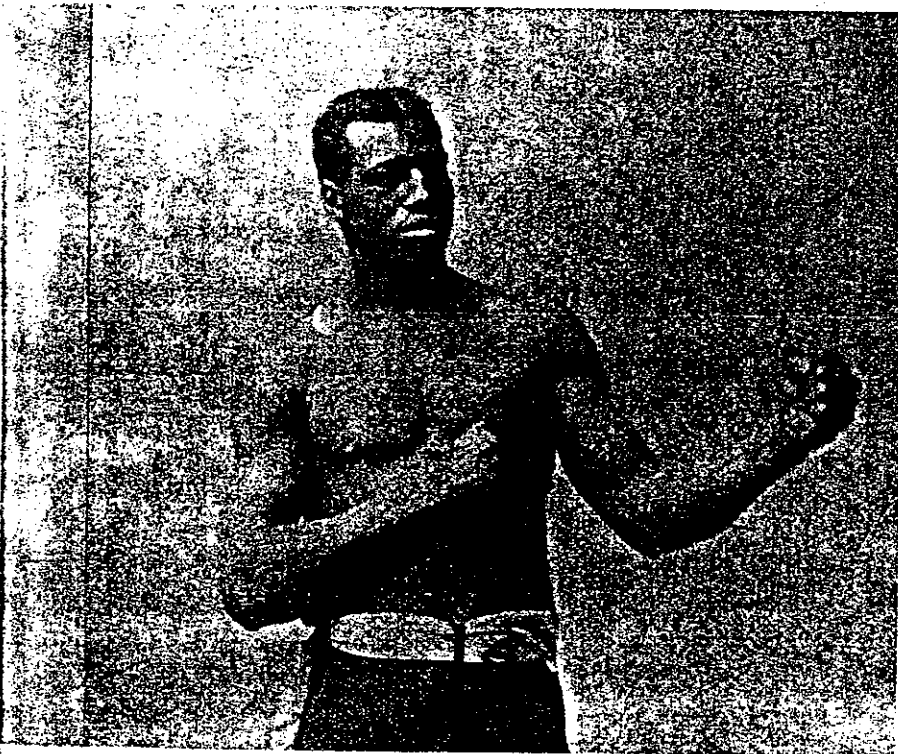


THE GREATEST SPARRING PARTNER THAT EVER LIVED



A famous ring technician, Bob Armstrong, who was in great demand by all the leading heavyweights to practise with.



Armstrong and Bob Fitzsimmons going through a series of ring maneuvers which you seldom see.

Bob Armstrong was the complete fighter. He could imitate any boxer's style and was good enough to drop the great Tom Sharkey. Managers vied for his services . . . and here's why

BY BILL McCORMICK

ROBERT (Bob) Armstrong was, in his day, a remarkably adept fighting machine and a fanatical crap shooter. It is difficult to ascertain whether his ninety or so prizefights reaped him a greater harvest than his countless sessions on bended knees. A tall, smooth muscled Negro out of Washington, D. C., with sharp features and a physique not unlike Max Baer's, Armstrong's boxing career spread over ten years (1893-1903). His crap shooting span was a good deal longer;

from 1883, when he was ten years old, through 1934, when he died in Chicago.

Bob fought against most of the great pugs of the gas light era—Frank Slavin, Ed Martin and even Jeffries, to name a few. After straining unsuccessfully to knock Armstrong out in 1898, champion of the world to be Jeffries evaluated his frustrating opponent thusly: "the bastard has a head of stone and a belly of

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Tom Sharkey (left) going through a course of strategy with famous Bob Armstrong.

The Greatest Sparring Partner That Ever Lived

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strap-leather."

Although Armstrong developed into a menacing threat for the heavyweight title the most stimulating stories about him are those which filtered out of the racy old training camps where he was habitually employed as combination boxing instructor, second and chief sparring partner. Never before or since has any fighter been so enormously in demand as a camp hand as was Armstrong. Think of a well known heavyweight in the 1890's chances are Bob helped train him. Fitzsimmons was one. Jeffries, Corbett, Tom Sharkey and Kid McCoy a few others. Jim Corbett once said: "Armstrong makes a profitable career of wet-nursing well known fighters.

There was a constant squabbling and competitive bidding for Bob's services. When Marvin Hart, the clever Louisville heavyweight, went into training for his crucial bout with Tommy West in 1901, so anxious was he to have Armstrong train him that he paid Bob ten percent of his gross purse.

Hype Igoe liked to tell how Kid McCoy, who, when scheduled to fight Tom Sharkey, masterminded an elaborate plan to have Armstrong slugged and kidnapped and brought to his secret training camp so that he, and not Sharkey, would have the advantage of Bob's know how.

"Armstrong was a master at solving styles," Igoe said. "And he could imitate perfectly even the most complex maneuvers after watching a boxer just once. McCoy reasoned that if he had Armstrong to mock Sharkey's peculiar stance and furious body attacks in training his chances of defeating the tough Sailor would be substantially increased. But as things turned out McCoy was wrong. Sharkey flattened him. After the fight McCoy, black and blue around the eyes, a deep gash down his nose, sat in his dressing room brooding. Armstrong walked over to the Kid and began to wipe the blood off his face. Suddenly McCoy grabbed Bob's sweater and spun him around. 'You no good rat,' McCoy fumed. His black eyes flashing like a maniac's 'You double-crossed me. You worked all together different in camp than Sharkey did in the ring. And you did it on purpose because you knew all the time what he was going to do.'

Hype Igoe grinned as he recalled the incident. "Armstrong brushed away McCoy's fragile hand. His face split into a broad grin. 'Mastah Kid,' he said, 'you should o' ass'ed me to work fo' you and not had ma' head smacked wit' a lead pipe. Ah was willin' to help you train. All you had to do was ass'ed me nice.'" Armstrong admitted that he mislead McCoy intentionally, Igoe said, and that McCoy never forgave him.

Aside from his value as a trainer and sparring partner Armstrong was a six act vaudeville show all wrapped into one. He danced, sang and pulled rabbits out of hats. With Bob in camp the dreary days passed a lot faster and easier. Jeffries in particular had a deep affection for the

loveable Negro. Bob was one of the very few who the tight fisted Jeff endowed with gifts. When Armstrong was helping Jeffries train for the Joe Choynski fight, Bob shot a left hook at Jeff's hard skull and fractured a bone in his hand. After a doctor finished setting the break Jeffries slipped five hundred dollars into Armstrong's pocket and said "go home and have a good time." To so willingly part with his blood money was completely out of character for the niggardly Jim Jeffries.

In 1898, for a reason still unknown, the Armstrong — Jeffries friendship erupted into a raging feud. Jeff growling frantically, "get him away from me before I tear his throat out." What caused this drastic change of events is still a hot subject for speculation. Jack Jeffries, Jim's brother, assumed that Armstrong had been throwing loaded dice against the bedroom wall and that Jim was out about three hundred dollars when he noticed Robert switch a queer set of galloping dominos back into his pocket. Perhaps it was out of revenge that Armstrong went to work for Tom Sharkey when the Sailor went into training for his famed fight with Jeff at Coney Island. Perhaps it was because Sharkey paid more than Jeffries. But no matter what the reason, Bob's genius suddenly switched from helping Jeff to the camp of the enemy.

Sharkey was managed by seedy Tom O'Rourke in conjunction with Tim McGrath, a California referee and trainer. McGrath, the worrying type, fretted about the confusing Jeffries' crouch.

"Unless Tom is trained carefully," McGrath moaned to O'Rourke "Jeffries will murder him. He must learn how to counter-act that crouch."

"How," O'Rourke asked "can you teach a thick Irishman like Sharkey to change his style in a couple of weeks?"

McGrath rubbed his chin. Suddenly his eyes lit up. "I have it," he said excitedly. "We'll shock him into it. We'll prove to him that unless he fights accordingly, Jeffries will kill him."

Still skeptical, O'Rourke grunted coldly, "How you gonna do that?"

McGrath grabbed for his hat. "Leave that to me," he said. "You just tend to the publicity and paying the bills."

McGrath, fully aware of Bob Armstrong's capabilities and his knowledge of Jeffries' style, hunted down the sparring partner. Ten minutes later he found him in the kitchen tearing hell out of a turkey leg. The two men talked about California, food and the fight business and then McGrath asked Armstrong if he knew why he had been hired.

Bob looked up from his turkey leg. A puzzled look covered his face. Now he smiled, as if suddenly realizing he was playing straight man to a joke. "Yas sah, Ah knows why," he said "cause yo' wants me to train Mastah Tom."

"Yes," McGrath answered impatiently "but there is more to it. We want you to teach him what to do against Jeff's crouch. If he goes in cold, not knowing what to expect, Jeff will slaughter him. You're here because you know more about Jeffries than anybody else. You've boxed him more than anybody. You know his crouch and you also know how to straighten him up. Those

are the things you must show Sharkey. When the fight begins I want Tom to go out there and handle Jeff as if he had been boxing with him for years. Do you understand Bob?"

"Ah sho' expects to do jast dat," Armstrong said as he tore into the other turkey leg.

The next day Sharkey was to begin sparring. He was a bull of a man. Short and yard wide. A square chin and a thick hide. He worked a few rounds on the punching bags and then did sitting up exercises. Armstrong was still in the main house trying to find his left boxing glove. He was on all fours searching under the bed when Tim McGrath walked into his room.

"Sit down a minute and listen to me, Bob," the manager said. The big Negro looked surprised but did what he was told. "Remember what we spoke about last night?"

Armstrong nodded that he did.

"Good. I want you to stay in a crouch all the time and lead into Tom's body. Stay away from his head. He will keep coming into you because I will tell him to. I don't want you to back away. When he comes in I want you to hit him as hard as hard as you can in the ribs, or under the heart, or on the liver."

Bob's eyes opened like saucers. A look of amazement crossed his handsome features.

"Does yo' mean, Mastah McGrath, that yo' wants me to knock out Mastah Tom if in ah can," the fighter asked?

"That is exactly what I mean, Bob. If you can knock him out — do it!"

Armstrong nodded slowly in agreement. It was evident that he didn't fully understand. He started to say something but stopped. McGrath noticed his concern. "What is it, Bob. What do you want to say?"

Armstrong scratched his head. "Ah was jest wonderin'," he sighed, "supposin' ah does knock out Mastah Tom like you say. What's gonna happen to me?"

McGrath smiled. "Nothing, Bob. Nothing at all. I might even give you a raise."

Once in the ring with Sharkey, Armstrong obeyed his orders, but only in part. He crouched and mocked Jeff's style perfectly. He didn't back up when Tom came bulling into him but when the time came to explode into the Sailor's wide open middle, Bob held back. He let the punches go allright, but with nothing behind them.

McGrath became furious. He ordered Armstrong out of the ring and told him to start packing. "There is a train out of here in about two hours," he yelled "see that you're on it." The sparring partner bent his head low and walked away. Sharkey looked on dumbly, not knowing what it all meant and caring less.

But Tim later cooled off. He sent a message to Armstrong telling him to stay if he wanted to. McGrath then went to see O'Rourke. "Tom," he moaned bitterly "we must get somebody who will cooperate. Armstrong can do it better than anybody else but I think he's afraid something will happen to him if he hurts Tom. I can't figure him out. He can box rings around Sharkey and Tom couldn't hit him on the leg if Bob doesn't want him to."

If Armstrong was the man for the job

then Tom O'Rourke was the man to convince him. Nobody else had so much experience handling Negro fighters as did the fierce Irishman with the flowing handlebar. George Dixon was his fighter and so was Joe Walcott. O'Rourke told McGrath to send Armstrong to him immediately and that he would straighten him out.

Bob walked meekly into Tom's room.

"Sit down there." O'Rourke pointed to a chair.

"McGrath tells me you disobeyed his orders today. Is that true?"

The fighter twisted his body uneasily. But he didn't speak.

O'Rourke continued in a cold, direct voice. "Now you listen to me. You do what McGrath tells you to do. You've been in this business long enough to understand that you must obey orders. McGrath has a plan for Sharkey to beat Jeffries but he can't carry it out unless you do as you're told. That's why we hired you and why you're being paid \$25 a week."

Tom asked Armstrong why he acted as he did that afternoon.

"If I done like Mastah McGrath said, Ah might get killed! he said indignantly.

"If you do," O'Rourke broke in "I'll see that you get a top class funeral. Flowers and everything."

Bob got up and walked out. That last remark wasn't funny.

He went back to his quarters and flopped down in bed. Soon McGrath walked in. He seemed anxious to know the effects of O'Rourke's scolding.

"Well, what about it? Will you do what I tell you?"

"Ah is gonna' try," Bob answered. "But ah feels like ah is not doin' right by mah family."

McGrath smiled and walked out.

Now it was the next afternoon and Sharkey was shadow boxing in the ring. Armstrong was standing by the apron listening to McGrath's Methodical instructions. O'Rourke was there too, rolling a thin cigar between his fingers. Bob glanced at him from the corner of his eye.

McGrath patted Bob on the back and the fighter slipped into the ring. He nodded nervously at Sharkey who was already dripping with sweat. Tim called "time" and the fighters moved toward each other. Sharkey standing erect. Armstrong in the Jeffries' crouch. Bob jabbed two lefts to the body and Sharkey bulled forward. He started a right cross to the face but the punch never landed. Armstrong went underneath it and at the same time sank a terrific right counter into the white man's belly. Tom's face turned a sickly green. His eyes rolled so that all you could see were the whites. He quivered, then dropped to the hard wood floor. Soon he was resting on hands and knees and shaking his head. Armstrong came over to him cautiously. McGrath and O'Rourke jumped into the ring. O'Rourke ripping his trousers as he crossed the ropes. They picked the stricken Sailor up and threw water in his face. He started to come out of it, slowly. First he looked at McGrath, straining to focus his eyes. He was coming out of it and that was Armstrong's cue to depart — quickly. He stepped out of the ring and half walked, half ran, to his cabin. Sharkey broke out of his stupor.

He cursed and wanted to know where Armstrong was. His lips curled like that of a cornered cat. There was hate written all over his face. O'Rourke tried to calm him down, as did McGrath.

After a half hour of fruitless searching, Tom gave up. Armstrong wasn't to be found anywhere. Even McGrath and O'Rourke wondered what had happened to him. They found out late that night, after Sharkey was tucked in for the evening, A worried Armstrong sneaked into McGrath's parlor.

"Is Mastah Tom sleepin'?" he asked anxiously.

Tim grinned. "Yes, Bob. He's dead to the world. Come on in."

"Is he mad at ol' Bob?" The sparring partner said as his eyes cased the room.

"A little," Tim answered, "but he'll get over it. Don't worry. You did us all, especially Tom, a big favor today. I think that even he realizes it by now."

"Ah sho' hopes so," the Negro said putting his hands together in prayer.

And then Armstrong said something that made McGrath double over in laughter:

"Does you all think that Mastah O'Rourke will be buyin' them funeral flowers for me?"

O'Rourke slipped Bob an extra weeks' pay and the next day he explained to Sharkey why Armstrong had hit him so hard. The Sailor understood and he shook Bob's hand and asked him to try it again. It was like that until Sharkey broke camp and headed for New York and the big fight with Jeffries. Armstrong was able to hit him now and then but Tom was ready for it and he took those murderous shots without apparent effect. He also learned to counteract the crouch and body assaults.

Against Jeffries, Sharkey put up a remarkable battle and although he did not get the decision there were many who thought he was entitled to the championship. Bob Armstrong worked with him in the corner and much of the credit for the sailor's astonishing showing must go to the Herculean Negro. The greatest sparring partner and crap shooter the fight game has ever known. . . .

What Is Your Boxing I.Q.?

Answers To Quiz

- 1—Tippy Larkin
- 2—Marcel Thil, left, and Lou Brouillard.
- 3—Four bouts in all. First bout Saddler won knockout. Second bout Pep won on decision. Third bout Saddler won by knockout. Fourth bout Saddler won by knockout.
- 4—False.
- 5—Len Harvey.
- 6—Nino Valdes.
- 7—He gave up lightweight title to campaign as welterweight.
- 8—Rickard referee Jeffries vs. Johnson. Pecord refereed Willard vs. Dempsey. Blake refereed Stribling vs. Schmeling. Barry referred Dempsey vs. Tunney.
- 9—Max Schmeling.
- 10—Larry Boardman.



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