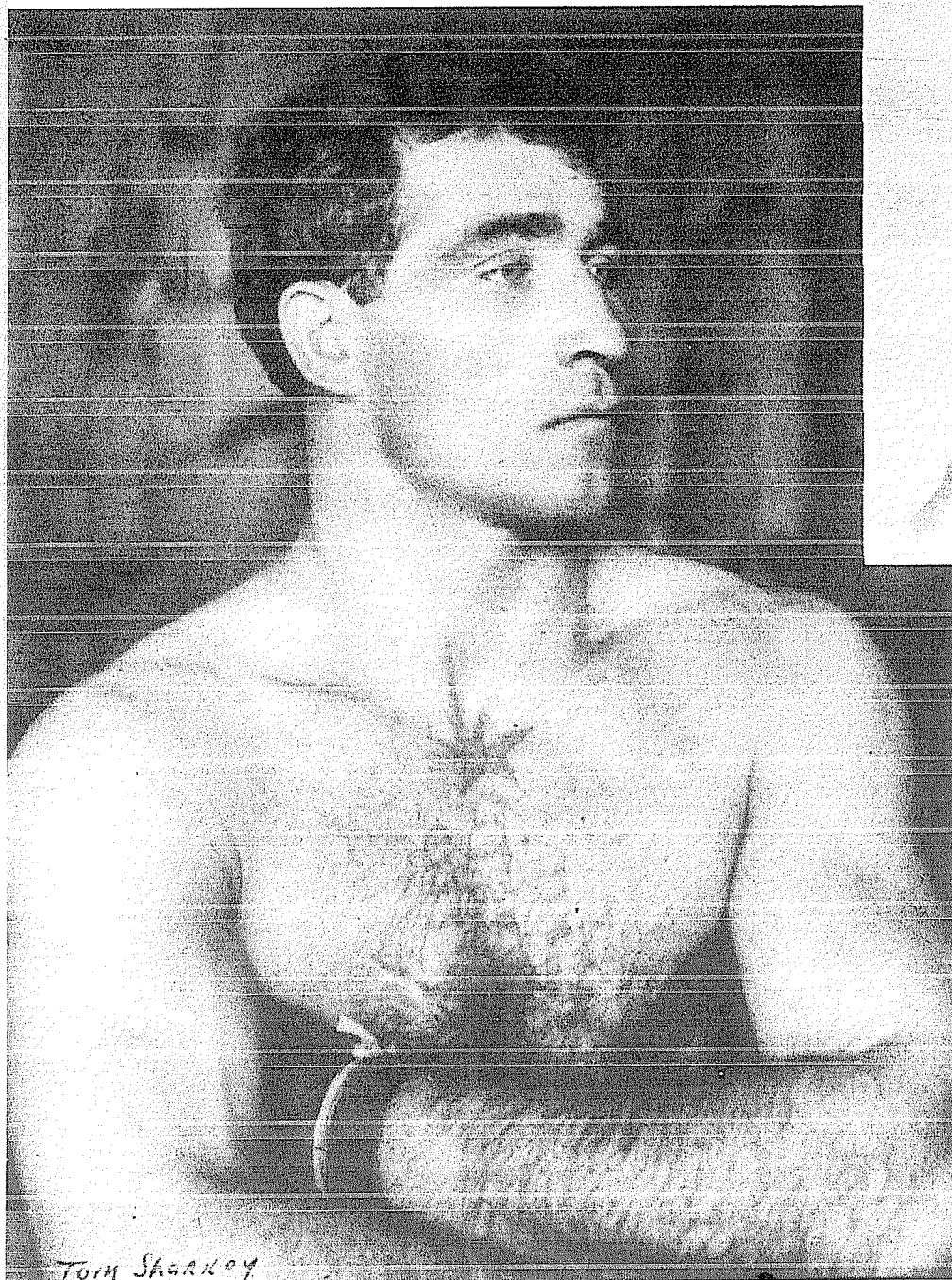


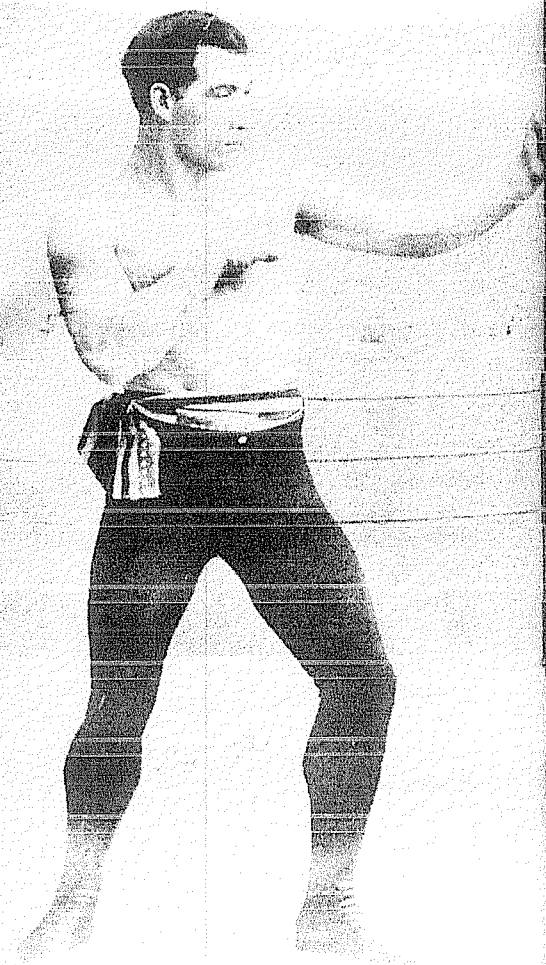
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HEAVYWEIGHT**

SAILOR TOM SHARKEY



TOM SHARKEY

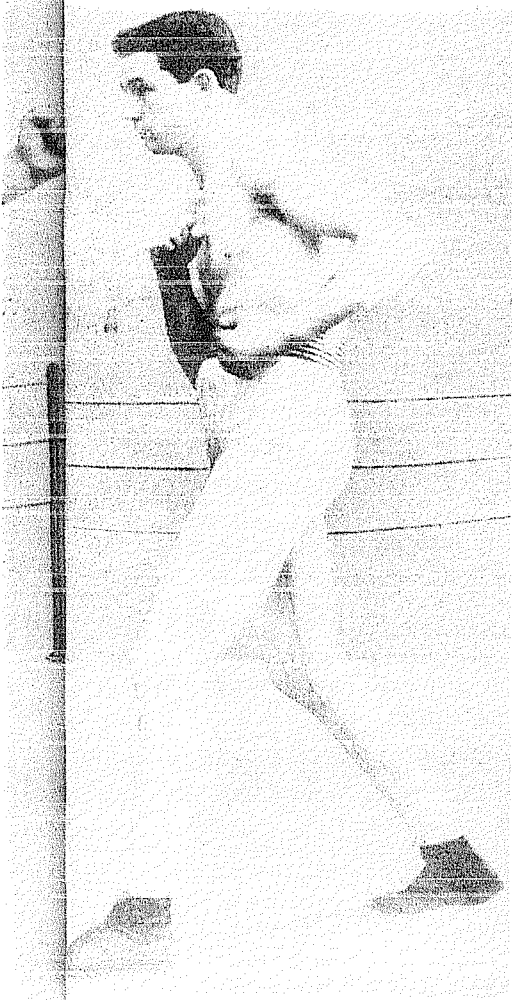
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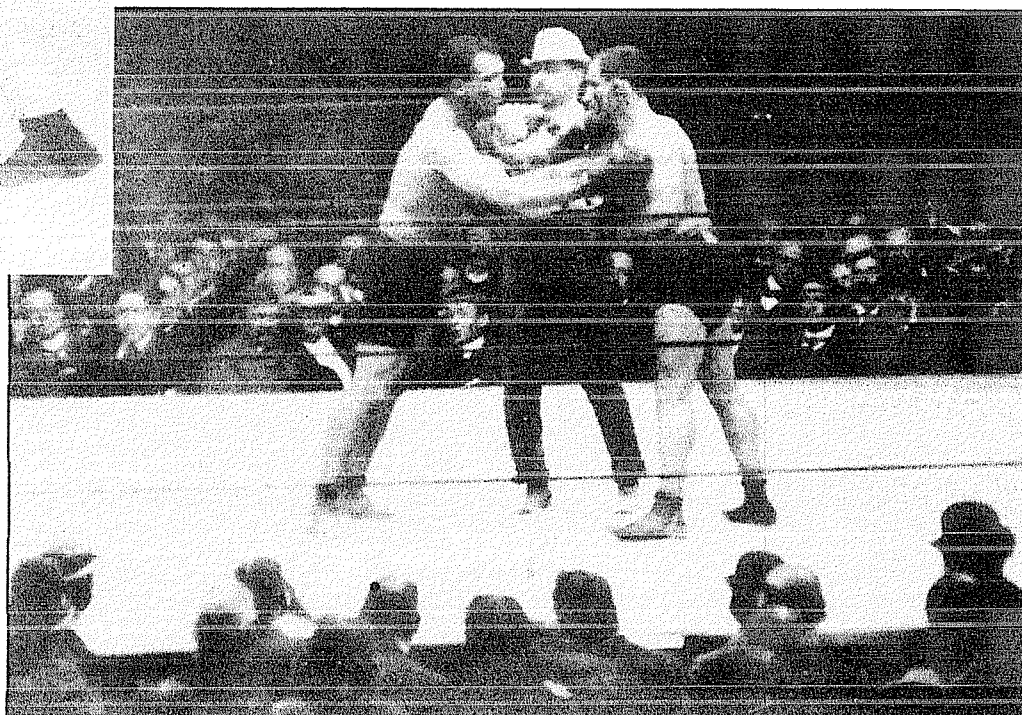
THE RING, FEB. 1994



Sailor Tom squares off with former world middleweight champion Kid McCoy. They rumbled in January 1899, with Sharkey winning by 10th-round kazo.



Above: Sharkey (seated) and Jeffries share a ride in a photo taken in the late-'20s. Below: Jim Jeffries (left) and Sharkey engaged in two memorable battles. Pictured is their second bout, fought for the world title in November 1899, and won by defending champion Jeffries via exhausting 25-round decision.



By Patrick Myler

Fearless Tom Sharkey, who stretched no more than 5'8" from toenails to balding pate and weighed in at about 185 pounds, took on the biggest and best fighters at the turn of the century. They included heavyweight kings James J. Corbett, Bob Fitzsimmons, and Jim Jeffries. Sharkey even crossed gloves with a graying,

portly John L. Sullivan in a three-round no-decision match in 1896.

But a pairing that seems to have escaped the notice of most ring historians is the occasion when "Sailor Tom" stormed into battle with Jack Johnson. The forgotten meeting took place at the Chicago World's Fair of 1934. Johnson had officially hung up his gloves six years earlier after

being kayoed by Bearcat Wright and Bill Hartwell, but he continued picking up a few dollars in exhibition bouts. Sharkey had not fought in 30 years.

Had Johnson and Sharkey clashed at the peak of their powers, the pairing would have had fight fans drooling with anticipation. Sure, Johnson's

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Sharkey

(Continued from page 45)

defensive genius and cutting counterpunches would likely have proven too much for crude slugger Sharkey, but the tearaway Irishman would not have let his bigger foe relax his guard for a second.

Giving away four inches in height and 10 pounds on the scales would not have bothered Sharkey any. Nearly every man he faced in the ring towered over him. But they all looked the same stretched out on the canvas, which was the fate of most of his opponents in a nine-year career that saw him lose just six times in 53 fights.

Tearing in with both fists flying, with little regard for what he might suffer in reply, was the only way he knew how to fight. Even in 1934, at the well-advanced age of 61, and in what was meant to be a harmless exhibition between two of the ring's great names, he wasn't about to change the habits of a lifetime.

Though it had been 19 years since he surrendered his world heavyweight crown to Jess Willard under a hot Havana sun, Johnson still cut quite an impressive figure. His trunks might have been hitched high to partly hide his expanding waistline, but the muscular definition of his arms and upper body were reminders of a once-magnificent physical specimen.

Sharkey, too, retained much of his powerful figure, the thick chest bearing its familiar sailing ship tattoo topped by a huge star, and the square jaw set in grim determination to put on a good show against the man many experts tagged the greatest heavyweight of them all.

At the bell, Johnson, flashing the gold-toothed grin that had infuriated opponents when the fighting was for real, eased forward, his waist-high fists weaving their customary pattern. His smile quickly evaporated and his large brown eyes shot wide open as he saw Sailor Tom coming toward him like he had been fired from a ship's cannon.

Proving that even at age 56 his renowned reflexes hadn't deserted him, Johnson picked off his opponent's introductory left swing with his right forearm, then grabbed Sharkey's right fist

under his left arm to prevent the intended followup blow. It was the old master showing he hadn't forgotten the tricks.

Pulling the squat Irishman in close so that Sharkey's misshapen left ear (a souvenir of his many hard battles) rested against his chest, Johnson whispered into his good ear, "Hey, Tom, what are you trying to do to me?"

Sharkey's reply was a snarled swear word as he wrenched himself free and tossed another wild swing, which Johnson avoided with ease. Sharkey never gave up his attempts to pin a haymaker on the elusive former champion. Johnson was mighty relieved to hear the final bell.

Jack wasn't the first world heavyweight king to learn the short, thick-set Irishman was no pushover. Back in 1896, Corbett took on Sharkey and was lucky to get a draw. The contest was limited to four rounds, at Corbett's insistence. He had announced his retirement the previous year to take up an acting career, and was now in the initial stages of a comeback.

Out of condition after a tiring theatrical and personal appearance tour, "Gentleman Jim" boxed the head off the untutored Irishman for

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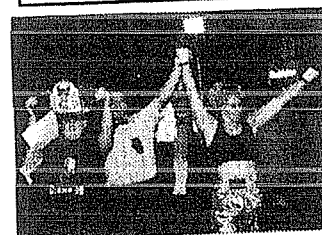
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two rounds—then ran out of steam. Sharkey roughed him up so badly that Corbett slumped on his stool after the four rounds and didn't leave the ring for half an hour. In his autobiography *The Roar Of The Crowd*, Corbett made the ludicrous claim that Sharkey didn't hit him once, but he did admit he had underrated his opponent's strength.

Two years later, Corbett, having lost the world title to Bob Fitzsimmons, again faced Sharkey in a bid to cement his claim to another crack at Fitz' crown. In his book, Jim made another extraordinary claim—that Sharkey had agreed there would be no infighting. Such a pact, if true, was sensibly ignored by Sailor Tom, who wasn't about to surrender the one area where he would be the master craftsman's superior.

Floored in the second round, Corbett used his skill to pick up long-range points. But his ribs took an unmerciful battering from the aggressive Sharkey. By the ninth round, Corbett was weary and dejected. One of his seconds, Jim McVey, fearing his man's humiliation, jumped into the ring, claiming a foul by Sharkey. But the referee, "Honest" John Kelly, disqualified Corbett.

Sharkey claimed another heavyweight champion's scalp when he was declared the winner against Fitzsimmons. But again it was via unsatisfying ruling, an alleged low blow. "Ruby Robert" risked his life by vehemently disputing the decision, for the referee was none other than notorious gunfighter Wyatt Earp.

Fitzsimmons had won and lost the world crown before he met up again with Sharkey, at Coney Island in 1900. Sharkey suffered the most comprehensive defeat of his career when smashed down for the full count in the second round, but not before he had Fitz on the floor in the opening session.

Sharkey's reputation as a tough nut was never more clearly defined than in a riotous clash with fellow Irishman Peter Maher at the Palace Athletic Club in New York. Sailor Tom had his rival down and almost out in the sixth round, but in the next session it was his turn to hit the canvas. After the knockdown Sharkey jumped to his feet and tore into Maher like a madman.

The bell rang, but Sharkey still flailed away. The referee failed to stop him, so the police joined in. Still Sharkey swung away, hurting his own second, Joe Choynski, and opening a deep gash on an opposing cornerman's forehead. Finally, a rope was wound around the wild Irishman before he could wreak further damage. The referee called the bout a draw.

Sharkey notched impressive knockouts over some of the top-notchers of the period, men like Choynski, Gus Ruhlin, Joe Goddard, and one-time middleweight champion Kid McCoy. But it was his losing battles with the mighty Jeffries that ensured his recognition as one of the division's toughest and bravest campaigners. In two encounters lasting a combined 45 rounds, Sharkey, outweighed by 35 pounds and six inches shorter, doggedly refused to be crushed by "The California Grizzly Bear." Moreover, there were quite a few experts who alleged he was robbed of the world title in a grueling 25-rounder.

Both Sharkey and Jeffries were undefeated when they first paired off in San Francisco on May 6, 1898. After a bruising 20 rounds, Jeffries took a close decision. He promised Sailor Tom that if he won the world heavyweight title, he would give him first crack at it. He was as good as his word.

Five months after he dethroned Fitzsimmons, Big Jeff put his title on the line against Sharkey at New York's Coney Island Athletic Club on November 3, 1899. Thousands of fans braved a steady downpour to pay from \$5 to \$35 to witness the two men wage battle for sport's greatest prize and a \$25,000 purse, winner take all.

The Biograph Film Company had secured exclusive rights, which required the setting up of a battery of 400 powerful light bulbs over the ring. When all these were switched on, the ring was like an oven. If ringsiders saw fit to complain about the heat and the blinding glare, think how it must have been for the fighters and referee George Siler.

Sharkey dismissed his physical disadvantages by adopting an aggressive role, shaking off the bigger man's heavy punches and getting home with punishing shots of his own. He shook Jeffries with a left hook in the sixth round, and the champion finished the round bleeding from the mouth and ear.

By the 10th round, the Irishman was considered ahead. He had pounded the champion's body until it was black and blue, and had inflicted severe facial damage. But Sharkey, too, had not escaped unhurt. His forehead was gashed and one ear was torn. It was only afterward revealed that Sailor Tom had battled from the third round onward with two broken ribs.

In the 17th round, Sharkey straightened up the crouching Jeffries with a right uppercut, then smashed a terrific left to the jaw. Sharkey later said it was the hardest punch he ever landed on

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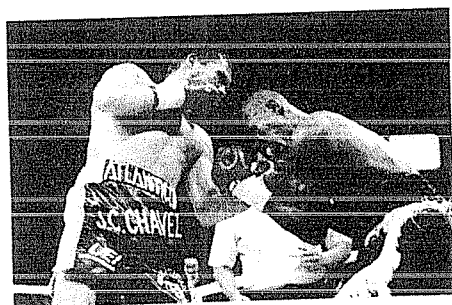
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Sharkey

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anyone. But Jeff just shook his head and resumed his onward march.

The failure to drop the rock-hard champion knocked much of the heart out of the fighting Irishman. Had it been a 20-rounder, there was little doubt Sharkey would have earned the verdict and his place as heavyweight champion. From the 20th to the end of the 25th, Jeffries displayed amazing recuperative powers and battered the challenger without mercy.

Sharkey survived two tremendous uppercuts in the 22nd to rock the titleholder with thudding right hooks in the next round. But the real strength had gone from Sailor Tom's fists. Most of the punishment was dealt out by Jeffries.

A remarkable incident occurred in the last round. As Jeffries threw a left hook, Sharkey clamped his arm down on the glove. The force of the blow sent the Irishman tumbling to the canvas, and as Sharkey fell, he pulled off the champion's glove. Siler tried to restore the glove but, in the meantime, Sharkey had regained his feet and was anxious to get on with the fight.

Sharkey dodged around the official and threw a punch at Jeffries. The champion yanked his hand free from the referee's grasp and hit back at Sharkey—with his bare fist. It was the only time a fight was contested with gloves and bare knuckles at the same time.

By the time the referee sorted things out, the final bell had rung. Jeffries was the winner and still champion. The verdict met with a storm of protests from the pro-Sharkey crowd. Even the neutrals thought the game Irishman deserved at least a draw. He had forced the action for two-thirds of the way, even if he took a pounding in the last third.

Years later, Jeffries told *THE RING's* founder/editor, Nat Fleischer, "They came no greater than Tom Sharkey. I split his eye open, and his ear was swollen as big as my fist. When I landed a blow on it, it was like hitting a big wet sponge. Yet he wouldn't think of quitting. I also broke two of his ribs and still he kept coming at me. He was as game a fighter as I've ever seen."

When Jeffries died in March 1953, Sharkey said, "Well, I finally beat him." Within a month, Sailor Tom, too, was dead. There never was much between them.

Patrick Myler is a freelance writer based in Dublin, Ireland.

THE BIBLE OF BOXING