

MARVIN HART-TRUE HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION

By Matt Donnellon

This article attempts to redress the lack of information on this great fighter of the first decade of the twentieth century and tries to evaluate his true position in pugilistic history.

Marvin Hart was born on September 16th 1896 in Jefferson County, near Louisville, Kentucky. His father Samuel was born in Pennsylvania and was noted for his strength and fearlessness. His mother was a Kentuckian and she too was tall and muscular. Marvin soon found that he excelled at wrestling and fighting. He was also an excellent footballer and played left end for the Louisville Athletic club football team. Finishing school at eighteen, the youngster started learning his trade as a plumber. He was to be twenty-three before he entered the profession that made him famous.

Marvin never boxed formally as an amateur but a Professor Gearhardt, at that time physical instructor at the Young Men's Hebrew Association, had been giving him boxing lessons. Hart was challenged to a bout with a local named Joseph Eichenberger. Marvin enlisted another local boxer, Charles Slusher to train the now twenty three year old while Eichenberger sought the help of **William Schiller**. Schiller, however knocked out his protégé in sparring, prompting his retirement and Schiller took his place against young Hart.

The date of this debut is uncertain, usually been listed as December 12th 1899 but listed as January 17th 1900 in the only contemporary record that I found. Hart weighed only 158 to his opponents 190 for the scheduled twenty rounder. The result is not in question, a six round KO win for the aspiring champion. He repeated the dose a month later, this time in four stanzas.

Next up was **Charles Meisner** who had a reputation that, while in the regular army, he had whipped all the soldiers that thought they could fight. He fell in one and "**Australian Tommy**" **Williams** went the same way, in two.

Marvin stuck to his home patch of Louisville for the rest of the year and closed it out with 5 stoppage wins over **Louis Seifker**, **Harry Rogers**, **Kid Hubert** (twice), and **Peter Trainor**. Hubert and Hart boxed at 156 pounds in their first clash at the Nonpareil Athletic Club, Lexington with Hart the winner on a sixth round disqualification.

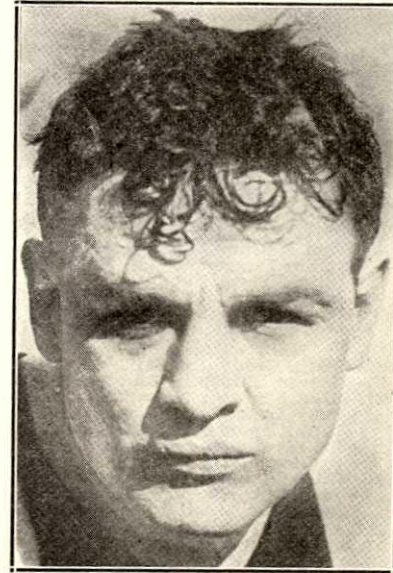
A step up in class was required and came in the form of **Al Weinig**. Al stood 6 feet 1 inch and tipped in at around 190 pounds. He had wins over Jim Daly, Dick O'Brien, and "Doc" Payne and would follow up the Hart fight by beating Dick Moore, Jim Scanlon, Dan Creedon, Billy Stift, John Willie, Jim Jeffords and Jack McCormack. After a tough battle during which Weinig had the best of the early fighting, at the Music Hall, the man from Buffalo hit the mat three times in round eleven of the scheduled twelve and was counted out on the last visit.

The Kentucky man was on a roll and the useful "**Australian**" **Jimmy Ryan** went out in eight a month later. Ryan boasted a draw with Jack Root, about whom more anon. Next came another step up, in the form of another conqueror of Jimmy Ryan, **Tommy West**. Billy Stift, Joe Walcott, Dick Moore, Charlie Stevenson, Jack Bonner, George Byers, Billy Hanrahan, Frank Craig, "Doc" Payne and Philadelphia Jack O'Brien had all fallen to the little man from Wales.

The bout took place at the Southern Athletic Club and West, despite weighing only 158 to his opponents 165 was the betting favorite. He was coming off a middleweight title loss to the great Tommy Ryan and hoped to garner a quick win. It was not to be, and from the thirteenth on, West was down numerous times before referee Tim Hurst brought proceedings to a halt in round 16 of a mooted 20.

Dan Creedon, one time big hope from New Zealand was on the come back trail, Frank Craig, Alec Greggains, Frank Childs, Nick Burley, Al Weinig and England's Jem Smith were just some of the top men he had defeated in his long career. In a savage fight at the Southern A.C. set for 25 rounds, Hart still gaining weight at 170 pounds, sent his man, 167 pounds, crashing to the canvas in round three. The bell saved him in round five but a right hook sent Dan down and out in the sixth. His corner tried to revive him by sprinkling water during the count and this led to an all-out melee. The police soon cleared it all up.

Big Jack Beauscholte was trotted out next and lasted into the tenth before Marvin's career met its first hiccup. It came in the unlikely form of former amateur middleweight star "**Wild**" **Billy Hanrahan**. Hanrahan had drawn with George Byers and taken Joe Walcott into the twelfth round as well as starching Kid Carter in twelve and winning and losing against Jack Bonner but nothing in his record hinted at what



MARVIN HART, Jefferson Co., Ky.

was about to happen. They met at the Auditorium in Louisville and from the outset Hart looked out of sorts. He was to claim later that he was drugged and while this was a common defense in those days, contemporaneous accounts bear out that Marvin seemed ill at ease and lacking a confident air before the first bell. Whatever the reason, the 175 pound "Wild" Bill caught him cold, knocking him down with a right to the neck. A dazed Hart got to his feet to be met by a left to the body and a right to the point of the jaw which ended his interest in the proposed twelve rounder as Tim Hurst tolled the fatal ten.

This defeat has never been adequately explained, as Hart never again showed any signs of either a nervous disposition or a "glass" chin. Marvin went quickly about rebuilding his shattered career and picked no less an opponent than the hard-hitting **Billy Stiff**. Stiff wasn't much of a boxer but he hit as hard as a mule. Weinig, West, "Mysterious" Billy Smith and George Byers were some who had felt his power. After a hard and fast three rounds, it was the man from Chicago who bit the dust.

The experienced **Dick O'Brien** came to the Empire Athletic Club in April 1902. Craig, Weinig, Sandy Ferguson, Ed Binney, "Scaldy" Bill Quinn and Bobby Dobbs were the big wins on his résumé as well as a draw with Kid McCoy. He was completely outclassed by the hard-hitting Kentuckian and after three rounds of hitting to the face and body. Hart knocked his hapless victim out with a right hand to the solar plexus. The impressive winner threw punches "with such rapidity that it was impossible to keep count of them".

Kid Carter was the next to test the Louisville comer and a tough test it promised to be. In an up and down career the then twenty two year old held wins over George Cole, Billy Hanrahan, Joe Walcott, and Jack Bonner. More significantly, he was coming off two great wins in 1902 over the great Joe Choynski (KO1) and Al Weinig. After eight and a half rounds of terrific fighting Hart knocked out the Kid with a tremendous left to the jaw, delivered when he himself seemed almost ready to fall. Both men were severely battered and the winner was bleeding freely from the mouth and nose and his face and right eye were badly swollen. Carter maintained he never met any opponent who could take punishment like Hart.

In August **Billy Stiff** was again beaten, this time after six rounds of "awkward fighting" in a disappointing showing. It took Hart four rounds to get going and then he started landing his straight left and "by rough work held his advantage". The fight marked two milestones however, it was Marvin's first "away" contest, having been held in Chicago and it was also his first bout to go to a decision.

October 16 saw **Kid Carter** renew acquaintances with Hart, this time at the Penn A.C. in Philadelphia over six rounds in a no decision affair. Again, it was a crowd pleaser and the honors were fairly even though the tough Louisville lad had the edge.

Jack Root from Chicago now crossed paths with Hart for the first time. Born in Austria in 1876 he amassed a brilliant record going 46 fight undefeated against all the top middle and heavyweights of the period. The names of the men he defeated are a who's-who of the period and were littered with former foes of Harts. Root is lightly regarded today but very few, if any, fighters in the history of the light-heavyweight division have better records. Stiff, Jim Ryan, Craig, Greggains, West, Dick O'Brien, Creedon, Byers, Carter, and George Gardiner were just a sample of his victims. Australian Jimmy Ryan and Tommy Ryan had draws against Root and it was the outstanding George Gardiner that snapped his streak in August 1902.

Root bounced back with a win over Kid Carter but many felt the Kid deserved the decision. Hart felt that he was ready for Root. He was wrong.

Root took the six round decision in the Glicman Theatre, under the auspices of the Lyceum Club, Chicago, even though Marvin always maintained that he got a raw deal against the local hero. Accounts at the time said that Root was just too fast and cute for the stronger southerner.

Nothing daunted, Hart was engaged for a six round no decision affair with "**Philadelphia**" **Jack O'Brien** at the Penn Art club in that man's hometown. George Cole, Yank Kenny, Craig and Choynski numbered amongst Jack's many scalps and Jack was moving with the big boys having tackled the dangerous Peter Maher in a couple of close no-decision affairs.

O'Brien was a cautious operator and felt that Hart was too strong for him. He insisted that Hart agree not to KO him, Hart agreed but Jack wanted his opponent to put up a forfeit. Hart refused, simply because he hadn't got the money anyway. Jack then demanded that Hart's purse be frozen in the event of the unthinkable happening and O'Brien been kayoed, Hart again refused whereupon the crafty Philadelphian announced to the crowd that Hart, the heavier by fifteen pounds, was too big for him to tackle. Marvin, seeing a badly

needed payday, going down the drain, relented and Jack promptly went back to the crowd and bravely (!) agreed to go against the heavier man!

O'Brien had the better of it early on but in the fifth Hart forgot himself and forced the issue. In the last, he drove O'Brien to the mat for a nine count and the lighter man ran and hugged until the bell saved O'Brien; - and Hart!

All-in -all 1902 was a good year and on the domestic front, he had married the pretty Florence Zeigler on September 2nd. On the fighting front, he had moved to a level just behind the big boys. In Mick Paul's brilliant retrospective computer ratings, he comes in at joint tenth with Kid Carter at the end of '02.

The men ahead of him are impressive. Jeffries, Fitz, Ryan, Johnson, Gus Ruhlin, Root, Gardiner, O'Brien and "Denver" Ed Martin.

1903 saw a continuation of the good form with a four round disqualification win over capable **Jack Bonner**. Jack knocked his man through the ropes in the second but then resorted to butting Hart in the stomach. Referee George Siler promptly awarded the verdict to Hart. Bonner, too, had mixed with the best and had scored wins over Burley, West, Joe Butler, Dick O'Brien, Creedon, Dick Moore, Yank Kenny and Hanrahan.

A return with "**Philadelphia**" **Jack O'Brien** in that man's city saw the fighting plumber having the best of it with his superior strength and harder hitting. O'Brien always had trouble with Hart and never wanted any part of a decision fight over a long number of rounds with him. Marvin wasn't as big and slow as the usual heavies that Jack bewildered with his skill and speed but yet he had the strength, stamina and punching power of the bigger men. Jack was down in the fifth and the bell was a welcome relief at the end of the sixth as he was all in.

Irishman **George Gardiner**, the future light-heavyweight champion of the world (he would win the title in his next fight with a KO of Jack Root) was the next in line. Like Root, O'Brien and Hart he had a tremendous record. Carter, Craig, Walcott, Byers, Maher, Weinig, Stift were some of the names on his plus side and he had given the outstanding Jack Johnson a good argument over the twenty round distance six months earlier. A great and close contest went to the wire until Hart broke his hand and had to retire in the twelfth of a set-for twenty. George hit faster and oftener, Marvin hit harder and was the stronger.

The great **Joe Choynski** was engaged in a six round no-decision battle in Philadelphia. Joe had mixed with the best, champions Corbett, Fitz, Jeffries, Johnson and near champs like Sharkey, Maher, Ruhlin and McCoy and had held his own with them all. He was on the slide now but after six rounds of fast, furious and skillful action, most observers felt honors were even.

Edward "Kid" Carter re-entered the fray in December '03 in Boston and another mighty struggle ensued. Peter Maher, John Willie and Joe Butler had bit the dust against the "Kid" since their last encounter and this one was to be a classic. It took place at the Criterion Athletic Club, and was a savage affair. Carter was knocked down in the third and clinched to survive. From there to the ninth, it was warfare but Hart had the better of it. Carter opened a bad cut over Hart's left eye, which bled freely but from that point to the finish in the fifteenth round Hart repeatedly floored the Kid. With one minute left in the fight referee Buckley waved off the action to save Carter from serious harm after he was knocked down twice in that round.

1904 saw Hart back at the Criterion Club, against the local man **George Gardiner** who had won and lost the light-heavyweight crown since last fighting Hart, beating Root and losing to Fitz. They fought fifteen furious rounds and at the finish, it was declared a draw. The decision was not a popular one, for it was the opinion of all that Hart had the best of it, dropping the Irishman twice in the second. In all other rounds, he punched his opponent around the ring and completely outclassed him.

John Willie, another useful journeyman was the next obstacle in Chicago and in a poor performance, honors were even at the end of the six no-decision rounds. Hart came down sick after the fight and this may account for the poor performance. Willie was no slouch, however, as his wins over Weinig and Beauscholte testify. It took a rally in the last round to earn Hart the draw.

The biggest top class fighter of the time was **John "Sandy" Ferguson** who at six feet three and 197 pounds was a formidable foe. Dick O'Brien, Bob Armstrong, "Klondyke" Haynes, Joe Walcott and George Byers were men who had succumbed to his tough, no-nonsense style. The venue for his clash with Marvin was the Whittington Park Athletic Club, Hot Springs, Arkansas, before a large crowd. Hart forced the fighting at all times but caught a lot of left jabs to the face. Ferguson sent him to the floor for a seven count in the seventh round but as he often did, Hart finished well in the latter part. Swings, uppercuts and kidney

punches swung the closest of contests in the favor of the lighter man at 185 pounds. Hart had started a 2 to 1 favorite.

Back to Philadelphia for a date with another big heavy, the Akron Giant **Gus Ruhlin** for a six round no-decision clash at the National Athletic Club. Steve O'Donnell, Maher, Joe Goddard, Sharkey were the caliber of men that Gus had fought and beaten and he even had a draw with the champion Jeffries. Hart entered the affray against the three inches taller Ruhlin with an injured left hand but it bothered him little as he dominated the early exchanges before dumping his adversary in the forth, for a nine count with a big right hand. In the last round, the men went toe to toe in a fast and furious finish after which it was generally felt that Hart had the better of it.

They met again a month later at the Eureka Athletic and Sporting Club in Baltimore. This time over twelve rounds and Gus had trained hard in the meantime but the result was much the same, though some felt that Gus was worth a draw this time around.

At this point in time Hart was just about the top white contender for Jeffries title and a contest was arranged for early 1905 with the other logical contender, the top black heavyweight, **Jack Johnson**. Woodard's Pavillion, San Francisco was the meeting place of the two hopefuls. Twenty rounds of hard fighting ensued with Hart the aggressor and Johnson the superior in strength and skill. Harts dogged approach and body punches won the day and he was awarded the decision by referee Alec Greggains. Speaking afterwards Greggains said, "Hart won because he was aggressive throughout the fight. He wanted to fight continually. Johnson, in my opinion, dodged it". Johnson would later claim that the sight of a revolver in the lap of a ringsider encouraged him to ease up on Hart but after retirement he gave Marvin his due, saying he was one of his toughest men he ever met.

Breaking his own Southern induced color bar had pushed our man to the very head of the contenders for championship honors.

A date with **John Willie** on May 8th at the Washington Sporting Club in Philadelphia marked time for Hart and he had little difficulty beating his opponent, hitting him at will in a rather poor contest before a small crowd. His next contest was to be a different kettle of fish, Hart's manager, Jack McCormack, secured a world title fight with **Jack Root** on July 3rd at Reno, Nevada.

Since his win over Hart, Jack had defeated Kid McCoy to win the first generally recognized light-heavyweight title and then lost it to Gardiner. However, he had since avenged this reversal and also topped the up-and-coming Fireman Jim Flynn. All this conspired to make him the clear leader in the betting.

The retired champion Jim Jeffries acted as referee in this contest to find his successor and Root weighed in at 171 pounds to Harts 190. in what was to prove a good fight, Root started fast and his speed won him most of the early rounds while Hart looked for the body. Round seven saw a steady assault by Jack, culminating in Hart crashing to the floor from a big right hand just before the bell. Without much doubt, if he had been caught earlier in the round he would not have survived.

It was a tribute to his recuperative powers that he came out in the eight and took the action to Root and by the tenth was starting to score heavily with right hand swings. Twelve proved to be the faithful number for the Austrian as a tremendous right to the chest resounded through the theatre and smashed Root to the floor where he remained for the duration of the full count. \$3,200 accrued to Marvin as his end of the purse but more importantly, Hart was world champion!

Hart's right to be considered a true linear champion has often been questioned but at the time all agreed that he was either number one or two in the pecking order and his win over Root was universally acclaimed. He had proved himself superior to all the leading contenders, Root, Gardiner, O'Brien, Carter, Johnson and Ruhlin. The retrospective regrading of Hart's achievements and abilities stem from Johnson's victory over Burns. The best way to diminish the "Negro's" win was to denigrate Burns as a fighter, and if Tommy was no good, then it followed that neither was Hart. The truth was that Burns was a great fighter and probably a good match for any champion up to that time, Jeffries excepted.

Pat Callahan, a miner from Butte was engaged for a four round non-title tilt in his hometown in Montana. Despite conceding a great weight difference to the champion, he is credited with putting Hart to the canvas in the opening round. He paid the price in the next as the aggressive Hart put him to sleep.

Tommy Burns, a five feet seven inch Canadian, had risen the ranks to challenge Hart for the title. The lightly regarded contender was a two to one underdog for their clash at the Pacific Athletic Club, Los Angeles before 4,000 fight fans. Tommy started nervously in the opener but from there to the finish, he out

boxed a bloody and increasingly rough and frustrated Hart in all rounds except the tenth and twelfth. The decision of referee Charles Eyton was a formality.

Marvin licked his wounds and boxed a lively four rounds no decision bout with southpaw **Mike Schreck** in Madison Square Garden in New York. After the fight Hart reckoned he had learnt enough to master his difficult and awkward opponent, Schreck was the “Spinks Jinx”, the Mike “the Bounty” Hunter, the Jimmy Young of the era. The man from Ohio held a win over Burns as well as Willie and Gardiner. He was to prove to be Marvin’s nemesis.

1907 started with a pair of victories in Hot Springs. The first was a very impressive two round demolition job on his old foe from the early Louisville days, **Harry Rogers**. A big right hand did the trick. The second opponent was the once great **Peter Maher**, perhaps the biggest hitter of the period. He was well over the hill at this time and only once in the first round did he connect with his famous right swing, which visibly affected Hart. The man who had laid low Choynski, Slavin, Goddard, Ruhlin, Godfrey and hundreds more was but a shadow of his former self and a body blow sent him to the mat at the gong. The Kentuckian then struck but two blows in the second and the Irishman wisely lay down.

This activity saw Hart line up a big contest at Tonopah, Nevada, with **Mike Schreck**, advertised for the world heavyweight title. Since their first clash, Schreck had knocked out Rogers, Ben Tremble, John Willie and Tony Ross. It was a terrific scrap with Hart the aggressor and Schreck giving as good as he got, the right wrist that Marvin had broken against Gardiner gave out in the sixth but still he gamely fought on. Mike was nearly put away in the eighteenth but rallied in the next two and Hart was a sorry sight at the end of the twentieth. Half way through the next, Hart’s seconds threw in the sponge and referee George Siler awarded the fight to Schreck. Hart was never the same fighter again after this punishing contest and neither was Schreck.

Ten months later, Hart re-entered the ring to score a win over **John Willie** in a scheduled twenty at Hot Springs. Willie was disqualified by referee “Doc” Hottum of Memphis for hitting Hart on the ear after a break in the fourth round. He then boxed a draw with old foe **Kid Hubert** in the Kid’s home base at Lexington before tackling the top-flight contender, **Jack “Twin” Sullivan**. Sullivan had just started to slip but in his time had defeated Burns, Burley, Schreck, Billy Squires and had crossed gloves with almost every top Middle and Heavy of that time. He should have added Marvin to his list of victories as he was well on top of their scheduled twelve round bout at the Armory in Boston, when a body blow doubled Hart up. He claimed a foul and referee Dan Donnelly agreed and awarded him the contest. Another six rounder with **John Willie** .in a no decision affair closed out 1908.

1909 saw Hart score his last victory at the West Side A.C. McDonoughville, New Orleans over **Tony Ross**. Ross, himself, had been a leading contender, and had beaten Schreck and Gardiner. Marvin won on a thirteen round disqualification. Ross would fight world champion Jack Johnson three months later and would go on to record good wins over Frank Moran and “Sandy” Ferguson.

Mike Schreck broke Harts jaw in the third at Terre Haute before he was rescued by his seconds and he had his swan song against the big “white hope” Carl Morris in December 1910. Swan song is hardly the appropriate word as Hart weighed a career high of 212 pounds to his opponents 235 and after been blasted to the floor he survived to the middle of the third before his corner mercifully called *finis* to his career.

After retiring, the former champion pursued his hobbies of plumbing and farming on his property on the Barnstown pike. He took particular delight in raising Plymouth Rock chickens. He also acted as referee at many boxing contests. In the later part of his career, he operated a tavern at 466 East Market Street in downtown Louisville. Marvin was not blessed with any children and passed away at his Fern Hill home, after an illness lasting nine months, on September 17th, 1931. Reportedly, he died of an enlarged liver and blood pressure problems. He is buried with his wife Florence who died in 1967, in Resthaven Cemetery six miles south of Louisville.

Marvin Hart was a modest man and very underrated today, both in contrast to Louisville’s other more famous heavyweight champion.

The epitaph on his headstone says a lot. **“Champion Heavyweight Boxer of the World 1905 to 1906. A friend of countless hundreds. A man among men, an ideal of children, a clean fighter whose example will continue to inspire the coming generations.”**

Sources: Marvin Hart-The fighter and the Man by David Nicolaou. (Boxing Illustrated, May 1973)

Contemporary Newspaper Articles 1900-1911

Marvin Hart's vital statistics: Hart's stats are quite surprising as a comparison with all other champions up to 1983 in that year's Ring Record Book shows. Only Carnera had a bigger neck and calf measurements than Marvin while his normal chest dimension is only surpassed by giants, Willard and Carnera.

Height	5-11 1/2
Weight	156-212 lbs
Chest-nor	45 in.
Chest-exp	47 1/2
Waist	35
Biceps	15 1/2
Neck	18 1/4
Calf	17 1/4
Thigh	25
Forearm	14

MIKE PAUL'S EXCELLENT ALL TIME RATINGS OF THE HEAVYWEIGHTS HAD HART IN 46TH POSITION.

BELOW ARE HIS RATINGS FOR 1901-1910 WHERE WE ARE COMPARING THE ALL-TIME HIGH OF FIGHTERS PROVIDED THAT THEY HIT THEIR HIGH POINT WITHIN THAT PERIOD.

**1-JEFFRIES 2-GARDNIER
3-BURNS 4-HART 5-RYAN
6-KAUFMAN 7-ROOT 8-O'BRIEN
9-SCHRECK 10-SQUIRES
11-JEANNETTE 12-MARTIN
13-LANG 14-ARMSTRONG
15-FERGUSON 16-CARTER**

1901-1910(MY PICKS)

- 1- JACK JOHNSON
- 2- SAM LANGFORD
- 3- TOMMY BURNS
- 4- SAM MCVEY
- 5- MARVIN HART
- 6- DENVER ED MARTIN
- 7- PHIL JACK O'BRIEN
- 8- JACK ROOT
- 9- JIM FLYNN
- 10- AL KAUFMANN
- 11- SANDY FERGUSON
- 12- GEORGE GARDNIER
- 13- TONY ROSS
- 14- MIKE SCHRECK
- 15- JIM BARRY
- 16- JACK TWIN SULLIVAN
- 17- JOHN WILLIE
- 18- AL WEINIG
- 19- KID CARTER
- 20- BILL LANG
- 21-
- 22-
- 23-
- 24-

Was Mike Schreck a "world" heavyweight champ?

Following are some press cuttings of a May 30th 1907 fight between former champ Marvin Hart and his nemesis Mike Schreck. These articles were published in many newspapers including the Forth Wayne Journal Gazette and The Cochocton Daily Age. Tommy Burns was the real champion and Jack Johnson the champion in waiting but Schreck held a win over Burns and Hart had got the nod over Johnson, so they probably had more legitimate claims than many of our claimants since the 1980's. Any claim Schreck had was laid to rest by an up-and-coming Al Kaufman, who stopped Mike in seven rounds in August, 1907. Schreck was an interesting character, boasting wins over Hart, Burns, George Gardner, John Willie, Tony Ross and many more top men. He stood 5-8 ¾ and grew into a 180 pounder.