

# Bygone Days: The Largest Crowd Ever at Madison Square Garden Sees Zivic TKO Armstrong

Arne K. Lang (The Sweet Science, January 10, 2025)



There's not much happening on the boxing front this month. That's consistent with the historical pattern.

Fight promoters of yesteryear tended to pull back after the Christmas and New Year holidays on the assumption that fight fans had less discretionary income at their disposal. Weather was a contributing factor. In olden days, more boxing cards were staged outdoors and the most attractive match-ups tended to be summertime events.

There were exceptions, of course. On Jan. 17, 1941, an SRO crowd of 23,180 filled Madison Square Garden to the rafters to witness the welterweight title fight between Fritzie Zivic and

Henry Armstrong. (This was the third Madison Square Garden, situated at 50<sup>th</sup> Street and Eighth Avenue, roughly 17 blocks north of the current Garden which sits atop Pennsylvania Station. The first two arenas to take this name were situated farther south adjacent to Madison Square Park).

This was a rematch. They had fought here in October of the previous year. In a shocker, Zivic won a 15-round decision. The fight was close on the scorecards. Referee Arthur Donovan and one of the judges had it even after 14 rounds, but Zivic had won his rounds more decisively and he punctuated his well-earned triumph by knocking Armstrong face-first to the canvas as the final bell sounded.

### **This was a huge upset.**

Armstrong had a rocky beginning to his pro career, but he came on like gangbusters after trainer/manager Eddie Mead acquired his contract with backing from Broadway and Hollywood star Al Jolson. Heading into his first match with Zivic – the nineteenth defense of the title he won from Barney Ross – Hammerin’ Henry had suffered only one defeat in his previous 60 fights, that coming in his second meeting with Lou Ambers, a controversial decision.

Shirley Povich, the nationally-known sports columnist for the Washington Post, conducted an informal survey of boxing insiders and found only person who gave Zivic a chance. The dissident was Chris Dundee (then far more well-known than his younger brother Angelo). “Zivic knows all the tricks,” said Dundee. “He’ll butt Armstrong with his head, gouge him with his thumbs and hit him just as low as Armstrong [who had five points deducted for low blows in his bout with Ambers].”

Indeed, Pittsburgh’s Ferdinand “Fritzie” Zivic, the youngest and best of five fighting sons of a Croatian immigrant steelworker (Fritzie’s two oldest brothers represented the U.S. at the 1920 Antwerp Olympics) would attract a cult following because of his facility for bending the rules. It would be said that no one was more adept at using his thumbs to blind an opponent or using the laces of his gloves as an anti-coagulant, undoing the work of a fighter’s cut man.

Although it was generally understood that at age 28 his best days were behind him, Henry Armstrong was chalked the favorite in the rematch (albeit a very short favorite) a tribute to his body of work. Although he had mastered Armstrong in their first encounter, most boxing insiders considered Fritzie little more than a high-class journeyman and he hadn’t looked sharp in his most recent fight, a 10-round non-title affair with lightweight champion Lew Jenkins who had the best of it in the eyes of most observers although the match was declared a draw.

The Jan. 17 rematch was a one-sided affair. Veteran New York Times scribe James P. Dawson gave Armstrong only two rounds before referee Donovan pulled the plug at the 52-second mark of the twelfth round. Armstrong, boxing’s great perpetual motion machine, a world title-holder

in three weight classes, repaired to his dressing room bleeding from his nose and his mouth and with both eyes swollen nearly shut. But his effort could not have been more courageous. At the conclusion of the 10<sup>th</sup> frame, Donovan went to Armstrong's corner and said something to the effect, "you will have to show me something, Henry, or I will have to stop it." What followed was Armstrong's best round.

"[Armstrong] pulled the crowd to its feet in as glorious a rally as this observer has seen in twenty-five years of attendance at these ring battles," wrote Dawson. But Armstrong, who had been stopped only once previously, that coming in his pro debut, had punched himself out and had nothing left.

Armstrong retired after this fight, citing his worsening eyesight, but he returned in the summer of the following year, soldiering on for 46 more fights, winning 37 to finish 149-21-10. During this run, he was reacquainted with Fritzie Zivic. Their third encounter was fought in San Francisco before a near-capacity crowd of 8,000 at the Civic Auditorium and Armstrong got his revenge, setting the pace and working the body effectively to win a 10-round decision. By then the welterweight title had passed into the hands of Freddie Cochran.

Hammerin' Henry (aka Homicide Hank) Armstrong was named to the International Boxing Hall of Fame with the inaugural class of 1990. Fritzie Zivic followed him into the Hall three years later.

Active from 1931 to 1949, Zivic lost 65 of his 231 fights – the most of anyone in the Hall of Fame, a dubious distinction – but there was yet little controversy when he was named to the Canastota shrine because one would be hard-pressed to find anyone who had fought a tougher schedule. Aside from Armstrong and Jenkins, he had four fights with Jake LaMotta, four with Kid Azteca, three with Charley Burley, two with Sugar Ray Robinson, two with Beau Jack, and singles with the likes of Billy Conn, Lou Ambers, and Bob Montgomery. Of the aforementioned, only Azteca, in their final meeting in Mexico City, and Sugar Ray, in their second encounter, were able to win inside the distance.

By the way, it has been written that no event of any kind at any of the four Madison Square Gardens ever drew a larger crowd than the crowd that turned out on Jan. 17, 1941, to see the rematch between Fritzie Zivic and Henry Armstrong. Needless to say, prizefighting was big in those days.

***A recognized authority on the history of prizefighting and the history of American sports gambling, TSS editor-in-chief Arne K. Lang is the author of five books including "Prizefighting: An American History," released by McFarland in 2008 and re-released in a paperback edition in 2020.***