

Boxing Ringside With Bobby Franklin

Dempsey Vs. Firpo A Fight That Has Gained Mythic Proportions Was It Really That Great?



Jack Dempsey won the Heavyweight Championship of the World in 1919 from Jess Willard in a fight that is remembered for the brutality of Jack's attack on the much bigger champion. The images from the first round are what are etched in most people's minds when they think of the fight. Jess was dropped seven times in the opening stanza and was saved by the bell.

What is often overlooked is the fact that the champion wasn't floored again during the two more rounds the fight lasted. In fact, while still taking some awful blows, Jess fought back gamely. His seconds called the fight off before the bell rang for the fourth round. At that point Willard's face was pretty busted up, but he was still very conscious and walked across the ring unaided to offer his congratulations to the new champion.

Dempsey took on an aura of invincibility as the public got to see film of the fight and read the newspaper accounts. Unfortunately, the new champion was also dogged by allegations that he had dodged the draft to avoid fighting in WWI. This created an environment where people were drawn to seeing Dempsey for the excitement he generated in the ring, while at the same time a great many wanted to see him defeated.

Jack would wait a year before defending the title. His first opponent was Billy Miske who had given him two tough fights before Dempsey was champion. Jack kayoed Billy this time. (It has been documented that Miske was suffering from Bright's disease and was just a shadow of the fighter who fought Dempsey years earlier.)

Next up was another former opponent, Bill Brennan. Dempsey had knocked out Brennan in 1918 and stopped him again, this time in the 12th round at Madison

Square Garden. The fight drew 13,000 fans and promoter Tex Rickard lost money on the promotion. The Miske fight had drawn just over 11,000 people. Dempsey wasn't exactly setting the world on fire.

Promoter Rickard came up with a way to successfully market a Dempsey title fight. Since many saw Jack as the bad guy because of the scandal around his draft avoidance, Tex decided to match him with the French war hero Georges Carpentier. Though it turned out Georges was no match for the vicious punching champion, the fight drew over 90,000 fans and a gate of \$1,789,000. It was a huge success, and suddenly Dempsey was a major attraction.

Jack would not fight again for two years. Unfortunately, instead of following up with another fight in a major city, Dempsey's manager made a deal for a fight against Tommy Gibbons to take place in Shelby, Montana. The town would finance the fight which turned out to be a huge flop. Dempsey received his purse of \$300,000, but Gibbons, who dropped a fifteen round decision, went unpaid, and the town went broke.

Dempsey now returned to New York and signed to fight Luis Angel Firpo who was known as the Wild Bull of the Pampas. Firpo, from Argentina, had earned a shot by kayoing Jess Willard who had been on the comeback trail hoping for a rematch with Dempsey. Firpo ended that quest when he dropped Jess for the count in the eighth round.



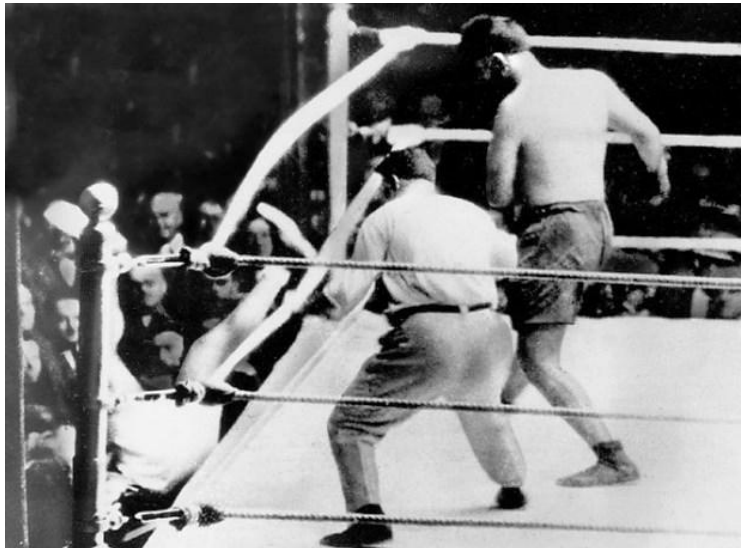
The Dempsey vs. Firpo fight was scheduled to take place at the Polo Grounds in New York on September 14, 1923. It is a fight that has gone down in boxing history as one of the most exciting heavyweight title bouts ever to take place. But how great a fight was it?

Firpo weighed in at 216 pounds to Dempsey's 192. The Argentine at 6'2 1/2" was also taller than the champion. While not nearly as big as Jess Willard, Luis would be the biggest man Jack had faced since the day he won the title.

The fight drew a crowd of 80,000 and a gate of \$1.25 million. Fans expected fireworks, and that is what they got from the opening bell as Dempsey came out

looking to end things early. The overeager champion stormed across the ring and was all over the challenger. In his zeal to score a quick knockout the champ was caught with a right hand that briefly dropped him to one knee. That did not slow him down and he came right back and floored Firpo. Luis arose and went right back at Dempsey, only to be decked again. Firpo went down a third time and then a fourth time where he just beat the count. Jack dropped him again, and amazingly, Firpo got up again. The challenger was shaky but still managed to hit the champion hard enough that Jack's glove touched the canvas for what could be counted as a knockdown.

While Firpo was wild and solely focused on trying to land his right hand, Dempsey was being methodical and landing very short but hard body punches which were already taking a toll on the challenger. Firpo was down two more times for a total of seven trips to the canvas, and the first round still wasn't over.



It was then that something happened that would turn this one sided bout into an event that would go down in the history books. Firpo, completely desperate was almost exclusively throwing right hands in the hope of getting one in and pulling out the win. He was lunging and as Dempsey was backed up against the ropes Firpo landed a right hand on Jack's cheek. The

punch was hard but also more of a push. As it connected Firpo followed through with his body weight and Dempsey went flying out of the ring. He landed on a sportswriter's typewriter.

The crowd was stunned. Jack made it back into the ring though there was some question of whether or not he did so under his own power or was helped by those at ringside. If he was aided he could have been disqualified. The fight continued and the two men traded punches as the round came to an end.

In the second round it was all Dempsey. The champion battered Firpo, dropping him twice, the second time for the full count. The fight was officially over at just

57 seconds of the second round. The entire bout had not even gone four minutes but the crowd was not disappointed.

Was it a great fight? Yes and no. It was actually a one sided affair, with Dempsey dominating for all but a short time. Firpo was wild and unorthodox and not nearly as skilled as the champion. However, in boxing anything can happen and did. While the punch that landed on Jack was not a particularly hard one or even that accurate, the force of Firpo's weight behind it and Jack's proximity to the ropes caused it to send him flying out of the ring. That was the dramatic moment that would never be forgotten.

It was clear Dempsey wasn't hurt by the blow, and he quickly regained control of the fight, but seeing the champion go sailing through the air seemed surreal to people.

I would not call it a great fight. I *would* call it a great event. It was surely unforgettable and very dramatic. It's been talked about for decades. It even became the subject of a famous painting by the artist George Bellows. Luis Firpo became a national hero in his native Argentina, and his name has forever been linked with Dempsey's.



Would this have happened if Dempsey had not been knocked through the ropes? No. If the fight had gone on as it was going without that happening it would have gone down as a one sided victory for Jack. But that one moment when it appeared the underdog had pulled it out and, in very dramatic fashion, made it into a classic. And, I would add, deservedly so.