

## **JIM CULLY, THE TIPPERARY GIANT**

*By Patrick Myler*

Ever since overwhelming favorite Goliath was felled by a single accurate shot from a diminutive David, oversized physical specimens have generally proved no match for smaller, more talented opponents. The great Bob Fitzsimmons got it spot on when he observed, "The bigger they are, the harder they fall".

If size really mattered – and we're talking about the really big guys here - boxing history would have produced more than a single world heavyweight champion tipping seven feet or more. Russia's Nicolay Valuev, standing exactly 7ft and with a reach of 85ins, defied the odds by twice claiming the WBA belt in the last decade. But no one can seriously suggest that "the Beast from the East" would have been too big for giant killers like Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis or Mike Tyson to handle.

The Irish got a bit over-excited in the 1940s when an 18-year-old fairground strongman was persuaded to try his luck in the boxing ring. Tipperary-born Jim Cully, at 7ft 2ins, was officially Ireland's tallest man at the time and had built up his strength as a weightlifter and professional wrestler. He also proved useful in setting up the fair's big tent by lifting up one end of the 1,200-pound main pole while five other workers hoisted the other end. Sceptics saw his switch to the boxing ring as no more than a novelty stunt that would quickly fall flat.

Nonetheless, Cully was presented with a stiff test for his debut at the Cork Opera House on April 4, 1942. Butcher Howell, though at 5ft 10ins conceding a massive 16 inches, was a respected campaigner who had won 12 of his 15 fights to date. Despite his experience, Howell was no match for the eager youngster. The Cork Examiner's brief report said that Cully "celebrated his debut by knocking out Howell in the third round. Howell was down for seven counts."

The drums started beating in earnest for the prospect billed as "the Tipperary Giant" and "Ireland's Carnera". It was an act of utter folly, however, when promoter Gerald Egan paired the one-fight novice with hard-hitting Chris Cole for the vacant Irish heavyweight title at Dalymount Park, Dublin. Cole, a farmer from Mullingar, was just over 6ft 1in tall and weighed 196 pounds. He might have had a patchy 9-6 record and a suspect chin, but he had mixed with tough opposition. Nicknamed "King Cole", his best success to date was a first round TKO of respected Englishman Alf Robinson.

Publicity yarns claimed that "clean-living" Cully's favourite drink was milk. He downed half a dozen quarts of milk a day, two after every meal. But newsreel footage (available on youtube) shows him effortlessly knocking back a pint of beer in a single swallow.

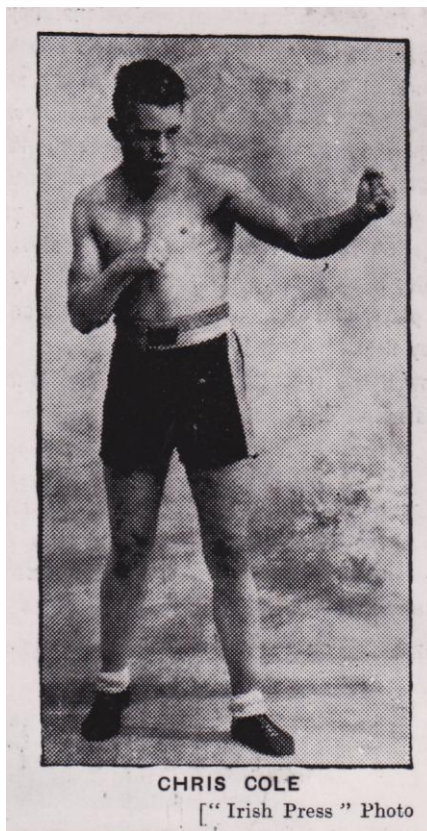


The massively ballyhooed Irish title fight was over inside two rounds. Just 40 seconds after the opening bell, a powerful right from Cole crashed home on Cully's jutting jaw and sent him to the canvas. Twice more he beat the count before the bell interrupted the slaughter. The next day's Irish Press newspaper, under the heading "The Giant Took a Hiding", praised Cully's "remarkable stamina and gameness the way he kept coming back for more".

His cornermen showed poor judgement in sending the badly dazed youngster out for round two. Four more times he went down, the final punch crash-landing him half-way out of the ring. Ringsiders rushed to support his massive bulk as he lay draped over the bottom rope. He was counted out, just as the towel was belatedly tossed in. British Movietone News footage shows the bemused Cully barely managing to remain upright as he is helped back to his corner.

While Chris Cole went on to destroy another grossly over-hyped fellow Irishman, Jack Doyle, in the first round, the Tipperary Giant took two years to decide that he should give boxing another try. Dalymount Park, scene of his spectacular collapse against Cole, was again the venue for Cully's match with Joe O'Neill, from Belfast. The Irish Independent reported that O'Neill's "disadvantages in height and reach forced him to play for the body, but he did no apparent damage and Cully's left hand had him down for several long counts before the end came in the third round".

Buoyed by his successful "comeback", he next took on Dixie "Seaman" Moore, from Belfast, again at Dalymount Park. Once again, Cully's limitations were brutally exposed by a much smaller opponent. He had got off to an encouraging start, flooring Moore twice in the second round and once more in the third. But once Dixie landed a heavy blow in the fourth round to scramble his senses, it was only Cully's courage that kept him going. After taking heavy punishment throughout the fifth round and staggering back to his corner, his seconds signalled his retirement.



That should have been the end of Cully's fistic ambitions. It was clear he didn't have what it took to make him a true topline, except as a kind of curiosity figure. His size and strength obviously gave him certain advantages but his lack of mobility, poor defence and inability to sustain punishment made him a poor prospect for top honours

For the next three years he appeared reconciled to life as a fairground manager and performer. It was a big surprise, therefore, when Irish newspapers reported in 1947 that he was setting off on an American adventure to again test himself in the ring, initially as a wrestler and then as a boxer.

According to the Wrestlingdate.com website, Cully had four wrestling matches in the US, winning three and losing one. He defeated Big Ben Morgan, Texan "giant" Don Lee and Chief Saunooke, described as a "war-whooping Cherokee" from Oklahoma, while losing to Frank Sexton in a "best of three falls" match.

Boxing, however, remained Cully's prime obsession, despite his chastening experiences in Irish rings. He told newsmen that he preferred boxing to wrestling and his main reason for his American trip was to take boxing lessons. He told reporters that he only had six amateur fights, somehow failing to mention his 2-2 professional record. While appearing in New England as a wrestler, he was recommended to New York boxing handlers Teddy Gleason and Harry Mandell.

Renowned trainer Whitey Bimstein, watching him sparring, said he was astonished at the rapid strides the big Irishman had made under coaching by "Pop" Gleason at his Greenwood Lake, New Jersey, camp. "He's a natural," said Bimstein, "You wouldn't think he's only had six amateur fights. His left jab can knock a guy out".

Along Jacobs Beach, seasoned observers of the game weren't so easily convinced of his potential. They recalled Italian giant Primo Carnera, who managed to win the world heavyweight title, but suffered merciless beatings from Joe Louis and Max Baer.

Cully played down his own image as a man mountain. "You should have seen my grandfather," he said. "He was 7ft 4ins and when he finished his day's work in the field he just lifted the plough into a cart and went home".

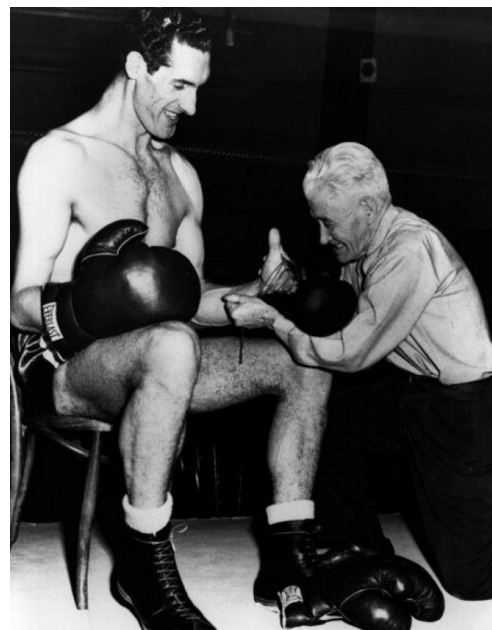
Publicity photos showed Cully towering over heavyweight title contender Joe Baksi, a mere 6ft 1in, as they squared up at the Greenwood Lake camp. Gleason was pictured tying up Jim's specially made boxing gloves, as the regular size was too small for his massive mitts. He took size 17 shoes.

Wally Baden, from Scranton, Pennsylvania, proved to be the perfect "patsy" for Cully's New York debut on May 12, 1948. With just three wins from 15 contests, Baden was a foot shorter and 60 pounds lighter than the Irishman (262 pounds). He looked so intimidated that Cully's giant shadow might have sent him scurrying towards the exit. The crowd at the Jamaica Arena in Queens booed the farcical affair that ended with Cully's hand being raised after just two minutes, 13 seconds of the first round. Baden said afterwards that two of Cully's punches "practically paralysed me". The Prescott (Arizona) Evening Courier reported that Baden was "down five times before being counted out. Twice he slipped to the floor and three times he was felled by blows that didn't look too terrific".

Just 13 days later, Cully was back in the ring at the Memorial Auditorium in Buffalo, New York, to face local boxer Earl Pierce, whose only other recorded bout up to then was a defeat. It was Cully at his



**Jim Cully, 24, of Ireland towers over U.S. heavyweight Joe Baksi in Baksi's Greenwood Lake training camp. Cully, 260 pounds.**



worst once again. Twice in the opening round he was sent tumbling to the floor and he was taking a pounding when the referee mercifully called a halt in the third round. Cully accepted the inevitable when the New York State Athletic Commission revoked his licence to box. Never again, not even when he returned home to Ireland, did he pull on the gloves.

He did, however, appear at London's famous boxing venue, Harringay Arena, in April 1950, but as a wrestler. Promoter Atholl Oakeley, showing a scale of exaggeration not unknown to the grappling game, saw nothing wrong in adding to Cully's already remarkable physical dimensions by billing him as "the Gargantuan Giant" with a height of 7ft 7ins and tipping the scales at 24 stone (336 pounds). Cully lost the match against American Ed Don Virag and returned home to Ireland to run a fairground attraction known as "Cully's Bazaar".

He regularly took the show on the road and once, when the fair reached Mullingar, the amiable giant sought out his former opponent Chris Cole and the pair reminisced about their brief encounter in 1942, when Jim bit the dust in the second round.

Cully was 59 when he died in 1981. His wife had passed away four years earlier. He was survived by his two daughters and three sons. Many of his old friends attended his burial at St Michael's Cemetery in Tipperary.

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### **Jim Cully's professional record**

**Won 3 (all by KO)    Lost 3 (all by KO)**

**1942**

<b>April 4</b>	<b>Butcher Howell</b>	<b>W KO 3</b>	<b>Cork Opera House, Ireland</b>
<b>June 12</b>	<b>Chris Cole</b>	<b>L KO 2</b>	<b>Dalymount Park, Dublin, Ireland</b>
	<b>(Vacant Irish heavyweight title)</b>		

**1943**

**(Inactive)**

**1944**

<b>June 16</b>	<b>Joe O'Neill</b>	<b>W KO 3</b>	<b>Dalymount Park, Dublin, Ireland</b>
<b>Aug 18</b>	<b>Dixie Moore</b>	<b>L RTD 5</b>	<b>Dalymount Park, Dublin, Ireland</b>

**1945-47**

**(Inactive)**

**1948**

<b>May 12</b>	<b>Wally Baden</b>	<b>W KO 1</b>	<b>Jamaica Arena, Queens, New York</b>
<b>May 25</b>	<b>Earl Pierce</b>	<b>L TKO 3</b>	<b>Memorial Auditorium, Buffalo, NY</b>

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