

The Pittsburgh Kid

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

The double-decked steel and concrete stands of the Polo Grounds reverberated in anticipation: 54,487 fans filled the permanent seats in the grandstand and the temporary wooden chairs, laid out in an ordinary grid on the New York Giant's playing field. Nothing in sports quite equals the excitement present at a heavyweight championship fight. And this fight, which matched the great Joe Lewis against challenger Billy Conn, generated interest not seen since the champion battled Max Schmeling three years earlier, in 1938.



Billy, sporting a white robe, bounced up the steps leading into the ring, slipped through the ropes, blessed himself, and bowed to the section that came all the way from Pittsburgh to cheer him on. He was a picture of confidence. Thirty seconds later, Lewis wearing a blue robe with red trim and a customary towel draped over his head, entered the ring opposite Conn.

So much was on the line...

Billy came in at 174 pounds, and that was with promotor Mike Jacob's finger on the scale. The actual disparity of weight of thirty pounds was significant, and certainly enough to scare any potential patrons who had no desire to see the

scrawny Pittsburgher sacrificed at the Polo Grounds purely for their entertainment.

Most followers of the sport recognized Lewis as a gracious and great champion. Lewis held the heavyweight crown for four years which, in the eyes of some, was four years too long. To others, Billy's ethnic background appealed most. He was Irish through and through, and proudly wore his heritage on his sleeve. Earlier in the day, a great number of Billy's followers could be seen roaming the avenues of New York decked out in green, with emerald bowlers worn neatly upon their heads.

In the days leading up to the fight, Conn was swimming in a sea of emotions. Vigilant newsmen couldn't resist the forbidden love affair between the challenger and his young fiancée. The story was irresistible. Photos of the young couple were snapped running through sand at the Jersey shore, "The Boxer and the Blonde", the All-American couple.

Louis went on the offensive with Billy backpedaling for the first two rounds. It looked as if Conn was on his way to joining the other "bums" on Joe's lengthy list. In the 3rd and 4th rounds, Billy got off his bicycle and the fight began in earnest. With each succeeding round, the Pittsburgh press expressed profound amazement to sheer delirium.

The eighth started slowly with Billy circling to his left throwing jabs; Louis came in with a right and left and several combinations to Conn's body; Billy was cautious as Louis continued to be on the offensive. Then as quick as that, the fight turned on the dime. Billy lashed out with a right and left to Joe's head and followed that with another one two punch. A hard right to the jaw, then another, brought the crowd to its feet. Conn tied Louis up and, as they broke, caught Joe cleanly with a left hook to the jaw. Another right, and Louis pulled Billy to him in a clinch. Conn fought his way out of Joe's hug and delivered a trio of hard blows as the bell brought the round to a close.

Billy walked back to his corner and told his manager and trainer Johnny Ray, "I got him." Dancing through his mind were visions of Mary Louise on his arm, the two of them walking along the Jersey shore. The champ and his girl. Passersby would gaze admiringly at the handsome couple. *There he goes. There goes the man who knocked out Joe Louis.*

By the tenth, Joe knew he was in a fight as the champ began to show the effects of Billy's hooks and jabs. In the twelfth, Conn hurt Lewis as he landed everything he threw and at the close of the round, Joe was in trouble. In the champ's corner, Joe's trainer urged his fighter, "Chappie you're losing...you gotta knock him out." Across the ring, a beaming Conn told his manager that the fight was in the bag. "This is easy, Moonie" Billy told Ray. "I can take this sonofabitch out this round." Ray couldn't believe what he was hearing. Their plan had worked to perfection thus far. "No, no! Billy stick and run. You got this fight won. Stay away. Just stick and run, stick and run..." The bell, Billy's cue, interrupted Johnny's counsel.

Conn shot up from his stool, ready to claim his glory. The only thing between him and the championship was three rounds and ninety seconds....

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William "Billy" David Conn was born 1917 in an Irish catholic family. He grew up in East Liberty, Pittsburgh, Pa., and learned the fine art of street fighting from his father. Conn dropped out of Sacred Heart school in eight grade and his father knew that no good could come from a fourteen-year-old boy wandering aimlessly on the streets. So, his father paid Johnny Ray \$1 a week to teach Billy how to box in the gym he managed. Johnny started Billy with sweeping the gym and making runs to the bootlegger down the street for a pint of moonshine while Ray trained boxing prospects. This went on for several days. On the fifth day, Billy set aside his broom and started shadowboxing off in a corner. "So, help me" Johnny Ray later recounted "as soon as he put up those little fists and made his first move, I fell in love with him." Billy spent the next three years learning to box under Ray. Ray, who fought as a lightweight, trained with hall of famer Harry Greb. Conn made his pro debut at age 16 when he lost his decision to 21-year-old Dick Woodward. Conn began his career as a welterweight and fought up to a heavyweight. By the age of 21, Conn had defeated nine present or former world champions. Almost one third of his fights were against title holders.

Conn gained national attention with his up-set victory over middleweight champion Fred Apostoli. At the time Apostoli was regarded as the best pound for pound fighter in the world. Conn beat him in his New York debut at Madison Square Garden with a 10 round decision and won again in 15 rounds just five weeks later. Conn won the light heavyweight title from Melio Bettina in July 13, 1939. He later gave up the title to campaign as a heavyweight.

Conn will forever be remembered for his near upset of Joe Louis on June 18, 1941. Louis had beaten every top heavyweight and was in the prime of his career. Conn out boxed and outslugged Louis the majority of 12 rounds and almost sent Louis to the floor at the end of the 12th. Overconfident and ahead on points going into the 13th round, Conn told his manager Ray that he would knock Lewis out. Ray pleaded, "coast in, stick and run. Keep movin'." Conn came out slugging and was winning in the first half of the round, but carelessly left himself open after he threw a punch. Louis responded with a right to the head which bewildered and stunned Billy. Louis finished the fight with a barrage of punches that sent Billy to the canvas. No, Billy's name wouldn't be added to the Bum of the Month Club. His spirit, will, and Irish courage separated him from the long list of palookas that become fodder for Louis. Louis said this fight was the toughest of his career and that Conn was the best lightweight he ever saw. This fight is often referred to as the greatest fight of all time.

"What happened Billy?" a reporter asked, "you had him in your pocket." "I'll bet it's the first time a fella ever lost a fight because he had too much guts." Conn answered. "After the twelfth, I thought I had him and I simply couldn't do anything else but go after him. Then it happened...What's the sense in being Irish if you can't be dumb."

Conn beat Hall of Famer Tony Zale in 1941 and had a rematch scheduled with Joe Louis the same year. The rematch was cancelled when Billy broke his hand in a much-publicized fight with his father in law major league ball player Jimmy "Greenfield" Smith. Billy was sent on a morale tour with Bob Hope and other celebrities during WWII. When the war ended there was a rematch in 1946, but this time it was an older, slower Conn who hadn't a professional fight in

four years. Louis knocked out Conn in the eighth round. Billy Conn possessed great hand and foot speed, had an excellent defense, boxed beautifully, and had an iron chin. He was a slow starter who never tired and fought when hurt. He was generally regarded as the world's most handsome fighter in his day and starred in a movie for Republic pictures called "The Pittsburgh Kid" in 1941. He turned down a career in Hollywood, including a role in "On the Waterfront" to live in Pittsburgh with his wife Mary Louise. But that didn't prevent the screenwriter from invoking his name in the movie dialogue. In the picture, Charles Malloy, played by Rod Steiger, mournfully reminisced to his brother, Terry Malloy, played by Marlon Brando: "When you weighed one hundred and sixty-eight pounds you were beautiful. You could have been another Billy Conn...."

At the age of 72, Billy Conn once again made national headlines by interrupting a convenience store robber in Pittsburgh. Billy decked the gunman who was later arrested. Billy Conn died in 1993 at the age of 75.

As the story line goes....nobody could have been another Billy Conn!