

Final Bell...Jackie Graves

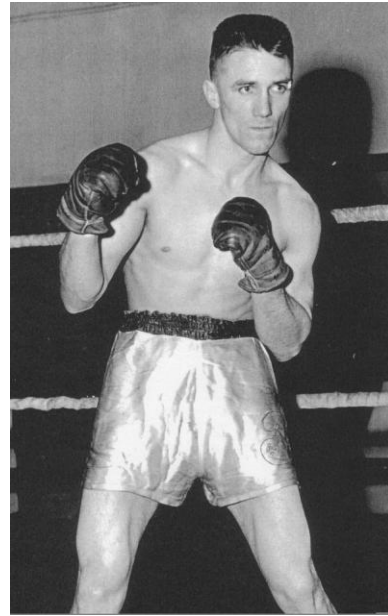
1922-2005

The Austin Atom fizzles away to the boxing heavens

John Thomas Graves was born on September 12, 1922 on the east side of Austin. His father and mother, Charlie and Mary Graves, knew that that meant one more mouth to feed in an already crowded household. What they didn't know, was that the babe they held in their arms, would one day be feeding them—handfuls of hundred dollar bills and free groceries.

Growing up, John didn't care much for school. He didn't care much for others' lip either, as he frequently got into schoolyard arguments that his big brother Harold had to finish for him. Until one morning right before class, when a situation arose and big brother wasn't around for backup. Graves was forced to put up, or shut up on his own. *He chose the first.* It was over from the start as the hallway bully threw a biker-esque-like roundhouse right, while Jackie stepped in, beating him to the punch from his southpaw stance with a straight right hand to the chin. When it was over, John, now known as "Jackie" had recorded his first "unofficial" knockout. "I think I surprised myself more than anything," recalled an 81 year-old Graves in early 2003, "I felt a strange sensation go through my fist, like a shock—and it kinda hurt a bit, but instilled in me a bit of self-confidence I hadn't had before". Graves went on to say that most kids thought of the hallway knockout as a fluke, or lucky punch, on account of his adversary being a sophomore and about 50 pounds heavier. The hallucination was short-lived, as Jackie knocked out the bully's buddy after school just a week later. Same story...one punch. The school troubles only jaded Jackie's outlook on an education even more, prompting him to drop out after the 8th grade. His father was a good athlete with an appetite for sport, especially his beloved boxing. He often worked with Jackie and his brothers out in the yard on their boxing skills, and eventually Jackie and his brother Jimmy, joined the Golden Gloves. It was a natural fit and Graves found his calling almost immediately. By the time his amateur career was over, he possessed a record of 284-6, including a National Golden Glove title at Bantamweight in 1942. He almost repeated the feat in 1943, this time competing at Featherweight, but lost in the finals to future Middleweight great, Tony Janiro—a loss Graves would avenge a few months later.

So popular was the kid with dynamite in both fists, that he was made the Main Event in his very first pro fight—something quite rare in the golden era of boxing. Heavyweight champ, Joe Louis came to Minneapolis to referee the bout and stated to the press after the fight, "He (Graves) reminds me of another Jack...Jack Dempsey". It wasn't long before he was drawing national attention. He whipped former champ Harry



Jeffra in every round of their fight in February of 45', knocked Charley Riley out cold in the 2nd round the following month, and then two months after that, beat former champ Tony Olivera. Graves stayed busy and battered another former champ, when he took apart Jackie Wilson in May of 46', and was ranked number 2 in the world when he fought the Featherweight champion of the world Willie Pep in a non-title fight in July of 46'. It is in this fight, that Jackie Graves' name took on a tarnish—an untrue tarnish made up of fantasy and fiction. The story goes, that Pep won the third round of the fight without ever throwing a punch. Something that neither the newspapers round-by-round accounts agree with, or eye-witnesses of the affair. In fact, more than one newspaper called the third round, “the most rapid of the night” and also saying, “a clicker couldn't count the blows between the two.” (For more on that, one can read the Jackie Graves interview on the Cyberboxingzone website.) In all, Graves dropped Pep twice in the fight, before being KO'd himself in the 8th round. Things were going well for the “Austin Atom”, and his works of charity were well-known throughout the state of Minnesota, which included buying clothes and shoes for poor children in Austin, donating part of fight purses to the needy, paying the rent for his parents apartment, as well as giving them a few hundred each month in spending cash.

In an era of only one champion, and seven weight classes, being ranked was no easy task to accomplish. Graves was ranked a total of 46 months over a seven-year period of his career. When it was all over, he owned a record of 82 wins, 11 losses, and 2 draws with 48 KO's, including 15 of those KO's being in the 1st round, and a whopping 83% of his knockouts were within the first 5 rounds! He can also say that he fought 32 ranked opponents, beat 6 out of 7 world champions, and beat 6 Hall of Famers. Not bad...not bad at all.

After boxing, Graves went through a messy split with his wife Helen, tried his hand at a few sales jobs, a few manual labor jobs, a youth minister, a prison guard, and few other attempts to find his way. He never did. After living from place to place, Graves moved back to the place he knew best—home. But his years of hard drinking that began in 1953 after his split with Helen, combined with the leather absorbed throughout nearly 400 fights from amateur through professional (remember...there was no headgear worn in those days of the amateurs), Graves developed pugilistica dementia, which later advanced into Alzheimer's Disease. It ate him away slowly like it does to all of its helpless victims; before finally, on November 15th, Graves' breathing slowed, his eyes wouldn't open, and the lights fizzled out as his spirit left his ailing body. I was there for him just a few days before he passed. He couldn't speak, but he managed to pry open one eye. I read him press clippings from his old fights and showed him pictures of his wife and children. On those occasions, his breathing picked up rapidly and the retina in his eye grabbed a bit more light. I like to think he understood. When he finally succumbed, he left behind a league of family and fans who mourned his loss. There was a slideshow at his wake that teased visitors with glimpses of a life and career we boxing fans are finding it harder and harder to come by. Farewell Austin Atom...to where you're heading, gloves are not needed; and the memories that fledged you in your last days, will be at your fingertips.

By Jake Wegner