

Benny Leonard In His Own Words *by Bobby Franklin*



Benny Leonard

With the recent publication of Mike Silver's book *Stars In The Ring: Jewish Champions In The Golden Age Of Boxing*, I have been reminded not only of how boxing was once nearly dominated by Jewish fighters, but also how one, Benny Leonard, stood out above all the rest. It is surprising that in all the years since Leonard was champion there has only been one biography of him published. That book was by the founder of Ring Magazine, Nat Fleischer. Unfortunately, it is not a very good book and does not do justice to the great Lightweight Champion. Fortunately, Mr. Silver fills the void with his chapter on Leonard in his new book. Mike captures the essence of Benny Leonard in his thoughtful and thorough look at the Ghetto Wizzard.

While my thoughts turned to Benny I was also lucky to come across an interview the reigning champ had given to journalist Robert Edgren in 1921. This historic piece was shared by boxing researcher Gregory Speciale, the man who has unearthed more incredible historic boxing items than anyone I know.

I thought I would share a few of Benny Leonard's quotes from both works along with some photographs. Remember, boxing experts have consistently rated Leonard among the top ten pound for pound fighters for decades. He is also considered by many to be the greatest lightweight of all time.

Mike Silver has a wonderful quote from Leonard that was passed on by the great trainer Ray Arcel: When asked by Arcel why he studied four-round preliminary fighters sparring in the gym Leonard replied, "You can never tell when one of those kids might do something by accident that I can use."

Mike also has this passage, "In his prime Leonard was far superior to most of his opponents, but he never sought to humiliate them. 'I don't want to hurt the other guy,' said Leonard. 'I want to stop him. But that does not mean I am eager to cut him up and murder his self-respect. The credo of the professional ring is to win with speed and your best means of execution. As

for that 'killer instinct', I never had it as a kid when bringing home the pay was very important, and I never had it as a champion."

Here are a few gems from the Robert Edgren interview of 1921:

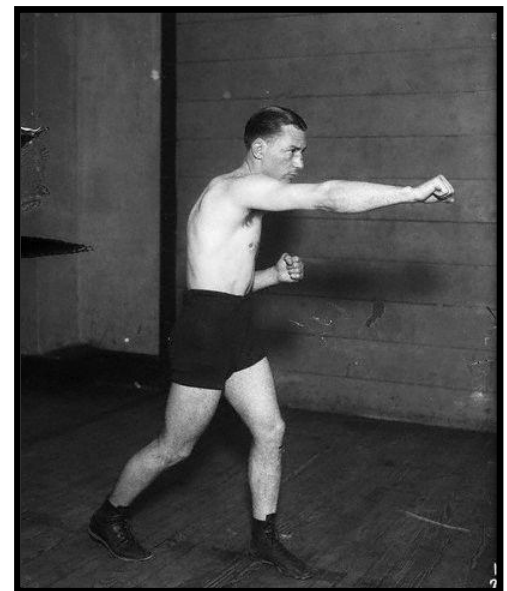
"Study is the thing that makes successful fighters nowadays. Yes, the day of the boy with a strong back and a thick skull has gone by. You have to be a student to get to the top and stay there. I'm champion and any other lightweight could make a fortune beating me. Yet nothing can induce the best of them to meet me in the ring. I'm in a funny position as a champion without a contender for his title. Tendler, Jackson and the others know I can beat them, but they don't know why. They think it is because I have an awful 'kick.' They think I am bigger and stronger than I am. They don't realize I can beat them because I am a better student."



Leonard with his Mother.

"You have to study three things to be a first class fighter. First, your opponent's mind and habit of thought: second, your own mental control of timing and movement, and last, physiology."

"Do you know what a knockout is? It's simply a shock to a nerve, carried to the brain. There are three knockout points on the head, each where nerves lie near the surface. For instance a straight blow on the end of the chin isn't a good knockout punch. But hit a man on either side of the chin, an inch or so back, or above the eye tooth, and you deliver a shock to a nerve connecting with the brain. The nerve telegraphs the brain that you're knocked out, and down you go."



"Now for myself. I study my self most of all, because after all. It's my machine that does the work. Every blow I use I've practiced thousands and thousands of times, studying every detail of delivery. I've put as much study into the delivering of a lifting right hand body punch as a man would

need to learn Greek. I follow every inch of the blow and try to improve it in detail."

"NOW about those 'six inch punches' they say I use. I've heard hundreds of people talk about my knocking fellows out with a six inch punch, the way they used to say Bob Fitzsimmons did. I never knocked out anybody with a short punch. I don't believe any other fighter ever did.

"What I do is just this. I fool the eye. The speed of your arms in feinting counts. I feint rapidly with my arms when advanced, and suddenly I strike. The feinting is intended to fool my opponent so he won't know when the real blow starts, and if it fools him, it fools the spectators, too. You see me feinting and hitting, and what your eye catches is the general effect, because my arms are moving as fast as I can move them.

"You don't know that when I struck the blow my elbow was drawn farther back that one time, and instead of striking six inches or a foot, I really drove my fist two feet or more. They say Dempsey uses short punches. Dempsey takes twice as long a drive as he seems to take and, as for Carpentier, I watched him beating Levlinsky, and he puts the punch into the finish of a blow that travels a yard or more."

Leonard sounds more like a college professor than a boxer, but in his day many boxers looked upon the sport of boxing as an art and studied it as if they were going for an advanced degree. Well, that is just what they were going for. I hope you have enjoyed these tidbits from one of the all time greats, and I also hope you will spend time exploring the rich legacy left behind by such Champions as Benny Leonard.



Benny with Harry Houdini and Jack Dempsey