

The Pottawatomie Giant Deserves Respect

By Bobby Franklin



Jess Willard

In the recent heavyweight title fight between Tyson Fury and Deontay Wilder, both men were, to put it mildly, quite large. Fury at 6'9" weighed in at 273 pounds while Wilder at 6'7" tipped the scales at 254 pounds. Wilder usually comes in lighter but was bulked up for this fight.

While both men are among the largest to ever hold the crown, there have been heavyweights in the past who would not be out of place in the ring with either one of them. Jess Willard at 6'6 1/2" and weighing in the vicinity of 245 pounds would be able to match eyeballs with Fury and Wilder, though Fury would have a couple of inches on him.

Willard is best known for two fights, his win over Jack Johnson when he took possession of the Heavyweight Title, and his defeat at the hands of Jack Dempsey when he lost the crown. Both fights have the shadow of controversy hanging over them that obscure Willard's performances in them.

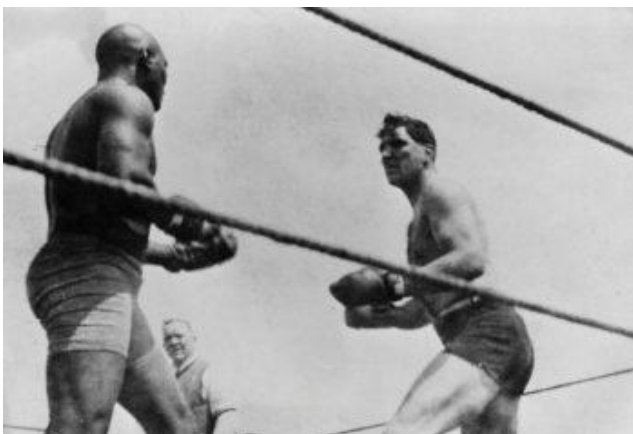
When Jess met Jack Johnson for the title on April 5, 1915 at Oriental Park in Havana, Cuba he was the latest in a string of White Hopes who were sought out to take the title from Johnson. The fight was held in Cuba because at the time Johnson was a fugitive from justice and would have been arrested had he returned to the United States.

Jack Johnson On The Attack Against Willard

The fight was scheduled for 45 rounds and took place in the afternoon. One of the myths surrounding the fight was that the temperature was scorching by the time the combatants had entered the ring. Arly Allen, who wrote the definitive biography of Willard stated after exhaustive research that the hottest it had gotten that day was 70 degrees. Looking at footage of



the fight you can see the fighters were dressed warm when they entered the ring; Willard had a heavy sweater on. The fans also looked quite comfortable.



Johnson Vs Willard

The other myth that has been used to discredit Willard was started by Johnson years later when he

claimed he threw the fight. Every boxing historian I know does not buy into that. In fact, all you need to do is watch the video of the fight and you will see in the early rounds Johnson going all out to knock out Willard. Jess survived these assaults from the champion and came on to knock out Johnson in the 26th round. While Johnson was not in the best of shape, weighing 225 pounds as compared to the 208 he weighed against Jim Jeffries five years earlier, Willard fought a very good fight showing excellent footwork for a man his size. Jess also had a powerful right hand which he used to finish off Johnson.

Much of the blame for Johnson not being in great fighting shape falls on Jack as he refused to face serious opposition after he won the title. His toughest opponent was Jeffries who had been out the ring for six years when they fought. Johnson also had been leading a wild lifestyle. Would things have been different if Jess was facing an in shape Johnson? Possibly, but the fact is Willard won the fight fair and square after standing up to the best Johnson had to offer.

Willard vs Dempsey



In the Dempsey fight, things turned out differently for Jess. The controversy in this fight centered on Jack, who many believe fought with loaded gloves. This story was started by his manager Jack Kearns years later after the two had a falling out. It has never been proven or disproven and, while most historians don't believe Kearns' story that he put Plaster of Paris on Dempsey's hands before the fight, there is reason to believe Jack had his hands wrapped in bicycle tape. The bicycle tape was legal at the time. There is also a theory that Jack had a metal bar in his hand when the fight began. I have written about this in more detail before as have many other boxing experts. It is something that will never be fully resolved.

In the first round of the fight, which took place in Toledo, Ohio on July 4, 1919, Jess took a terrible beating being floored seven times and being saved from a knockout by the sound of the bell. (Actually, a whistle as the bell had broken before the fight.)

That is what most people remember about the fight. What happened in the next two rounds is interesting as Jess was not floored again. He put up a courageous stand before his corner called an end to the fight after the third round.



Jess Willard vs Floyd Johnson Drew A Huge Crowd

It has been written that Willard wanted a rematch with Dempsey but he didn't help his chances at getting another go against the Manassa Mauler by staying inactive for the next four years. In 1923 he stepped into the ring against Floyd Johnson, and while having some rough moments early in the fight came on to kayo Johnson in the 11th round. Willard looked fit and on the way back at the age of 42. He was then signed to fight Luis Firpo with the winner being promised a shot at Dempsey.

The fight took place at Boyes Thirty Acres in Jersey City, New Jersey on July 12, 1923. Firpo kayoed Jess in the 8th round putting an end to any hope of the Pottawatomie getting his return bout against Jack Dempsey.

It should also be noted that both of Willard's comeback fights drew huge crowds and the former champ remained extremely popular. A rematch with Dempsey certainly would have been a major attraction.

So, what would have happened if Willard and Dempsey had fought again? I think it would have been a bit different than the first fight. Jess wasn't imbued with the killer instinct. When younger, he killed a man in the ring, and that had always haunted him. He believed, with good reason, that he was much more powerful than his opponents and had a certain fear of fatally hurting another. Because of this he often lacked aggression when fighting.

Before the Dempsey fight, Jess was asked if he thought he might kill Dempsey. In fact, many thought that was highly possible. When the bell rang for the first round you can see how Jess came out of his corner in a very calm manner. When the two went into a clinch Jess stepped back with his arms spread as if to say he wasn't going to hurt the little guy. Willard was completely unprepared for the assault that was soon to take place. However, after taking that beating in the first round, he fought back hard and gave Dempsey a bit of a go of it.

In a rematch, Jess would have come out ready for battle. He most likely would have used his weight against Dempsey, not stepping back in a clinch but instead, he would have roughed the champion up. Dempsey still would have won, but the fight would have gone longer and would have had more grappling.

Willard only had 28 fights in his entire career. He was a reluctant yet courageous warrior. In his two most notable fights he has not received the credit he deserved. Nobody thought he would beat Johnson, yet he proved them wrong. Against Dempsey, he showed the heart of a champion and a strong fighting spirit.



Jess really didn't have the killer instinct that is needed in such a cruel sport. He did have great athletic ability, was always in great shape, and had tremendous courage. You might want to take a look at the fights I have discussed and reconsider your opinion of Willard.

Bobby Franklin's Boxing over Broadway
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