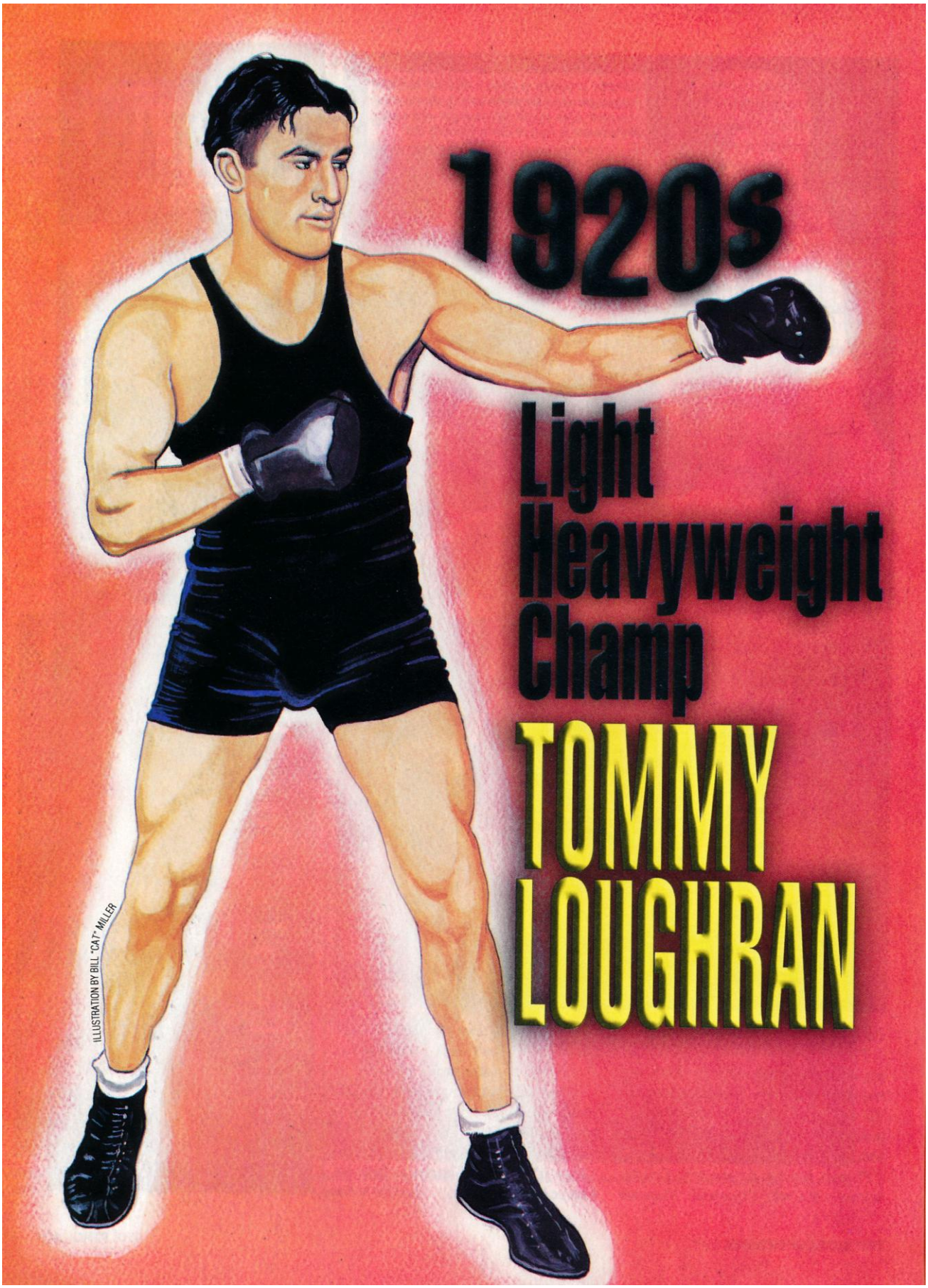

1920s
Light
Heavyweight
Champ
TOMMY
LOUGHRAN
ILLUSTRATION BY BILL "CAT" MILLER

The Nicest Guy In Boxing History

By Pete Ehrmann

By its very nature, boxing has always attracted more sinners than saints, and the number of truly pure-hearted figures in ring history can probably be counted on Mike Tyson's favorite finger. And he would be Tommy Loughran.

While probably not in the same league as Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa, the fighter called "Gentleman Tommy" and "The Philadelphia Phantom" was so decent, upstanding, and stout of character that social critic Quentin Reynolds went so far as to call him "the kind of man you'd like your son to be."

To Nat Fleischer, founder of THE RING, Loughran was nothing less than the savior boxing needed at a low point in the sport's history.

"In these days when the fingers of suspicion are cast on almost every fight, and the racketeers, the cheap-skate gamblers, try to pull a great sport down to their own level, it is indeed gratifying to have a Tommy Loughran in the field," Fleischer wrote in 1931. "His popularity will continue to grow regardless of reverses, because in this bright-eyed, gentlemanly, soft-spoken Philadelphian, boxing has a model that the youth of the land could well afford to follow."

Gilding his halo was the fact that Loughran was the best 175-pounder of his era and one of the top light heavyweights in ring history, whose flawless boxing skills even awed such hallowed practitioners of the art as James J. Corbett and Jack Johnson.

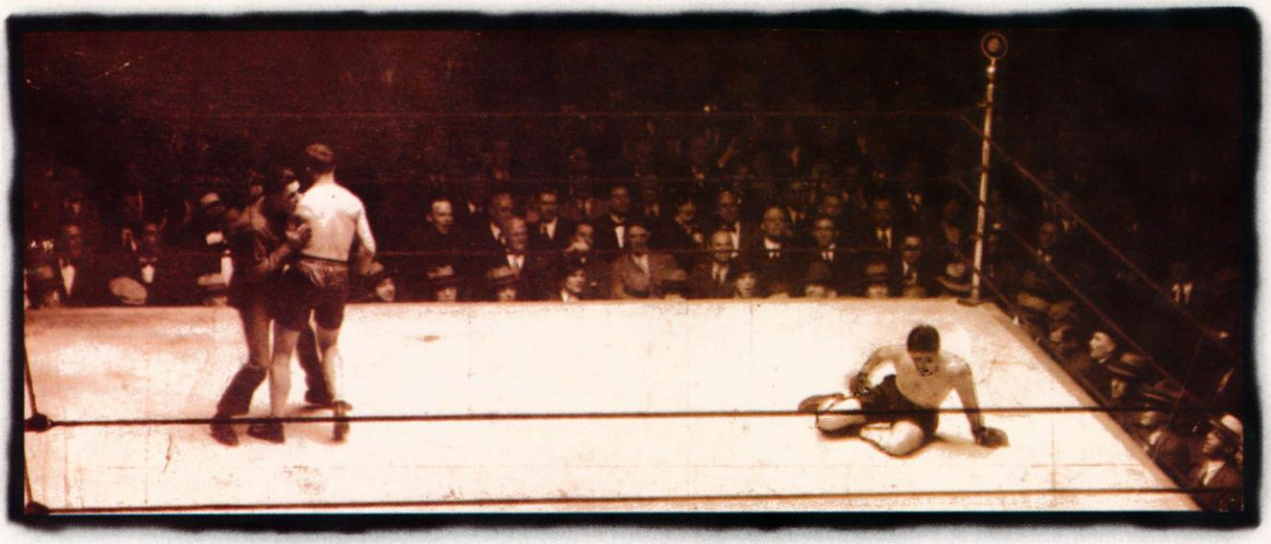
Only one thing kept the ring's holy ghost from across-the-board greatness, a failing that in boxing is considered the most mortal of sins. Loughran couldn't punch hard enough to knock a kindergartner off his roller skates. Only 18 of the 96 men Loughran beat on the record (with 24 losses, nine draws and 46 no-decisions) didn't make it to the final bell. But that was of little matter to the man himself.

"There are other ways to beat a man without knocking him out," Loughran said.

That wasn't always his philosophy. After he flattened Eddie Carter in the second round of his pro debut on December 9, 1919, Loughran kissed the right fist responsible and envisioned it eventually clearing away everything between him and a world title.

But Loughran's manager, Joe Smith, had a different vision—of a right-hand-crazy kid who'd be easy pickings for every left hooker he faced. Smith was a longtime friend and neighbor of the Loughran family to whom Tommy had turned to see about becoming a fighter after watching featherweight champion Johnny Kilbane

Loughran (right) squares off with former light heavyweight champion Mike McTigue prior to their October 1927 bout for the vacant 175-pound crown. Loughran won the title via 15-round decision.



Challenger Leo Lomski put Loughran down in the opening round of their 1928 bout. Loughran beat the count, but was out on his feet for the next five rounds before he regained his wits and boxed his way to a unanimous decision victory.

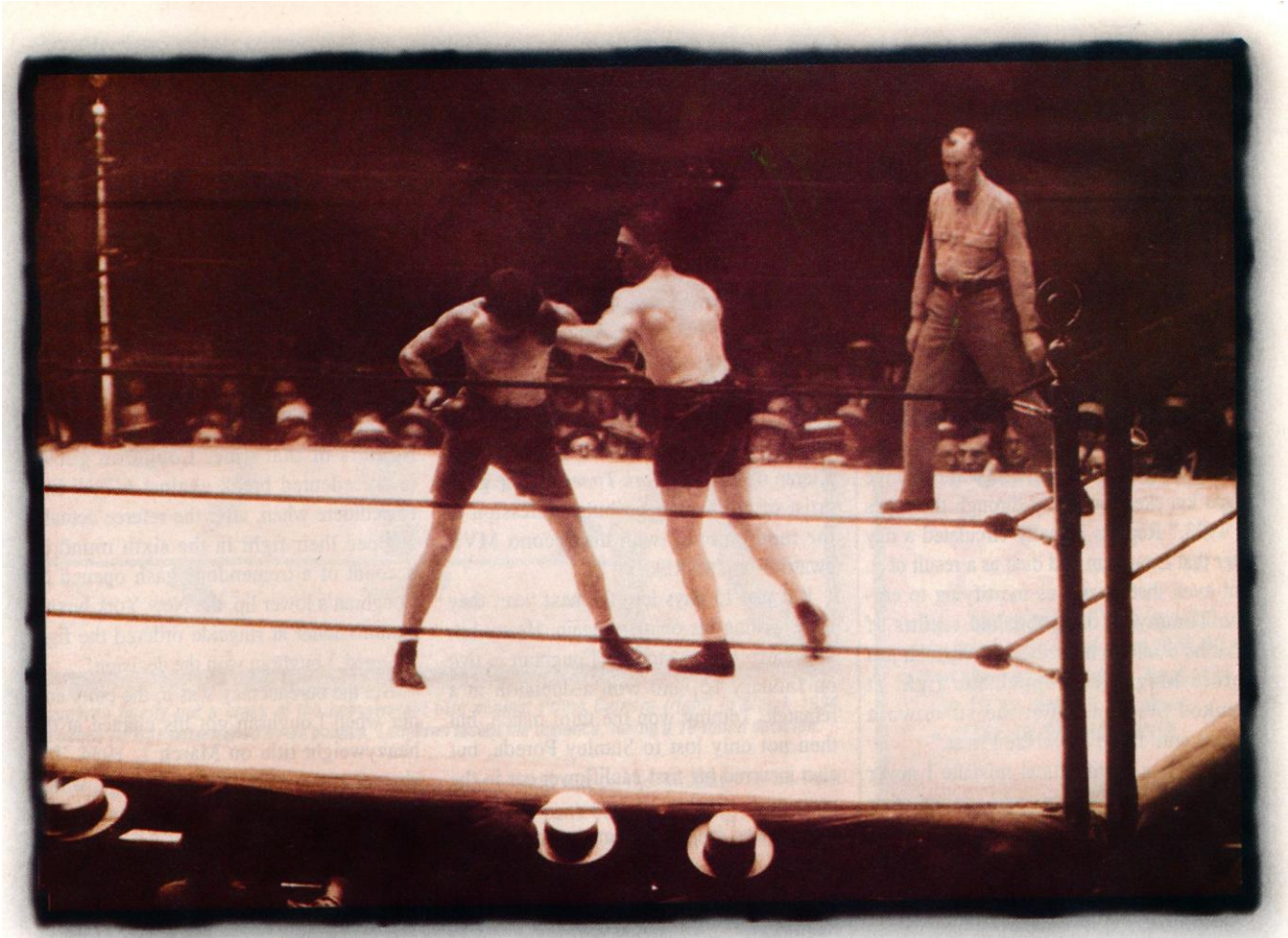
beat Joey Fox in Philly that year. Smith had over 300 fights himself, but you couldn't tell it by the manager's features that remained smooth thanks to his diligence about boxing fundamentals. Smith transferred that diligence to Loughran by means of a rope that kept Tommy's hair-trigger right hand tied to his side in the gym. Forced to punch with his other hand only, the result was the development of what Fleischer would call "as pretty a left, snappy jab as has been seen in years."

Emphasis was placed on learning and utilizing the science of boxing, and out of that grew a famous Loughran dictum: "They have to hit me to hurt me, and they can't hit me."

Gene Tunney did, though, in their eight-round bout in Philly on August 24, 1922. Loughran was just 19 years old, and the future heavyweight champion had 10 pounds on him that felt more like 10,000 when Gene reached him with a right hand in the first round. Loughran went down, but he got up and made such a fight of it that two local newspapers called him the winner of the no-decision match.

For someone who didn't like to get hit, Loughran had no qualms about standing right in the face of danger. He proved that before he ever laced on a boxing glove by lying about his age to join the military during World War I, making it all the way to boot camp before the brass got wise to the 14-year-old and sent him home. Some boxers would probably have preferred going up against the whole Hun army barehanded to

Loughran receives a trophy from THE RING's founder and Editor-in Chief Nat Fleischer. Loughran was the magazine's Fighter of the Year in both 1929 and 1931.



Future world heavyweight champion Jimmy Braddock absorbs a left from Loughran during his bid to take the light heavyweight title away from the Philadelphian. Loughran retained the title with an easy 15-round decision.

fighting Harry Greb in the ring. Loughran not only fought Greb—"the busiest chap I ever met"—six times, but went the distance with him each time, going 1-2-1 with 2 no-decisions.

Two impressive Loughran performances made big news in 1926. On June 17, the idol of Ritan St. won a decision over ex-175-pound champ Georges Carpentier before 30,000 happy fans at Philadelphia's Municipal Stadium, even flooring the Frenchman in the process. Loughran was even more dominant in a public sparring session with Jack Dempsey, then preparing to defend his heavyweight title against Tunney. Newspapermen were agog watching the Loughran jab piston into Dempsey's face.

The popular Loughran could have been declared 175-pound champion without breaking a sweat in 1927, but he opted, like the earnest, by-the-book lad he was, to win it the old-fashioned way. When champion Jack Delaney decided to go heavyweight, the National Boxing Association declared Loughran his successor, only to be told no thanks by its designee. Instead, Loughran fought former champion Mike McTigue on October 7 for New York State recognition, and with the band from Tommy's alma mater, St. Monica's Catholic School, tootling encouragement at Madison Square Garden, Loughran, 24, thoroughly outboxed the 37-year-old McTigue for the decision.

Just two months later, the title was unified in what the *New York Times* called "an excellent exemplification of what the manly art means with the elimination of sluggery and primitive, brute strength." With his victory over NBA titlist Jimmy Slattery at the Garden, the universal champion was hailed as not only the most artistic boxer since Corbett but also, in the words of THE RING, "one of the finest fellows you'd ever want to meet."

Resilient, too. In his first title defense, the sluggery of challenger Leo Lomski resulted in two trips to the canvas for Loughran in the first round and a five-round separation of the champion and his much-admired faculties. Loughran fought on pure instinct, then woke up before the sixth round and went on to outbox Lomski the rest of the way in as stirring a performance as when Archie Moore did virtually the same thing against Yvon Durelle about 40 years later.

Following successful defenses against ex-welterweight champ Pete Latzo (twice) and middleweight champ Mickey Walker, in his swan song as light heavyweight champion Loughran administered both a brilliant boxing lesson to future heavyweight king Jimmy Braddock and also one on manners. After the thoroughly frustrated challenger was reduced to spitting obscenities at him, Loughran stopped punching long enough to ask, "Do you talk like this to your mother? I'm as good as your mother, and don't you use language like that!" The chastened Braddock stopped cursing, and after the fight Loughran stopped being light heavyweight champion to go hunting for the

heavyweight title that had been vacated by Tunney.

In the very first balloting for THE RING'S Fighter of the Year award in 1928 (then called the Most Valuable Boxer award), Loughran was runner-up to Tunney. A year later, Tommy was the winner, which was some consolation after the unthinkable happened and he got knocked out for the first time in over 100 bouts.

The right hand thrown by Jack Sharkey in the third round of their scheduled 15-rounder for the American heavyweight title on September 26, 1929, was called by Fleischer "the most terrific wallop since Firpo knocked Dempsey through the ropes in 1923." Reports actually circulated a day later that Loughran had died as a result of it. But even that wasn't as mortifying to erudite Tommy as the published reports of what he'd said to referee Lou Magnolia just before Magnolia stopped the fight at Yankee Stadium: "Let me sit down a minute until I find out where I'm at."

"That is a grammatical mistake I never make," huffed Loughran, who, unlike other famous fighters, didn't rely on the services of a ghostwriter for the boxing column syndicated in newspapers under his name.

He certainly never would have said, "It ain't over 'til it's over," but that Yogi-ism describes better than any treatise the balance of Loughran's career. Written off after successive losses to heavyweight contender Ernie Schaaf in 1930, the next year Loughran beat Schaaf, Max Baer, Johnny Risko, Paulino Uzcudun, and several others in a comeback acclaimed in these pages as "one of the most remarkable in the realm of boxing." The man called by Fleischer the "Wizard of Boxing," and anointed by John Kieran of the *New York Times* as "the great artist of the leather-pushing profession in the modern era," won his second MVB award from THE RING.

But just 15 days into the next year, they were writing his obituary again. Heavy-hitting Steve Hamas stopped Loughran in two on January 15, and won a decision in a rematch. Tommy won the third match, but then not only lost to Stanley Poreda, but also incurred his first cauliflower ear in the process.

However, the most damaging blow of all that year hit Loughran square in the wallet. The Great Depression was on, and among the banks that went down for the count was the one in which Loughran had sunk all his ring earnings. Flat broke, Loughran had no choice but to keep fighting.

He still did it better than most, reversing an earlier loss to King Levinsky, beating Hamas again, and evening his record against Jack Sharkey with a 15-round decision.

His next two fights pitted the 5'11", 185-pound Loughran against the two largest fighters of that time. Loughran got an unprecedented break against 6'7½" Ray Impellitiere when, after the referee actually stopped their fight in the sixth round on account of a tremendous gash opened on Loughran's lower lip, the New York boxing commissioner at ringside ordered the fight resumed. Loughran won the decision.

But the bureaucracy was in the other corner when Loughran got his chance at the heavyweight title on March 1, 1934. The champion was 6'5¾" Primo Carnera, whose 30-inch thigh was only an inch smaller than Tommy's waist, and whose 84-pound pull

After he relinquished the light heavyweight title, Loughran campaigned as a heavyweight. Among the many top heavies he beat was Ernie Schaaf, pictured taking a jab from "The Philadelphia Phantom."

Loughran finally got a crack at the heavyweight title against Primo Carnera (right) in March 1934. Although he was outweighed by 84 pounds, Loughran lasted the distance, losing a 15-round decision.

in weight still stands as a record in a world title fight.

Primo wasn't much of a fighter, but his fists weren't Loughran's main concern. In training, Carnera had broken the foot of sparring partner George Manley by stepping on it with his own gondola-sized dogs, and the suspicion that he was practicing the Frankenstein Stomp to use against Loughran prompted the latter's camp to appeal to the Florida commission for help several days before the fight in Miami.

But Chairman Louis McReynolds decreed, "fighters must protect their feet just as they do their faces," and suggested, "the other man shouldn't leave his feet where they can be stepped on."

Given that engraved invitation, Carnera broke one of Loughran's toes in the first round and otherwise manhandled him to the point that the slickster who prided himself on finishing each round of a fight in his own corner so as to take full advantage of the one-minute rest period (because, Loughran said, "a second saved between rounds is of as much value to a boxer as a half-hour's sleep to the average man") was so exhausted at the bell ending the 14th round that Tommy plopped himself down in Primo's corner. The decision for Carnera was a formality.

Over the next two-plus years, Loughran was in and out of the rankings as he built up a new bank balance fighting all over the world. He was on the bad end of a few decisions as rank as the grease Loughran had plastered on his hair in the Carnera fight, hoping its odor would send Primo recoiling out of toe-mashing range. Judges might have been unmoved by the remnants of his skills, but boxing epicures ate it up.

"When a boxer of the Jim Driscoll type, like Loughran, makes old-timers sit up and remark, 'This is boxing as it was always intended to be,' it must have been a splendid exhibition," wrote THE RING's Johnny Sharpe after Loughran dropped a hometown verdict to Tommy Farr in London in 1936.

Later that year, as long as he was giving Joe Louis the MVB award and a title belt to heavyweight champion Jimmy Braddock, Fleischer bestowed yet another award on Loughran "for his splendid services to the fight game over a long period of years."

Asked THE RING editor: "Who has done more for the sport in a wholesome way?"

With apologies to grammarians dead and alive, if you can think of anybody else even 67 years later, you'd better sit down a minute and find out where you're at. ■

Pete Ehrmann is a freelance writer based in West Allis, Wisconsin, and a regular contributor to this magazine.

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