

SAGA OF THE FIGHTING MARINE

Gene Tunney As He Was And Is

"... and Heeney was lying on the ropes in the 10th round with the referee putting the count on him, but at nine, the gong sounded the end of the round. Heeney's handlers carried him to his corner, bleeding, cut about, helpless, for I say in all modesty that Tom had taken a terrible lacing. I was at the peak of my career and had never fought better. His seconds faced the seemingly hopeless task of reviving him during the minute's rest. Restoratives in the shape of brandy and smelling salts were administered, and the gong signalled the start of the 11th round. Immediately Heeney tore across the ring and faced me in my corner almost before I had left my chair. I was amazed at the courage of the man! It was in this round that the referee stopped the fight—a fight in which Tom Heeney displayed what, in my humble opinion, is the greatest of all human qualities—Courage."

Written for "The Listener"
by "Mac of 2YD"



COMMANDER J. J. TUNNEY who, as officer-in-charge of physical education in the U.S. Navy, is visiting New Zealand

THE above, in Commander J. J. ("Gene") Tunney's own words, is the tribute paid to the first New Zealand-born boxer to fight for the world's heavyweight crown since the Maori Herbert Slade was laid low by John L. Sullivan.

But there was a time when Gene himself displayed the same quality attributed to "Honest Tom." It was on the occasion of Tunney's first and only defeat in the professional ring. Commander Gene fought on at least 110 occasions; 42 while a member of the American Expeditionary Force, and 68 recorded battles after his return from World War I.

After returning to his native heath for demobilisation, Private J. J. Tunney of the U.S.M.C. looked about him for lucrative employment. The wolf was not quite at the door but had a hopeful gleam in its eye. The gleam faded, however, as the fists that had won the American Forces' light-heavy weight title in France, began to make themselves felt among the American light-heavies.

The Fight Against Greb

Early in 1922 Tunney took his first important step on the ladder of success when, in 12 rounds, he won the American 175 pound title from Batling Levinsky. In May of the same year, just two days before his 24th birthday, Tunney defended his crown against Harry Greb. Greb was a popular fighter, very unorthodox and known as the "Pittsburgh Windmill." He was the originator of the "perpetual motion" style of fighting.

Gene could do little with Greb. The Pittsburgher never once let-up in the middle of the whole 15 rounds, and Tunney received a terrible lacing; but the word "quit" was not in the Tunney make-up. With a fractured nose, both eyes cut open, bruised and battered, Tunney endured those 15 rounds against one of the greatest ring-men the boxing game has known. He lost his title. Courage? Yes, but greater was to come. Through swollen lips, Gene told his manager that he wanted a return with Greb.

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difficulty of getting a house tempts them to find the solution in that way, naturally. But I wish you'd make one thing plain—we're not a charitable institution. Our job is to give men, the opportunity to come back here and start off from where they might have been now if they hadn't been away—taking into account the changes in our mode of life, however. To do that we need everybody's good will—the servicemen's, and the public's."

"Listen," said Tunney, "I can beat Greb. While he was hitting me, I was studying him. He's like a buzz-saw. Well the only way to stop a buzz-saw is to throw a spanner into the machinery, isn't it? Well, I've got that spanner. Next time we fight and Harry comes into me, I'll attack his body, and I'll keep on doing it. Get him signed up for a return with me."

His Taste for Shakespeare

Gene's training for this return fight was no different from that of other boxers, in as much as road work, sparring, and so on were concerned; but Gene did more. He began to study the human body, the bones, the nerve centres, the muscles of the stomach. Reading, too, had its place, in his training day. Hugo, Shaw, Jack London, Shakespeare were read and re-read. Reading brought relaxation, he said, but only the right type of reading. "Shakespeare Tunney" was no mere ballyhoo catch-phrase coined to arrest the gullible public. Gene was, and is, a genuine reader of the poet.

In February, 1923, Greb and Tunney met for the second time. Greb had in the meantime relieved Johnny Wilson of the World's Middle-Weight crown. But Tunney fought according to plan. As the "Pittsburgh Windmill" went forward he met a tattoo of lefts and rights on his ribs. The pace was terrific for eight or nine rounds, the fury of Greb's attack being methodically dealt with by Gene's body punishment.

In the 10th round Greb began to slow down; the trip-hammer blows of a body-punching expert were taking their toll; the spanner had been thrown into the works of the buzz-saw and the machinery had been thrown out of gear. Then Tunney began to cut loose on the pride of Pittsburgh.

The decision at the end of 15 rounds was Tunney's, and the American title was again in his possession. Three times more they fought, twice in no-decision bout, and once to a decision with Tunney the winner.

After their fifth bout, Greb said to Tunney: "I won't fight you again, Gene, you're too tough. Go after Dempsey now. You are the next World's Heavy-weight Champion."

Then began the hard grind of getting a match with the Champion. Martin Burke, Ermino Spalla (later an Italian Opera singer), and Georges Carpentier were successively beaten; and then came the big test. Gene was matched with Tommy Gibbons, the same Gibbons who in 1923 had gone the full 15 rounds with Dempsey.

Gibbons lasted just 12 of the scheduled 15 rounds with Tunney.

Against the Champion

Gene's next ring appearance was at Philadelphia when he faced the most popular fighter of recent times, Jack Dempsey. My authority? Why, certainly. The box-office receipts.

Close on two million dollars were paid in anticipation of this bout. The odds were 14 to 5 on the champion. Harry Greb had a nice bet at those favourable odds and won a tidy fortune on Tunney. For the fight was always Tunney's. Dempsey, bobbing and weaving, could not get a chance to land his murderous left hooks, and Gene Tunney became World Champion on September 23, 1926.

A return Tunney-Dempsey fight was a "natural." Tex Rickard was again at the helm, and the gate was the largest in boxing history—2,658,660 dollars; In other words, over £1,000,000 in cold, hard cash was paid to see the two Tunney-Dempsey battles!

The story of the second fight is one that boxers will long remember. The question whether Tunney's title was saved by an error on the part of the referee will be argued (boxers will tell you) till the crack of Doom.

Tunney was on the floor for 14 seconds—there was no argument about that; but whether he'd have been able to rise at nine or even keep Dempsey away from him if he could have risen, are questions that have kept that fight of 16 years ago green in the memory of fight fans.

Tunney fought only once more—when Tom Heeney earned the right to face him in New York. The fight was all Tunney. Heeney's boring-in style suited Gene who methodically cut Tom to ribbons. In the 11th round the fight was stopped and Gene Tunney announced his retirement.

"He'll come back," they said, "they all come back." But Tunney never came back. He amassed a fortune during his nine years as a professional and he's still got it. And remember that the only disfigurement he's got to show for 110 battles is a slightly cauliflowered left ear. In addition he is the only heavy-weight champion of the world who never had a knock-out registered against him.

* * *

So you will understand why I was eager to see this great man, but you would be surprised to know how modest and approachable he is. I missed him at his hotel in Wellington, though that was not his fault—he made an appointment without any difficulty at all—and if I had not had an attack of lumbago this story might have filled ten pages. He might also have cured my lumbago. I am sure he would have tried if I had asked him. He is that sort.

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