

Time Tunnel: Jess Willard, Inept Giant or Forerunner of Lennox Lewis?

by B. R. Bearden

29.11 - Fame is fickle. Two men participate in an event of historical importance, but only one emerges renowned through the long years to follow. The other becomes but a footnote, a name without a face, a curiosity remembered only for his size and the men he fought. Such was the case with big Jess Willard; not once, but twice.

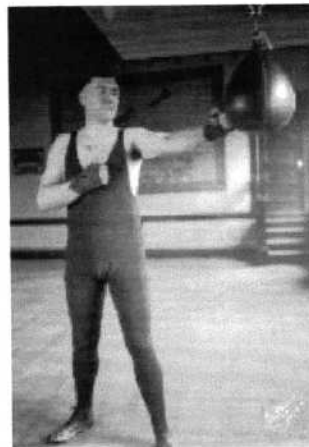
In 1915 Willard took the heavyweight championship of the world from the first black champion, Jack Johnson, and in 1919 he lost it to the savage Jack Dempsey. Two of the greatest fighters of all time stand like bookends on either side of Willard's reign as champion, dwarfing the 6' 6 1/4" giant. The fights themselves emulate each other with their controversy, still heard to this day.

Jack Johnson would later claim he took a dive in his fight with Willard in Havana, Cuba. Willard would counter with, "If he was going to quit, why did he wait until the 26th round to do it?" Johnson supporters pointed to the photo of Jack stretched out on the canvas under a blazing sun, his hand raised to cover his eyes, a sure sign that he wasn't knocked out. Others dispute this evidence because the shadow cast by his upraised arm is over his forehead, not his eyes, something a semi-conscious man might do but not likely if he were actually awake.

Willard, in his turn, would claim Dempsey's gloves were loaded because no man could hit hard enough to break a jaw in seven places, a cheek bone, shatter a nose, knock out several teeth, and break ribs. And all that in three rounds. But the single punch KO of Jack Sharkey, the repeated knockdowns of big Luis Firpo, and even the futile knockdown of Gene Tunney for the "Long Count" demonstrate the punching power of the Manassa Mauler. And just as with the Johnson fight, a photo seems to disprove the claim; a clear photograph of Dempsey climbing into the ring without his gloves, the bandages on his hands clearly not coated with Plaster-of-Paris.

In between Johnson and Dempsey, in between the arguments of sun-baked dives and loaded gloves, Willard himself remains as elusive as a ghost. Partly it was his inactive reign as champion, a term which saw him defend the title but twice over four years and makes him a tepid heavyweight champion. It was a time, before television, when folk were happy just to see the heavyweight champion, in the ring or not. People today dismiss early champions for not defending their titles more often, but in the first quarter of the Twentieth Century, a fighter could pull down more money making appearances, fighting exhibitions, and touring, than he could in the ring with a dangerous opponent who might derail the gravy train.

For his fight with Dempsey, Willard was paid the most he would ever earn in the ring, \$100,000. That's a lot of money now and was a fortune in 1919. But as champion, Willard toured with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show for a minimum guarantee of \$1000 per day, and by taking a



percentage of the gate, he often earned \$2500 a day. His risk free income outside the ring depended on one thing, his position as heavyweight champion of the world. It's little wonder he chose not to put the title in peril as long as possible.

He was born in St. Clere, Kansas, but grew up in Pottawatomie, which led to his boxing nickname of the Pottawatomie Giant. At 6' 6 1/4" and 245 pounds with an 83" reach he was

certainly a giant-sized fighter. He didn't fight his first pro fight until he was 29 years old and was 32 when he won the title. During his career, he fought some other big men, including 6' 4" Luther McCarty, 6' 4" Carl Morris and 6' 6" Dan Daily. He was the greatest of the "Great White Hopes" sent to dethrone Jack Johnson and the only successful one. He combined the features the racially motivated promoters of the time deemed most important; he was big, he could box, and he was white. It was the combination of the first two which set him apart from the other men matched against Johnson.

Not to disparage Jack Johnson, who received enough unfair treatment in his own time, but he did benefit from the fact that during his reign, once he excluded black fighters from his opponent list, he was left with a line up of men who were either very good but small, or very big but not so good.

He took the title from 5'7" Tommy Burns, enraged the white race with his self-assured nature and preference for white women, and weathered a storm of hate and racism that no black fighter before or since has ever seen. Still, the fighters thrown at him were, for the most part, the same men the champion before Burns, Jim Jeffries, had looked over and found unworthy challengers to the title.

By refusing to fight another black fighter, Johnson was left with the white fighters in a division so weak that Jeffries had walked away unchallenged. In a frenzy of "bigger is better" (as we hear today regarding the heavyweights), they began throwing the biggest white men they could find at Johnson, regardless of any boxing skill. When that failed, they tried the best white fighters they could find, regardless of their smaller size.

After Burns, Johnson fought Frank Moran, who was 3-2-1 at the time. Then he fought light heavyweight Philadelphia Jack O'Brien, a great fighter himself, but one who never weighed more than 165 pounds. Johnson went ND 6 with O'Brien, but in O'Brien's next fight a month later, middleweight Stanley Ketchel knocked him out in 3. Well, if O'Brien the light heavyweight can't do the trick, how about middleweight Ketchel? Or so the theory must have went, for later that year 5'9", 167 pound Michigan Assassin Stanley Ketchel was in the ring with 209 pound Johnson. The fight ended in a knockout of Ketchel in the 12th, but not before the middleweight had put the champion down for an 9 count.

After O'Brien, before meeting Ketchel, Johnson got 5' 9" Tony Ross with a 10-6-2 record, then Kid Cutler with a 1-2-0 to boast about. After Ketchel, they even dredged up old Jim Jeffries, despite a 6 year lay off and the need to shed 80 pounds in a few short months, and pushed him into the ring with Johnson; it ended much as expected, with a 15th round KO of Jeffries.

And so it goes. Until the coming of Willard, Johnson's opponents for the most part fit into the pattern I've described; good and small or big and not-so-good. Still, Johnson is an All-Time Great and Willard isn't worth consideration; at least in the minds of many boxing enthusiasts. It is my belief that the former is correct, Johnson was great, but the latter is false. Willard was a good fighter, and on that April hot day in 1915, he was the better fighter. He beat Johnson not only because Jack was past his prime, but also because he was good enough to do it.

In the excellent book "A Flame of Pure Fire", Roger Kahn says, "Willard was a stand-up boxer with a giant's reach. He threw long left jabs and then leaned back, a tower too tall to hit hard unless you charged him. But charging this enormous man was dangerous. Willard's power punches were a straight, clubbing right and a right uppercut, which startled, hurt, and wore down onrushing opponents."

In 1913, Willard dropped a young fighter named John "Bull" Young with an uppercut in the 11th round. The terrible blow drove the base of Young's jaw up into his brain and he died the following day. Willard was arrested and charged with manslaughter. The charges were dropped, but Young's death would haunt the gentle natured Willard the remainder of his long life.

Willard knew how to use his size and was surprisingly fast for such a big man. What films remain of Jess show him not to be lumbering and slow but rather agile and balanced. All of his life he resented comparisons to Primo Carnera, insisting he was a real fighter who didn't need fixed fights to win.

The total destruction of Willard by Dempsey seems stark evidence that Big Jess was remarkable only for size, but those who lived in the time, who saw Willard in person and saw him fight, didn't feel that way about him before his savage beating at the hands of Dempsey. Step back a week in time before the bout with Dempsey and we're presented with a different picture of Willard the champion.

Promoter Tex Rickard had misgivings about putting Dempsey in with the giant Willard. He said to Dempsey, "Willard is a big man. You look small." "I strip big," Dempsey responded. Rickard went on, "Every time I look at you, you get smaller. I'm afraid if I put you in the ring with Willard, you'll get killed. I'm afraid Willard will kill you."

The great sports writer Ring Lardner was an expert on the sport, a man who was ringside for every major fight of his era. And he saw Willard as a real fighter and favored him over the young challenger. He was so convinced of Willard's ability that he bet \$500 on him to beat Dempsey.

Dempsey's father visited Willard's training camp and saw him sparring. When asked by newspapermen to project the outcome of the fight, he picked Willard to win.

When Willard removed his robe in the ring and turned his back on Dempsey to wave his arms over his head to the crowd, Dempsey recalled, "Willard's back was a solid wall. His fists looked like they were twice as high in the air as I was tall. I saw the muscles standing out on his back. He was in terrific shape. I said to myself, 'This guy is liable to kill me!'"

Willard himself was extremely confident of his ability to whip Dempsey. He said, "I've killed a man. I never

want to do that again. I'm going to carry this boy Dempsey for the full twelve rounds, not hurting him any more than I absolutely have to. Then I'm quitting the fight game and going back home to run my farm."

The fight, of course, went much different. Almost killed in the ring, Willard set a standard for going down in defeat that no heavyweight champion has matched yet. His skill can be doubted by those who put no faith in the words of the men who saw him fight. His right to the championship can be doubted by those who believe Jack Johnson second only to Honest Abe Lincoln when it came to being truthful. But, his heart and courage erased any measure of doubt the day he lost the title.

After his near-death experience with Dempsey, Willard pretty much vanished from the boxing scene. He didn't seek or want a rematch. Four years after losing the title to Dempsey, he tried a comeback, winning a lackluster bout against Floyd Johnson and then being KO'd by Luis Firpo, but it was a brief and futile return. The violence of the sport never appealed to Jess and he made enough money to live very well for the rest of his life. He died in 1968, two weeks shy of his 86th birthday.

More than 80 years separate the first giant heavyweight champion from the current one. A comparison based on evidence is heavily weighted in favor of Lewis, especially if we minimize the prose of the writers of that earlier day and maximize the vastly superior film used to record today's boxing matches.

It's easier to assess Lennox Lewis. We see him fight on our televisions and there are wonderful color films of his bouts to study. He moves well for a man his size, has boxing skill and power, but his chin isn't just suspect, it's convicted. Still, he is a good fighter and rightfully heavyweight champion.

But Willard comes to us through old newspaper accounts and flickering films that drop every other frame. Yet even in those, he also moves well for a man his size, he shows skill, and the tragic death of "Bull" Young proves he had power. His refusal to quit against Dempsey, the punches he took that were so damaging that even today some assert the gloves must have been loaded, showed he could take a punch. His victory over Jack Johnson was certainly more impressive than Lewis's destruction of Mike Tyson. The gap between the two men in terms of their ability as boxers isn't nearly as great as the gap of years between their reigns.

Was Willard as good as Lewis? Probably not. Does he deserve better than a footnote between Jack Johnson and Jack Dempsey? Absolutely.

Sources:

1. "A Flame of Pure Fire" by Roger Kahn
2. "The Heavyweight Champions" by Stanely Weston Ring Magazine

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