The RING Remembers

JIMMY CLABBY

A Good Guy Who Got Some "Bad" Advice

By Pete Ehrmann

Jimmy Clabby didn't have an enemy in the world until it was suggested that he go out and make some to boost his appeal at the box office by bringing out fans who hoped to see him lose. Being an agreeable sort who never cared to antagonize anyone, Clabby complied by becoming his own worst enemy, and his ensuing flameout was one of the saddest in ring annals.

To say Clabby was one of the cleverest boxers ever is less debatable than his claim to the welterweight and middleweight titles in 1910 and 1913, respectively. The glut of self-proclaimed titleholders then was as great as the one of alphabet "champions" today. If anything, it was even more confusing then because of the almost total absence of oversight that made it possible for just about anybody to set up shop as a champion of the world.

That Clabby was Wal-Mart to everybody else's five-and-dime was attested to by a 1913 editorial

in the *Milwaukee Journal* hailing the demise of "the booze fighting champion" and rise of "well-behaved young fellows who make a gentlemanly appearance and know how to conduct themselves before the public. Here in Milwaukee, we have Jimmy Clabby ... who can walk into anyone's parlor and get away with it."

The native of Norwich, Connecticut, who came to Milwaukee in 1906 by way of Hammond, Indiana, was more likely to be found at the horse track than some swell's parlor, and Clabby's fondness for the brew that made Milwaukee famous soon outstripped his taste for sarsaparilla. But his wide smile, sunny disposition, and especially the wizardry between the ropes he learned as a boy because he promised his mother he would become "too clever to be hit hard," qualified Clabby as a marvel of the age.

After one of his first local fights, a win over Billy Morehead in the opening bout on a card on December 21, 1906, a reporter credited Clabby with "skill and ring generalship that is rarely if ever seen in the least important contest of a fistic entertainment."

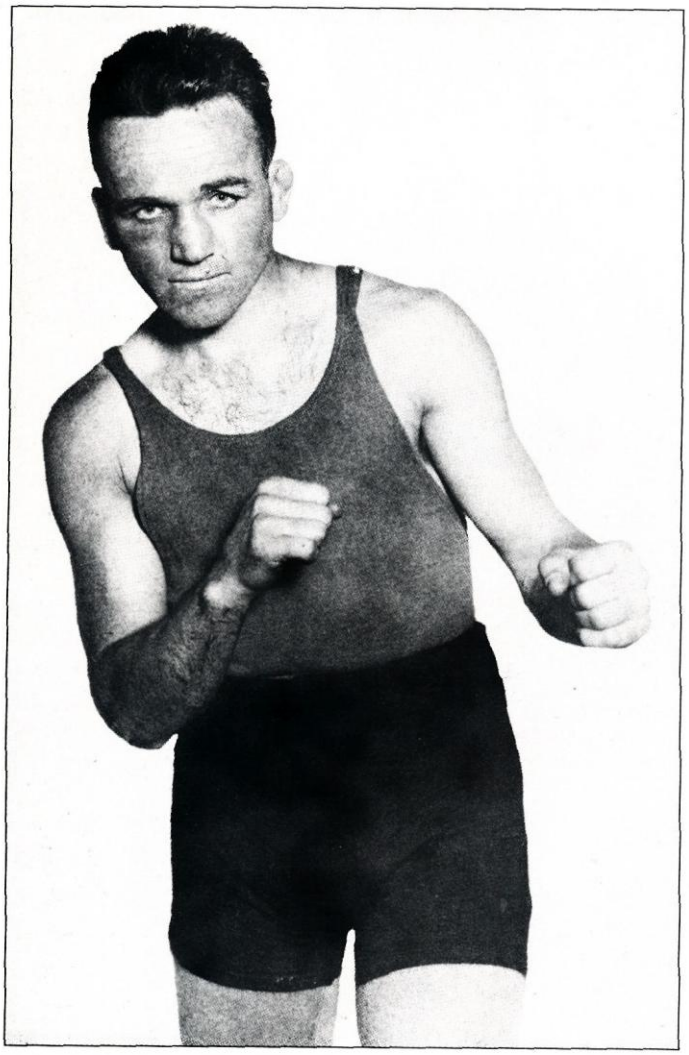
A headline in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* on October 11, 1908, proclaimed the 18-year-old "Milwaukee's Most Promising Scrapper," and the story said "that indefinable thing called 'class' sticks out all over him. He is cool under fire, never wastes an effort, and carries himself in every way like a champion."

Clabby's slickness was buffed to an even greater brilliance out of necessity when he went to New Orleans just a month later and earned a 20-round draw against Jimmy Gardner for the welterweight championship. According to the challenger's manager, Frank Mulkern, when Clabby and Gardner tumbled out of the ring in the 17th round, Clabby's right shoulder went out for good, forcing him to develop "one of the snappiest left hands in boxing history."

Mike Gibbons tasted defeat for the very first time as a pro in his 1909 match with Clabby, but the boxing lesson he got then helped make Gibbons the "St. Paul Phantom" of later renown.

"I really learned about boxing from Jimmy," said Gibbons. "He was a wonderful boxer with a talent for rolling his head away from punches that gave me several good ideas for future fights. He was best at infighting."

Clabby's original claim to the welterweight title was based on his defeat of the Dixie Kid in New York City on May 5, 1910. He totally dominated the recognized titlist over 10 rounds, but since it was officially a no-decision fight and the Kid was a late substitute for Mike "Twin" Sullivan, Clabby's self-anointment is open to question.



Future Hall of Famer Mike Gibbons (pictured) was given a boxing lesson by Clabby when they fought in 1909. The previously undefeated Gibbons said Clabby was "a wonderful boxer with a talent for rolling his head away from punches that gave me several good ideas for future fights."

But Australia went along when Clabby made the first of several tours Down Under later that year. Probably no American fighter was more popular with Aussie fans than Clabby. In fact, "champion" hardly begins to describe how Clabby was regarded in the Antipodes. "God" is more like it. According to a newspaper account, Clabby's mere appearance on Sydney streets created "blockades of traffic," and "when Jimmy goes for a stroll, proud mothers hold their children up to the windows to see the conquering hero."

Back home it was a different story, even after his points defeat of Eddie McGoorty in 1913 for a slice of the middleweight title. Clabby's subsequent arrival in Los Angeles aroused only yawning indifference.

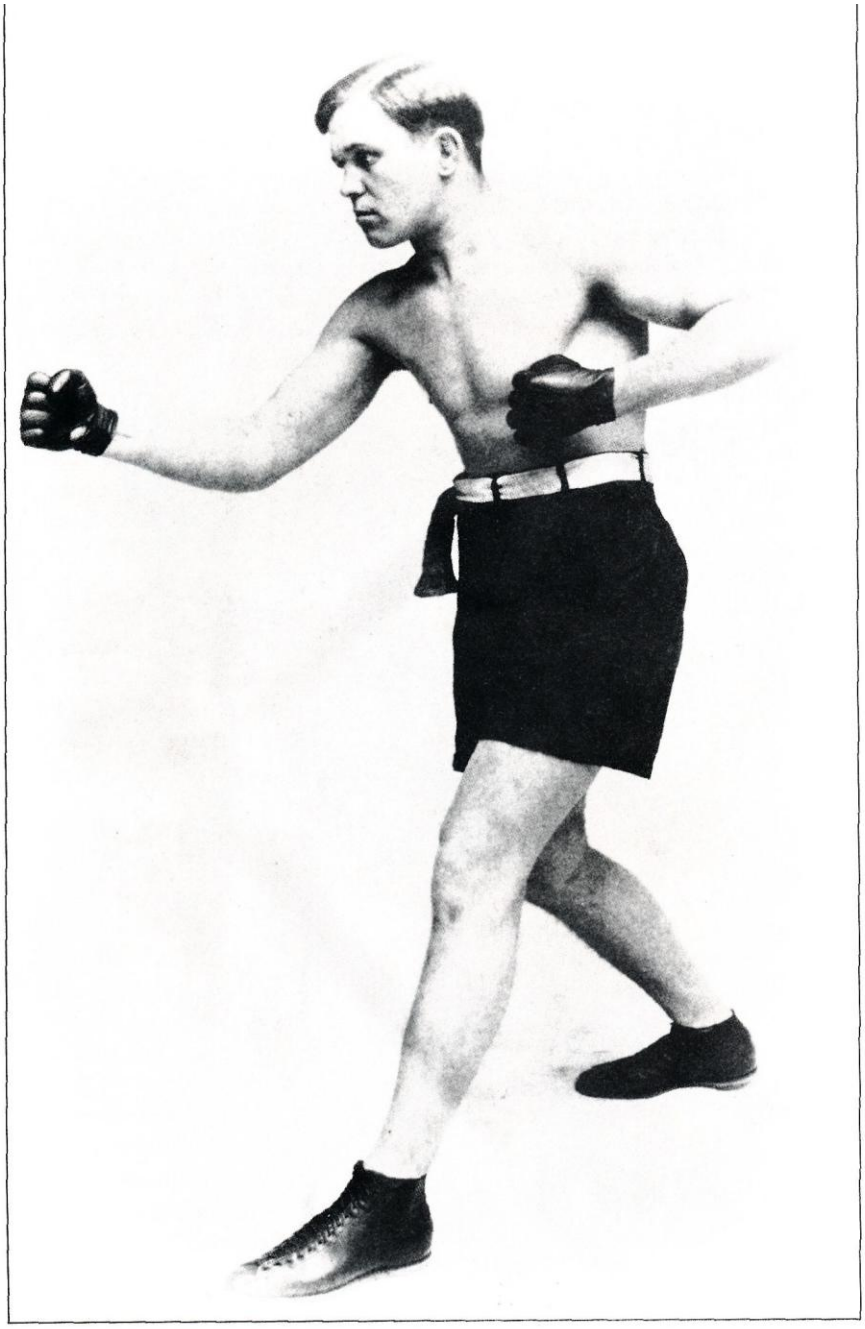
That's when it was seriously recommended—by Harry Foley, manager of lightweight champion Willie Ritchie—that Clabby climb down off his white horse and start pissing people off.

"The trouble with you, Jimmy," Foley told him, "is that you have too many boosters to be a real money-getter. Every man you meet is telling what a great fighter you are. There are no knockers, nobody to say that you are a bum in the ring."

Foley cited the cases of ex-lightweight champions Jimmy Britt and Battling Nelson, whose "enemies," he said, made up a large percentage of the crowds at their fights, hoping to see them go down to defeat.

"Go and make some enemies," counseled Foley. "If you will only do or say something to make enemies, you will soon be getting more money than you do and fill the arenas whenever you fight."

While calling Foley's advice "sound enough from a business standpoint," the notion of Clabby making enemies drew a snort from the *Milwaukee Journal*. "He is too good-natured and consid-



In 1914, Clabby beat George Chip (pictured) for a version of the middleweight title in San Francisco. Just like today, back in the early part of the 20th century many titles were split. Earlier in his career, Clabby also claimed a piece of the welterweight title.

erate for anything like that," said the paper.

But on January 28, 1914, genial Jimmy turned over a new leaf. In fact, he uprooted the whole damned tree when he got loaded and then beat up a Los Angeles policeman in a street brawl. According to press accounts, Officer C.E. Laurence suffered a broken jaw and/or a severe concussion.

Enemies wearing blue uniforms and guns weren't the kind that Foley had in mind, and after paying a $1,000 fine and signing a pledge to "not touch booze, engage in verbal controversy, or visit any place where he may be tempted to fall off the water wagon" for the next three years, Clabby lammed out for Australia. In Sydney, he beat McGoorty on a foul, and he won the Aussie middleweight, light heavyweight, and heavyweight titles in one fell swoop by clocking Dave Smith just a minute into their scheduled 20-rounder.

Upon his return stateside that fall, Clabby beat George Chip in 20 rounds for promoter Jim Coffroth's middleweight championship belt, and returned to his boyhood home of Hammond, where a lavish testimonial dinner welcomed home the prodigal son. Soon, there was even talk of running him for mayor.

But Clabby preferred money, lots of it, and explained why in a letter that was widely published in early-1915, which offers a poignant, revealing look at the life of a prize fighter of that era. In it, Clabby wondered, "How many people stop to think what it means to become a champion? There's the ridicule from promoters, the joshes from your friends, and, worst of all, the extreme disfavor with which your 'prize fighting foolishness' is always regarded by the folks at home. If you told Father that you were going to another city for a $7 clerkship, he'd give you the carfare and his blessing. If you told him you wanted to go to the same place to become a fighter, he'd give you something else.

"You have to get to the scene of your initial battle the best way you can, moneyless, friendless, almost an outcast. You have to start by sweeping out a gymnasium or letting 'a real fighter' make a chopping block out of you. You eat and sleep where you can, but mostly you can't.

"After months of poverty, ridicule, and discouragement, you get started, and for a year or two your face is changed by other boxers and you get, now and then, enough real money to really keep you."

In his case, the best place for that was Australia, and Clabby spent the next five years there, collecting national titles, and in New Zealand, losing twice to homegrown idol Les Darcy.

But fighting was no longer his main interest. What Clabby liked more than anything was spending time at the track, laying down bets on the horses. Pretty soon, he liked it as much as he liked breathing and eating.

"He'd walk out on a fight if he heard the sound of hoof beats," Frank Mulkern said. Milwaukee middleweight Gus Christie traveled to Sydney for a fight, and when he got off the boat, there was Clabby to welcome him Down Under with

the words, "I've got a hot tip on a horse."

"I had never bet on a horse race," Christie recalled, "but I took Jimmy's hot tip and plunked down about $90 on a horse named Miss Nonie. Clabby put a pile of his own dough on the same mule. We lost."

Clabby's bad judgment at the track spilled over into other areas of his life. He got engaged to the daughter of the country's wealthiest bookmaker, but left her standing at the altar on their wedding day.

By Mulkern's account, Clabby earned about $400,000 as a fighter, but by 1922 it had all ridden away in a cloud of dust.

That year Clabby was given $5,000 from fans who agreed with Aussie boxing writer W. Corbett's pronouncement that "No braver fighter ever lived than Jimmy Clabby. He can live here the rest of his natural days, respected and honored."

But that would've made too much sense. Instead, Clabby departed for home, and announced upon his arrival that he was going after the middleweight title. Now, of course, he was old and as slow as some of the nags he'd supported, and fighters who would've been chased out of the ring by him a decade earlier beat him up. Clabby finally quit when Morrie Schlaifer knocked him out in 1923.

In 1930, when Clabby returned to the city where he'd started fighting, he was no longer fit to "walk in anybody's parlor and get away with it." Broke and disheveled, he got a job on the Milwaukee docks. Then he discovered a bank account in which he'd left a couple dollars when he left town years before. Thanks to accrued interest, the amount had grown to $13. Clabby grabbed it and disappeared.

In November 1931, newspapers reported that he had burned to death in a hotel for transients in New York City. It turned out to be a case of mistaken identity. Death finally dialed the right number on January 20, 1934. Just 44, Clabby died in a shack in Calumet City, Indiana. Exposure and starvation were the official causes, but some columnists of the sob-sister genre pointed the finger at boxing, as if Clabby was another victim chewed up and spit out by the most pitiless of sports.

They were nuts, of course. The tragedy of Jimmy Clabby was that of a man inherently incapable of offending anyone, except for a cop here and a fiancee there. ■

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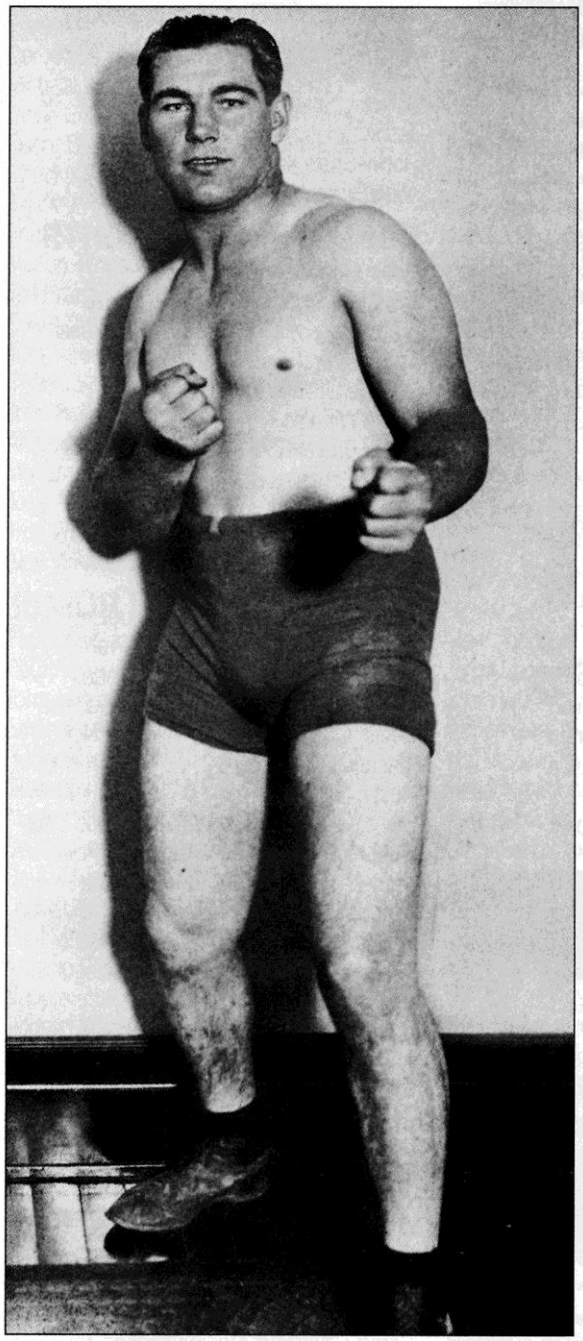
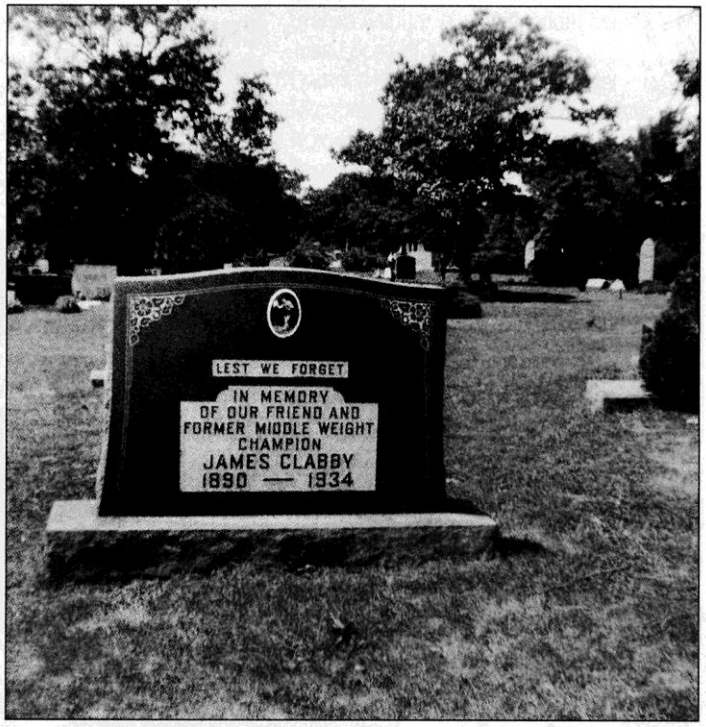


Clabby engaged in several lengthy Australian campaigns and was very popular Down Under. But he could never quite get past local hero and future Hall of Famer Les Darcy (pictured), who won a pair of 20-round decisions over the American.



Although Clabby was broke when he died in 1934, Hammond, Indiana, resident Charley Rhode raised the money for this marker in 1944 by collecting donations from fans. The fighter's grave is located in nearby Highland, Indiana.