

This Was Dempsey's Toughest Fight



When Dempsey inked contract to defend heavyweight crown against Bill Brennan in 1920, he little dreamed it would be a fight he'd never forget. Attending ceremonies at Chicago's Morrison Hotel were (l. to r.) Jack Kearns, Brennan, Harry Maur, Dempsey, Leo P. Flynn and Floyd Fitzsimmons.

ASK A FIGHT FAN to name Jack Dempsey's toughest fight and chances are he'll say: "The one with Luis Firpo." Dempsey himself has admitted that being knocked out of the ring by Luis was "the most spectacular thing that ever happened to me." It was a tough bout, no mistake about that. But was it Dempsey's *toughest*?

Commenting recently on the demolition of the Polo Grounds, where the match was held 40 years ago, Dempsey said: "All I remember about the fight is shaking hands with Firpo at the start. The next thing I knew I was asking my manager what round I was knocked out in."

The quotation was obviously incomplete since Jack remembered much more than that. He may have been in a fog when he got up to deck Firpo seven times before the Wild Bull blasted him through the ropes. But his head had cleared in

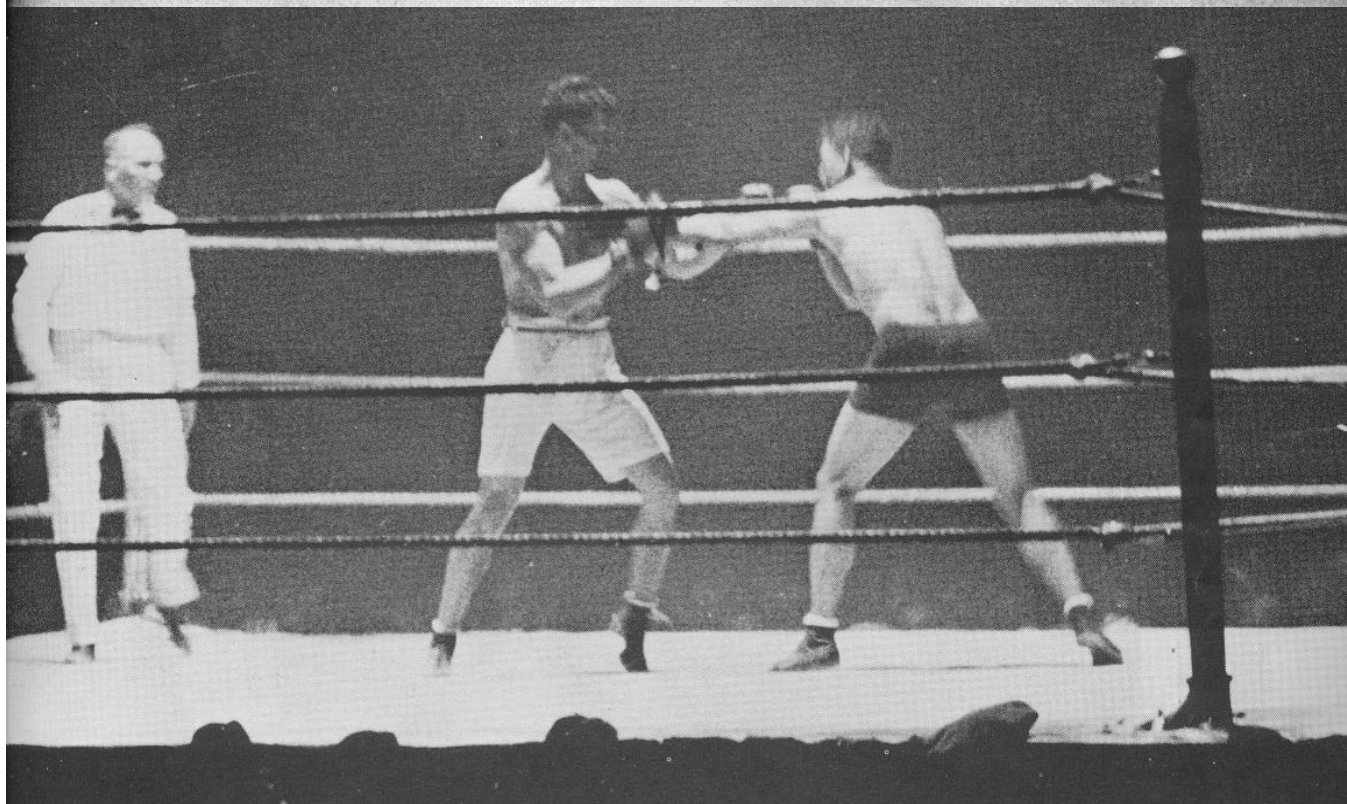
the second round, when he dropped Luis twice, then finished him off with two lefts to the jaw.

It is a curious thing about Dempsey that he fought some of his roughest battles in a haze. Time has dulled the memory of those scraps. But as long as Jack lives he'll never forget his blazing second battle with Bill Brennan in 1920—the toughest of them all.

Jack had kayoed Brennan in six rounds in their first fight in Milwaukee in 1918 when both were making a strong bid for Jess Willard's title. Dempsey had been banging around the country for 19 months, losing only to Fireman Jim Flynn and fat Willie Meehan.

Jack respected and admired Brennan. Bill had helped him when he had visited New York a few years before and Dempsey was grateful. Nevertheless he had to knock Brennan's block off to

Contrary to general belief, Luis Firpo did not give the great champion his most hectic battle — that honor goes to a handsome Irishman named Bill Brennan



In the second round, Brennan (right), after keeping the onrushing Dempsey at bay with stabbing lefts, landed a block-buster to Jack's chin, followed by an uppercut that almost decapitated the champion. "It hurt me more than the punch that knocked me out of the ring in the Firpo fight," Jack recalls today.

get a title shot. He did—with one terrific punch to the jaw that spun Bill completely around. As he dropped, his legs locked and his ankle broke.

Dempsey went on to capture the title, leaving Brennan to tangle with such fellows as Harry Greb, Billy Miske, Bartley Madden and Willie Meehan.

In the winter of 1920, promoter Tex Rickard wanted Jack to defend his crown at the old Madison Square Garden. When the subject of an opponent came up, Dempsey suggested Brennan. Everybody agreed on the choice and Dempsey went into training.

Jack admittedly made a mistake training in New York. He had trained hard for his title defense against Billy Miske three months before and felt it wouldn't be difficult to stay in shape.

But he hadn't counted on the fact that the

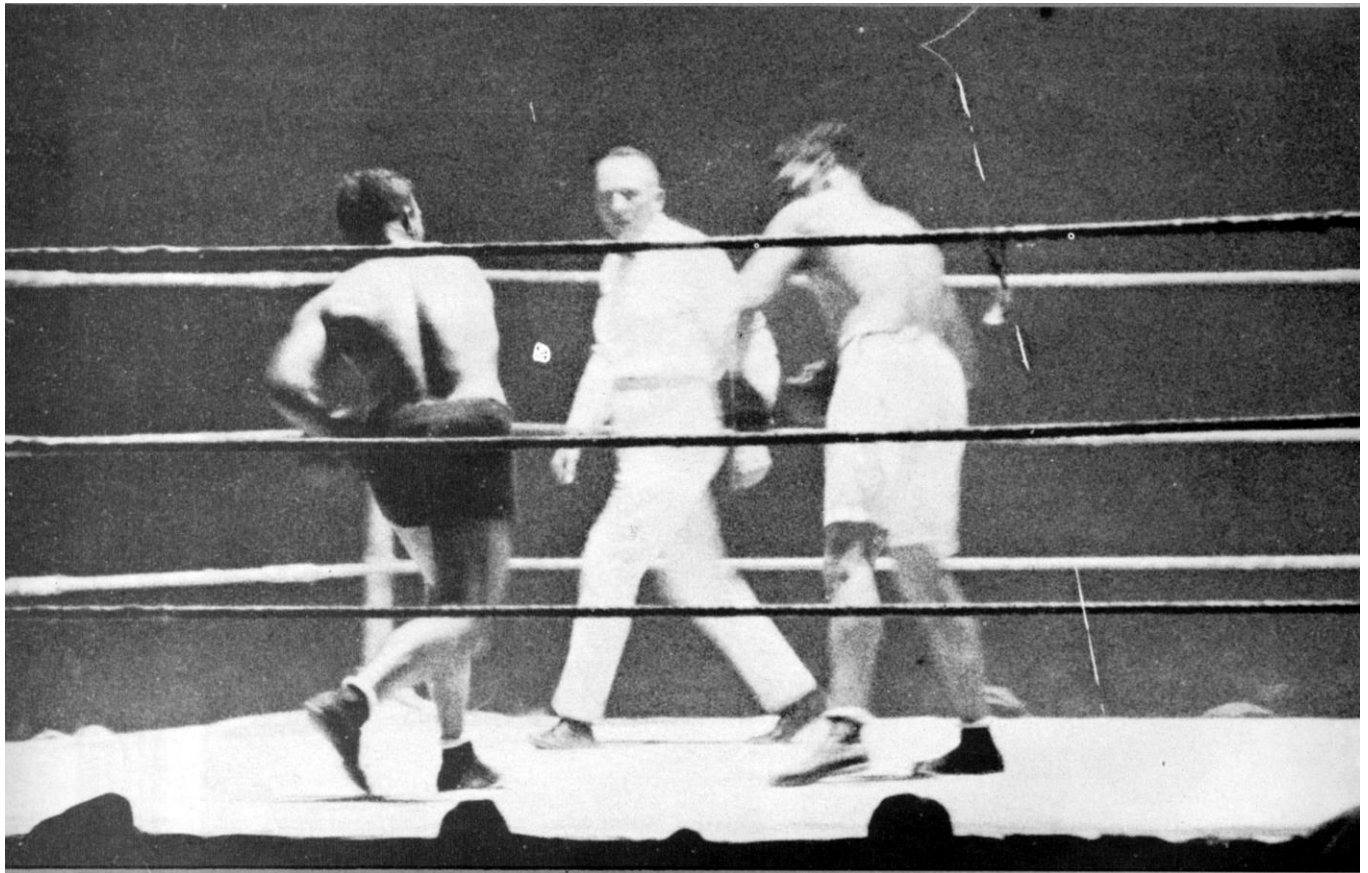
Miske battle had been his first real fight in 14 months and that he would have to do a lot more hard training to really keep in top condition.

There were other drawbacks. Jack needed the invigorating atmosphere of the country, where he could toughen himself with outdoor activities.

Doing his roadwork in Central Park and working out on the old battleship *Granite State*, which was moored off 96th Street, wasn't the same, though it added color and novelty to the pre-fight ballyhoo.

Perhaps far more damaging was the lure of Broadway. It wasn't easy to stay away from the *Follies* or the *Scandals* or the dazzling nightclubs spawned by the Roaring Twenties—places like the *Silver Slipper*, *Texas Guinan's* and, in Harlem, *Connie's Inn* and the *Cotton Club*.

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Knowing he had to score a knockout to win, Dempsey tore out desperately in the 12th. Moments after the action pictured above, a fearsome barrage to the body dropped Brennan for the full count and ended the game Irishman's gallant bid for the title.



A crowd of 16,000, paying from \$2.50 to \$25, jammed old Garden to see Jack make 2nd defense of title he won the previous year.

On top of all this, the fight was postponed for three weeks to December 14. "I went as stale as a piece of bread," Dempsey recalled.

His peaked condition was so noticeable that one sportswriter commented: "The champion was drawn to a very fine point when he entered the ring. He was pasty in the face . . . He was cold, too, and it took him five rounds to get warm enough to show anything like his form."

Sixteen thousand fans jammed the old Garden to see the match. The men were evenly matched, both standing 6'1½", with Dempsey, at 189, one pound less than Brennan.

The Irishman, wearing green trunks and a bright red sweater, entered the ring first, followed two minutes later by the champion in his famous white shorts which reached almost down to his knees.

Both smiled as a battery of photographers clicked away. Then announcer Joe Humphries held up the diamond-studded belt Tex Rickard was donating to the winner. The referee called them to mid-ring for instructions. Brennan was in great shape and looked it.

At the bell, Dempsey moved forward in his famous crouch, looking for an opening. But Brennan didn't give him one and kept flicking out his lightning left to keep Jack off balance.

Midway in the second round, Brennan blasted Jack with a shot to the jaw and followed it instantly with a right uppercut to the same spot. It nearly tore the champion's head off.

It was Brennan's golden opportunity but he muffed it. As Jack recalled: "Had Bill seized the opportunity, the title would have changed hands then and there. For a second or two, I was helpless. That uppercut hurt me much more than the punch that knocked me out of the ring in the Firpo fight."

But Brennan was just as surprised as Jack and, when he hesitated, Dempsey dived into a clinch and lasted out the round.

Jack had only a hazy memory of the next six rounds. Bill swarmed all over him, pinpointing his blows with crackling accuracy.

Over the roar of the crowd, Dempsey kept hearing his manager Jack Kearns scream: "He's licking you, Jack. You're gonna blow the title!"

But there didn't seem to be anything he could do about it. Cut and bleeding, with one eye swelling shut, he tried to strike back. But his arms felt like lead.

Just when Jack felt he couldn't take any more punishment, Brennan loosed a chopping right that nearly ripped off his ear.

As warm blood cascaded down his shoulders, Dempsey suddenly felt a stab of fear. He had felt it before—in 1916, when John Lester Johnson had caved in three of his ribs. At that time, Jack kept thinking that if Johnson hit in that spot again the blow might push one of those broken ribs into his heart and kill him.

But now he felt a worse fear. He not only feared the loss of his ear—hanging by a shred of skin—but, in a crazy, mixed-up way, he feared

for the loss of his title, too—as if that was more important than life itself.

Ask Jack today how he managed to come through and he won't be able to tell you. For the first time, he felt a premonition of age.

But, strengthened by some inexplicable miracle, he charged out in the ninth and started rocking Brennan with crushing rights and lefts.

Slowly, he regained confidence. He crouched, bobbed, weaved. He was landing more frequently now and there was more steam in his punches.

Brennan started boxing more cautiously. He had been hurt but he was still confident he could whip Dempsey as he had years before when Jack was his sparring partner.

In the eleventh, Brennan took charge again. But toward the end of the round, Jack drove him into the ropes with a barrage of body blows and Bill nearly went down.

In his corner after the eleventh, Jack nodded dully as his seconds applied ice packs to the back of his neck and Kearns kept telling him he had to score a knockout to win. As if Jack didn't know that!

He went out swinging for Bill's jaw in the 12th. But Brennan had recuperated and matched him blow for blow. As they battled it out, Jack felt his strength ebbing again. He had to get that sleeper across—now.

As he lunged in, Brennan caught him on the torn ear. But by this time, Jack was too desperate to care. Reeling forward, he nailed Bill with a left to the face and fell into a clinch.

Coming out of it, Jack saw the opening he'd been looking for. He exploded a right under Bill's heart. Brennan gasped and doubled up and Jack sank a left hook to the ribs "with everything I owned."

Brennan's knees buckled and he crumpled to the canvas. Jack hovered nearby, ready to blast him again if he got up. The roar of the crowd was like the thunder of surf in his ears.

As hurt as he was, the game Irishman started to rise. Jack couldn't believe it. He watched him, through a bloody haze, almost transfixed.

At the count of "nine," Bill got one knee off the canvas. Shaking his head to break the trance, Dempsey charged in to finish him off but the referee stopped him. Bill had failed to beat the count by a whisper—and Jack was still champion.

Brennan took his loss hard but he liked Jack and was in good spirits when he visited Dempsey's dressing room to watch the doctor patch up Jack's torn ear.

"It took you twice as long to get me this time, you lucky stiff," he grinned. "Next time, out *you* go!"

There was no next time. Brennan quit the ring and opened a speakeasy. One night he had a row with some mobsters who demanded that he stop buying a rival gang's beer.

Bill told them to go to hell and threw them out. Several nights later, a hood paid him a "visit"—and shot him dead. ■