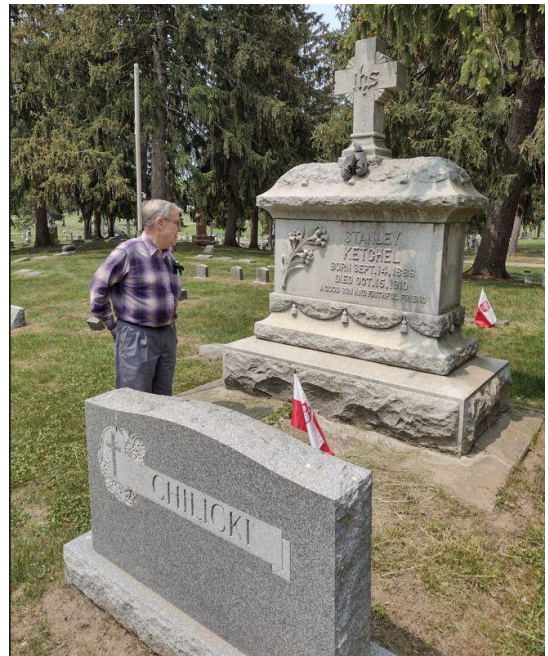


# STANLEY'S LITTLE HELPER?

By Bruce Kielty

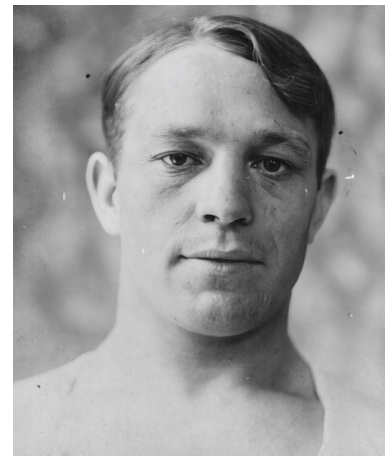
When I was transferred in 1975 by my then-employer Westinghouse Electric to assist a growing division of the company in Grand Rapids, Michigan, I knew a total of two things about the city. First, it was the hometown of the legendary Middleweight Champion Stanley Ketchel and that of the massive heavyweight contender of the late 1960's and early 1970's Big Buster Mathis. The latter became my business partner in a long-running boxing gym and the former captivated my interest by his larger-than-life stature.

Of course, my first order of business was to see Ketchel's impressive gravesite in the local Polish cemetery. For a man who was among the living for only 24 years, his gravesite monument casts a towering presence on a prominent hillside of Holy Cross Cemetery. It has often been reported that Ketchel's funeral procession in 1910 was the largest in Grand Rapids history until that of native son President Gerald R. Ford in 2006. **(Photo – IBRO Member Mitch Levin visits Ketchel's grave)**



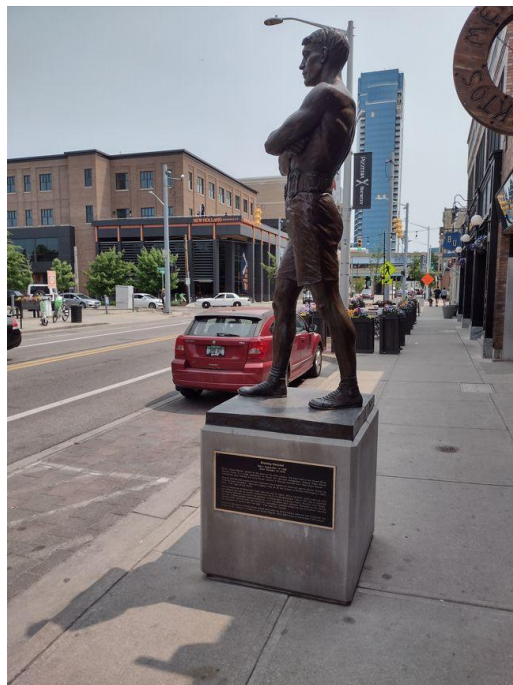
There is a local joke that in Jerry Ford's case, the construction of an impressive library in his honor was perhaps unwarranted. After all, he was never actually elected President, assuming the position only after the resignation of his boss Richard Nixon who he later pardoned. Some joked that perhaps a Ford bookmobile might have been more appropriate. Nevertheless, Ford was well-liked by both Democrats and Republicans in this area and that is saying something.

On the other hand, the legend of ill-fated Stanley Ketchel has passed the test of time. When Ketchel became recognized as the undisputed Middleweight Champion of the World in May 1908 with a 20<sup>th</sup> round knockout of Jack "Twin" Sullivan, he shared the stage with Heavyweight Champion Tommy Burns, Light-Heavyweight Champion Philadelphia Jack O'Brien, Welterweight Champion Harry Lewis, Lightweight Champion Joe Gans, Featherweight Champion Abe Attell and Bantamweight Champion Owen Martin. Although Gans and Attell are still recognized as true greats,



it can arguably be said that Stanley Ketchel exceeds their notoriety for his sheer power, fierceness and stamina. His out-of-the-ring shenanigans also add to his cult-like aura as a world-class partier and womanizer.

Approximately 25 years ago, I contacted Grand Rapids' City Historian Gordon Olson and asked him why a statute was never dedicated to Ketchel when his reputation has an international acclaim that has resulted in at least 7 published biographies from 1946 to as recently as 2021. Gordon said simply, "Grand Rapids is a conservative family-oriented city and Stanley's hell-raising reputation will NEVER be honored with a statue." Gordon's statement held true for many years until local industrialist Peter Secchia commissioned renowned Boston sculptor Ann Hirsch to create a 12 foot monument in 2015. It was appropriate that it was erected on the sidewalk directly in front of the many rowdy West Side bars that Stanley would surely have patronized with great gusto.



One of the most telling decisions by Ketchel was when he enlisted the "services" of (in)famous playwright/con man/hustler/playboy Wilson Mizner as his personal advisor. From all accounts, they were soulmates.

In the 1975 biography of Wilson Mizner entitled "Rogue's Progress: The Fabulous Adventures of Wilson Mizner," the author John Burke recounts an often-told account of one such "adventure."

Mizner claimed that Stanley disappeared on the eve of a scheduled bout in Johnstown, PA. Wilson frantically searched for his charge in all of the area bars and whorehouses without success. Eventually, he located Stanley in a hotel room, sharing a bed with a blonde, brunette and a smoldering opium pipe. When Mizner was quizzed by reporters as to how he handled the situation, everyone was stunned.

Did he destroy the opium pipe and throw the girls out of the room? No, Mizner started undressing himself! "What the hell could I do?" I said "Move over."

Is Mizner's tale on the money or did the famed raconteur fabricate it for publicity purposes? We will never know but there is no record of Ketchel ever boxing in Johnstown, PA. Like much of Ketchel's life, it is shrouded in mystery and myth. In fact, there is even a question if Ketchel was actually a Ketchel.

It is a matter of record that the court transcripts from the Walter Dibley murder trial reveal that Dibley's defense team claimed that prominent Grand Rapids businessman Colonel Pete Dickerson had actually fathered Ketchel. It was on Dickerson's Missouri ranch that Stanley was shot to death by Dibley, who claimed self-defense.

This brings us to the point of this brief treatise. How could a man reputed to be an incorrigible womanizer, drinker and drug partaker have the stamina for which he is renowned? Was it strictly because he was still in his early 20's? Here is a possible explanation.

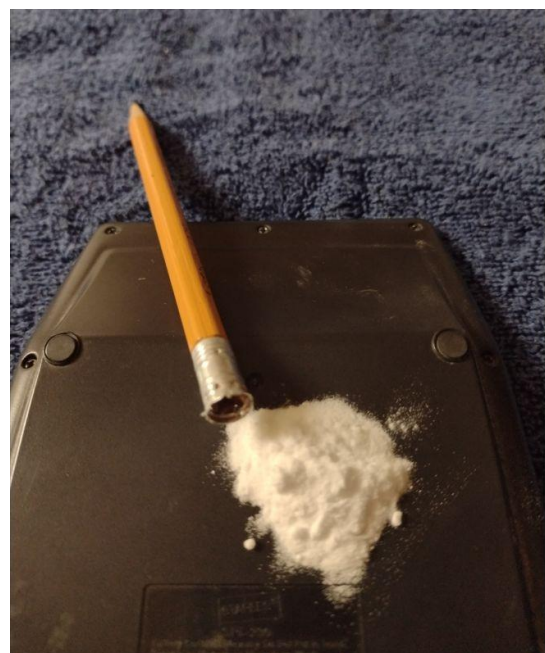
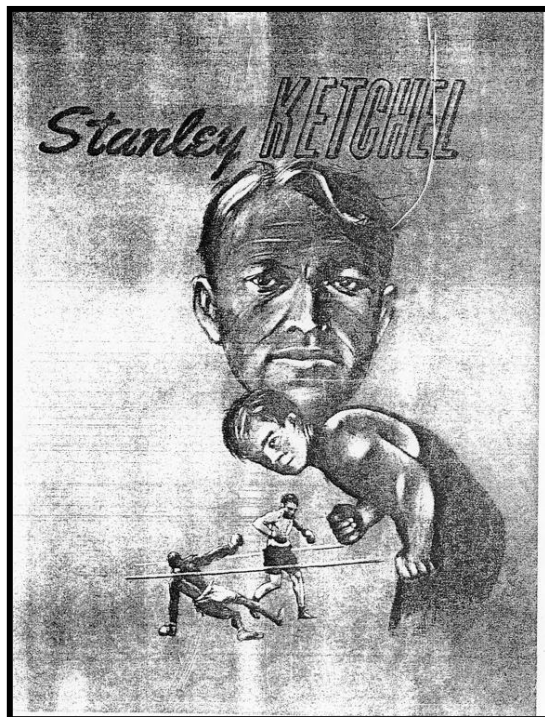
In April 2023, respected Chicago-based fight film collector Mitch Levin loaned me about 200 pages of newspaper and magazine articles regarding Stanley Ketchel. He had received them from a Ketchel devotee in Croatia, proving that dear Stanley has a wide-ranging fan base.

***(Stanley Ketchel Collection)***

Approximately nine months after Ketchel was shot to death by Walter Dibley, a former California boxing trainer by the name of Joseph Leroy was arrested in Los Angeles for cocaine possession. He was only 35, yet years of personal cocaine use had taken a toll on his health. However, it is what he shared in court that startled the police and judge. He went into detail about cocaine and boxers he had allegedly trained, including Stanley Ketchel. The Los Angeles Times picked up the story and this is the gist of Leroy's testimony:

"Some fighters were no good at all without cocaine," Leroy said. "Stanley Ketchel was like that. I never could make him fight well until he had been given a little dope."

According to the L.A. Times, Leroy explained how he was able to have enough cocaine on hand, regardless of the stringency of the law. Leroy claimed that he would place the cocaine powder under the rubber eraser of a standard pencil. Before a fighter would enter the ring, Leroy would remove the eraser and place the end of the pencil into the boxer's nostril



for a snort. Leroy claimed that the coke not only stimulated the fighter but also quickened his movements, and even deadened him to the pain of his adversary's blows.

Leroy told the court authorities that he had also trained boxing notables such as Jack Johnson, Jimmy Britt, Jack "Twin" Sullivan and Joe Thomas but did not imply any cocaine use on their part, only Ketchel.

Due to the passage of time, this claim may never be substantiated. On one hand, Leroy was very specific how he administered the cocaine. On the other hand, the article indicated that Leroy's personal addiction would not endear him as a credible witness. The court did sentence Leroy to 100 days in jail or a fine of \$200. Due to his condition, a police inspector recommended that treatment would be a more effective punishment and Leroy was admitted to a rehab facility instead.

This was not the end of newspaper coverage of Mr. Leroy. Two years later (1913), the United States Secretary of State filed a complaint due to the failure of the Mexican government to honor our existing extradition agreement with them. Mexican authorities had failed to extradite Joseph Leroy back to San Diego where he faced charges for highway robbery. My further research failed to reveal the outcome of the complaint.

Leroy's last stab (literally) at notoriety occurred in 1920 when he received lacerations to his throat and neck following a fight with a drug dealer on the streets of San Francisco. The altercation resulted from Leroy's claim that the pusher sold him chalk dust instead of cocaine. Leroy refused to identify the knife wielder to authorities, received emergency treatment at a hospital and apparently survived the attack.

Controversy has always been the lifeblood of boxing and will remain so. Stanley is the living embodiment of that fact. The short and bizarre life of Ketchel will continue to fascinate future generations, for sure. How it has escaped the Hollywood film industry is beyond me.

When I moved to Grand Rapids in 1975, I learned of a local sporting tradition from ex-boxer Chuck Wissmiller. Chuck told me that after the bars would close at 2am, it was not uncommon for revelers to gather at the gravesite of the great Ketchel and raise a glass in his honor. I also remember when the HBO crew arrived in Grand Rapids in 1999 to televise a Floyd Mayweather Jr. title defense. What was their first request? "Can we visit Ketchel's grave?" We accommodated them.