BOXER WHO THOUGHT IT ALL OUT

By OSWALD FREDERICK

Gene Tunney said he would win the heavyweight championship of the world. He did. He could spend three years studying a fighter, "putting him in a test-tube," before meeting him. It led to mighty Jack Dempsey's downfall.

A PRIVATE of the U.S. Marines and an American Army lieutenant were saying good-bye in Europe. It was July, 1919, the First World War was over, and they discussed what they intended to do now.

"Come to Yale with me," suggested Eagan to his friend.

"I won't have time for the university," said Private Gene Tunney. "I'm going to win the heavyweight championship of the world."

Lieutenant Eagan, a capable amateur boxer, and now President of the New York State Athletic Commission, later admitted that he felt sorry for his friend. Only ten days previously the championship had been won by Jack Dempsey. Eagan had boxed with him and knew just how great Dempsey was. Yet here was a youth of less than 12 stone seriously hoping to defeat him!

Seemed Impossible

The task Tunney had set himself seemed impossible. Yet in under ten years he twice beat Dempsey, amassed a fortune, and retired as undefeated champion.

He began his post-war career in a painstaking manner. He had no intention of plunging into professional boxing haphazardly and hoping for the best. He knew better than anyone his physical drawbacks: brittle hands and flesh that cut easily; he was aware that caution and scientific planning were necessary. So at first he was content to meet second-raters from whom he could gain experience.

He also had his own training methods. Gradually he grew and developed, but his hands were still his weakest points. After breaking his thumb in a bout in 1920, Tunney got right out of boxing until he had strengthened both fists. For months he worked as a lumberjack, and then toiled as a labourer, shovelling coal for ten hours a day.

One of his first fights on returning to the ring was in the 1921 Dempsey-Carpentier programme. It was the first million-dollar gate, and 80,000 people watched in boredom as a sluggish Tunney won his contest. He had been out of the game too long and he was rusty. Nevertheless, his fight over, he hastily dressed and rushed back into the arena to study the two principals.

Tunney continued fighting around New York, but he remained unimpressive. He was so methodical, he took few risks, so that he was often dull to watch. The public did not notice that he consistently won all his fights.

By 1922 he was good enough to beat Battling Levinsky for the light-heavyweight championship of America, and then he met Harry Greb, a wild and unorthodox middleweight of world's title class. Tunney did not feel that he was quite ready for Greb, but he believed that he had no right to call himself a champion unless he could prove it in the ring.

The result was the only defeat Gene Tunney ever suffered in his career. Such a defeat would have discouraged a more squeamish and less courageous man. Almost the very first blow broke Gene's nose in two places, and he sustained a long cut over the eye in the first round.

Stuck It Out

From then, until the end of the fifteenth round, he bled terribly, and he took one of the worst beatings ever seen in an American ring. Somehow he stuck it out, but he lost his title and collapsed before he reached his dressing-room.

The next day he filed his challenge for a return fight! While enduring that gory hiding, Tunney had discovered that he could beat Harry Greb.

During the next three years, Gene and his conqueror met four times. On the first occasion Tunney regained his title, but the decision was not well received. He won the next time and decisively, but Greb was still not convinced. So they fought again, and once more Tunney triumphed.

Opening round in the return match between Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney, with Dempsey's right and left boring in. But Tunney, though nearly knocked out in round seven, kept the championship.

In the final meeting Harry Greb was thoroughly whipped.

It was in 1924 that Tunney began to go to the top. In July he fought his thrilling fifteen-rounder with Georges Carpentier. Although he won, Tunney so exhausted himself in making the stipulated weight of twelve stone seven that he resolved to confine himself to the bigger men.

But the public still refused to consider such a polite man as a coming heavyweight champion. A professional boxer who read books in his leisure could not be taken seriously!

In 1925 Tunney met Tommy Gibbons in a final eliminator to decide who would be Dempsey's next opponent. Gibbons had been challenging Tunney for almost two years, but Tunney still remembered the Harry Greb catastrophe, when he had fought a man before he was ready to meet him. He had no wish to repeat that experience. Instead, he had studied Gibbons at every opportunity, and now he knew every move that Tommy was likely to make. He had Gibbons "in a test-tube for over three years," as he himself put it.

His Chance Came

Tunney outboxed the more experienced Gibbons for round after round and floored him for the count in the twelfth. It was the greatest upset of the year.

The chance for which Tunney had been working for seven years now came to him. In 1926 he signed to meet Jack Dempsey in Philadelphia.

The greatest boxing crowd ever assembled up to that time watched the contest; 120,757 people paid over a million dollars. The idea that Tunney might win was laughable, and even his own manager had privately bet that Tunney would be knocked out.

Confident as Tunney was, he let no opportunity pass to ensure his triumph. To gain a 'psychological' advantage over Dempsey, he flew from his training camp to the arena. Aviation in 1926 was far more hazardous than it is today, and the stunt no doubt had its desired effect. But he was air-sick all the way, and he spent most of the day until ring-time sleeping. Only his closest friends knew that this was because he was still feeling rather ill.

Shortly before the fight started, a fine drizzle began falling over the open-air arena. Tex Rickard, the promoter, desperately tried to get Dempsey into the ring before the deluge fell. "Don't worry, Tex," the champion said. "Tunney won't go more than two rounds, anyway."

In the first round Tunney launched a right to the jaw which did everything but knock Dempsey out. After that, the champion never properly got into his stride. He was dazzled with jabs, hooks and uppercuts, and lost almost every round. By the tenth, Jack's eyes were swollen and closed and he was almost collapsing. Tunney was proclaimed the new champion.

Very Unpopular

Having attained his ambition, Gene Tunney became incredibly unpopular. He had never had time to be a good mixer, and now he remained aloof from fawning well-wishers. Nevertheless, the fans flocked to Chicago a year later when Dempsey sought to regain his title in a return fight.

This time the gate receipts almost doubled the first fight's takings. Tunney had a harder task than before in beating Dempsey, and he was almost knocked out in the seventh round. But he recovered and saved his title in a whirlwind finish.

Tunney boxed only once more. He easily beat Tom Heeney, amassed another half-million, and then announced his retirement. His explanation was that he had ceased to improve and saw no reason for continuing. This decision amazed the boxing world, but Tunney went his own way.

Nine years earlier, he had declined to go to Yale because he had not the time. He had all the time he needed now, but when he did eventually go to Yale it was not as a student. Tunney 'lectured' at the university on Shakespeare! It is most doubtful if another professional boxer will ever repeat that feat.

The end of a second Dempsey–Tunney fight that amazed the boxing world. In their first encounter Tunney had been declared the winner over a Dempsey considered unbeatable. He is shown here having won again.