

Harry Greb Won The Title From Johnny Wilson But It May Not Have Been Easy

By Bobby Franklin (Boxing Over Broadway, July 17, 2018)

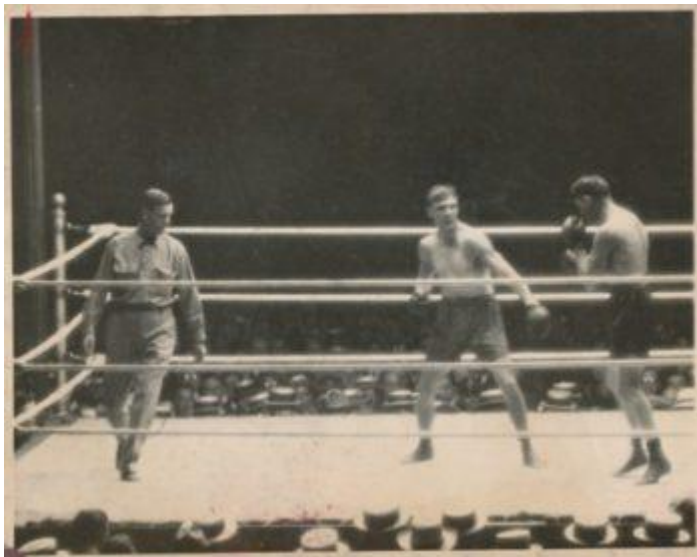


Wilson vs Greb

On August 28, 1923 Harry Greb won the World Middleweight Championship from Johnny Wilson. Greb gained a fifteen round decision over the reigning champ who fought out of Boston. The fight was held at the Polo Grounds in New York. It has always been believed that Greb won the title in easy fashion over an outclassed Wilson. In fact, the New York Times reported that Harry won 13 of the 15 rounds. The headline said “Wilson, Slow and Awkward, Bewildered By Opponent’s Attack”.

After reading the Times’s report it appears it was only a formality for Greb to take the title. Wilson comes across almost as inept. The reporter from the Times also went on to write that “...the crowd showed its approval with a boisterous shout of acclaim for the newly crowned champion”.

Six months later the two would meet in a rematch. It seems there would have been no call for the two to step into the ring against each other since the first fight was so one sided. Well, one sided at least according to the New York Times. Could the Times’s story been a case of “fake news”?



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In the early years of the 20th Century, most states made it illegal for decisions to be officially given after a boxing match. Professional fights were only supposed to be exhibitions as the game was pretty much outlawed at the time. People still wanted to bet on the matches and in order to decide who won or lost fans would rely on the opinion of reporters covering the fights. Of course, this led to some wheeling and dealing behind the scenes in order to get a newspaperman to give a decision in favor of a certain boxer so that gamblers could collect on their choice. It was just another way of fixing fights.

By the time Greb and Wilson fought, it had become legal for official decisions to be given in fights. However, newspaper reporters still liked to pick up that extra cash on the side and would take payoffs from managers and promoters to give favorable publicity to certain boxers. In some cases reporters would write stories about fights they had not even attended. Fake news was just as abundant then as it is today.



In the case of the first Wilson vs Greb fight, the coverage from the Times has pretty much defined how that fight is remembered. Recently, the great boxing historian Gregory Spicale uncovered another report on the fight. This one was written by the very highly esteemed reporter Robert Edgren. Mr. Edgren's account of the fight is quite different from the New York Times' piece.

"Nobody felt sure which would get the decision when the fifteenth round was over."

He begins his story, which was published in the New York Evening World on September 1, 1923, by completely contradicting the New York Times' reporter who said the crowd shouted its approval of the verdict. Edgren wrote "Harry Greb today is the middleweight champion of the world but when Announcer Joe Humphreys...began his announcement 'Winner and new champion' there was no wild burst of applause. It was a victory with no sensational features, and not at all the overwhelming triumph the

crowd had expected him to score over Johnny Wilson. Nobody felt sure which would get the decision when the fifteenth round was over."

That's quite different from what was reported in the Times. Edgren went on to report that Wilson gave Greb all kinds of trouble and even stated there was a case for Greb being disqualified because of the amount of holding and hitting he did. Wilson's southpaw style and tactic of going to Greb's body seems to have made things difficult for Harry.

Edgren ended his piece by opining how it was not a very exciting fight. He wrote "I've seen more excitement at a chess tournament, but it was all right. A world's championship changed hands as expected." I think if you read just a bit between the lines you get the message that there was no way Greb was going to lose that night.

I tend to believe the Edgren version over the NYT one as Robert Edgren had an impeccable reputation until the day he died. In fact, the same New York Times wrote in Edgren's obituary that he was "known for truthfulness".

There is no doubt that Harry Greb was one of the greatest middleweights of all time, but that doesn't mean he didn't have trouble with certain boxers. As I have written before, Greb was the only middleweight champ to both win and lose the title to southpaws. (He lost it to Tiger Flowers).

Greb and Wilson fought two more times. Their second was a rematch for the title six months later, and according to Boxing Blade it was a close fight. The last fight took place in Boston on April 17, 1925 at the Mechanics Building. This was reported as the most exciting of their three fights with Greb winning a very close decision.

It appears Wilson's southpaw style was a problem for Greb, and it is also possible that Johnny very possibly could have been given the decision in any of these fights.

It is unfortunate that Johnny Wilson is often considered more of a footnote in boxing history and best remembered for losing to Greb. It is also unfortunate that most people think Greb won in a cakewalk over him when it turns out Johnny Wilson gave Harry Greb more than enough to handle. It's time to reassess Wilson's talents as a fighter. The man could fight.