

# MY GREATEST RING BATTLES



BY

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# HOW I STARTED BOXING



When I was a boy I lived on the lower east side of New York City, at 8th Street and Avenue "C". There were more than fifty boys living in my block, and they were scrapping all the time among themselves and with boys from other streets, and believe me, you had to know how to defend yourself in that neighborhood—that is, if you wanted to hang on to your marbles or buttons.

As for me, I didn't have any marbles or buttons, for I was a timid, shy, little kid, like most other average boys, and my uncles were continually urging me to get up a little gumption and fight for my rights. These uncles of mine belonged to a club, formed by the young working men in the neighborhood, and they took me over to this club and taught me boxing, and by the time I was 11 years old I was champion of my street—8th Street.

I'll never forget my 11th birthday. I had met and beaten the champions of several of the other streets, but there was one kid named Joey Fogarty, champion of 6th Street, who had quite a reputation as a fighter.

The Athletic Club members thought I was pretty good so they arranged a match between Fogarty and me for their own amusement. The afternoon of the contest, the members of the club took up a collection among themselves and got together 50 cents for a purse . . . 30 cents was to go to the winner and 20 cents to the loser.

The fight took place in the back yard of the Athletic Club. There was a grass plot in the center of the yard, which, at some time or other, must have been a garden, for this plot was surrounded by a border of stone about 2 inches high and 2 inches wide. There were no ropes, and if you forced your opponent outside these stones you had to back up and give him a chance to get back in again.

I've fought hundreds of fights since that time, but this one will always stand out clearly in my memory. There was more fuss and ceremony in that back yard than if this were a world's championship. I had on the lower part of a suit of long, woolen underwear, with the legs cut off a few inches above the knees, and wore canvas sneakers. Fogarty wore a pair of green swimming trunks, with a netting sash wound around his waist and tied in a small bow at the left side. He had on a pair of old skating shoes that looked something like regular boxing shoes. He was all dolled up.

All our friends wanted to be seconds but we finally picked out three each. But before the fight had gone two rounds, each one of our seconds had a host of self-appointed assistants. Rusty Grogan, a tough little red-head—Tony Pollozollo, son of the fruit-peddler and Izzie Winters were my appointed seconds, while Hugo Blotz, a butcher's son, Augie Caster and a fellow named Spraud, were in Joey's corner.

There wasn't any referee—the time keeper acting in that capacity by calling "time" to begin and end the rounds. After we got the gloves on and everything was ready "time" was called and we went at it.

Fogarty was heavier and stronger than I, and he was a real tough fighter, but because of my long practice and the lessons I had received, I was able to outbox him till the round ended. As I returned to my corner my enthusiastic seconds snatched me down on the stool and went to work to get me in shape for the second round. Tony and Rusty Grogan each grabbed one of my legs, yanking them out from under me, and proceeded to rub and knead and pound them with all their strength. They'd seen this done at a regular boxing club, and so thought it was quite the thing to do. Issie grabbed the big soda-water bottle and sloshed water all over my head and face. As the water streamed over me, into my eyes and down my back, Izzie shoved my head back and rammed the water bottle almost down my throat. Water ran up my nose and down my wind pipe and I almost strangled to death. But this wasn't all, for I had extra help. One of the self-appointed assistant seconds seized this opportunity to play a tatoo on my stomach, pounding and kneading it lustily. Boy, were those seconds excited.

In fact, my well-intentioned seconds gave me such a battering and mauling, in a mistaken effort to pep me up, that I was practically on the verge of a knockout when the call of "time" came to my relief and I staggered away from them, glad to get back into the fight, where I had only one fellow socking at me.

Poor Fogarty also took a shellacking from the seconds in his corner during the rest between rounds, and he looked even worse than I did when we squared off again. I don't remember much about the fight itself, but I do remember I thought at the finish that I had won, possibly not because I was the better fighter, but because Fogarty's seconds were much stronger than mine.

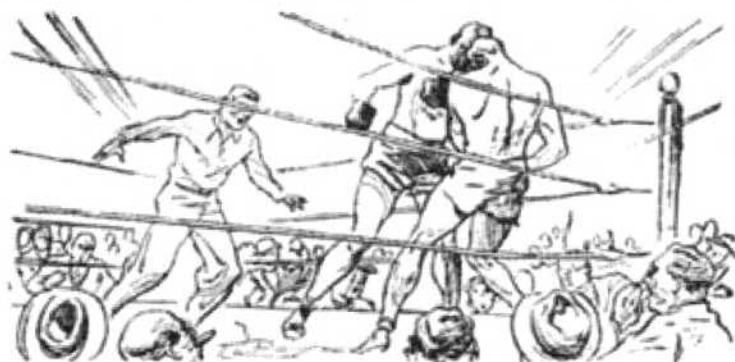
Believe me, we both took much more punishment from our over-enthusiastic seconds than we did in the fight. Well, when the purse was split up, I had to give 3 cents to Rusty, 3 cents to Tony and 3 cents to Izzie—for helping me win the fight.

Well, when I reached the age of 15 one of the boys said that I could get five dollars for doing the same thing in the Boxing Club up the street—and so one night I fought my first "professional fight" and won by a knockout in the second round. I continued boxing regularly every week, against my mother's wishes. I'll never forget my first ten round contest. For this fight I received 20 dollars and a black eye. My mother cried when she saw me and appealed to my father to stop me from fighting. He looked at me and said: "Look at your face—what are you fighting for?" I reached into my pocket for the 20 dollar bill and put it in my father's hand. He turned and showed it to my mother—my mother cried, she didn't want to see her boy get hurt. My father put the 20 dollar bill in his pocket, patted me on the shoulder and said, "Benny, my boy, when are you going to fight again?"



From then on Papa Leonard collected regularly—and the purses were much fatter.

# MY HARDEST FIGHT



No, it wasn't Mitchell, nor was it White or Tendler who gave me my worst moments in the ring. As long as I can use my brains to recollect I'll always tell you that Ever Hammer gave me the toughest time of it. Hammer didn't look so much to me then, though he was a real fighter with a good record. He was a stocky, thick-jawed Swede who could slug and box and hit. We met in Kansas City and aside from under-estimating Hammer I was under another disadvantage that I then couldn't realize. It was a 15-rounder to a referee's verdict and I had never fought more than ten rounds in my life. As I say, Hammer was a real fighter. He had given Johnny Dundee, Freddie Welsh and other tough ones lickings and I should have been prepared for trouble. But I was a cocky kid myself then, for I was just beginning to strike the stride that later brought me to Welsh's title.

Hammer had heard all about me, too, but that didn't jar his confidence. During the instructions he glared daggers at me and gathered me in with an almost disdainful air. I was familiar with that sort of thing, though, a trick I had used and had used against me in the preliminaries. No one ever scared me that way.

## KID LAVIGNE

*World's Lightweight Champion, 1896-1899*

I never saw him box—he was before my time—but my manager, Billy Gibson, told me he was a great champion. He had a world of endurance and was a good puncher.



Hammer bounded from his corner at the bell and before I know what was "up" the fellow shot a hard left hook to my mouth. I didn't even see it coming, and before I could compose myself the Swede was whaling me about with both hands. I was badly rattled and didn't know just how to handle the matter. I tried to sprint, but Hammer caught up with me. Then I tried boxing him, and then slugging. I was second best all the way. My mouth was badly gashed and I was already as dizzy as a ginny sailor. That first round with Hammer was the worst I ever encountered, either before or after the winning of the lightweight title.

Billy Gibson, my manager, was as flabbergasted as I was. I inhaled enough smelling salts to revive an Egyptian mummy. Meanwhile, I tried to sop up some of Gibson's advice thru my buzzing ears. I heard something about roller skates and bicycles and about pulling myself together. But I was in no condition to be inspired by any such talk.

I don't know how I ever got thru the second round. Hammer gave me an awful pelting. I guess he used every blow on me ever heard of in boxing. It must have been an accident that I ever got to my corner.

Gibson was still lashing me. "What are you trying to do? You're a boxer—not a catch-all. Will you pull yourself together? You're breaking my heart. If you lose to this fellow it will put you back a whole year." And so on. I simply told Billy that Hammer really wasn't such a wonder, but that I couldn't get started.

Well, I kept taking a hammering from both Hammer and Gibson until along about the sixth round. Then a curious thing, a psychic touch developed that helped me a lot. Hammer began "kidding" me . . . "So you're from Noo Yark, hey? Say, are you the best they've got down



### JOE GANS

*World's Lightweight Champion . . . 1902*

I've often been asked how I thought I would have fared against Joe Gans. Well, all I can say is that Gans must have been a great fighter and perhaps it was just as well that he was before my time.

in that dump?" Stuff like that, and all accompanied by grins and other side remarks to the ringside.

Now, I always had a lot of pride, and it made me hot to hear this fellow give me the razz. I thought of my pals around Times Square and what they would think if they know . . . and then I began to fight. I boxed better, avoided many of his blows, and began to get in a good dig now and then. Hammer began to slow up a bit himself—and that made me think.

I began to pace myself so that I could still make a showing and yet regain strength enough to inflict some real damage. You see that although I was reaching my man, the blows lacked power. I was still weak from the awful socking I had gotten. But I was using my head, and the plan was a good one.

In the ninth I figured myself strong enough to let out. I took my time, still letting Hammer push the fighting until the right opening arrived. That was when Hammer started a left hook. I beat him to the punch with as cruel a right hook under the heart as any fighter ever got. Hammer was shaken from head to foot. His knees sagged till they almost touched the floor, but he managed to grab me and tumble into a clinch.

That blow was the winner though, and it taught me to use it in every fight thereafter. Hammer was easy for me after that and I punished him thoroughly. The same punch dropped him like a sack of cement in the twelfth, but the tough fellow was up at nine. I appealed to the referee to stop it, for Hammer was helpless, with arms dangling at his sides. The referee refused to act, however, and I was obliged to start another punch. Luckily, Hammer toppled over before it reached him, and the fight was over.

I had a lot of luck—good and bad—with Hammer. We met again

#### **AD WOLGAST**

*World's Lightweight Champion, 1910-1912*

He was a rough and rugged champion and loved to fight. He sure was a crowd pleaser.



after I had become champion. It was one week after my fight with Lew Tendler which took place in Boyle's Thirty Acres in 1922 (where I was supposed to have talked Tendler out of the fight, if you remember). Tendler hit me on the chin in the 8th round and my legs did a Leon Errol. In that contest I had lost two front teeth, but that meant nothing to a fighter in my time—so I started for Michigan City a few days later where I met Hammer for the second time, in a ten round contest. I was worried going into the contest—I had a bad cut over my right eye, which was still open. My mouth and gums were sore—I didn't see how I could get away from being punished on those vulnerable spots for I remembered Hammer of years ago, ripping and tearing ruthlessly, unafraid. However, I was fortunate this time in that Hammer had gone back considerably. He wasn't half the fighter of a few years back or he might have whipped me.

## MY GREATEST RING BATTLES

By **Benny Leonard**

### When I fought Gans, Nelson, Wolgast and Britt.

It is true that Willie Ritchie hung an eye on me as big as an orange in our fight in San Francisco (February, 1919), but let me tell you how it happened. Billy Gibson, my manager, took me across the bay to San Rafael to finish work for Ritchie at Shannon's training camp. Bill then beat it back to 'Frisco, because the night lights looked so much brighter over there, and left me at Shannon's with only one other boxer in camp, roly poly



Willie Meehan, the guy who once beat Dempsey. Willie had a stand-in with the Shannons and slept in the house, like one of the family. That left me to sleep alone in

### FREDDY WELSH

*World's Lightweight Champion, 1914-1917*

I boxed Welsh three times before I won his title. Welsh knew all about the art of self-defense. He was cagy, cunning and knew what his opponent was trying to do, and when I beat Welsh he was slipping.

the training camp dormitory, a big, ramshackle, barn-like building furnished with 20 rickety beds. When the wind blew draughts through the place the building moaned like a saxophone. Not exactly the place, to begin with, for a youngster staying away from home for the first time to enjoy peaceful slumber.

Pop Shannon led me into the dormitory. "Here, Benny, me boy," he said, "you sleep over there," pointing to one of the sagging cots. "That's right next to the bed where the great Joe Gans used to sleep. And right here in this one that great little fighter, Ad Wolgast, slept. And down here at the foot of your bed was Jimmy Britt. And over there was Battling Nelson." . . . And so on down the line (of beds and names) until about all the famous fighters of the century had been located on cots surrounding mine. It made a great impression on me.

All that night I tossed in bed, in that lonesome, dismal barn, a victim of imagination. I felt the ghosts of all those great fighters slipping from their beds and gathering around me. I could hear them chuckling and ridiculing among themselves "that little punk" who pretended to be a fighter. That would be me, of course. It was so real I could see old Ad Wolgast winding up to take a punch at me.

That first night I went at least 20 rounds with Wolgast (all in the nightmare, of course). Did you ever try to box a ghost? It's no fun. The next morning I was as tired and sore as if we had really fought.

The second night it was Leonard vs. Jimmy Britt. I did pretty well in this one. But the following night I took on the Dreadful Dane, Battling Nelson. He never stopped coming at me, but this was my fight. (I was my own matchmaker, wasn't I?) I pasted Nelson around pretty

### **ROCKY KANSAS**

*World's Lightweight Champion, 1925-1926*

I boxed Kansas four times. They called him the Rock of Gibraltar. He was handicapped with an unusually short reach . . . but he was dangerous as a grizzly bear when he got in close.



well. Leonard was swell that night. Nelson batted me, too, but I took it. Believe me or not, I woke up next morning with my ribs actually so sore I had to take a day off from training.

But that fourth night . . . whew! What a battle! The ghost that called around to shadow box with me this time was Joe Gans. Greatest lightweight of all time, some experts called him. He was plenty tough that night. Hardly had I closed my eyes and tried to go to sleep when the bell rang, and not the morning alarm clock bell, either. It was Gans, spoiling for a fight. He shuffled up and jabbed me out of bed with a left hand to the nose. Lo and behold, my eyes popped open and I found myself on the floor. Back into bed I crawled and tried to force the phantasy of a Gans fight out of my mind. But that little dark guy was belligerent. "Get outa there," I'll swear he snarled. I had to fight or run, so I fought. I wasn't sure I could make the door in time if I tried to run.

Gans shuffled in throwing a storm of punches at my head and body. It was all I could do to ward them off. Then I heard the bell ending the first round. I found myself on the floor again and was just creeping back into bed when the fight went on again. Round 2 was a terror. I could not shake the dark shadow. I realized I had to fight, so we went to it. I guess I went 20 rounds with the ghost of Gans. He was down a couple of times and I don't know exactly how many times I had to scramble off the floor. To make it brief, the next morning—day of the Ritchie fight—I told old Pop Shannon, "I fought Joe Gans last night." "Gwan," he grunted, "you're fighting Ritchie tonight." "But I'm



tired, Pop. I fought all last night." So that's why Leonard wasn't himself against Ritchie. I was bruised and worn out before I entered the ring. It wasn't Ritchie who gave

### **SAMMY MANDELL**

*World's Lightweight Champion, 1926-1930*

Sammy Mandell was a good boxer. Not much of a puncher, but knew how to keep his man at long range and won many fights by decisions.

me that black eye—it was Gans, Nelson, Wolgast and Britt. No disgrace about that, eh?

### **How I used psychology on Ritchie Mitchell.**

My fight with Mitchell took place in Milwaukee and up until this particular fight they had been very lenient about allowing a boxer who had floored his opponent to stand over him and take a punch as soon as his adversary got up. This night the referee's instructions were very implicit that there was to be strict enforcement of the rule that a fighter who had scored a knock-down must retire to a neutral corner before the count would begin.

The official wound up his little speech by saying: "Those are your instructions, boys. Is it perfectly clear that if either of you knocks the other down you must retire to a neutral corner?"

Mitchell just stared at me and kept mum. But that line I had read about the old-time fighter popped into my bean. I took the referee by the arm with one of my gloved hands and, pointing to a neutral corner with the other, I asked: "Look, when I knock him down, will it be all right with you if I go over to that corner?" "Sure," answered the referee, "either neutral corner will be O. K." Then I glanced at Mitchell and I give you my word, there were beads of perspiration sticking out on his forehead as big as huckleberries. Ritchie Mitchell was beaten right there. But no matter how much I thought I had the advantage of any opponent, through what you call psychology, it never made me feel for an instant that I could afford to let up, either physically or mentally, until that particular battle was over. I always remembered the old gag about never giving a sucker an even break, on the theory that he might not be a sucker.

### **TONY CANZONERI**

*World's Lightweight Champion, 1930-1933*

Tony Canzoneri in his younger days was a scientific boxer. He knocked out Jacky Kid Berg and decided to be a slugger. Now, he relies on his punch and his aggressiveness more than his skill.



### My opinions of some great fighters.

Jack Dempsey was the greatest heavyweight. He would knock out Joe Louis in one round. Jack would be too aggressive for Joe. Braddock showed Louis up, in my book. Jack Delaney was the finest 175-pounder I ever saw. He knew the art of self-defense. The middleweights are a toss-up between Mickey Walker and Harry Greb. Both had much to recommend them. Jimmy McLarnin was the top welter—and I should know! When I was an old geezer, playing vaudeville out on the Pacific coast, a friend told me that there was a little boy out there—I think he was a bantam then—who would box the ears off me, and I always prided myself on being a Fancy Dan. His name was McLarnin, and he did—years later.

Left Hook Charlie White was the hardest-hitting lightweight I ever met. (Listen to the man's modesty!) He knocked me through the ropes one afternoon out in Benton Harbor, Mich., and if a brother of mine hadn't pushed me back, I'd have been counted out. The greatest all-around fighter I ever saw was Lew Tendler. I told Tendler bedtime stories in our first fight at Boyle's Thirty Acres. He said he couldn't talk with his hands and fight at the same time. Lew gave me the worst licking I ever had in my life the first time we fought.

Little Tony Canzoneri was a topnotch lightweight. I guess he goes in the Hall of Fame. Johnny Dundee was our all-time featherweight. Again, I should know, for I fought Johnny eleven times and most of those decisions were closer than your next breath. Before I was through with that Scotch Wop, I had learned to speak Italian. Johnny Coulon was our No. 1 bantam and you must admit that the little Englishman, Jimmy Wilde, was the all-time flyweight.



#### **LOU AMBERS**

*World's Lightweight Champion . . . 1936*

Lou Ambers has a world of crazy speed. His unorthodox style makes him a hard man to fight. He is still one of the greatest lightweights in the ring today.