

Pep's wizardry is illustrated in photo at left as he hammers Saddler's face out of shape with an inside right to the jaw that snaked through Sandy's defense.

With one of the most dazzling displays of boxing skill ever seen in a prize ring, little Willie Pep regained the title he had lost to Sandy Saddler

THE

BY AL GOLDSTEIN
(Baltimore Sun Boxing Editor)

WILLIE PEP and Sandy Saddler fought four times for the featherweight championship in a private vendetta that threatened to last longer than the Hatfields and McCoys.

But people remember, and still talk about, only their second fight, the one in which incomparable boxing master Pep regained the title from his lanky tormentor with the most superb exhibition of boxing wizardry this writer has ever seen.

The night of February 11, 1949 in New York City was wet and cold. But nothing could chill the enthusiasm of the vast crowd that filed into Madison Square Garden. On everybody's mind was the same question; Could Willie do it?

The vast majority hoped he could, for Saddler hadn't exactly won any medals for popularity when he stopped Pep in four rounds on October 29, 1948 to win the crown. Explained one Saddler admirer: "Sandy doesn't do anything wrong. Can he help it if the other guy happens to shove his eyeball against Sandy's thumb? And can he help it if they run into the top of his head — or his knee?"

But whether you liked his

methods or not, Sandy Saddler was unquestionably one of the best fighters of his time, and one of the most accomplished featherweights of all time.

Saddler posed a dangerous problem to all he fought. Although he weighed only about 127 pounds — the featherweight limit — he towered five feet 9, and his reach was that of a middleweight, or even a light heavyweight.

Since people instinctively root for the underdog, Sandy, with all those physical advantages going for him, was always on the receiving end of the boos and jeers. And when he walloped long time idol Willie Pep in their first fight, Saddler's popularity hit an all time low. He was in the same position Gene Tunney found himself in when he licked Jack Dempsey in 1926. Shattering idols, even though it can bring rich rewards, also has its disadvantages, as Gene and Sandy can tell you.

Despite the convincingness of his victory in which he floored Pep three times before finishing him off with a tremendous left hook in the fourth round, Sandy had failed to make believers of Willie's army of worshippers. There was ever the faint, but certainly pres-

ent, hint that something was wrong in view of the abnormal fluctuation of betting odds before the first fight.

Determined to clear the air before the return match, New York Commissioner Eddie Eagan called the fighters into his private office immediately after the noon-time weighing-in. Said Eagan: "We get lots of rumors after every fight. They suggest a fix, a dive, the use of dope, all sorts of things. We don't believe any of them! I am sure that you are two honest athletes and I am holding you responsible for upholding the good name of boxing."

When Eagan's action broke in the afternoon papers, the betting odds leveled off and steadied for the first time since the match was originally made. Saddler was favored at 6-5. But at ringtime, Ten P.M., the price jumped to 7-5. The notion that the 26-year old Pep, four years Saddler's senior, had seen his best days, evidently outweighed the sentimental feeling that the first fight had been a fluke.

When they finally closed the Garden's doors, a standing-room-only throng of 19,097 had set a new gross receipts record for an

indoor featherweight fight, \$87,563, breaking the old record, which was set the night Pep won the title from Chalky Wright, also in the Garden.

Standing in mid-ring listening to the instructions from referee Eddie Josephs, the 5 feet 5½ Pep seemed sadly miscast in his giant-killer's role, while champion Saddler looked coldly confident. Sandy wore his usual look of disdain, apparently hoping to discourage his ring-wise opponent even before

the fight got under way.

One reporter, while interviewing Saddler at his training camp, asked him why he looked so glum every time he went into the ring. "You look like you lost your best friend," the reporter said. "Are you unhappy?"

"I dunno," the fighter answered. "I guess I'm just evil."

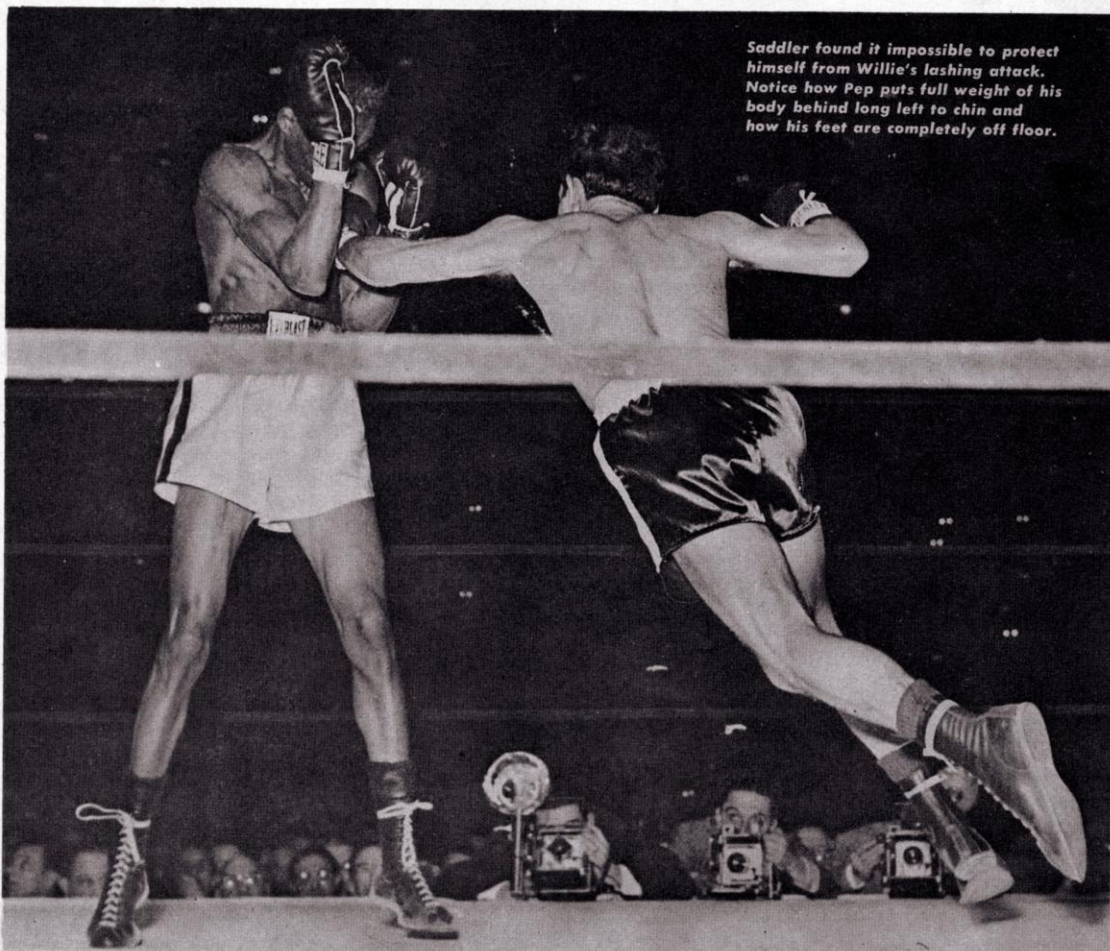
Pep, however, was unruffled by Saddler's pre-fight theatrics. From the opening bell he carried the fight to his stronger rival.

Time after time, graceful Willie landed five or six jabs in a stinging staccato on Saddler's face and then quickly darted out of danger before his confused foe could retaliate.

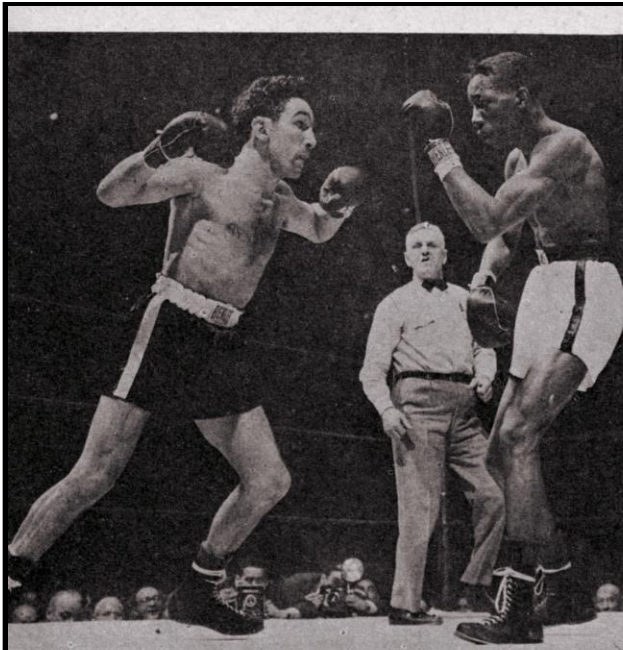
The fight took on a definite pattern in the opening round. Pep would start off fast, scoring repeatedly with lightning jabs and deft counter-punches. Saddler would then recover and take the play away in the middle of the round with a body assault. But the

GREATEST FIGHT I EVER SAW

Madison Square Garden, N. Y. — February 11, 1949



Saddler found it impossible to protect himself from Willie's lashing attack. Notice how Pep puts full weight of his body behind long left to chin and how his feet are completely off floor.



Pep, left, appears to make a wide open target as he darts in at the champion. But so dazzling fast were his moves that Saddler couldn't take advantage of the openings.

crafty Pep would delight the gallery — and sway the judges — with a beautiful boxing display as the round drew to a close.

Saddler was always the pursuer, never taking a backward step as he measured his elusive target with unblinking eyes. One writer at ringside likened the champion to a praying mantis swooping down on his prey.

Sandy tried to slow down the perpetual-motion Pep by beating away at his body. But Willie had learned his lesson from the first fight. Whenever they fell into a clinch, Pep would cling to Saddler's left hand until the referee ordered them to break.

Relying on his dazzling footwork, wily Willie made Saddler miss repeatedly and startled the crowd by staggering the champion with a stunning right cross in the fifth.

But Pep couldn't keep completely out of harm's way. In the third round, one of Saddler's whip-lash lefts caught Willie under the right eye and opened a deep gash. By the tenth round, Pep was sporting an elephant-sized mouse under the eye. The blood-letting continued throughout the fight and, on the surface, Pep seemed to be getting much the worse of it.

Saddler slashed Willie's left cheek in the fifth and the wound bled freely through the rest of the battle. Again, in the thirteenth, Saddler connected solidly with a left that imprinted a deep red smear over Pep's right eye.

By the end of the fight, Sandy had dug a large foxhole in Pep's features, making Willie appear a badly beaten loser. Sandy himself sported slight cuts over both his eyes as a result of Pep's persistent jabs, but he remained unperturbed in his relentless pursuit of his perky tormentor.

As the battle progressed into

the last five rounds, it was fairly obvious that Saddler would have to score a knockout to win. Pep had built up an insurmountable lead with his staccato-like lefts and crisp counters.

Still, Saddler came close to repeating his earlier victory in the last two rounds when he landed his best punches. But Pep, evidently in better physical condition than in the first meeting, survived the desperate assaults and was still dancing around like a miniature Fred Astaire when the final bell sounded.

After the long wait as the officials added up their scorecards, ring announcer Johnny Addie stepped to the center of the ring and became the object of over 19,000 pair of eyes in the smoke-filled arena.

A wild demonstration by Pep's boisterous legion of fans greeted the unanimous decision in favor of their hero. Referee Eddie Josephs gave Willie the most decisive margin, awarding him 10 of the 15 rounds. Judge Jack O'Sullivan registered a 9-6 vote, while Frank Forbes called it 9-5-1.

It was the shining hour of a remarkable career which spanned more than 200 bouts. And not even the fact that Pep was to lose a pair of succeeding fights to this same Sandy Saddler could dim its lustre

You can have your Marcianos, Grazianos, Louis', Dempseys and all the rest. When it comes to real class, give me little Willie Pep the night he made a monkey out of Sandy Saddler. ●

His face cut and badly swollen, Pep is declared the winner and once again feather-weight champion of the world.

