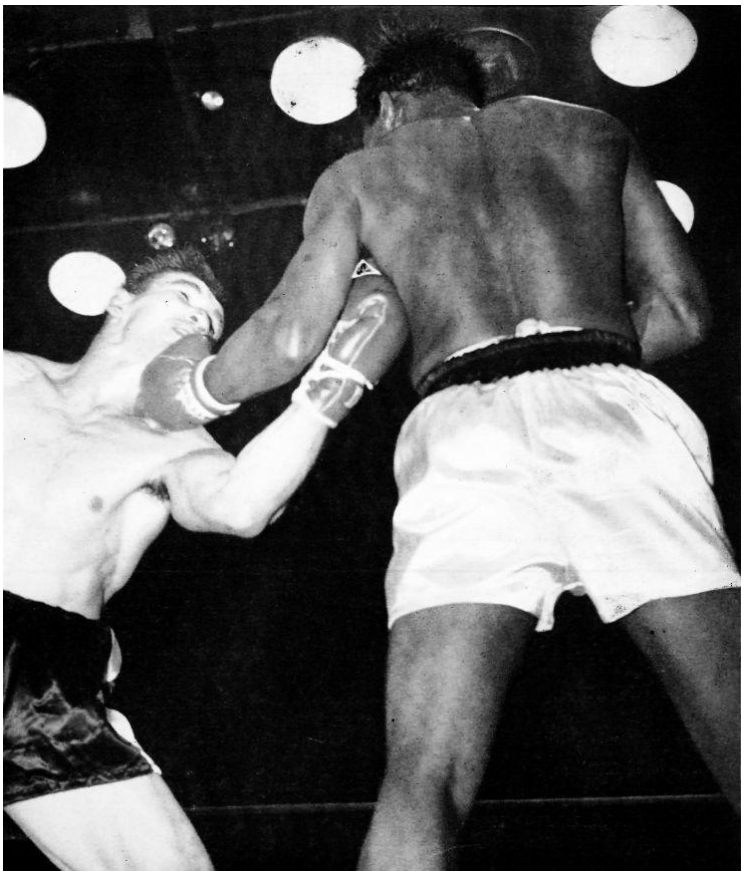
A PUNCH FOR HISTORY

BEHIND ON POINTS, SUGAR RAY ROBINSON KO'D GENE FULLMER WITH A SINGLE MAGNIFICENT BLOW FOR HIS FOURTH MIDDLEWEIGHT CHAMPIONSHIP

By Martin Kane



The perfect punch is rare in boxing, rarer than the home run in the days of Home Run Baker, or even the hole-in-one. The perfect punch is always a left hook—for no straight right-hand throw can be as pretty as a hook—delivered against a strong-jawed man who has not been weakened by a long, hard fight. It comes fast and it executes instantly, like a well-timed squelch. Only the great ones have been able to throw it and they but seldom when facing a fresh and sturdy opponent.

In all the history of boxing the perfect punch never has been so well-delivered with so much at stake as on the night of May 1 at Chicago Stadium when Sugar Ray Robinson, underdog once more at ringside odds of 1 to 3, saw an opening as wide as a boulevard arch and drove smartly through to his old familiar home, the middleweight championship of the world. He dwells there, it seems, whenever he feels like moving back in. Many's the time he has propped his nimble feet before its fireplace and leaned his sleek head back against the antimacassar—more times than any man. To get there this time he dispossessed Gene Fullmer, an inoffensive tenant who moved in only last January and hadn't even had time to get the attic cluttered up.

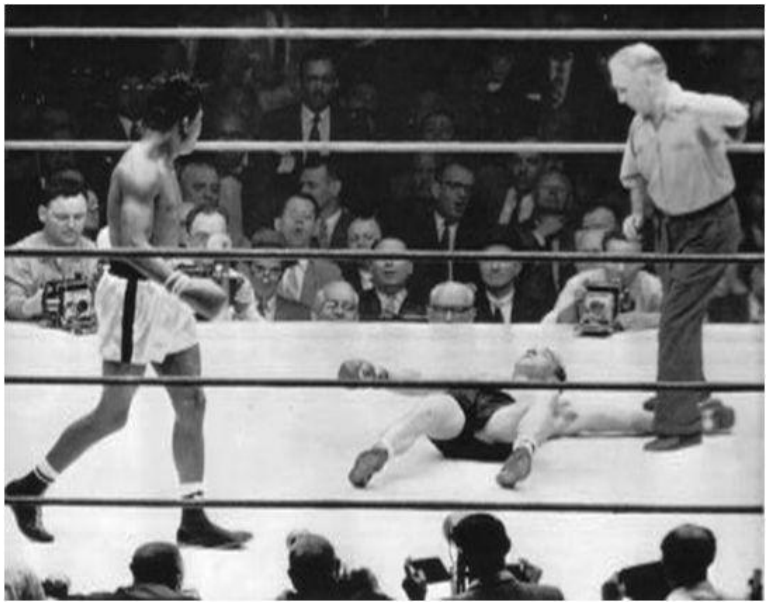
The historic punch came in the fifth round. It came suddenly, with no hint of preparation save for a right hand to Fullmer's body, which is built like a Sherman

tank. Fullmer was leading then on all three official cards, and rightly so, for he had lost only the fourth round on a strong Robinson flurry.

The pattern of the first Robinson-Fullmer fight at Madison Square Garden was beginning to reappear except for one enormous blunder. A nondrinker, Fullmer had tasted the wine of championship and it went straight to his head. In the first fight he had rushed Robinson cautiously, both hands protecting his jaws until he was well inside. This time he came at Robinson in the fifth round with his right hand low on his chest. He meant to bring the right up from his heels at the first opportunity. This was apparent even to children at home reading comic books while they watched TV. Sugar Ray saw it, too. It was what he had been waiting for.

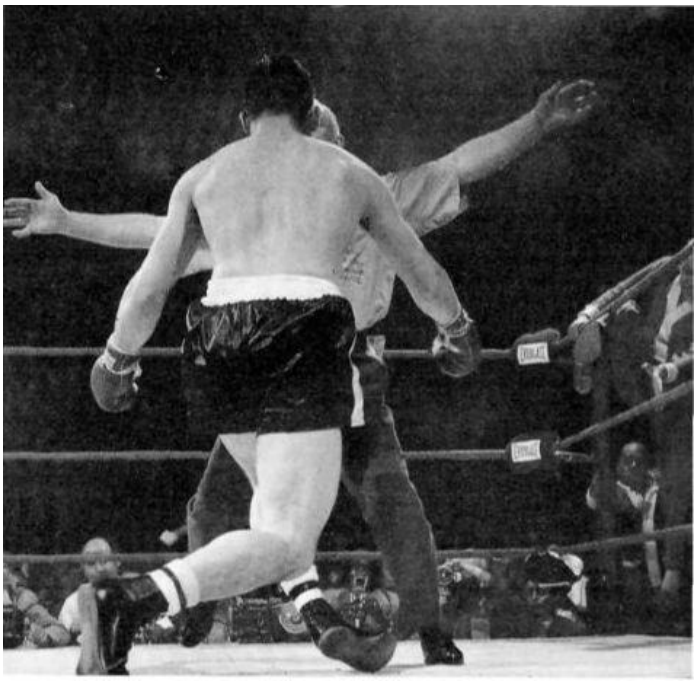
Later, in euphorious retrospect, the sugary Ray recalled that he had been subtly "showing him the right all night in order to set up the left." The Fullmer version is that he never saw the right, didn't notice it at any time. It does seem to be the essential truth, agreed upon by all, that Fullmer walked into a left hook. For a while thereafter he couldn't walk at all.

Robinson's preparatory right to Fullmer's body had the effect of bringing Fullmer's head over to the left. As the head swung back to the right in the same arc—Gene was planning to throw his underslung right and needed balance—Sugar Ray's perfect left hook caught it with precise timing and precisely on the Fullmer button. The lights went out. Hours afterward Fullmer was still in the dark as to what had happened. He could remember nothing. That part of the fight is hearsay so far as he is concerned.



Fullmer went to the canvas so suddenly that the crowd—there were 14,757 paying fans in the stadium—was totally hushed for a moment. Then it burst out with an ear-pounding roar of astonishment and admiration. For in the little interval that it took Referee Frank Sikora to glide into position above Fullmer and start his count it became clear that Gene, though drawing manfully on some wellspring of inherent courage, would not be able to rise again in 10 seconds. His powerful legs pumped in the effort, but he had no more control of them than if he had been an infant squirming in his crib. He rolled and twisted. Sikora bellowed the seconds—he is one of the few

referees who can be heard loud and clear at such a moment—and they went relentlessly by. As they went, so went Gene Fullmer's brief hold on the title.



Sugar Ray Robinson knew the title was coming his way once more. In a neutral corner, arms spread along the red ropes, he took a deep breath of triumph. He showed his white mouthpiece in a happy grin. When Sikora had counted to 10 Robinson had done what no man had done before. He had won the middleweight championship for the fourth time. He had been the first man to knock out Gene Fullmer.

Fullmer knew nothing of all this. Rising on crisscrossed legs he wobbled back to his corner and into the arms of his manager, Marv Jenson.

"Why did they stop the fight?" Fullmer inquired. He had begun to see that things were not going well.

"They counted you out," Jenson explained.

"Well, that's a pretty good reason," Fullmer conceded. When he told about it later his black eyes were twinkling as though it was, after all, a pretty good joke on him. Outside the ring he has a gentle and sporting disposition, a natural decency and grace and, talking to him, you understand that those low blows were really and truly unintentional, just as Referee Sikora figured.

There were two low blows in the third round, so clear and palpable that Sikora, jotting down his score, shook his head sadly. Even so, he did not take away the round but scored it even. So did Judge Jim McManus. Judge Frank Clark gave it to Fullmer, presumably because Robinson had done nothing in the round but act hurt. In the two preceding rounds he hadn't even done that and was, in fact, beaten to the punch several times, and even countered by the supposedly inept Fullmer. Shrewd Sugar had been biding his time.

But the fourth round was altogether different and it forecast something of what was to come. Robinson won it on everyone's card. Previously he had allowed Fullmer to

start the action but now he moved in smartly with a right-and-left combination to the head. Fullmer then moved inside. Neither punch had hurt him. Robinson threw a weak left to the head, followed it with a good right. There was a clinch and Fullmer put two lefts to the body. In the next exchange of the round Fullmer led with a right to the head and hooked to the body. Robinson threw two lefts to the head. Until then, the fourth round could have been called even, with a slight edge, if any, for Robinson.

Then something snapped. In every big fight a certain tension builds up, whether or not there is much action, but the next few moments of the fourth round were thrilling because they were filled with action and because they proved Robinson had retained at least something of his old magnificent powers—that he was still able to put punches together meaningfully, in a calculated series, with masterful design. Every punch in this flurry went where he wanted it to go.

There seemed, however, to have been very little power in the flurry. For all that the punches landed so neatly, their only effect was to cause Fullmer to back off and to murmur, perhaps, "Touché."

They did have one other effect. They opened the eyes of Marv Jenson to a horrid possibility. Fullmer went back to his stool as serene as a stroked kitten. Jenson was worried.

"He'll come out fighting in the next round," Jenson snapped. "Keep your right hand high."

Fullmer, of course, did nothing of the sort. In contrast to the disciplined strategy of the first fight, Gene seemed so anxious to punch that he forgot the simple lesson of the January Bout.

At the inquest Jenson testified that his fighter, displeased at intimations that he had won the championship by protecting himself at all times—which he mostly did—had proudly decided to slug it out with Robinson. In most cases a manager's declaration on why his fighter lost isn't worth the lip spray that goes with it. But Jenson's explanation has a solid ring.

"Since he was the champion," Jenson said, "he decided to win more spectacularly."

What he did was to lose spectacularly.

After which came The Coronation Scene in Sugar's dressing room.

Sugar Ray entered, with robe and retinue, sweat beads dripping off his slight mustache. An aide held a lump of ice to the side of his head where a Fullmer right had clopped him. (Oddly enough, Fullmer showed no sign of bruise or tenderness, not even a slight swelling, where the Robinson left had landed.) Photographers shot pictures interminably. Everyone shouted and some laughed hysterically. Brother Chester M. Batey, minister of the Hyde Park Bible Church, came in and shook the champion's hand.

"They were pulling for you," he said, "but I was praying for you."

Julius Helfand, chairman of the New York State boxing commission, extended his congratulations. Welterweight Champion Carmen Basilio bounded over the table that separated Robinson from his audience and hugged the man he hopes to beat next summer. At Basilio's appearance there were shouts of "million-dollar gate!"

Then the interview began, with Robinson responding through a microphone.
"How did you do it, Ray?" someone asked.

"It was a very rough fight," Ray replied, and you could see that this was the beginning of an oration. "I owe my success to the millions of people who have prayed for me and to the way that God answered their prayers and mine. That was what helped me to victory tonight. And I want to thank Joe Louis who came to my aid when I needed him and helped me with his advice and counsel. He is my very great friend. My very dear friend, Father Jovian Lang [a young Franciscan priest standing nearby] gave me the spiritual help I needed. Their faith is what sustained me, and I am grateful.

"It was a left hook that caught him on the way in."

He thanked his wife, Edna Mae, who was seated on a bench, listening. Someone asked how far the knockout punch traveled. (It was, actually, quite long.)
"I don't know," Ray answered, "but he got the message somewhere."

At which point Gene Fullmer strode in, as if on cue, grinning broadly at the joke. He slipped an arm around Robinson's shoulder and whispered words of congratulation to him. The embarrassed Robinson, afraid that he might have made a faux pas with his wisecrack, announced to the crowd: "He is a real gentleman." To which Fullmer responded that Robinson was "the greatest guy in history."

Then Fullmer pushed his way out to dress for the street and someone mentioned the low blows in the third round.

"He didn't mean that," Robinson said. "It was an accident and it wasn't bad."

What was bad was Fullmer's decision to abandon the intelligent caution he had shown in the first fight, when he had won a championship he dreamed of keeping for 10 years. Fullmer's Folly was a costly bit of business. He had taken only about $21,000 out of the first fight and, though he and Robinson made $67,479 apiece in the second, Fullmer deprived himself of a share in the enormous gate that will result when Carmen Basilio tries for the middleweight championship. It is most unlikely that Fullmer and Robinson will meet again.

Sugar Ray went suddenly coy about fighting Basilio, though it would certainly restore his fortune (Internal Revenue agents had attached $23,000 of this purse for back taxes.) Allowing for theater television, a million-dollar take is not an extreme hope. He said he might not ever fight again. James D. Norris of the International Boxing Club said he would like to put the fight on at Yankee Stadium in July, before interest in the bout had a chance to cool off. Everybody, Sugar Ray said, would be out of town in July, so September would be better. And so on. It was apparent that Sugar was laying the groundwork for a long, hard session of business poker at which he would demand the lion's share of all the dollars in sight.

But he is, in truth, a lion among the champions. His feats are unequaled in ring history. By the record books alone he is the greatest fighter of his generation. His place in history is high and secure and so is the place of that perfect punch, a blood-red streak in the night, that won him all the glory one fighter needs.

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