

Willie Pep and Sandy Saddler – Two of Boxing's Greats

Written by Sam Gregory
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Willie Pep turned pro in 1940 at the age of 18, coming off an outstanding amateur career in his home state of Connecticut. Pep had won the State flyweight and bantamweight championships the previous two years, in 1938 and 1939.

Pep started his professional career by winning an unheard of sixty-two consecutive fights over three years. His first loss was in 1942 to world class lightweight Sammy Angott, who outweighed Pep by 12 pounds. Willie went the distance with Angott, losing the fight on points in a 10 round decision.

During Pep's sixty-two consecutive wins, he challenged title holder Chalky Wright for the featherweight belt. Pep won a 15 round decision against the title holder in 1942, becoming the new Undisputed Featherweight Champion of the World and the youngest featherweight title holder at the age of 21.

Pep held the title for six years before being stopped by Sandy Saddler with a 4th round KO in a championship fight on October 29, 1948. Except for a draw with Jimmy McAllister in December of 1945, Willie Pep had a total of 134 wins out of 136 bouts until his loss to Sandler. Along with that 4th round knockout by Sandler, Willie Pep and Sandy Saddler would embark on four of the most memorable championship fights in the history of featherweight boxing.

Sandy Saddler turned pro in 1944 at the age of 17. Having fought just 50 bouts as an amateur, Saddler started his pro career as a bantamweight. After winning his first fight by decision, he was knocked out in his second fight to a more experienced Jock Leslie. That was the only time Sandy Saddler was knocked out in his 162 fight career. Saddler soon moved up to the featherweight division and was quickly recognized by Ring magazine as a top contender in the featherweight division. In his second year as a pro, 1945, Saddler fought 24 fights, going 24-0 with 17 knockouts.

The 5 foot, 8 and a half inch tall-124 to 130 pound Sandler didn't look like much of a puncher, but he was one of the best. With 103 career knockouts, he not only holds the featherweight record for knockouts, but is ranked sixth on the all time knockout list. He fought 93 fights before his knockout win over Willie Pep for the featherweight title. The first of the four title fights took place in New York on October 29, 1948, with Saddler winning by a 4th round knockout.

Willie Pep was considered skillful, sharp, a beautiful boxer and hard hitter. He was exceptional at counter-punching, side-stepping, had outstanding defensive skills, as well as being expert at the art of feinting.

The difference between the two was with Saddler, he was not quite as skillful and sharp as Pep, but was a stronger and sturdier man. Saddler was also a two-fisted puncher who was accused by several opponents and the public of engaging in unfair tactics in the ring.

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Four months after the first fight, Willie Pep regained his title from Saddler by winning a 15 round decision in Madison Square Garden. It was considered the most brutal fight of the four. Both fighters were evenly matched at 126 pounds, though Saddler was taller and had the longer reach. Saddler also possessed a left jab unlike any other. It was almost like a southpaw's left, with Saddler being able to use it as a hook and an uppercut, as well as a jab.

In the third bout on September 8, 1950, Saddler regained the title by stopping Pep in the eighth round. Going into the fight Saddler was an 8 to 5 favorite to win. Pep was knocked down in the third round for a standing eight count. Pep was quick to recover from the knockdown and started winning the middle rounds of the fight. Saddler, not afraid to use any tactics to win, began raking Pep's face with the laces of his gloves. Ignoring several warnings from the referee, by the 5th and 6th rounds Saddler had Pep's face a bloody mess, with his eyes swollen shut. By the seventh round Willie Pep somehow dislocated his shoulder and was unable to answer the bell for the eighth round. Even though Pep was ahead on the judges' scorecards, Saddler got the win.

The fourth fight, September 26, 1951, could have been considered a free-for-all. By today's standards the fight would have been stopped disqualifying Pep and Saddler. Both fighters spent most of the fight wrestling, holding and pushing each other around the ring. At one point in the fight, the referee was even knocked to the canvas trying to separate the two. The fight was stopped after the ninth round due to swelling in Pep's right eye. Saddler retained the title. Because of the illegal tactics used in the fight, both fighters were later suspended briefly by the New York State Athletic Commission. Saddler spent the next two years in the Army, after returning home he was allowed to retain his featherweight championship. He announced his retirement from boxing in 1957, after injuries sustained in an automobile accident.

Pep continued boxing until 1959, making a brief comeback in 1965 at the age of 42. Both men were inducted into the boxing Hall of Fame in 1990.