

## Time For A Break

Stanley Ketchel had suffered his most decisive defeat in the ring. He had never been hit as hard as by Jack Johnson. He had never before been actually knocked unconscious. Surely his famed self-confidence was shaken as well. Having effectively cleaned up the middleweight division, with the exception of business with Sam Langford, he also had to wonder where his future was headed. His rollicking, free-wheeling life outside the ropes had also taken a toll on his body. Yet he was only twenty-three! At a minimum, a rest from the ring where he had fought nearly sixty professional bouts in six years was a logical move. But another major blow hit him just a few days later. Willus Britt, his manager and now close friend, died suddenly. The explanations ranged from severe depression to complications from alcoholism. 1 Ketchel was profoundly affected by his passing and returned to his home in Grand Rapids for the Christmas holidays. There he reflected on the recent past as well as his future direction. At least one news report had him announcing his retirement. 2 There was no shortage of boxing people interested in managing the champion. Prominent among them was George Little, the manager of Jack Johnson, who wanted to match Ketchel as soon as possible with Langford. Indications are that Ketchel was reluctant to formally name anyone his manager at this time. He also had Wilson Mizner in his entourage, who had become more and more influential on him in both a business and a social sense. The two had met in California about a year before through Britt. Britt and Mizner had been close friends since their gold rush days in the Klondike and Alaska where they had started the territory's first newspaper in Nome. A physically imposing man himself, at well over six feet tall and 250 lbs., Mizner had gained a reputation as a wit and schemer from there to Central America, where his father had been a diplomat. Britt had initially engaged his old partner to assist with publicity for Ketchel and relied upon him, as a New York "insider", to help chart their path through the laws and political machinery that ruled the restricted sport in that city.

Wilson Mizner, born to a socially prominent family from near San Francisco, had gained substantial exposure to the underside of society as well. He had a solid education but was expelled from college for a prank. He subsequently worked as a confidence man, card sharp, hotel man and ballad singer, in addition to some prizefighting of his own. New York eventually became his principal place of residence and public renown. The "Beau Brummel of Broadway" cut a conspicuous figure with his extra tall top hat, Inverness cape and white-handled walking stick. He was seen in the most cosmopolitan of gathering places and events, frequently in the company of people like "Diamond" Jim Brady, Lillian Russell and "Bet-a Million" John Gates. According to his brother Addison, a famous architect, Wilson was an idol of low society and a pet of high society. He reportedly knew women from the best homes and houses.

Ketchel had taken an immediate liking to the sophisticated Mizner. They found much in common, while complementing each other's personality in many ways. Mizner biographer Alva Johnson noted that they shared a "redlight philosophy of life" with Ketchel's experience as a saloon bouncer in Butte and Mizner's exposure to the seamier part of frontier life in the Yukon. 3 At the same time, the fighter, who had left home as a young teenager, had a thirst for knowledge and was fascinated by Mizner's cultural polish.

Stanley reportedly spent substantial time listening to him read poetry and the stories of O'Henry.

Both men were rank sentimentalists with strong affection for their mothers. Mizner would relate a story of being at a party with Ketchel where he noticed the young man was missing from the group, only to find him back in the entrance hall alone and sobbing over a picture on the wall of a sheep lost in a blizzard. 4 Such a scene belies the "tumultuous ferocity" that Philadelphia Jack O'Brien described and every one of Ketchel's opponents saw in the ring. Oddly enough, he could marshal this sentimental side as an incentive during a fight. He confided to one source that, when necessary, he could convince himself in the middle of a round that the SOB in front of him had insulted his mother and thereby be able to step up the fury of his attack. In the first few months after Britt's death, Ketchel did little to distinguish himself beyond continuing to live life outside the ring with reckless abandon. Reports circulated in the National Police Gazette and elsewhere that he had gotten far out of shape and that an agreed upon bout with "Fireman" Jim Flynn was postponed because of it. An exhibition in Johnstown, PA, was cancelled when Ketchel refused to leave a bar there and was chased out of town by a posse. When Mizner rescheduled that exhibition, his fighter didn't appear and the event had to be cancelled. Mizner located him later that evening in bed with two women, reportedly smoking opium. "What the hell could I do?" he exclaimed. "I said 'move over'." 5

### Return To The Ring

The champion reportedly relinquished his middleweight crown because he could no longer get down to 158 pounds, the class weight limit, and defend it. 6 But subsequent news accounts and events indicate there was no formal statement to this effect. He did seek a bout with former heavyweight champion Tommy Burns, but it never came off. There is ample evidence that, whatever physical condition he was in, he had not lost belief in himself and the idea he could become heavyweight champion. Mizner and Ketchel planned a series of fights that would prepare him for another chance, after Jeffries fought Johnson. Speculation on that forthcoming clash dominated the boxing world and the general public for months.

Ketchel returned to the Woodlawn Inn in the Bronx and resumed training. It would remain sporadic and vary in its intensity for several weeks. Once more there was no shortage of Broadway types who rode out to see him. He had developed a considerable following which included friends of Mizner from the news and society worlds. Press coverage from reporters such as Hype Igoe and a young Nat Fleischer burnished his popular image. He was a great drawing card and had become something of a society fad. One source described him as "handsome as a half-grown leopard and cute as a devil". 7 The metaphor was probably suggested by Ketchel's reputed lifelong love of animals which included, at one point, a pet lion cub. With Mizner's supervision he had also become the most expensively dressed fighter in history. Among other eccentricities, they were both "shirt crazy". The champion at one point invested \$24,000 in silk shirts, suits and bathrobes from New York's most exclusive men's clothier. He would stroll the city's avenues in a dinner coat, three large diamonds in his shirt stud holes and a Stetson hat. He was enjoying the good life and fast paced activity of a city to which Mizner had provided him a full introduction. Among his favorite haunts was the pool room operated by New York Giants manager John McGraw at Herald Square. It was there he also met Tod Sloan, the country's best paid jockey, and the gambler Arnold Rothstein. 8

On March 23, 1910, recently returned from a therapudic visit to Hot Springs, Arkansas, and almost six months since his loss to Johnson, he reentered the ring in Pittsburgh to face

Frank Klaus, the "East Pittsburgh Bear Cat". He met the agreed upon 160 pound limit after losing seven pounds in the week before the match and claimed to the press that he "never felt stronger in my life than I do at this very moment". Klaus was rated as the top middleweight contender (absent Langford), having beaten Papke and Jack (Twin) Sullivan. A record crowd had packed the Duquesne Garden, including a large press contingent from New York and Philadelphia, but they witnessed a rather tame affair with no knockdowns. The lack of action drew periodic hisses and the referee, Jack McGuigan, urged both fighters to fight faster. As a "no decision" bout, it was left to the press to determine the unofficial winner. The Pittsburg(h) Dispatch reported that the local favorite had "outfought, outboxed and outgeneraled" the champion, giving Klaus all but the second and possibly the final sixth round. 9 Referee McGuigan described Ketchel as being in poor condition but called the fight a draw. The consensus of the out-of-town press was a win for the champion. Ketchel sought treatment for a dislocated left thumb and a sore right hand. There was no clamor from him or his camp for a return engagement. Reports circulated that he had only started serious training the week before the fight and that a couple of weeks before he had bet Bat Masterson, the former western lawman now a New York newspaper columnist, he "would remain on the water wagon for three months". 10

It had been an inauspicious return and Ketchel knew it. He resolved to rectify his image. Sam Langford now seemed to provide that opportunity. Langford, who had been chasing him for the better part of two years and issuing challenges after every one of his bouts, was more than ready. The Boston Tar Baby, born in Nova Scotia, had begun his career as a lightweight but, for lack of willing competition, had gone through all of the intervening classes to engage even heavyweights. At five feet eight inches, he combined great punching power and agility with intelligence and courage. In 1903, he defeated legendary lightweight champion Joe Gans. He lost a fifteen round decision to heavyweight Jack Johnson in 1906, outweighed by forty to fifty pounds. Thereafter, Johnson wanted no part of him. He was now at the peak of his career. Willus Britt had also sought to avoid him, although the Black man and Ketchel had come close to entering a New York ring six months earlier. However, at this point, Ketchel was eager to prove himself after the Klaus fight and an agreement was reached for a six rounder at Philadelphia on April 27, 1910. There was speculation that this bout was being staged as a preliminary to a longer and more lucrative future fight in California. News reports were that Jim Coffroth was offering \$30,000 for a forty-five round encounter. Some in the press doubted that either man would really extend himself in this "preview" affair. A few suspected a fix and stayed away. Yet neither man could be sure of another chance at the other, given the history of negotiations between the two camps. Ketchel seemed to be in much better shape and, as always, was supremely confident. Betting odds of 6 to 10 in the champion's favor were prevalent. Beyond this point, descriptions and press evaluations of the fight vary considerably.

The Philadelphia Inquirer stated that it was the fastest bout ever seen in the city at that weight, 11 while Nat Fleischer, then a reporter for the New York Press, saw it as an uneventful affair, disappointing to the fans attending. 12 Ketchel scaled 158, ten pounds less than Langford. The referee again was the well respected Jack McGuigan. A raincoat covered Ketchel, clad in his crimson red silk fight togs, while Langford wore pea-green trunks as they went to the center of the ring for instructions. The first round started slowly, although Stanley appeared the more aggressive of the two and connected with more punches. His few rushes were effectively sidestepped by Sam, who seemed unusually content to be on the defensive. Several of his infrequent punches missed their mark by wide margins. Ketchel again took the initiative in the second, but it was Langford who landed the more effective blows, including two solid lefts to Stanley's jaw. After McGuigan warned Langford about a head butt, fans voiced their displeasure with the pace of the action. Ketchel did land a left to his opponent's face and spun him around. In the third, Langford's strategy adjusted from one of keeping Ketchel at bay to actually

displaying an offense of his own. He threw two lefts to Stanley's face that were his most effective of the bout. The first dazed the champion and the second brought blood streaming from his nose and mouth. Ketchel then resumed boring in and the crowd was delighted with the faster pace. But Langford refused to follow up on his obvious advantage, satisfied to wait out the end of that round. Both men jumped out at the start of the fourth, as if signaling a willingness to really mix. This also evolved into a series of clinches, false starts and missed opportunities. Just before the bell, Sam got in an uppercut that hurt. The fifth was a close repeat of the previous round with Ketchel throwing the majority of the punches, none of them particularly effective, and Langford content to land an isolated shot but reluctant to pull the trigger. Before the start of the final round, the champion was obviously frustrated. He charged out at the bell and threw everything he had at Langford from every angle. Many in the crowd now cheered for him to finish Sam. Langford backed away, seemed dazed and then clinched. However, only a few of these actually landed, while Langford managed to get in one or two of his own that reminded Stanley of his presence. It was Ketchel's best round of the fight but Langford never lost control of his fight plan. By one account, the spectators felt a bit sorry for themselves at the end, for having seen a great show but a poor fight. 13

Largely on the strength of his finish, the New York American gave its decision to Ketchel, while three other New York papers called it a draw. 14 Richard Fox's Police Gazette claimed that, while Ketchel was the more aggressive fighter, Langford outpointed him with a most impressive defense. One of the more significant observations came from an Inquirer reporter who noted that Ketchel's elasticity of movement was absent and thought that the champion had aged five years since he last fought in that city, only ten months earlier, against Jack O'Brien. If there was indeed a plan to fight to a draw in order to build interest in a later, longer match, it succeeded. Ketchel had been the overall aggressor in this fight but not nearly as effective as he or his supporters had hoped. It was also obvious to most that Langford had held back on utilizing his formidable skills, to the extent of appearing at times to carry Ketchel. His strategy also seemed more transparent than the champion's. Langford needed Ketchel more than Ketchel needed Langford. Sam said after the contest, perhaps disingenuously, that he had done his best but Ketchel's aggressiveness at the end proved too much for him. For his efforts he received a cut of only \$4,000 from the gate, as compared to Ketchel's \$9,375. 15 Some years later, Wilson Mizner was quoted by his biographer as maintaining that Langford was advised he wouldn't get a cent if he knocked out Ketchel. 16

The champion still seemed intent on returning to peak form and scheduled a series of three East Coast fights over the space of less than a month. There were varied reports that he had also abandoned his fast paced life outside the ring and wanted to restore his public's confidence in him. On May 17, he met journeyman Porky Flynn in Boston for a scheduled twelve round bout. The hometown fighter had trained well for the encounter and was the favorite of the crowd at the Armory Athletic Club. Although Ketchel rushed out to him at the opening bell and sought to take quick control of the action, Flynn displayed a solid defense and scored effectively with counter blows to the champion's body and face. These did not appear to faze Stanley who continued to bore in. Flynn's confidence grew as the round neared its completion and his fans were jubilant. Ketchel picked up his pace in the second as Flynn still relied on his defense. In clinches, Stanley usually was able to land a solid left or right to the body and this started to take its toll on his opponent. Midway in that round, he sent a stiff left to Flynn's mouth that instantly changed the battle. Ketchel sensed that he had his man and jumped on him. Flynn covered up and tried to move away but his legs weren't fast enough. Ketchel's right hit him flush in the face and the Bostonian went to the mat for escape. He got up at the count of eight and managed to survive the round. Stanley was all over him from the start of the third, landing punches to the face and body from every direction. A right to the jaw again sent Flynn to the floor. Up at eight, he tried

to make some returns but Ketchel was intent on ending it here. A right to the jaw and a left to his stomach once again persuaded Flynn to seek a respite on the canvas. He had no resources or will to continue as the final count of the referee came a minute and a half into the third. The ferocity and power of Ketchel's attack held those spectators who had never seen him before in awe. 17

Only ten days later, on May 27, the champion entered the ring of the National Sporting Club in New York City to face Willie Lewis before a record crowd. The champion, attended by his trainer, Jimmy Kelly, and Wilson Mizner, was clearly the crowd favorite. Every Broadway denizen of any note was either present or left at the door unable to squeeze in. Although Ketchel had been based in New York for the last year, this was only his second fight in the city. Lewis, managed by Dan McKetrick, was basically a welterweight but over the course of his career fought through the lighthweight ranks. At least one source credits him with the invention of the classic "one-two" combination in boxing, a jab followed by a cross. 18 The difference in weights for this affair was negligible. Soon after referee Tom O'Rourke called the fighters to the center of the ring, the six round, no-decision attraction began. The first round was uneventful. Lewis intermittently threw left jabs which were obviously ineffective, while Ketchel started more slowly than usual, wanting to evaluate his foe. But early in the second round, the veteran Lewis made the error of trying to mix with the champion and paid the price. Amid a fast exchange, Ketchel landed a solid left to the stomach that caused Lewis to double up and lean forward. An immediate right to his open chin put him down. Manager McKetrick saw that it was over and threw in a towel from the corner but the count went to ten without a stir from his fighter. 19 The enthusiastic crowd had hoped for longer action but it was obvious that Lewis was simply outclassed. He was out for close to five minutes. A dressing room witness reported that a doctor had to pry his jaws apart.

Jim Smith had been at ringside for the Lewis fight and, as a sparring partner, had helped him train for Ketchel. He had the reputation of being able to withstand considerable punishment without hitting the floor. Bigger than Lewis, he had recently lost a bout with Black heavyweight Joe Jeanette, but now looked forward to leveling his straight right hand punch against the smaller Ketchel. Less than two weeks later, on June 10, he got his chance in the same ring. Once more, the crowd of four thousand that packed the National Sporting Club was largely populated with fans of Ketchel. They fully expected the same fate for Smith that had befallen Lewis. The result was more spectacular than most imagined. The first surprise was Smith's fearlessness. His ambition was to beat a champion and he knew he had to throw his best weaponry to do it. Ketchel started the first round cautiously but soon found Smith chasing him and trying to land that big right hand. He usually missed, but was frequently beating the champion to the punch and forcing him to cover up. In the second round, Ketchel tried to take more of the initiative but found his opponent just as eager. By the third, the champion had found that he was most effective during the infighting, when he could penetrate Smith's defense with left hands to the jaw. The fact that these were not really slowing Smith and many of his other punches were missing their mark had Ketchel's corner, notably Mizner, visably worried. Strength and courage continued to propel the lesser known fighter through the fourth, but the champion's superior ring experience and the cumulative effect of his punches began to show. Finally in the fifth, Ketchel caught Smith with a powerful, swinging right to the jaw that sent him down on his back as if he had been hit with an axe. He did not move during the ten count and then tried unsuccessfully three times to get up. The crowd roared. 20 The champion had never been in any real danger, but he obviously had a prolonged problem in pulling the switch. Perhaps his fame and popularity had created somewhat exaggerated expectations. Perhaps Ketchel's inconsistency reflected bigger problems. Nevertheless, he had sore ribs and a ringing head as reminders of the battle he had been in.

Some observers felt that Stanley Ketchel was no longer the Michigan Assassin. Bat Masterson opined that the fast life had dulled his skills. Others speculated about the negative influence of Mizner on his career. There were questions about the legitimacy of some of his recent fights, beginning with the loss to Johnson when he allegedly crossed up a "planned script" only to be knocked out. The most skeptical contended that rigged agreements on bouts were now necessary to extend the champion's future. Ketchel, not yet twenty-four years old, had now fought sixty-four times in a six year professional career and claimed many other bouts before that in Montana. There was reason to consider their aggregate toll on his competitive edge as well as on his physical condition.

### The First Battle of the Century

The attention of Stanley Ketchel and Wilson Mizner turned elsewhere, to the boxing event that had dominated the entire sporting world for months. Jim Jeffries, the ultimate "Great White Hope", was returning from six years of retirement in an effort to dethrone Jack Johnson and regain the heavyweight championship. Ketchel and Mizner travelled west to Reno, Nevada, to join the thousands who were assembling to witness the July Fourth event. Their interest in it was more than casual.

Since his own loss to Johnson eight months earlier, Ketchel had hoped for another chance at the heavyweight crown. Jeffries had crossed his path before. On the night of September 18, 1908, he was the referee who directed Stanley's seconds to take the battered ex-champion to his corner during the twelfth round of his fight with Billy Papke in Vernon, California. Ketchel never questioned Jeffries' decision to stop that fight, but surely bristled at his comments following Ketchel's knockout by Johnson. Returning to New York City from Paris at that time, Jeffries had said to reporters that Ketchel's efforts to "feed himself up" to make the heavyweight class only served to weaken him and he did not regard Ketchel, by any means, as even the best in his own weight class. 22

Just about everyone of consequence in boxing had assembled in Reno for a fight which had been in the making for a year and a half, since Johnson had wrested the heavyweight crown from Tommy Burns in Australia. The writer Jack London had led a growing pack of rascals in clamoring for a "White Hope" to beat Johnson, ultimately putting enough public pressure on Jeffries to come out of his six year retirement and do the job. London now claimed that the return of White dignity was imminent. The fight had been set originally for San Francisco, but the objections of local political interests had caused it to be moved out of state. A young Tex Rickard had prevailed over more established boxing interests such as Jim Coffroth to promote the affair. Reno was a giant party. Its population of 15,000 had swollen to an estimated 40,000 for this event. The city had the reputation as the hardest drinking town in the country and it was proving accurate. Its seventy saloons valiantly did their best to slake the thirst of boxing fans and those attracted simply by the legalized gambling there. All the big money was on Jeffries. Unfortunately, there remained a shortage of hotels and eating places. People stood in lines three blocks long for food. Over seven hundred reporters were covering this extravaganza. Arriving in Reno, Ketchel and Mizner visited the training camps of both Jeffries and Johnson. They quickly concluded that the unretired former champion was in no condition to save the White race. One report had Ketchel being escorted out of Jeffries' camp for heatedly criticizing the training methods being employed there. 23 Ketchel claimed that he personally liked Jeffries and was concerned that Johnson would humiliate him. He and Mizner proceeded to put down several thousand dollars on Johnson and the middleweight champion actually served as Johnson's timekeeper for the fight. Johnson's camp was guarded like a fortress. The hate and venom being expressed for him were palpable. He slept with a gun under his pillow.

Even rivals like Langford and Joe Jeanette favored Jeffries.

An outdoor ring and seating for 30,000 spectators had been erected. Then at the peak of his career, the ever smiling Black champion displayed not the slightest concern about the crowd bias and vituperation that surrounded him. Throughout the fight he could hear the voice of "Gentleman" Jim Corbett in Jeffries' corner shouting "kill the coon!". Johnson claimed that, from the look he saw in Jeffries' eyes after the first time he hit him, he knew he would beat the former champion. Jim Jeffries was a shell of his former self. His reflexes were gone. Johnson realized he could take him at any time but preferred to prolong the affair. He wanted to convince these doubters of his superiority and embarrass their hero. He taunted Jeffries from start to finish, disparaging his skills and frustrating him at every turn. Virtually toying with his stumbling and bloodied opponent for most of the later rounds, Johnson finally decided to end it in the fifteenth. He knocked him down three times before Jeff's corner men jumped into the ring and stopped the carnage.

In his autobiography, Johnson expressed gratitude to Ketchel for his assistance, recalling his presence at ringside with "the tenderest of memories".<sup>24</sup> Whether or not Ketchel saw all of this as the best way to promote his chances for another bout with Johnson is problematical. There is some speculation that he envisioned a victorious Johnson retiring from the ring after his major achievement and designating him as the champion apparent. After the fight, Mizner and Ketchel went back to San Francisco with Jack London and the three went on a notable bender featuring a wild, high-speed ride through the city in a "borrowed" vehicle. In August, Mizner arranged for Ketchel to meet the veteran Australian heavyweight, Bill Lang, in New York City, but the bout was cancelled a few days before the fight, allegedly because of a boil on the champion's foot. Then a front page story in the New York Morning Telegraph claimed that the reason was that Lang's people refused to post a \$5,000 guarantee that Lang wouldn't knock him out.<sup>25</sup> Rumors arose that Ketchel would soon be splitting from Mizner because of this incident. In any case, Stanley wanted a rest from it all and headed back to Michigan. A revelatory interview in Chicago in late August quoted the champion as saying he was "in terrible condition ... my nerves are gone".<sup>26</sup> The reporter described him as pale and thin. But Stanley maintained that all he needed was some of the simple, outdoor life and adherence to a plan from his physician so he could put on good weight and resume his career. If he was then unable to make 158 pounds, he would turn over his title to Hugo Kelly and campaign exclusively as a heavyweight. Ketchel felt Kelly was the next best in his class and that, although he had knocked him out in three rounds, he had beaten him with a lucky punch. Sam C. Austin subsequently wrote in the Police Gazette that Ketchel's return to Michigan meant that he was "hitting the sunset trail ... with a badly damaged reputation and broken physically".<sup>27</sup>

In any case, Stanley relished the time that he spent with his family on the farm he had purchased for them at Little Pine Island Lake, north of Grand Rapids. Those days in early September were fruitful, if only because he was joined by both of his parents, who had at last reconciled. But he remained restless and unsure of his future. Wilson Mizner was back in New York working on a Broadway play he had written and appeared to have lost interest in boxing at this time. A family friend, R.P. Dickerson, concerned about Stanley's condition, invited him to visit his ranch near Springfield, Missouri.

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