

IT'S SUGAR VS. GENE AGAIN

TRYING TO REGAIN THE TITLE HE HAS ALREADY WON THREE TIMES,
SUGAR RAY ROBINSON FACES CHAMPION GENE FULLMER IN A RETURN
BOUT AT CHICAGO

BY MARTIN KANE

The second running of a championship fight is justified in our decadent time by a business convention—the return-bout clause that all bright titleholders insist on. The clause requires a man to win two legs on the championship cup before he can drink from it. It says a champion has to lose twice to be defeated. It makes a championship fight a 30-round contest with a months-long rest between the 15th and 16th rounds.

In tougher times the losing champion had to fight his way back to a title shot. Even Jack Dempsey had to prove himself (by knocking out Jack Sharkey) in order to get a second try at Gene Tunney.

The return-bout clause has been accepted passively as good business, if not good sport. Some return bouts have been ludicrous repetitions of an original fiasco, as in the Joe Brown-Bud Smith series. Anyone who saw both those fights was cheated twice.

Now, in order to win a chance to regain his middleweight championship, twice lost and once relinquished, Sugar Ray Robinson has had to prove nothing beyond the fact that he can walk and talk and drive a hard bargain. In a May Day demonstration that boxing will never die because Barnum was right, Sugar Ray will meet Champion Gene Fullmer at Chicago Stadium.

Since the last one was close enough to start a thousand arguments, especially among those who saw it on TV, there is some justification for this one. But it would have seemed better if Sugar Ray had gone out and knocked over a couple of high-ranking middle-weights in the interim. It would seem even better if Champion Fullmer were getting a champion's share instead of an even split of the purse. Actually, he has not yet been effectively recognized as champion. He won't be until he is in a position to dictate terms and demand return bouts.

This second running could, however, be a better fight than the first one at Madison Square Garden last January, if only because the shrewd Robinson must by now have concluded that he cannot hope to win by outthinking a battering ram. Instead of thinking his way through 15 rounds he will have to fight his way through a majority

of them. It could be not only a better fight but a shorter one for, though Gene Fullmer is no knockout puncher in fast company—he has won about half his fights by kayos, but all against third-raters—he may find the confidence this time to swing from his heels in the early rounds and thus weaken Robinson for a TKO. And Robinson may decide to gamble early on whatever remains of his own good punch. Neither should expect to win by a clear-cut knockout, for Fullmer never has even been knocked down and Robinson's only knockout, if such it could be called, was at the hands of Joey Maxim.

Fullmer, a methodical, plodding fellow in private as well as ring life, won the championship by sticking to the simple fundamentals that every fighter learns and so many cockily discard. He kept his guard up and punched only when he was at close quarters, where bruising strength gave him the advantage over the more agile, infinitely more brilliant Robinson. Gene gave Robinson no proper chance to be either agile or brilliant. He was a bulldozer attacking a supple sapling. The astonished Robinson—his face was a study in puzzlement throughout the fight—discovered that at long range his only targets were two gloves protecting the head, two elbows protecting the body, and that at short range he was outgunned by his younger, big-muscled opponent. Sugar Ray's classic feints and draws were utterly disregarded—if indeed Fullmer recognized them when he saw them. In desperation Robinson clinched repeatedly and found himself able to restrain only Fullmer's left hand—which Gene, indeed, surrendered with suspicious willingness. Fullmer's right hand was always free and banging away at Robinson's body and head.

Those clinches have been made a part of this fight's ballyhoo. Cries of moral indignation have been raised that Fullmer repeatedly fouled the then champion, especially with rabbit punches. To these eyes, he did not. While Robinson was holding, he took some punches to the back of the head. They were the kind a fighter uses to persuade an opponent to let go and fight. They were not rabbit punches at all, since they were delivered to an upright, close-holding Robinson. A rabbit punch (and you could look it up in Webster's) is a downward blow delivered against an opponent who is bent forward. And Robinson's persistent, amazingly clumsy holding was itself a foul.

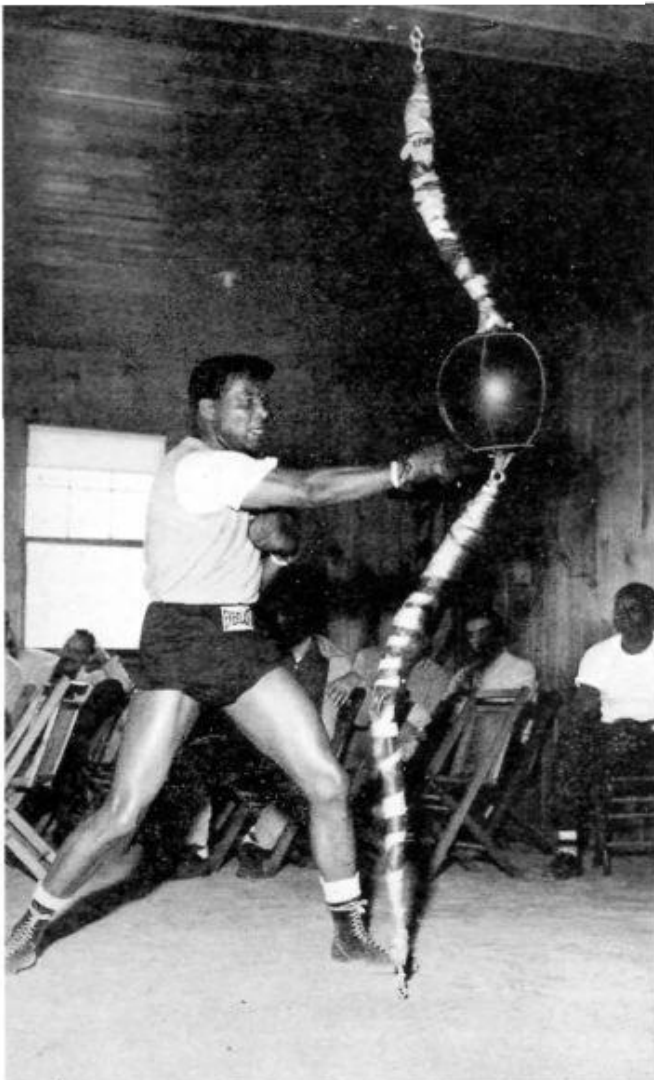
This second fight comes two days before Sugar Ray's 37th birthday, and it has been made increasingly clear of late that old fighters fade away. Robinson's chance to win the middleweight title a fourth time is mighty dim, though Sugar Ray believes he can win and likes to remember that no man has beaten him twice. Jake LaMotta and Randy Turpin, the only two who ever tried it, were trounced in return engagements. Sugar Ray did not, to be sure, give Ralph (Tiger) Jones a second chance.

The odds, better than 3 to 1 in Fullmer's favor, may go higher. There is no tendency anywhere to overrate Fullmer, whose limitations are well known, but it has become obvious that Robinson's comeback victories over Bobo Olson, though glorious in the record books of boxing, were achieved against a fighter who had deteriorated from mediocrity. By hindsight it is clear that almost any adequate middleweight could have taken Olson on the nights Sugar Ray knocked him out.

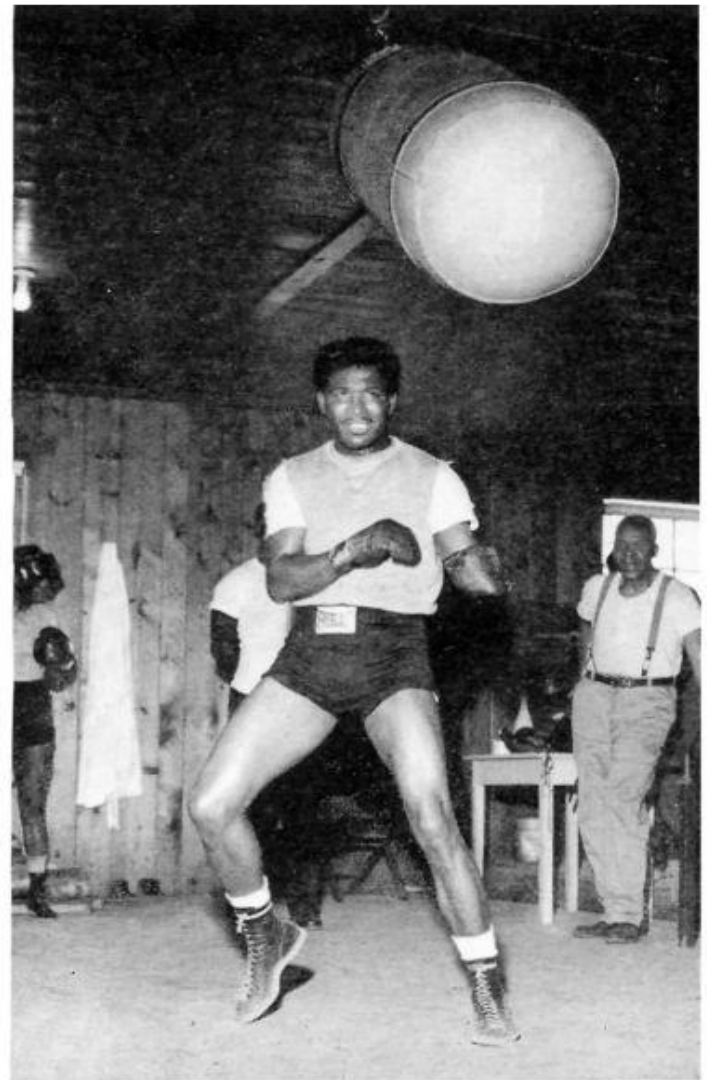
BOTH TRAIN HARD

The two men have been training far apart, the champion in the luxury of Tam O' Shanter Country Club outside Chicago, the challenger amid the lesser comforts of Long Pond Inn at Greenwood Lake, N.Y., an old favorite of his.

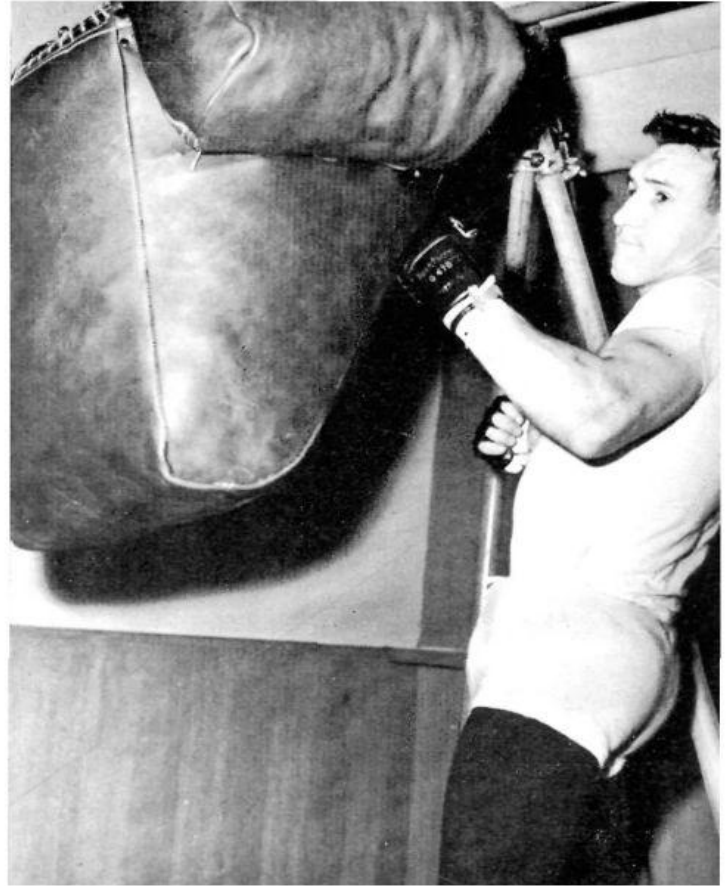
SUSPENSION BAG develops hand speed and coordination that Sugar feels he lacked in the fight that cost him his title.



HEAVY BAG, weighing 60 pounds, takes a pounding as Robinson tries to get back the big punch that won him 90 victories by knockout.



Late in his training Fullmer unveiled a secret weapon and, against all training camp tradition, it was a sensible one. A 96-pound punching bag of new design, the weapon looks like an enormous three-way sofa pillow with an overhang at the top. The standard heavy bag offers a fighter no chance to develop power in his uppercut, a punch which is, in fact, the most neglected in boxing. Fullmer's new bag not only develops the uppercut but presents a shifty target. It moves and turns with each punch and requires the boxer to throw a variety of blows in order to keep up with it.



SECRET WEAPON, unveiled at Gene Fullmer's training camp, is new heavy punching bag invented by Marv Jensen and designed to permit development of uppercut.

Both fighters have been assiduous in their training—Fullmer because that is his natural bent, Robinson because he knows he must be at whatever peak it is possible for him to achieve. One of the marvels of the first 15 rounds in this two-fight marathon was

that at the end of the first fight Sugar Ray Robinson, though clearly a bedraggled caricature of his younger self, still was on his toes, still showing some little signs of the poise and grace that had marked his first middleweight reign in the early years of this decade. He lost his title, but not without honor. He seems determined that if he must lose again, Fullmer will know he has been up against a champion.

It does seem that Robinson must lose again. Age is a mighty barrier in this battle, as it was in the first. In the end, no strategy can overcome it. A reasonable guess would be Fullmer by a TKO.

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