

Fighter and thinker both — remembering overlooked boxing great Gene Tunney

Jay Tunney, author of "The Prizefighter and the Playwright: Gene Tunney and Bernamd Shaw" talks about the friendship between his father, boxer Gene Tunney, and the playwright George Bernard Shaw.



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In our celebrity obsessed world there so many people craving fame that it is refreshing to learn about Jay Tunney's father who was, for a time, one of the most famous men in the world and hated it.

His name was Gene Tunney and he was a boxer, the heavyweight champion of the world from 1926 to 1928, a man of movie-star good looks and married to an heiress.

"He never talked about his boxing when I was young," says Jay. "I had no idea of that part of his life, his fame, until one day our family went to see Roy Rogers.

"It was during World War II at Madison Square Garden. I was 7, maybe 8 and Roy was my hero. When he rode into the arena I was in awe. Then all of a sudden there was a spotlight on us in the stands and Roy pointing in our direction. He introduces my dad, who stands up in his Navy commander's uniform and waves. There was a thunderous applause."

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That story is not included in Jay Tunney's magnificent, revelatory and fascinating book, "The Prizefighter and the Playwright: Gene Tunney and Bernard Shaw." But there are dozens of other stories, dozens of famous characters and at the book's heart there is genuine love story and a tale of deep friendship.

Jay Tunney spent more than 10 years researching and writing the book.

"All during that time I couldn't believe what I was finding," he says.

His father was born James Joseph Tunney in 1897, one of the seven children and the eldest son of Irish immigrants; a brother gave him the nickname Gene and it stuck. The father John worked as a stevedore and raised the family in a down-at-the-heels section of Greenwich Village.

Jay's word for his dad's youthful circumstances is "hardscrabble," which seems insufficient to describe "nights when (Gene) cried himself to sleep. It didn't matter that other Irish fathers used a whip, too, because he knew that some fathers never did," Jay writes. "The diversity of Gene's reading and his ability to withdraw into his imagination became essential to his withstanding his father's outbursts. Words became his refuge."

His love of words also brought him derision and scorn, for they did not fit a boxer's image.

Gene boxed a bit as a boy and took up the sport seriously while serving with the Marine Corps during World War I. He turned professional in 1915 and whipped all comers, losing only once before claiming the heavyweight title by defeating champ Jack Dempsey by unanimous decision in Philadelphia in 1926.

He was more tactician than slugger and he read books — and a boxer who spent his spare time reading books was not to the taste of the sportswriters of the time because, Jay Tunney writes, "Most sports celebrities were easy to write about because they tended toward extravagances with women, gambling, alcohol, temper tantrums, problems with their managers, with money, or tangles with the law."

Or as noted sportswriter Paul Gallico put it at the time: "The average pug, when he lets down, gets roaring drunk or takes to sitting up all night pounding night-club tables with little wooden mallets, reaching hungrily for the powered nakedness of the girls that march by."

Tunney's most famous fight and arguably the most famous heavyweight fight in history, took place here Sept.

22, 1927, in Soldier Field, in front of a crowd of 120,000 (creating the first \$2 million gate in entertainment history) with millions more listening on radios. In the seventh round of the fight that would become known as the "Long Count," Tunney hit the canvas for the first time in his career. Dempsey did not retreat to the neutral corner for five seconds before the referee started the 10-count. Tunney was able to get to his feet before "10" and went on to win the fight. (Judge for yourself at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5rDUbO4NSc>).

Tunney would fight and win once more and then retire, becoming the first and only heavyweight champ to ever do so, until Rocky Marciano joined this exclusive club in 1956.

He did this in large part to escape the insults and prying eyes of the press, which became almost unbearable after he fell in love with and began courting Polly Lauder, a beautiful heiress. "It didn't take long for the press to figure out that Gene was in Maine with his betrothed. An armada of reporters followed," Jay Tunney writes.

"I can't image how awful it was for them," says Jay, one of the couple's four children; his brother John served as a U.S. senator from California in the 1970s. "My mother was the most private woman I have ever known."

Their marriage in Rome was, Tunney writes, "the biggest love story of the year."

In their pre- and post-wedding travels, the pair met all sorts of celebrated people, from the Prince of Wales to Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Thornton Wilder. And when Gene and Polly were in London, they were invited to lunch by George Bernard Shaw and his wife.

Shaw, some 40 years older than Tunney, was a literary heavyweight: a widely influential and prolific playwright ("Pygmalion," among dozens) and critic, he had been awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1925. He had also done some boxing as a younger man, written boxing commentary and also a novel about a boxer, "Cashel Byron's Profession."

The couples hit it off and became especially close the next year when they spent a month and coped with Polly's serious illness on the island of Brioni. They remained close friends until Shaw's death in 1950.

Gene Tunney would have a successful career as a businessman, lecture about writing, serve as a Navy commander and read, read, read until his death in 1978. By that time, sportswriters had become kinder, as in this from Pulitzer Prize-winning sports columnist Jim Murray: "(Gene Tunney) was unloved, underrated, shunned by his own people, rejected by history. Still, he was the best advertisement his sport has ever had. ... He was like no Irishman you ever saw, but he was the greatest Irish athlete who ever lived."

"The Prizefighter and the Playwright" was published in 2010, with Jay's mother playing a supportive role until her death at 100 in 2008. A couple of years ago, Jay, who spent his life as a successful globe-trotting

entrepreneur and writer of articles and essays, moved here to be closer to his grown children and their families. He and his wife live in a handsome Near North Side apartment. She is Kelly Smith Tunney, a former Vietnam correspondent for the Associated Press and later the first woman vice president in the history of that venerable worldwide news organization.

They are, of course, surrounded by his dad, "alive" in paintings, photos, boxing gloves and other memorabilia. Jay spends his days reading and in other cultural pursuits. He's writing too, working on a play about his father in collaboration with accomplished local playwright Doug Post. They hope to have it on a stage next year.

Don't mean to butt into that process but they might want to somehow include something Gene Tunney wrote. He didn't do much writing but he wrote this: "Friendship is the most satisfying connection in life. No man can go very far with strength and courage if he goes alone through the struggles of life. There never was constituted a human heart that did not at some time, in some long and yearning hour, long for sympathy."

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