

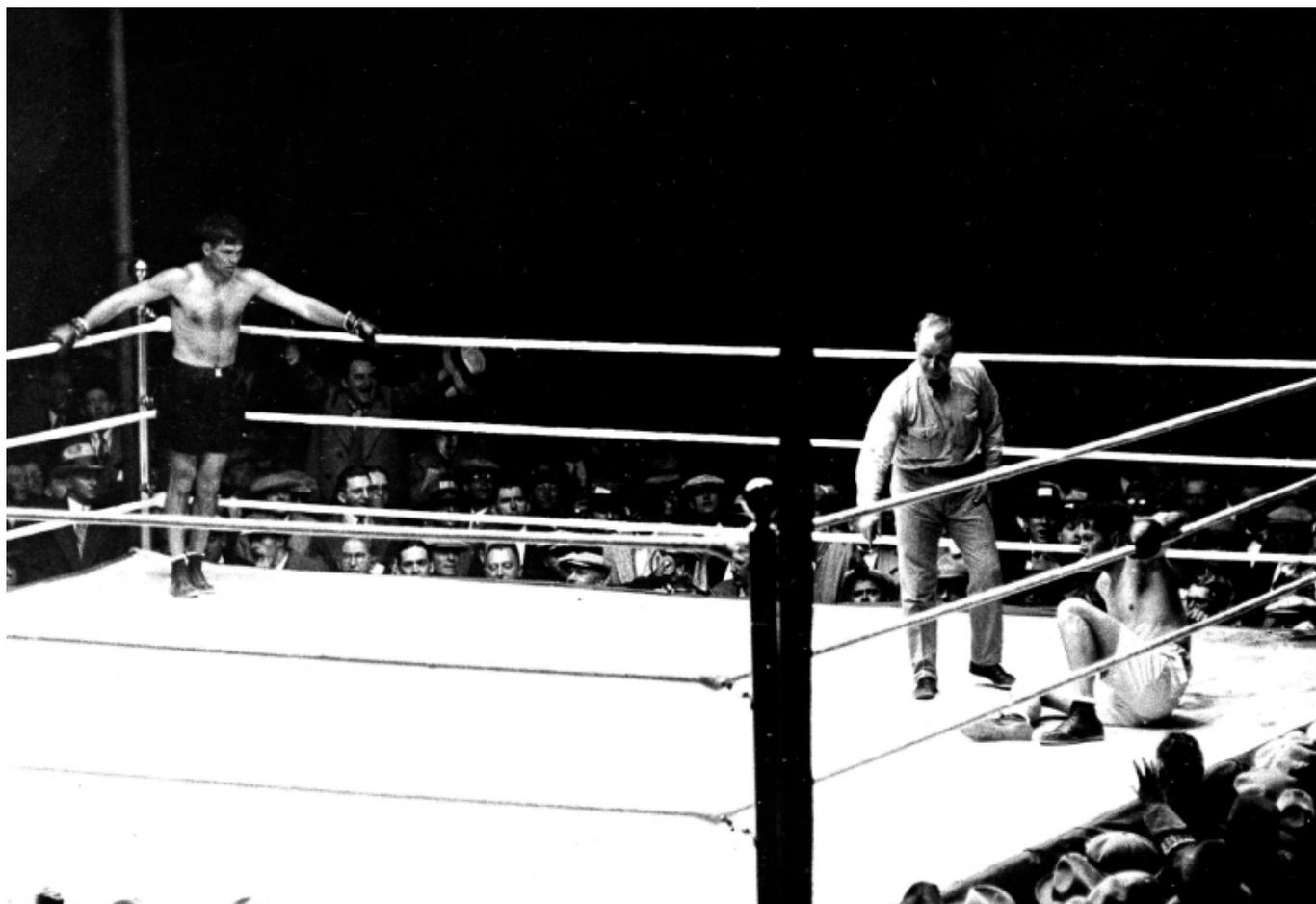
# Sports

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## Brains vs. Brawn: 90 years ago, Dempsey-Tunney shocked Soldier Field

  
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*Gene Tunney is down in the seventh round with Jack Dempsey standing in a neutral corner and the referee tolling the count over the champion during their bout at Soldier Field in Chicago, Sept. 22, 1927. Tunney defeated Dempsey to retain the heavyweight title. (AP Photo)*

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Nobody could hear.

The roar of 120,000 fans at Soldier Field was so loud that all that could be heard on the radio was a continuous howl.

Few could see. A \$5 ticket bought a seat on a bench up to 200 yards away. Those in ringside seats — which cost \$40 and extended 100 rows back, stretching the concept of “ringside” — jockeyed to see Jack Dempsey, with a right hook followed by a flurry of six punches, send Gene Tunney sprawling in the seventh round of the heavyweight championship of the world of boxing, a sport which had become legal in Illinois only the year before.

It was Sept. 22, 1927.

Tunney hit the canvas. Dempsey hovered nearby, right arm cocked.

The “Long Count” as it became known is perhaps the most famous 14 seconds in boxing, if not all professional sport. But why it mattered, why those people were screaming so furiously, deserves remembering.

Dempsey was considered a brute, a caveman, “The Manassa Mauler” who boxed with three-days growth of beard to enhance the effect. He won the heavyweight championship in 1910 from Jess Willard and became part of 1920s celebrity

championship in 1919 from Jess Willard and became part of 1920s celebrity culture, alongside Babe Ruth and Bobby Jones.

But Dempsey was also reviled as a “slacker” — he avoided military service in World War I — until he first met Gene Tunney in Philadelphia in 1926. Tunney battered him, and won the fight on a decision, taking all 10 rounds. But Dempsey won the hearts of America with a single quip.

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“What happened?” wailed Dempsey’s wife, rushing to him afterward.

“Honey, I forgot to duck,” he said.

“From that day on, the gallant loser was a folk hero whose fame never diminished,” Red Smith wrote when Dempsey died in 1983.

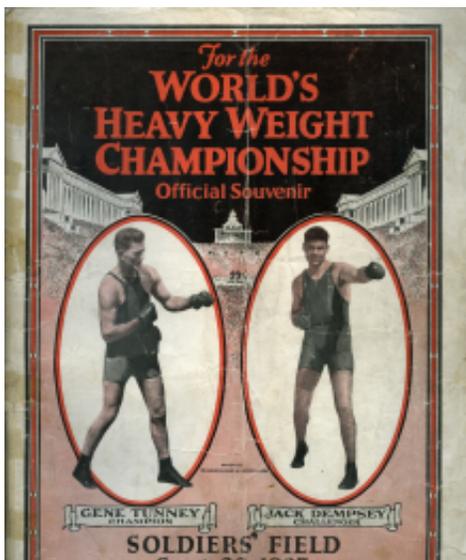
Not so for the victor. As love for Dempsey grew, Tunney became a figure of ridicule.

First he was a “scientific boxer” who valued technique over passion, as he would archly announce in a vaguely British accent. At Chicago City Hall, asked about his upcoming fight with Dempsey, Tunney replied: “If there is to be a fight, I know nothing of it. I don’t like fighting, but I do like boxing, and as far as I know this is going to be a boxing contest.”

“A priggish, snobbish, bookish fellow,” one sportswriter concluded.

Tunney loved Shakespeare, and was seen preparing for his second fight against Dempsey by reading Somerset Maughn’s “Of Human Bondage.”

“No one on our block liked Tunney,” remembered Studs Terkel. “Everyone wanted Tunney to lose.” The reason was sportswriter mockery. “They *hated* him, so we we hated him.”



Chicago has probably never seen an assemblage of



the famous, before or since, as those who gathered that night 90 years ago. From Hollywood, Charlie Chaplin, Gloria Swanson, Douglas Fairbanks, Tom Mix, Al Jolson. From the East Coast: George M. Cohan, Irving Berlin, Conde Nast, Joseph Pulitzer. Walter Chrysler. Titans of industry, the president of the nation's six largest railroads. Nine U.S. senators and 12 congressmen. Ty Cobb was there, and ring legends Jim Corbett, Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries.

Seventy-four radio stations received a feed from the National Broadcasting Company, hearing Graham McNamee call the fight for some 15 million listeners.

This was, of course, Al Capone's Chicago. Tunney's camp tasted his food, in case it was poisoned. To avoid fixing the referee, six were chosen, and randomly assigned to the undercard fights. The sixth referee was Dave Barry, who gave his instructions — no rabbit punches, no kidney punches, and a new rule: If one fighter was knocked down, the other fighter would go into a neutral corner before the count would begin. Dempsey's camp insisted upon it, not wanting Tunney to stand over Dempsey the way Dempsey had crouched over Luis Angel Firpo, waiting for him to rise so he could slug him again.

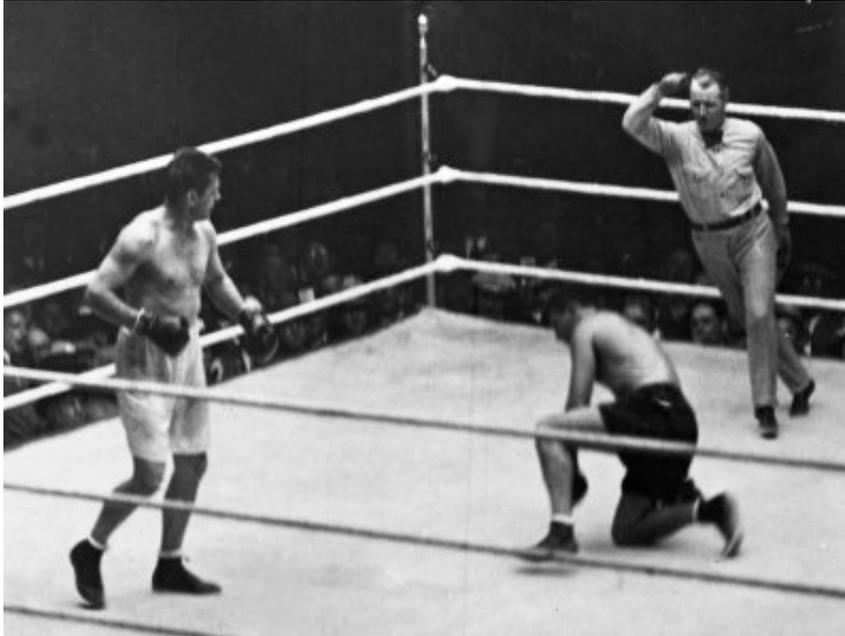
Shortly after 10 p.m, the fight began. Dempsey charged, Tunney held his ground. Dempsey angling to use his left hook, Tunney dancing around, peppering Dempsey then pulling away.

It seemed a replay of Philadelphia. By the end of the fourth, a cut opened under Dempsey's right eye. Tunney took the first five rounds, despite Dempsey throwing illegal punches, so at the end of the fifth round, Tunney's bodyguard, a Chicago police sergeant named Bill Smith, jumped onto the apron and screamed at the referee: "You son of a bitch! If you don't stop those rabbit punches, you'll be carried out of here dead!"

Then the seventh, "not only the most memorable round in boxing history, but among the most controversial episodes ever in sports," Jack Cavanaugh wrote in *Tunney*.

A minute into the round, Dempsey battered Tunney's jaw and face, dropping Tunney for the first time in his 12-year professional career.

"Tunney is down!" McNamee shouted into his NBC microphone, barely audible over the howl. "Tunney is down!"



*This Sept. 22, 1927 file photo shows Jack Dempsey going down on one knee during his heavyweight title fight against Gene Tunney, in Chicago. Tunney's unusual life of boxing and books will be on display on Thursday in an auction of his memorabilia by Sotheby's in New York. (AP Photo/File)*

If a boxer is down 10 seconds, the fight ends. But Barry, following the new rule, didn't start to count, instead urging Dempsey toward his corner. Only after Dempsey ambled away did Barry begin. By 3, Tunney was gazing at him, his left arm hooked over the ropes. At 9, he leaped up. Dempsey tried to press his advantage, but Tunney backpedaled until he could counterattack.

At the end of 10 rounds, the fight was called for Tunney.

Most fans, listening to the radio, never knew anything unusual had happened — they had to wait for their newspapers the next morning to learn of the controversy. Dempsey never fought again, going on to become a popular restaurateur. In 1950, an Associated Press poll named him the greatest fighter of the 20th century. Tunney married an heiress and became friends with Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw.

His love of books cut short his career. On April 23, 1928 — Shakespeare's birthday — Tunney accepted an invitation to give a lecture on the Bard at Yale.

“Nobody has ever gotten anything in this world without work, nor has anybody gotten any knowledge in this world without studying and working hard for it,” Tunney said. “I am trying to develop my intellect the same as everyone else.”

“The people who hadn’t hated him up to that point, he managed to have *everybody* hate him,” said his son, Jay Tunney, who lives in Chicago.

Tunney’s Yale talk was savaged in the sports press.



Jay Tunney sits in his Chicago apartment with a portrait of his father, Gene Tunney, in the background. Photo by Neil Steinberg/Sun-Times

“Harvard, I trust, will counter by asking Babe Ruth to tell the boys in Cambridge just what Milton has meant to him,” wrote Heywood Broun.

He defended his title again, then retired in July 1928, spending the next half century as a businessman, promoting physical fitness in the military during World War II, and watching the

popularity of the man he defeated twice eclipse his own.

“He had a hard time dealing with it,” said Jay Tunney, who wrote a book, *The Prizefighter and the Playwright*, about his father’s friendship with Shaw. “The pretense was it didn’t bother him at all that he was unpopular. In fact, it did bother him. A lot. I personally feel that it shortened his career as a boxer.”

He was more popular in Europe, “being a man of the head, and not just a man of passion and muscles and brawling the way we liked it so much in America,” Jay Tunney said. “Our John L. Sullivans and Jack Dempseys, we can’t get enough of them. He had to live here.”

Tunney, though overlooked, helped advance boxing toward its modern age.

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“Dad opened the game up to women, to businessmen,” Jay Tunney said. “He lifted boxing up by its ears, to give a certain respectability to it, as an exciting, interesting thing.”

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