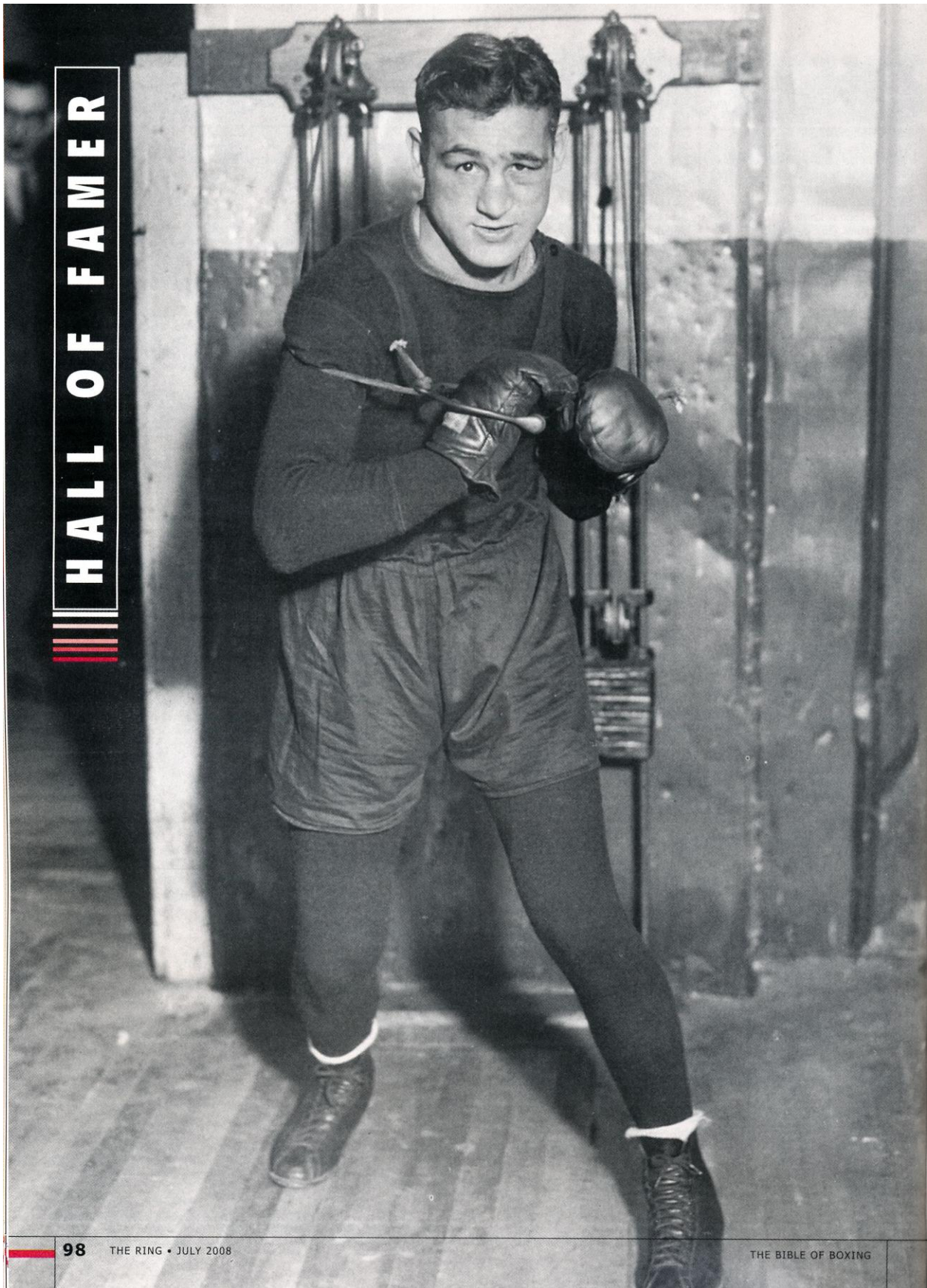


HALL OF FAMER



BILLY

PETROLLE

HALL OF FAMER

Why The Fargo Express Never Made A Championship Stop

By Pete Ehrmann

"Greed for gold may bring an abrupt ending to the fighting career of Billy Petrolle, who, instead of living up to his famous nickname, 'The Fargo Express,' is beginning to resemble a slow local."

—The Milwaukee Journal, May 4, 1928

"Billy Petrolle, The Fargo Express, has proved beyond a shadow of doubt that he is the outstanding contender in the lightweight, junior welter, and welterweight divisions, and he could rightly be heralded the miracle man of the age."

—THE RING, March 1932

Whether sportswriters were shaking their heads in disapproval or wonderment made little difference to Billy Petrolle. The only person he paid attention to where his ring career was concerned was his manager, Jack Hurley.

"I don't listen to these outside advisors anymore," Petrolle said in explaining the difference in him between 1928 and 1932. "They had me believing one time that I was all through, but Hurley convinced me that all I needed was a good, long rest.

"His word is law with me. When he says 'train,' I

train. When he says 'fight,' I fight."

It was how Jack Hurley taught Petrolle to fight, and Petrolle's unwavering belief and trust in Hurley that made them one of the most unique and successful duos in boxing history, and landed Petrolle in the International Boxing Hall of Fame even though he never won a world title.

Their partnership started in Fargo, North Dakota, Hurley's hometown. Petrolle moved there when he was a boy. His parents came from Italy, and Petrolle's dad worked for the railroad in Berwick, Pennsylvania, when Billy was born there on January 10, 1905. That's what Billy did in Fargo after dropping out of school in the seventh grade. He also started fighting.

Hurley had tried boxing too, but was too spindly for it. "Then I got the idea of using the talents of others," he later recalled to sportswriter W.C. Heinz. "I



The fighter and the talker: Petrolle and manager Jack Hurley check the newspapers for fight news. Even though their relationship got off to a rocky start, the pair stayed together throughout Petrolle's 11-year pro career and split every purse 50-50.

Petrolle has a three-fight series (1-1-1) with Jackie "Kid" Berg, the popular Englishman known as "The Whitechapel Whirlwind." Petrolle became the first to kayo Berg when he stopped him in the fifth round of a 1928 bout in Chicago.



Petrolle watches King Tut hit the floor during their February 27, 1931, bout in New York. Just 25 days earlier, Tut had kayoed "The Fargo Express" in one round, but Petrolle avenged the defeat by scoring a fourth-round kayo in the rematch.

figured that if I could get half a dozen kids and get them each a fight a month, I could make more money than if I was fighting myself."

He was promoting in Fargo in the early-1920s when Hurley saw Petrolle and offered him \$80 to fight on one of his cards. Petrolle accepted, but his opponent didn't show, and Hurley would only fork over \$10. They didn't speak for a year, until Hurley approached Petrolle and said he wanted to manage him. First Petrolle made him pony up the \$70 he owed him, and then handed half of it back to Hurley. Everything they did from then on was strictly 50-50.

The way Petrolle saw it, there was an equal division of labor. "I do the fighting for this combination and Hurley does the talking," he would say.

Hurley more than held up his end. Never above pure gimmickry, Hurley toned it down with Petrolle (though he did dig up an Indian blanket for the fighter to wear into the ring instead of a robe, and told reporters it was

presented to Petrolle by a famous Indian chief) and concentrated on developing what writer Jack Olsen called the "brink-of-disaster style" that made Petrolle so popular with fight fans.

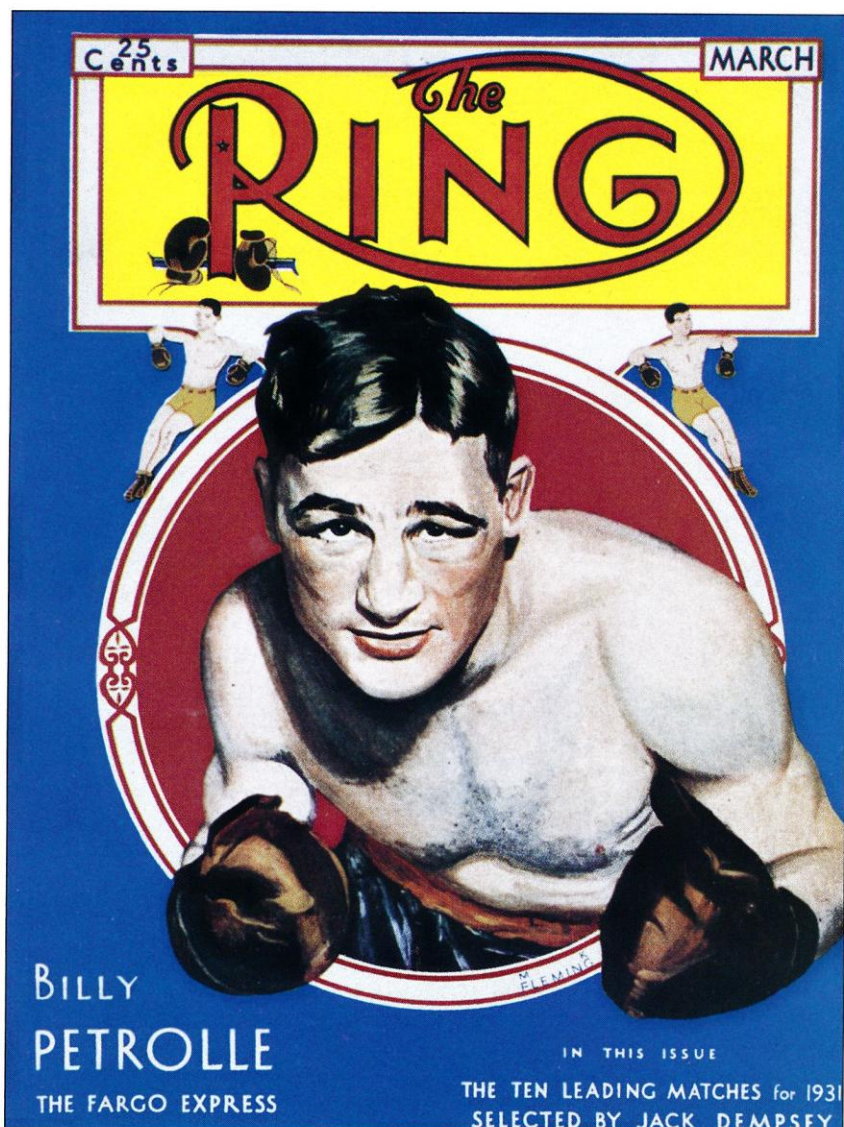
Hurley later explained the strategy to Heinz:

"Petrolle wasn't easy to hit. He gave the impression that he was easy to hit. Sure he did. He invited you to hit him. Do you know why? Because then he could hit you back. Petrolle would go in there and put it up there where you could hit it. He'd take two or three jabs, then slip under and let go with the heavy artillery. That's a good trade anytime you can take three light punches and let go with the heavy stuff. What gave people the impression that Petrolle was easy to hit was that he was always on the edge of danger. That's the place to be. Be in there close where you can work, where you take advantage of it when the other guy makes a mistake. You're safest when you're closest to danger."

By 1925, THE RING noted that Petrolle "looks like the best boy" in Hurley's stable of fighters, and when Petrolle knocked out top-ranked lightweight Eddie "Kid" Wagner the next year in a big upset ("Petrolle, practically unknown, was no doubt taken for a dub by Wagner," said THE RING), "The Fargo Express" roared into the lightweight Top 10.

Hurley took credit for the nickname too, but Petrolle and others said it was coined by Bob Green, sports editor of the *Hartford Courant*, after Petrolle soundly beat a fighter called Steven Smith in the Connecticut capital city in 1924. The night of the fight the Wells Fargo Express Co. reported a train robbery, and in the newspaper the next morning Green's story about the fight began, "The Fargo Express arrived on time last night, despite the robbery, when Billy Petrolle ..."

On January 13, 1928, Petrolle and 135-pound champion Sammy Mandell went 10 no-decision rounds in Minneapolis. Petrolle staggered



Mandell in the eighth round, and Hurley hollered that the timekeeper rang the bell early to prevent a kayo. In Petrolle's Madison Square Garden debut a few fights later, another one got away when Bruce Flowers recovered from a close encounter with Petrolle's trademark left hook and won the decision. A month after that, Petrolle lost on a cut eye TKO to journeyman Tommy Grogan, prompting the "greed for gold" harrumph from *The Milwaukee Journal*.

"He figured in 18 battles in 1927, an unusual amount for a chap of Billy's build," wrote the *Journal's* Sam Levy. "Overworked, he showed further signs of slipping (against Flowers)." When

his cut healed, Levy predicted, "he'll not be the same effective fighter he was a year ago. He jeopardized his standing in the division by placing the dollar ahead of his condition."

For a while, though, *The Fargo Express* was back on track. Later in '28, Petrolle became the first one to knock out future junior lightweight champ Jackie "Kid" Berg. He beat Flowers in a rematch, and also stopped Stanislaus Loayza. Promoter Tex Rickard ranked Petrolle fourth in his end-of-the-year ratings for *THE RING*.

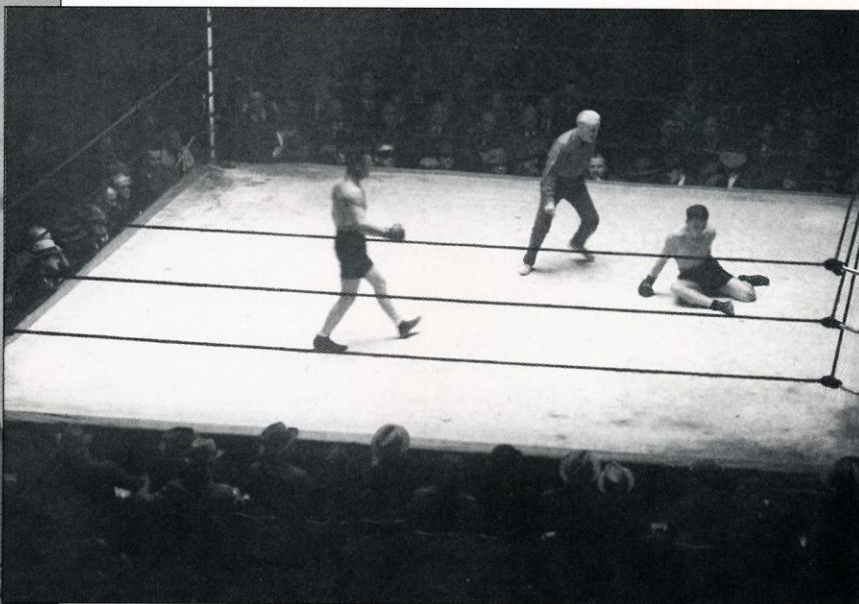
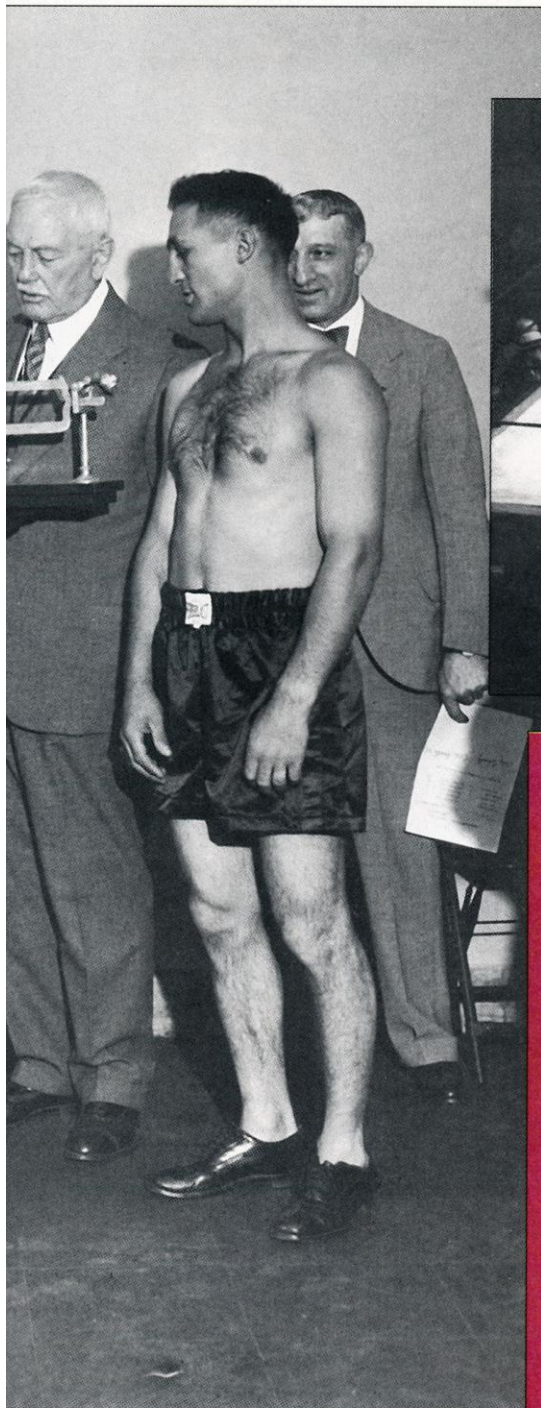
But on September 9, 1929, Petrolle lost a decision to ferocious King Tut, incurring more bad cuts above his eyes. Figuring the sportswriters who said he



was washed-up at 25 had it pegged, Petrolle announced his retirement from boxing and even bought a pair of eyeglasses to correct the vision problems some experts blamed for his deterioration in the ring.

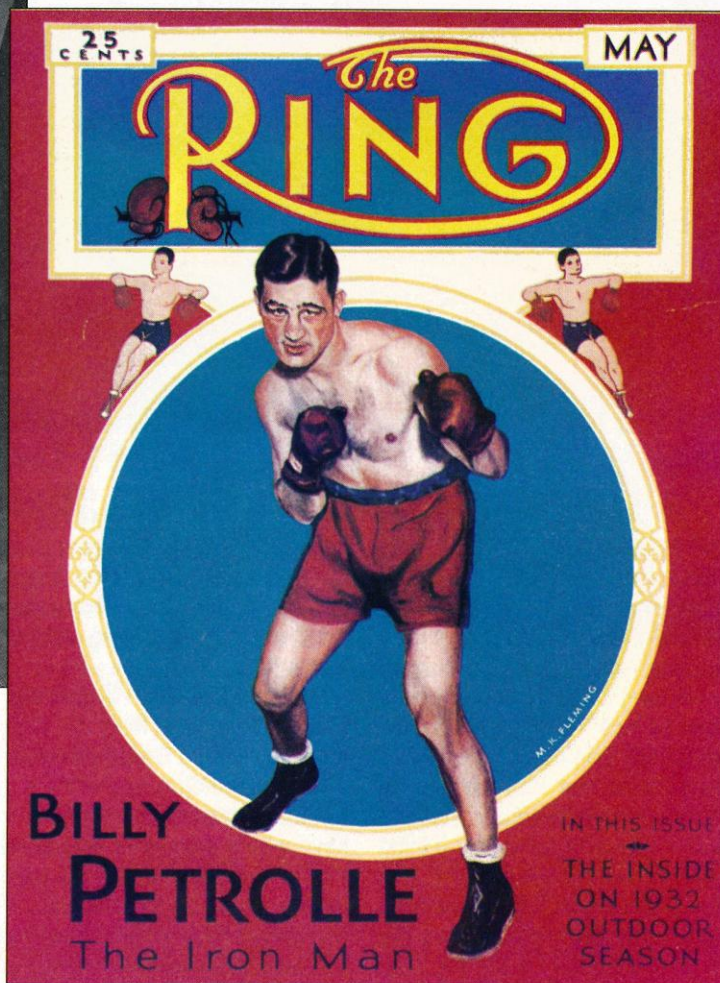
He only wore them once. When Hurley saw the specs, the livid manager ordered Petrolle to get rid of

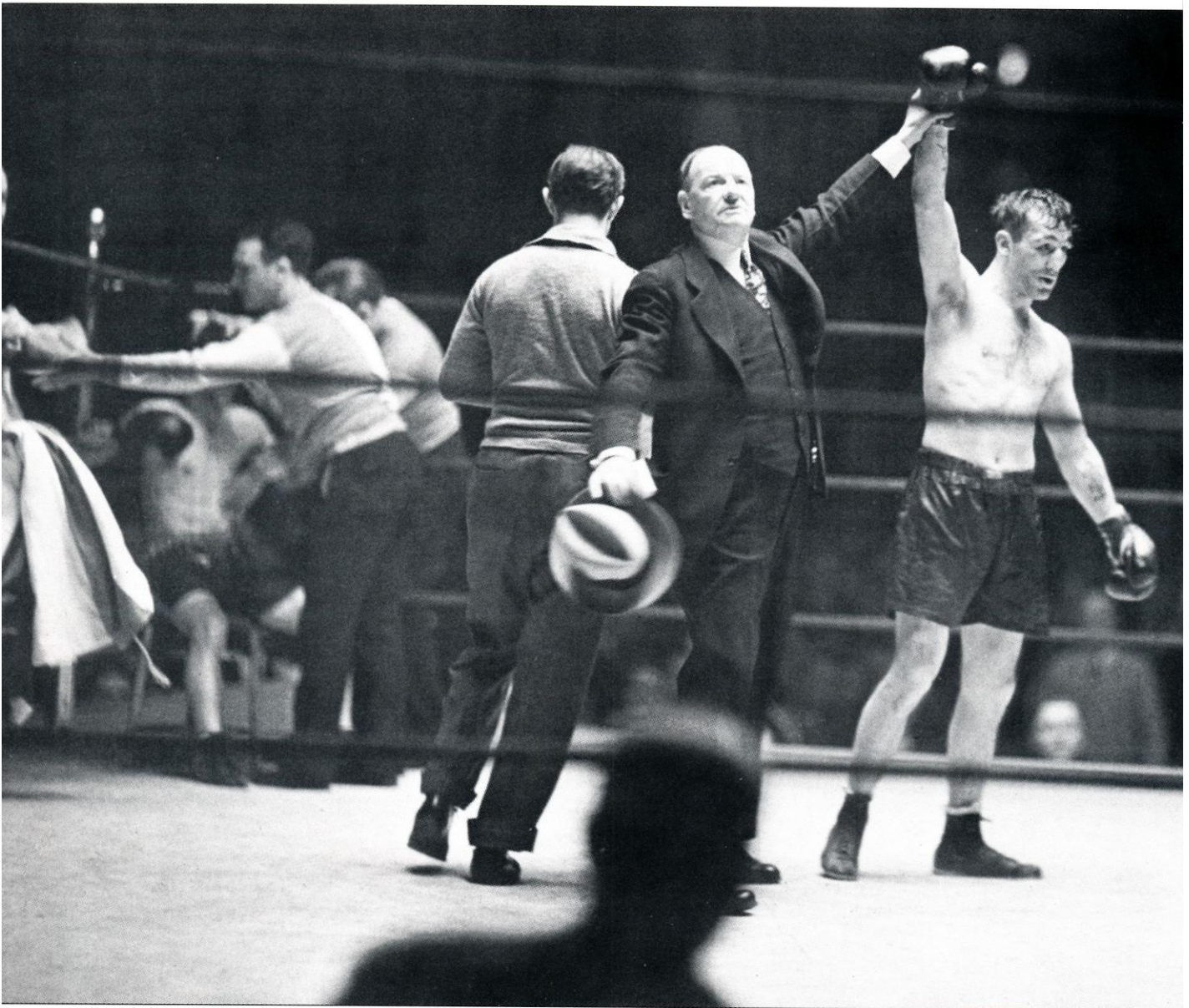
The hot-and-cold Petrolle also fought a three-bout series with the great Jimmy McLarnin, pictured weighing in for one of their bouts (left). Petrolle did his best work in their first fight, decking McLarnin en route to a 10-round decision victory.



them and said he'd mop the floor with the fighter himself if Petrolle ever wore them again. Then Hurley said nuts to retirement too, and after a four-month rest, The Fargo Express was back. He was really back when Petrolle beat future lightweight champion Tony Canzoneri on September 11, 1930.

Two months later, Petrolle knocked





Ring announcer Joe Humphries raises Petrolle's arm as kayo victim Battling Battalino is attended to by his handlers. Petrolle beat Battalino twice in 1932, which earned him a shot a lightweight champion Tony Canzoneri.

down 6-1 favorite Jimmy McLarnin twice and won a unanimous decision over the future welterweight titlist at the Garden, and onlookers who'd pronounced him dead were wiping off their own eyeglasses in astonishment.

When he was 81, McLarnin, an all-time great, told Earl Gustkey of the *Los Angeles Times* that Petrolle had hit him "so hard in the second round that afterwards I couldn't remember a thing from rounds two through seven."

After providing the "greatest fistic upheaval of 1930," Petrolle was the victim of one himself early the next

year when King Tut knocked him out in 24 seconds of the first round in Minneapolis. They fought again in the Garden 25 days later, and Petrolle won in four.

McLarnin beat him by decision in a savage rematch on May 28, 1931, but a month later the Express wowed them again by handing Argentina's Justo Suarez his first defeat via ninth-round kayo with a display of body-punching that moved Nat Fleischer to proclaim in *THE RING*: "If Petrolle can throw punches at Tony Canzoneri (who'd become 135-pound champion) as

he hurled them with effectiveness at Suarez, a new lightweight king will be crowned."

McLarnin won their rubber match with a decision win on August 20, but then Petrolle stopped Billy Townsend and Eddie Ran successively at the Garden and was hailed anew for, as the Associated Press stated, "one of the most remarkable comeback campaigns in modern ring history."

On March 25, 1932, the wild cheers of 18,000 fans threatened the stability of the Garden's walls when Petrolle beat Batt Battalino,

who'd surrendered the featherweight title to move up in weight, in what Westbrook Pegler called "the greatest cleaver and blackjack prizefight ever fought" there.

Battalino won the early rounds, but the fighter *THE RING* called "the old man of pugilism" came roaring back to have his hand raised with half-a-minute left in the 12th and last round with Battalino out on his feet.

The fight was so thrilling that in the June 1932 issue of *THE RING* was another feature entitled, "They're STILL Talking About It," which predicted that "when the years have passed and both the contestants in that hectic mill have passed from the picture, the story of their contest will be told and retold."

Another story in that issue ranked Petrolle as the third greatest puncher in lightweight history, behind Joe Gans and Benny Leonard. But even better than that was his unprecedented number-one ranking in the lightweight, junior welterweight, and welterweight divisions."

Knocked down in the first round by Battalino in a rematch on May 20, Petrolle got up and won a resounding decision. But he suffered an injury to his left elbow that was aggravated in his 10-round victory over Tommy Grogan the following November. An operation was necessary, and then there were weight issues leading up to Petrolle's fight with Canzoneri for the lightweight title on March 22, 1933.

Petrolle won maybe four rounds, and in the final seconds of the 15th round, the champion let up when Petrolle was in a bad way so he could finish on his feet.

Years later, Heinz wrote: "Petrolle never won the lightweight title because (Hurley) steered him away from it for years. Jack felt that once you win the title, the boxing commissions run your fighter, and he figured Petrolle could make better fights and more money without it."

Hurley was probably blowing more self-aggrandizing smoke. Before Petrolle fought Barney Ross at age 28 on March 22, 1933, the *Chicago American* newspaper quoted him as saying, "I've



Hurley peers over Petrolle's shoulder as the challenger signs the contract to fight Canzoneri. That's promoter James J. Johnson in the middle, Canzoneri on the far left, and manager Sammy Goodman looking over the champ's shoulder. The Fargo Express lost a 15-round decision in what turned out to be the only title shot of his Hall of Fame career.

got a little money, a little fame, and a little following. I'm getting old, and now I want a title before I die!"

Ross won handily in 10 rounds, and repeated the feat at the Garden on January 24, 1934. Petrolle retired from boxing then, and this time proved he was serious by announcing that he was going to send his famous Indian blanket to the cleaners. In over 200 bouts (his official record is 121-25-14, with 65 KOs), Petrolle never had the filthy thing laundered, figuring that his good luck would be washed out with all the sweat and blood. "When they send me to the cleaners," he said, "they can send the blanket too, but not until then."

Maybe Hurley wasn't interested in the title, but Petrolle worried that without one he would be forgotten. "They don't forget champions, but the memory of fellows like myself who never won a title soon fades, and I hate to think that in a year or so I will be only a name, and maybe not even that," he fretted.

Fleischer hit that one out of the park when he wrote in April 1934:

"The mighty roar of the old Fargo Express will ring in the ears of fight fans as long as you live. You wrote your name in the hearts of the fans." Longer than that, actually. In 2000, Petrolle's name was written on the roster of International Boxing Hall of Fame inductees.

Petrolle had saved a couple hundred Gs, and was in good shape financially up to his death on May 14, 1983. To the end, he said he owed it all to Hurley. "I have him to thank for every good thing that's ever happened to me," Petrolle told boxing writer Robert J. Thornton.

Hurley came close with a couple other fighters, but never like with Petrolle. The effort and disappointment turned him even grumpier and cynical, except where the man he called his "idol" was concerned. "People have great respect for fighters," he told Jack Olsen in 1961. "I don't, except for certain fighters, like Billy Petrolle, who were men in and out of the ring." ■

Pete Ehrmann is a Wisconsin-based writer and historian, and a frequent contributor to THE RING.