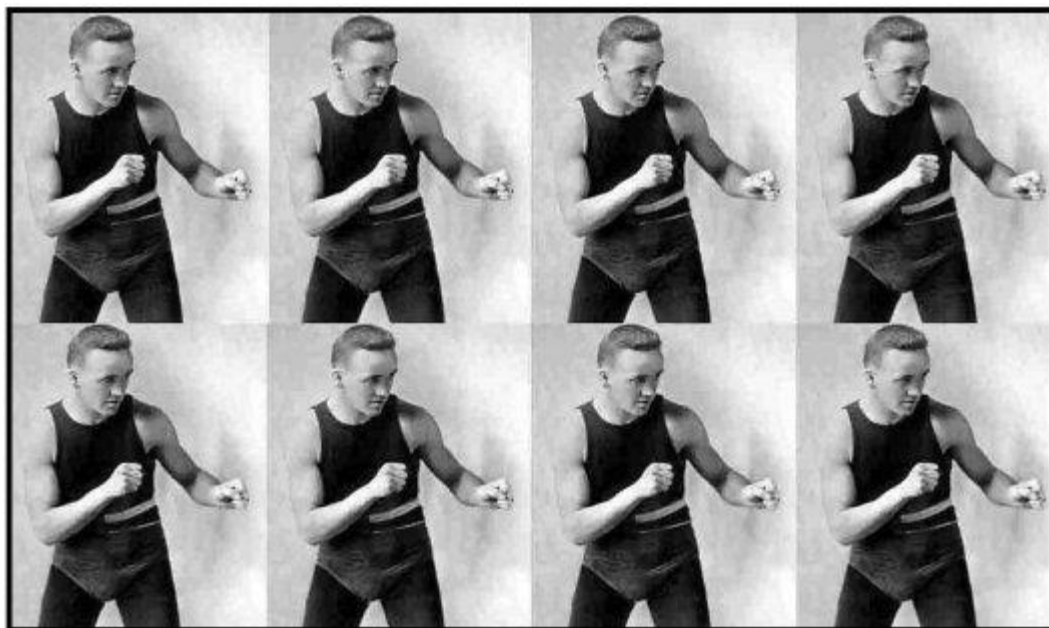


Majestic Mike Gibbons: Master of the Feint

by Mike Casey



Majestic Mike Gibbons always had the air of a man apart whose ship could never be sunk.

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In his serene prime, when he could box with the sublime skill of few others, Minnesota's Mike Gibbons was known to one and all as the middleweight champion of the world. Those two magical words — middleweight champion — would appear beneath his borrowed name on numerous instructional articles in the newspapers of the day when magnificent Mike would impart his considerable knowledge of the noble art to the would-be champions of the future.

Sadly, in the confused and muddled middleweight situation of his day, Gibbons was never recognized as the king of his class by the powers that be. The premature death of Stanley Ketchel in 1910 caused a stampede of title claimants, and while Frank Klaus restored the lineage of the championship in 1913, another 10 years would pass before the mighty Harry Greb restored the clarity.

Gibbons, the gifted St. Paul Phantom, just happened to get sucked into the interim mess and suffered the fate of never being officially recognized as the world champion. This was a great shame and it was a fate that tainted the careers of many of Mike's brilliant contemporaries throughout the weight divisions. We complain of too many 'world' champions in today's 'too much of everything' melting pot, yet the Gibbons era was only a boiled down version of the same stodgy stew. It was also boxing's no-decision era where the winner of a fight was determined by the newspapers.

Mike Gibbons, however, never seemed greatly bothered by the madness around him. Blond, ruggedly handsome and a picture of elegance in the ring, Mike always had the air of a man apart whose ship

could never be sunk. He knew exactly how good he was. He didn't have to go around town shouting about it.

In a retrospective of Gibbons' career, Harry Grayson wrote: "Mike Gibbons was a picture boxer of amazing speed who could knock the other bloke's head off from any angle he chose to.

"The individualistic Gibbons was a model for others. A fine crop of fighters sprang up around him in St. Paul, including his even more famous brother Tom and Jock Malone. Gibbons continually flicked the tip of his nose with his thumb. He used this as a feint and punched from there. This became a standard gag of many contemporaries. Starting in 1908, Gibbons sold the welterweight division to the public. Welterweights collected no important money until he came along.

"Reaching his peak as a middleweight, Gibbons would undoubtedly have been officially recognized as champion of that class, but the title was disputed and the St. Paul Phantom didn't choose to claim it. He had so much class, he didn't have to."

Reason

Gibbons was called the St. Paul Phantom for a very good reason. At his best, it was a major achievement to strike Mike with a truly meaningful blow. He was neat, fast, blessed with great footwork and one of the greatest ever masters of feinting. "Gibbons feinted with everything, including his eyebrows," wrote Harry Grayson. "He made a tough road look almost ridiculously easy."

Incredibly, Mike was self-taught and never did have a teacher. Genuinely gifted, his talent was innate and he simply honed it as he went along. He had many interesting theories on the techniques of the game and lent his name to many articles on the subject.

Here is Mike's interesting take on the art of jabbing: "Jabbers always have been factors in boxing. This blow is most commonly used by beginners who wish to muss up their opponents. It is essentially a punch to the face or chin that wears down the recipient to the point of exhaustion.

"After you have learned to box with your left foot forward and hand extended, practice sticking the hand in your opponent's face. Stick it in as far as you can and keep it popping on and off the other fellow's nose or jaw.

"Some boxers have developed the jab to that point where an opponent simply cannot escape being hit, but if you keep your right hand raised you can reduce the power behind these jabs and possibly avoid being touched. A boxer with a good right hand need not worry over the left jab."

Just three years into his career, Mike Gibbons caught the sometimes highly critical eye of a very significant spectator. Jim Corbett, the former heavyweight champion, was at the Fairmont Athletic Club in the Bronx to witness a majestic performance by Gibbons in his ten rounds match with Willie Lewis. Word had already reached New York about Gibbons and his silky skills after the Minnesotan's classy newspaper victory over Jimmy Clabby two months before.

The artful Clabby had earlier beaten the less experienced Gibbons in his hometown of St. Paul and taught the youngster a valuable mental lesson. Frustrated at his inability to master Jimmy, Gibbons lost his temper and let loose a wild punch that missed by a mile. Clabby then enraged him when he said,

“Where are you going? Out of the building?” Gibbons later joked that he might have strangled Clabby if he had ever caught up with him.

Gibbons was a much improved and more composed boxer by the time he drew with Clabby in their second meeting and then defeated him convincingly in their third. It was Jimmy who was given a lesson in how to do it in that third fight, and the manner of Mike’s victory trickled down the jungle wire. It wasn’t long before New York was calling.

“New Yorkers wanted to be shown,” wrote Jim Corbett in his newspaper column, adding, “and shown they certainly were last Wednesday at the Fairmont Athletic Club when Willie Lewis, who had been locally regarded as invincible at the welterweight limit, was made to look ridiculous before the remarkable work of the westerner.

“Gibbons is the best fighting machine on exhibition here in many a day. He has everything in abundance. Speed, two great hands, science to burn and a good headpiece. He did not waste a punch in the Lewis mill and completely outclassed the New Yorker.

“Who the proud possessor of the welterweight title is, I can’t say. I don’t think there’s a recognized champion at the present time. However, it will be some task to find a boy to successfully argue the right to the championship with this Gibbons lad. I think we had better start dubbing him ‘champion’ right off the reel. And how he can feint. He tied Lewis in knots.”

Masterclass

The Gibbons masterclass gave Gentleman Jim the perfect excuse to explain a few hard facts about the art of feinting and why Mike Gibbons shone out like a beacon. “Feinting is the most scientific part of boxing,” Corbett stated. “Modern scrappers, I am sad to confess, who develop the finer points of the art are sadly in the minority. The bunch of so-called ‘White Hopes,’ with possibly one exception, has no conception of feinting.

“The finished boxer feints with his hands, his eyes, his head, his body and his feet. When he has an opponent guessing, he is fairly on his way to victory. To cause an adversary to expect one thing and force an exposure of his defense for that particular blow or move is an objective point, and feinting is the method of learning the other fellow’s strong points as well as his weaknesses.

“A skillful boxer can frequently force an opponent to change his plan of battle through feinting. He can draw leads from the other fellow when the intention was to stay on the offensive. Any deceptive movement in boxing that will draw an opponent off guard is a feint and Mike Gibbons demonstrated that he is skilled in that branch of the science.”

Over a span of 14 years, to the time of his retirement in the spring of 1922, Mike Gibbons compiled an excellent record against the top campaigners of the age. Take the newspaper decisions out of his record and he comes in at 65-3-4. Add the newspaper wins, losses, and draws — for what they are worth — and his record expands to a no less impressive 113-11-8. Gibbons was never knocked out. Nobody was clever enough to pull off that feat and Mike was a very tough and durable fighter into the bargain.

Along the way, Gibbons got the better of top drawer fighters in Gus Christie, Jimmy Clabby, Willie Lewis, Al McCoy, Bob Moha, Eddie McGoorty, Jeff Smith, Jack Dillon, Ted (Kid) Lewis, Harry Greb, George Chip, Mike O'Dowd and Augie Ratner.

When Gibbons was putting on a masterclass, writers couldn't pound the keys of their typewriters fast enough in getting all the appropriate superlatives down on paper. By 1915, Mike was in his pomp as the master of the middleweights when he engaged the tricky Jimmy Clabby for the fourth time. The bout was held at the Milwaukee Auditorium on January 21 and Gibbons was in the mood.

Writer Harry Grayson's only criticism of Gibbons was that, in common with many other boxers of that more openly corrupt era, he wouldn't always put on his best show if it paid him to go easy. The Milwaukee crowd was fearful that Gibbons might coast against Clabby, but the delighted onlookers got their money's worth and witnessed a terrific display of precision boxing from the St. Paul Phantom.

One reporter wrote: "Mike Gibbons, the master of the middleweight division, outfought, outgeneraled and outboxed Jimmy Clabby in a sensational 10 round bout here last night. The bout was too fast, too clever for the average spectator who came to see a slugging match but for the keener student of the Queensberry art it was a treat."

Clabby was a master of defensive tactics but was prized out of his shell by a boxing master at his very best. Jimmy tried every which way to hustle Gibbons out of his rhythm, but Jimmy's attacks were largely fruitless as Mike drove him back with precise blows. Jimmy kept the bout competitive, constantly trying to find the one big punch that would cancel out Mike's superior skills. But Gibbons was too alert and too skillful as he stepped and feinted his way around his frustrated opponent.

This was a grim, businesslike Gibbons who wasn't in the ring to be fancy or over technical. Ringsiders had never before seen this no-frills side of the mercurial maestro, who could so often be irritating with his stalling tactics. Mike wasted little time and motion in mastering a world class foe in Clabby, who had mixed with such toughies as Jeff Smith, Eddie McGoorty, Mike (Twin) Sullivan, Bob Moha, Dixie Kid, Jimmy Gardner and Matty Baldwin.

Clabby would go on to rack up 160 ring battles in total and carve an admirable career, but he had no answer to the magic of Mike Gibbons on this day in Milwaukee. The variety of Mike's punching was a treat to see as he exhibited just about every trick he had learned. He hit hard and true, curling hooks around Clabby's guard and demonstrating great versatility with the right hand as he dazzled Jimmy with straight shots, smashing hooks and looping uppercuts.

These were majestic times for the majestic Mike Gibbons. It was no easy thing to defeat Jack Dillon — the mighty Hoosier Bearcat — or the hard drinking Eddie McGoorty, who canceled out many an inconvenience with his famous 'electric left'. But Gibbons outclassed them both. Oshkosh Eddie, fighting before his fans at the Hudson Arena in Wisconsin, could barely strike Gibbons with that deadly left and was adjudged to have lost eight of ten rounds as Mike countered him all night long. Gibbons often punched in rapid-fire sequences and repeatedly discouraged McGoorty with jolting uppercuts.

Jack Dillon, one of the greatest ever light heavyweights, didn't fare much better against Mike's brand of magic. Some newspapers awarded Gibbons every round of their 1916 set-to as his stiff and commanding jab blended with brilliant footwork to thwart the marauding Bearcat time and again. When Dillon did manage to hustle Mike into a tight space, the St. Paul Phantom would shoot free like a slippery fish.

Appreciation

Writer Harry Grayson had a great appreciation of the noble art and clearly loved Gibbons. Yet even Grayson conceded that boxers of Mike's sublime skill were an acquired taste for many. Writing of Gibbons' classic boxing duel with fellow master Packey McFarland, Grayson said: "For sheer boxing it was something to see, but for those looking for knockdowns and drag-outs it was a sleep-through."

The clash of Gibbons and McFarland was one of two classic boxing duels of the era that became set in stone by purists as shining examples of the noble art at its very best. The other was the battle of minds in which Jim Driscoll mastered Abe Attell at the Fairmont Athletic Club in 1909.

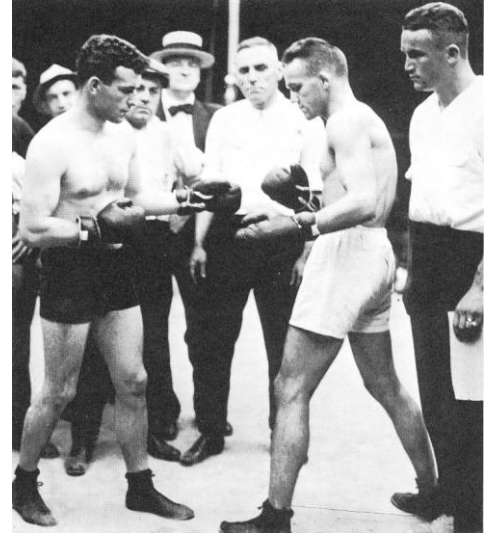
When Gibbons clashed with McFarland at the Brighton Beach Motordome in Brooklyn on September 11, 1915, some 60,000 fans saw a face-off between the two great untouchables of the game. It was to be Packey's last fight and his last great performance. He was still lean and strong at 153 lbs. for his classic fencing duel with Gibbons, who scaled the same weight.

The Brighton Beach Motordome was some place to go to watch a fight. Thirty thousand seats had already been filled by the time of the first preliminary bout at 8:30 pm, the endless throngs of spectators being played into their seats by a 32-piece band and assisted by 300 smartly attired ushers.

McFarland entered the ring at three minutes past 10:00, followed by Gibbons who paced around testing the boards. Both fighters looked superbly fit and deadly serious, although Packey did afford himself a little grin when ring announcer Joe Humphries announced him as, "The Fighting Chicago Irishman." The frantic clicking of cameras could be heard all around, while movie cameras and other machines were positioned on a high platform fifteen feet from the ring.

Nothing could separate the two defensive masters for the first eight rounds, as they feinted, shifted and bluffed like a couple of wary snakes. Referee Billy Job was barely noticeable as all eyes were fixed on two of the great ring scientists and their clever efforts to concoct the winning formula. Each was occasionally made to look foolish by the other's brilliance, but it was McFarland who was the calmer and more measured battler. He would often smile at friends in the crowd over Mike's shoulder, conveying the impression of a man taking a pleasant stroll in the park.

Mike was much more earnest, baring his teeth and often showing his frustration as he attempted to hit something apart from Packey's gloves. Come the ninth round, McFarland commenced his sprint for home. Gibbons enjoyed an early success as he feinted with the left and then struck Packey with a hard right to the jaw. But McFarland rallied to get the better of a heated mid-ring exchange, landing a left-right combination without return. Packey tucked up and protected himself beautifully as Mike tried to counter. In the final round, Gibbons had the bearing of a man who knew he had to force the fight to win it. He tried all he knew to pierce the famous McFarland defense, but it was the Chicago ghost who was doing the



Packey McFarland (L) and Mike Gibbons. Tommy Gibbons is on the far right of his brother.

cleaner scoring. Gibbons took three lefts to the face without return and was also being punished to the ribs. McFarland was anticipating Mike's return fire and staggered the St. Paul man with yet another left.

At the final bell, it seemed to many that the mesmerizing McFarland had done enough to secure victory. He certainly had plenty of supporters. George Holmes of the Oakland Tribune, called the bout for Packey, describing the Chicago man's performance as 'wonderful.' Many others disagreed, including the Associated Press, which tabbed the fight 7-2-1 for Gibbons. The New York Times and referee Billy Job called it a draw, which is how the contest is most often recorded today.

Best

On May 30, 1921, when Mike Gibbons was past his best but still able to beat most others, he had his sixth fight of the year and the 111th of his career when he outpointed Dave Rosenberg over 12 rounds at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn. Brother Tommy Gibbons fought on the same bill and defeated Jack Clifford.

Mike was hardly taking it easy in the autumn of his boxing life. He would go on to rack up 21 fights in his 1921 campaign. A spellbound spectator at the Gibbons-Rosenberg fight was light heavyweight champion Georges Carpentier, who would challenge Jack Dempsey for the heavyweight championship just two months later.

As he watched Mike Gibbons going through his extensive repertoire, Carpentier told his companion, promoter Tex Rickard: "His boxing is exquisite. I regret so much that I did not see Mike Gibbons when he was in his prime."

Those who did never forgot what they saw. The cagey and experienced Augie Ratner certainly never forgot Gibbons after sharing the maestro's company at the old Dyckman Oval in New York in August that year. After six rounds of being hit from all angles by Gibbons, a somewhat dazed and disoriented Ratner told his manager, Frank Bagley: "Doc, when you match me in the future, take them one at a time."



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BOB CARSON PORTRAIT (From Uncrowned Champions)