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BILLY STIFT HAD HARDEST PUNCH OF THEM ALL

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BY W. A. PHELON.

NEW YORK, Feb. 23.—Stanley Ketchel, with that terrific shift and deadly drive, is supposed to have about the most terrible punch that is visible along the fighting lines today. Old Bob Fitzsimmons had an unholy kick in either hand, and when Red Robert once sank that punch in anybody's system all bets could be cashed in. Peter Maher could hit like a flail if he happened to land, and John L. Sullivan could batter like a blacksmith's hammer.

But of all the fighters that ever threw a mighty biff, Billy Stift, who now tends quietly to a peaceful job in Chicago, had the most awful smash, the most nerve-deadening crash—if it ever hit you. Billy was an unlucky fellow, and didn't beat many of the high-class men. He fought most of them, because his gameness and willingness to be the trial horse made him extremely useful, but he was under natural handicaps which kept him from being a leading star. Nevertheless, old Billy Stift has one record that is almost unique, and with which he often refreshes himself, now that his fighting days are over.

HE HIT THEM ALL.

Billy Stift, during his extended ring career, hit more champions, and knocked more of them heels over head, than any other man that ever graced the game, save, perhaps, good old Fitzsimmons. This sturdy fellow was up against it every possible way. He was too short for battle with the reachy ones, too heavy for the middleweights, too light for the heavies and terribly slow on foot. Being tremendously strong, game as a lion and carrying that wallop, he would have been champion under London rules, but the glove game was too fast for him. Bill's whole stock in trade was to sit on his heels, swing that piledriving right with a tremendous swoop and fall headlong to the floor when he missed. Many times Stift's impetus has carried him around twice before he fell upon the carpet, and he hardly ever had a fight without doing this revolving stunt from five to fifty times.

It would be taken for granted that this slow-footed, sawed-off man, unable to box, unable to rush or retreat with any speed, with nothing but bravery and that comical swing, would be the softest sort of mark for the clever fighters, and that he would never hit a scenced man. The cracks all thought so, and they used to snort with laughter at the idea of fighting poor Bill, who, in addition to his slow helplessness, was an old, old man as fighters go. And yet, incredible as it may seem, Bill always hit them.

That round-arm, crazy swing, delivered with a frantic swoop of the chunky body, ought never to have hit a man, but Bill hit the fastest and the neatest of the fighters. He could not follow up with any skill, and so the dizzied champions often recovered and bested him on points, but they tasted that fat fist, and the knockdown record Billy made against the stars will, perhaps, never be repeated.

THE VICTIMS.

Tommy Ryan, supple as a panther, fought old Bill. In and out Ryan circled, graceful as a fawn, cruel as a tiger. He hit poor Bill a thousand times. Suddenly there was a booming sound. Bill had hit the agile Thomas, and, though Ryan got the point decision, his crafty head was one continuous ache for a week to come.

Kid McCoy, towering over the sawed-off Stift, took him on at St. Louis. The cold, mocking face of the Kid flashed here and there; his gloves drove in like bullets, his matchless skill made poor old Bill feel like a helpless child. There was a noise like the breaking up of a log jam and a tall, white figure sank to the floor. Bill had hit the wonderful McCoy. The Kid got up somehow before the ten, stalled it out and finally won—but what a knockdown he did receive!

George Gardner, ablaze with new won glory, said that old Bill would be like packing cherries. The first round was half a minute old when something fell with a substantial plunk. Bill had hit the scenced George, and Gardner was lucky to get himself together before the referee could end the counting.

Al Weinig, who thought he was to be a champion, fought old Bill. The slow-footed Stift was still slower, because he had a bad ankle. He asked Weinig to split the money, and Al cruelly refused, insisting on a 75 and 25 per cent division. When Weinig advanced, hands forward as if grasping the handle-bars, eyes sparkling, bump! Bill had hit him, and he came to twelve minutes later.

ROOT WON ON A FOUL.

Jack Root, foxy and crafty as Ryan himself, took Bill on for an easy killing. Root won, but it was on a foul, because Bill, after he had landed that diabolic wallop on the ambitious Mr. Root, swung again before he was quite off the floor.

Mike Schreck fought the aged William, and all ring-followers know Mike's strange style of advance, crouched low, gloves almost on the floor. He came at Stift that way, and old Bill spun three times in the air. On the third revolution the fist met something soft that gave way and fell upon the padding. It was Mike Schreck, and nobody ever hit Mike so hard before or after.

So the others came and went, all taking a whack at old Bill, and all getting the nine-count from old William, too. Finally Bill gave up the game and is now a respected citizen with a nice home and fine little family. Stift must be 47 years of age, and cares no longer for fistic diversions. But what a record he made while he was going—a record of knock-down punches administered to stars such as few men ever made before and none have rivaled since his time.