

1920s HEAVYWEIGHT

K.O. CHRISTNER

He Played Catcher To Jack Dempsey And Babe Ruth

By Pete Ehrmann

By the time he was 32 years old, before he laced on his first pair of boxing gloves, Meyers Wilson Christner had already lived the kind of colorful, swashbuckling existence plenty of men would be content to spend the rest of their lives reviewing from the comfort of their favorite bar stool.

Had they known what Christner would put them through, promoter Tex Rickard and a bunch of corporate fat cats might've even set up a permanent tab for the man who threw a monkey wrench into Wall Street's plan to take over the heavyweight championship in 1928. Actually, tire iron is more appropriate than monkey wrench, as Christner's right fist hit like one, and the power behind it was developed in the mills of Akron, Ohio, where the Goodyear and Firestone companies manufactured the automobile tires that kept America rolling.

"His strength was developed by working in the difficult Goodyear and

Firestone 'pits,' an area of extreme heat where cured tires were removed from their molds," recounted Rev. David A. Christner, grandson of the long-ago heavyweight contender, and the Christner family historian. "The mold sealed in tire curing. The seal was broken by hand, using a large pry bar and brute strength."

Brute strength and that right hand earned K.O. Christner his nickname and changed the course of heavyweight history 76 years ago, much like the hitting prowess of Christner's old friend and battery mate, Babe Ruth, did in baseball.

They met when they were 12 years old and inmates of St. Mary's Industrial School in Baltimore. Christner was sent there by his father after getting Meyers to show up at public school proved too much for his parents. At St. Mary's, George Herman Ruth was the ace of the 3rd Dormitory baseball team, and Christner was his catcher. Later, Christner himself would play some semi-pro baseball.

But first he enlisted in the U.S.

Army. While stationed with the 37th Infantry outside of San Antonio, Texas, Christner helped General John J. Pershing futilely chase after Pancho Villa, the famous Mexican revolutionary who had raided several American border towns. Upon his discharge from service, Christner settled in his native Pennsylvania and worked in the coalmines until he relocated to Akron and started breaking tire seals.

At the behest of the Ohio State Labor Department, the Goodyear plant employed a lot of mute workers, and in 1915 the company sponsored its own semi-pro football team comprised of players who could neither speak nor hear. The Goodyear Silents became a gridiron powerhouse, and in 1922, after the financially strapped company ended its sponsorship, the team continued independently and beefed up its front line by surreptitiously recruiting a few players who could hear and talk, including the 6-foot-tall, 200-pound Christner.

These ringers were under strict

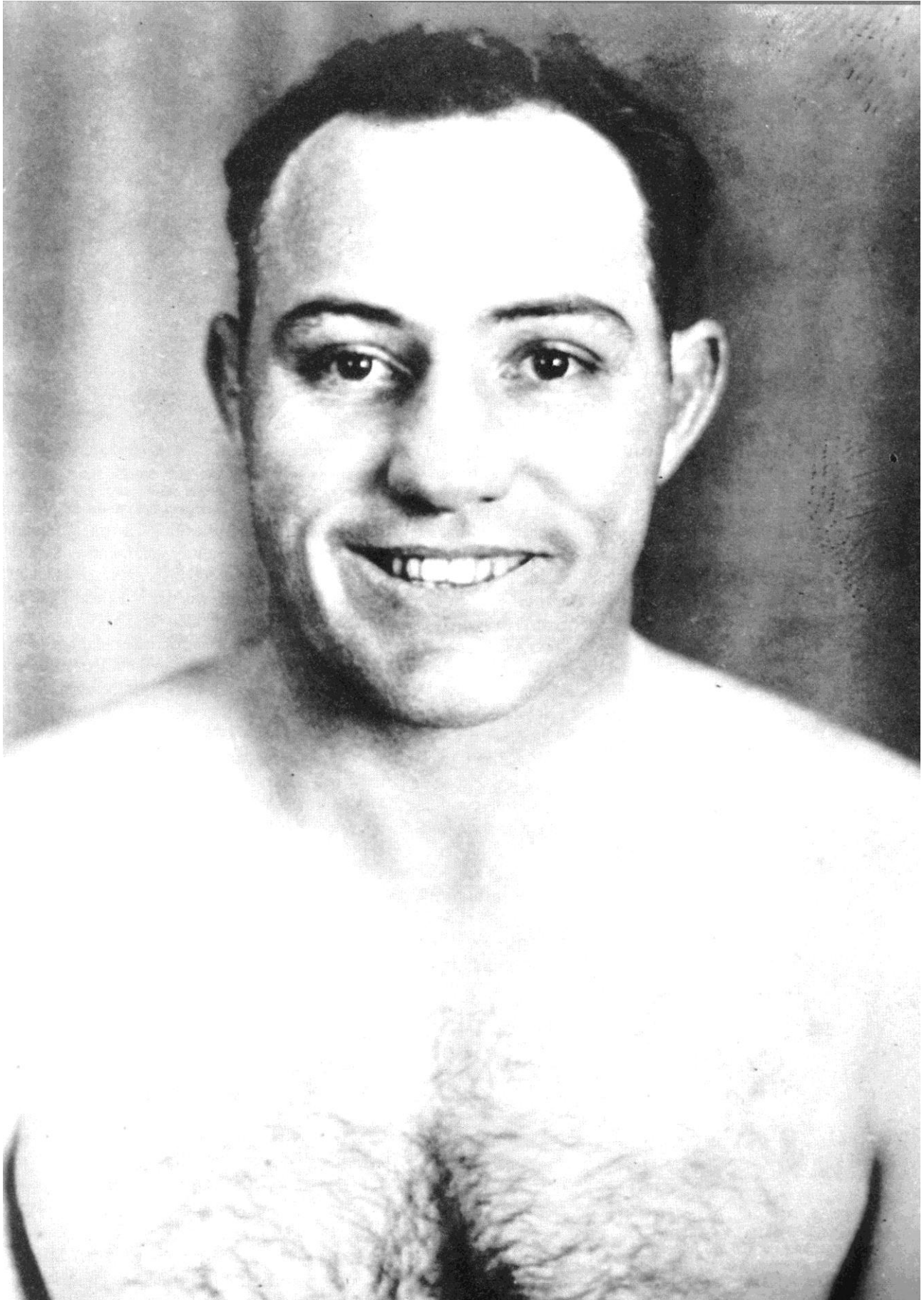
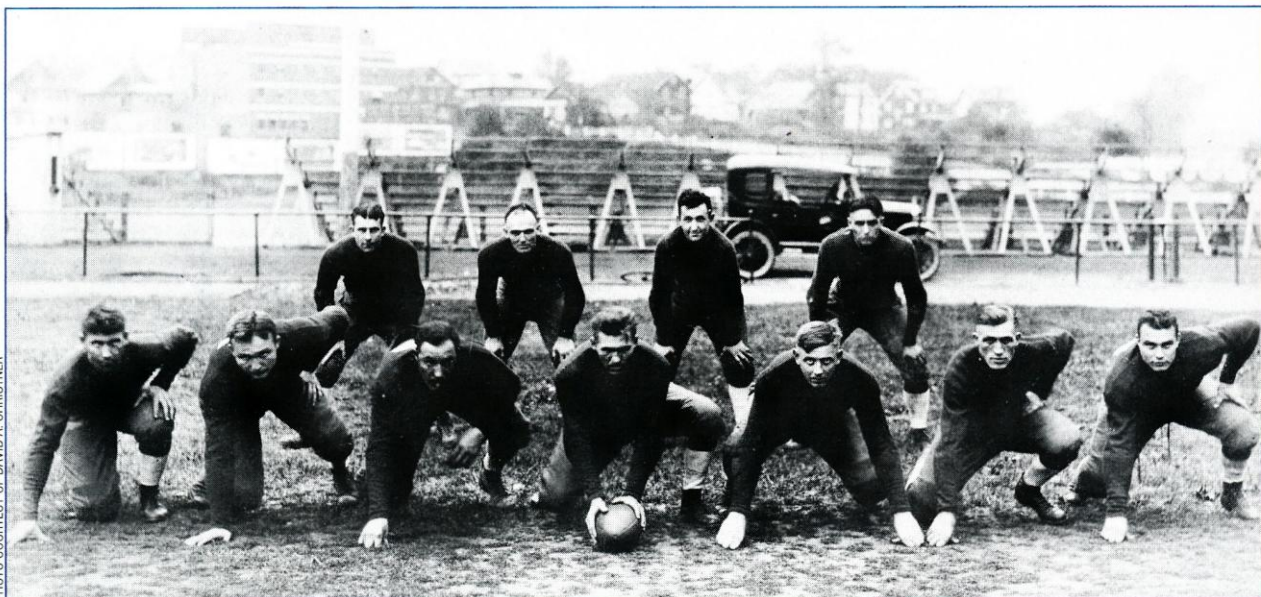


PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID A. CHRISTNER



Christner (front row, third from left) played football for the Goodyear Silents, a semi-pro team comprised of deaf mutes. When it was discovered that he could hear and speak, Christner took up boxing at the relatively old age of 32.

orders not to let on that they could speak and hear, and many an opposing team's quarterback ended up battered and frustrated by Christner's uncanny ability to break up plays as if he could almost hear the audibles that were called.

According to one newspaper account, Christner's career with the Silents ended when, "in one game, a former professional

heavyweight took offense at Christner's undue roughness and shook his fist under the 'mute's' large nozzle, yelling: 'You can't hear what I'm saying, you blankety-blank-blank, but you can understand what this fist means, you blankety-blank-blank!'"

Whereupon Christner indicated he did by breaking the fellow's jaw with one punch.

Firestone also held weekly smokers at its Akron clubhouse, and at one of them in 1926, Christner scored his first knockout in the ring after he and a co-worker with whom he'd argued in the factory pit were told to settle matters with the gloves on. Fighters in the company smokers got paid about \$50 per fight, and the smitten Christner put away 32 of the first 37 guys he faced, picked up his fighting nickname, and decided after disposing of one Bumbo Meyers that he was ready for bigger things.

Taking the train to Chicago the same night he shellacked Meyers, the balding 33-year-old showed up at the Lincoln Fields camp where Jack Dempsey was training to try to get his heavyweight title back from Gene Tunney, and announced that he had come to see what he could do in the ring with "The Mannasa Mauler."

"I puts him down for a nut," recalled Dempsey handler Gus Wilson later, "gives him some gloves, tells Dempsey to turn a few into him and we'll soon be rid of the guy. Jack belts him proper. He smacks him body and chin, and I notice that the guy keeps his mouth shut but the blood oozes

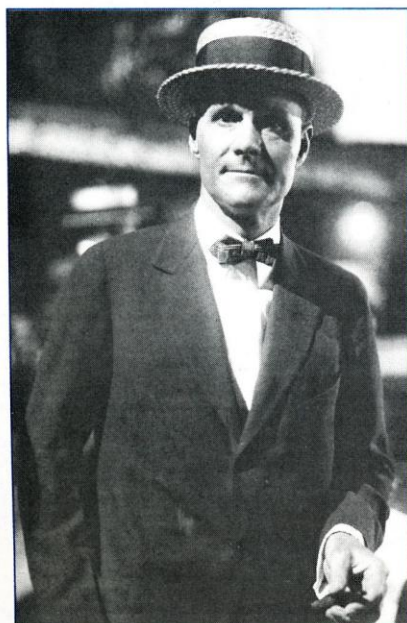
out of the corners of his mouth. I stops the affair and pries this Christner's mouth open. Believe it or not, Dempsey has driven some of the guy's lower teeth into the upper bridgework, and he can't get his mouth open himself."

Muted again, Christner returned home and picked up where he'd left off at the Firestone smokers. When he graduated to main events at the Akron Armory, knocking out Joe Burke in one round in his debut there, local sportswriter James Schlemmer wrote, "Christner showed himself to be just a powerful puncher with little semblance of boxing skill, but with a wallop that means death and destruction when it strikes."

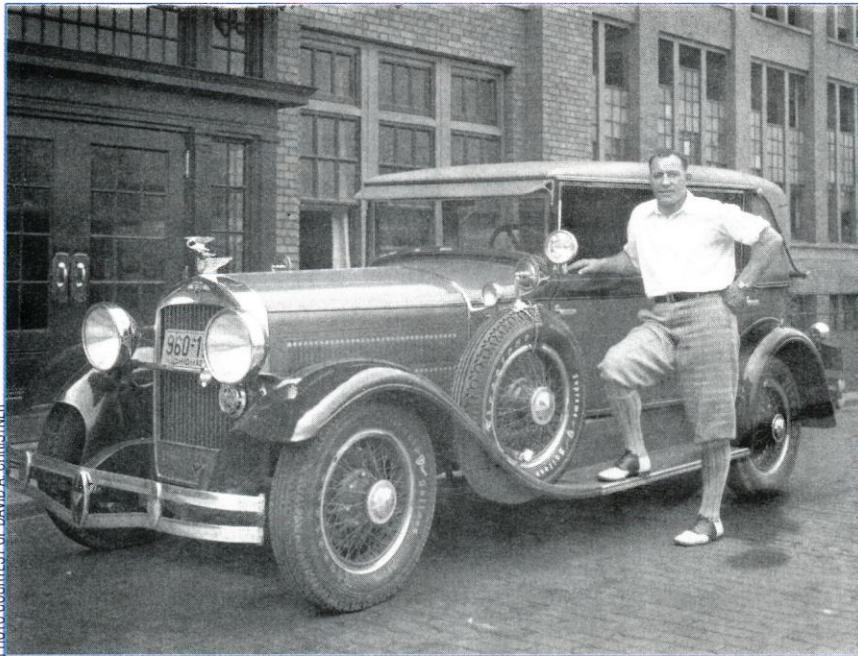
Christner relied so much on that ax-like right that often the hand was injured in the ring. When it happened in the second round against Sandy Seifert on April 26, 1928, Christner came back to his corner and said, "My right hand is gone. What will I do? I haven't got my right." Seifert not only lasted 10, but copped the newspaper decision.

That same year, Bud Gorman and Frankie Wine also easily outclassed the awkward Akronite, which made Christner just the man that Rickard and the big money gang in New York were looking for.

After Tunney relinquished the heavyweight championship on July 31, 1928, Rickard proclaimed that of all the candidates for the job, including Jack Sharkey, Young Stribling, and Johnny Risko, the



Tex Rickard (pictured) thought he'd found the perfect opponent for heavyweight prospect Knute Hansen in Christner, but the promoter and his Wall Street backers who had invested in Hansen were to be sorely disappointed in what materialized inside the ring.



Christner poses with his new car outside of the Firestone Tire Company in Akron, Ohio, where he developed his strength and punching power. Unlike many fighters, Christner invested his money wisely and operated a bowling alley after his fighting days were over.

most likely to succeed was a 23-year-old handsome blonde named Knute Hansen. Born in Copenhagen, Denmark, Hansen grew up in Wisconsin and, after a couple fights in Milwaukee, worked his way to the Far East and Asia on tall-masted schooners, beat up some natives, and had a lot of exotic adventures that made good newspaper copy when he resumed his boxing career in New York.

Hansen could punch. He knocked out British champion Phil Scott in one round, and, according to Rickard, "all the other heavyweights are afraid of him."

Rickard wasn't Hansen's only friend in high places. Wall Street titans Sprulle Braden and Walter P. Chrysler, the auto tycoon, led a group of millionaires who'd invested in Hansen. Several of them were also stockholders in Madison Square Garden, Rickard's promotional bailiwick, which, as far as a lot of observers were concerned, accounted for Rickard's unusual enthusiasm for the big Dane. Rickard even induced Billy Gibson, who'd managed Tunney and retired from boxing when Tunney did, to un-retire and become the guiding force behind what *The New York Times* referred to, in the jargon of the stock market, as "Knute Hansen Pfd."

Rickard's self-serving and incessant

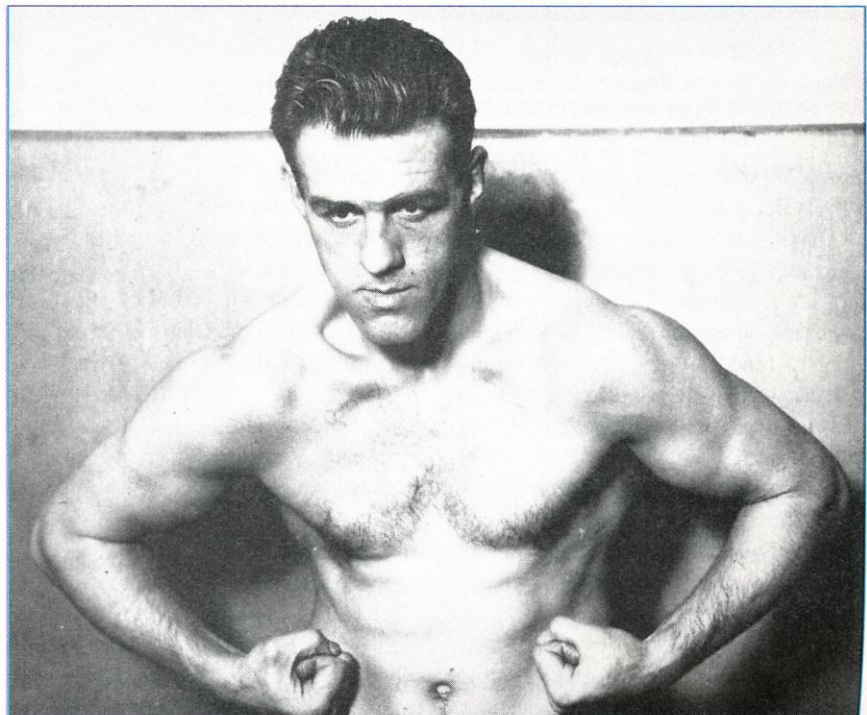
tub-thumping for Hansen raised eyebrows among veteran fight wags who'd dubbed Knute the "Melancholy Dane" after he performed indifferently in dropping decisions to Franz Deiner and Paulino Uzcudun before he blew away the easily-

blown-away Scott. They weren't swallowing Rickard's attempted coronation by press release, and the Hansen brain trust decided it would be best to open their new show off-Broadway, as it were, to work out any bugs.

When a Gibson confidante in Cleveland sent word about a 34-year-old "big, game, hard-hitting, awkward slowpoke," K.O. Christner got the call to serve as the initial sacrifice on Hansen's grand march to the throne.

"Wouldn't it be a laugh if some palooka, thrown in with Hansen in his first fight since he's come so thoroughly into the spotlight, should whack him on the chin and knock down the whole house of cards?" former lightweight champion Benny Leonard had asked in a syndicated newspaper column three months before 20-1 underdog Christner made him a prophet on December 4, 1928, by pounding Wall Street's blue-chipper into a virtual coma in eight rounds. It took Knute 15 minutes to relearn how to use his legs, and a little while longer for him to remember his own name.

Gibson went right back into retirement, Hansen's millionaire backers moved on to more reliable investments, and the suddenly famous Akron rubber man bounced into Madison Square Garden for his first fight



Christner's status as a heavyweight contender ended when he was stopped by Norwegian Otto Von Porat (pictured) in 1929. But Christner fought on for another six years, losing as many as he won.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID A. CHRISTNER

Christner and his wife, Elizabeth, are pictured years after Christner retired from the ring. Despite his many battles with the top heavyweights of his day, the former slugger lived to the ripe old age of 84.

outside of Ohio, facing Jack Sharkey on January 25, 1929.

Once again, on paper it looked like a bad career move for the Buckeye fighter. "Christner is nothing but a raw, crude, powerfully strong and willing swinger with little to recommend him but a strong physique and plenty of fighting courage as his principal assets," sniffed THE RING's Eddie Borden.

K.O. cheerfully concurred. "I can't box a lick," he said. "I'm a hitter if I'm anything. My best points are my strong constitution and a punch. You can see the constitution for yourself. As for my punch, ask the guys I hit."

To the astonishment and growing delight of the 20,000 Garden spectators, for five rounds Christner seemed on his way to another huge upset as he tore into

Sharkey, winging right hands at the future champion of the world. "You have just seen the blow that killed Hansen!" shouted a ringsider when one of them just missed its target right after the opening bell.

But the Ohioan faded in the second half of the fight, and at the end of what *The New York Times* called "a contest which set every man and woman present wild with excitement throughout its length," Sharkey received a majority decision that was greeted with lusty boos and catcalls from the crowd.

"This Christner is a man of granite," admired the *Times*' James P. Dawson, while John Kieran, the paper's sports columnist, wrote that "the fans would welcome another sight of [Christner] in the Garden ring. He's as tough as they come, and he carries a wild and wicked wallop."

Less than a month later, 20,000 Garden customers did welcome him back to fight Uzcudun, another granite man who used his superior experience to win a unanimous decision over Christner. A few months after that, on the undercard of the Uzcudun-Max Schmeling fight at Yankee Stadium, Christner suffered his first inside-the-distance loss when former Olympic champion Otto Von Porat stopped him in nine rounds. Christner rocked Von Porat several times, but ran out of gas. And title contention.

Over the next six years, he fought all over the U.S. The wins and losses came out pretty even. Christner beat Ernie Schaaf, George Panka, Emmett Rocco, and Leroy Haynes, among other lesser lights, but also lost to Schaaf, Young Stribling, Primo Carnera, Max Baer, King Levinsky, and Maxie Rosenbloom, among other lesser lights. He also lost by first-round knockout in 58 seconds to Mickey Walker, although Christner claimed that the ring ropes at the Chicago Coliseum had been loosened, and that after he fell through them trying to avoid Walker's opening rush, "two big men put their chairs on me" and pinned him down until the count was completed.

On February 12, 1932, Christner got Dempsey back in the ring, in an exhibition match in Cleveland. Christner had broken his right hand beating Bearcat Wright in Omaha not long before, but still managed to hammer the ex-champ pretty good with it before Jack put him down in the third. They were pals by then, and afterward Christner showed Dempsey how he used to make tires at the Firestone plant.

Unlike a lot of his contemporaries, Christner socked away his money, and after his retirement he operated a bowling alley in Maryland. When he died in 1979 at 84, his obituary credited him with "nearly 250 pro fights," although most available records come up well short of that figure, citing his record as 51-41-4 (29). The obituary also noted that he'd had 97 stitches over his left eye, 84 over the right, 46 in his mouth, and three broken noses.

They were testament to the courage that was immutable no matter who came out of the other corner, and was responsible for bringing the depression several months early to some Wall Street barons. ■

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