

The Fight of the Century

Written by Sam Gregory
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On March 17, 1897, in Carson City, Nevada, Bob Fitzsimmons kayoed James J. Corbett in the 14th round to win the heavyweight championship of the world. As a heavyweight fight between two of the greatest, most prestigious prize fighters of all time, the fight was considered the most renowned boxing match of the century. No one will ever forget Fitzsimmons' win over Corbett that day in Carson City. It was a true ring classic. Not only was it a classic by boxing standards, at the time it exceeded all expectations for a financial endeavor of any kind.

In "The fight of the century" Fitzsimmons earned a purse of \$15,000, took Corbett's stake money of \$10,000 and pocketed \$13,000 from the Edison Picture Company, which filmed the fight. The total expenditure in the United States resulting from "The fight of the century" was—for 1897—the staggering amount of \$2,700,000. Of that, \$1,300,000 was paid to telegraph companies for ticker and special wire service and for newspaper and private dispatches. Betting on the bout was equally colossal. One bookmaker from San Francisco had to employ four Pinkerton detectives to guard two bags of gold worth \$150,000, which he had to pay out the day after the fight.

The two prize fighters were the main reason it became "The fight of the century." Born in Helston, England, at a young age Bob Fitzsimmons and his family moved 12,000 miles to a small town by the name of Timaru on the South Island of New Zealand. While growing up, Fitz worked in his brother Jarrett's blacksmith shop, developing the strength he used to become one of the top pound for pound hardest punchers in boxing. Fitzsimmons stood slightly shorter than six feet tall and usually weighed between 150 and 176 pounds. While his stature was considered a handicap for a heavyweight, according to some in the boxing media, with his limitless courage and powers of endurance Fitzsimmons overcame any physical limitations. The man himself was once quoted as saying, "I did pretty well for a boxer who was only a middleweight."

Fitzsimmons had a 71 $\frac{3}{4}$ inch reach, but made little use of this abnormal reach. In fact, his most devastating punch did not travel more than a foot. It was a six-inch punch that he used to knockout his toughest opponents, including Corbett. To Fitzsimmons' generation, winning titles at such an early age as he did was unheard of. People talked of him as some kind of boxing freak—a big shouldered, bald-headed, thin legged fighting machine. Fitzsimmons was the first triple title holder in boxing history. He won the world middleweight, heavyweight, and light heavyweight championships over a 27 year career. Fitzsimmons was also a self-trained fighter.

Jim Corbett, born in San Francisco September 1, 1866, was considered a new breed of boxer, different from the stereotypical brawler style of fighter. Known as Gentleman Jim, he was brought up in a middle class family, learning to box under the professional direction of Walter Watson at The Olympic Club in San Francisco. Starting as a middleweight, Corbett fought a well-instructed amateur career at the club. He fought and beat a few pro boxers at that weight class before being moved into the heavyweight division. Before turning pro Corbett won his golden gloves along with several silver cup trophies as an amateur. Jim eventually became a

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boxing instructor at The Olympic Club in San Francisco.

When Jim Corbett turned pro at the age of 18 in 1884, he started his boxing career with a sound amateur foundation. Corbett's professional career took off five years later in 1889 when he took on the hard punching Joe Choynski for a three fight series. The first fight was broken up by the police after just four rounds and went on the record books as a no-contest.

Six days later the fight resumed. This time the two men fought the fight on the deck of a barge in San Francisco Bay. Corbett wore two ounce gloves while Choynski wore skin tight driving gloves. In the third round Corbett broke his left hand with a punch to Choynski's head. Finally, in the 27th round, Corbett used that same left hand to score a knockout over Choynski with a left hook. Jim Corbett went on to win the third and final fight with Choynski, but had his sights set on winning the heavyweight title from John L. Sullivan, who was the current heavyweight champion of the world. On September 7 Th, 1892, in New Orleans, Corbett beat the famous John L. Sullivan in 21 rounds. Jim Corbett knocked Sullivan out at 1:30 of the 21st round to win the heavyweight title.

At that time, Fitzsimmons had only been in the United States approximately two and a half years. Before coming to the U.S. he fought as a pro for seven years in Australia, leaving Australia as the middleweight champion. Fitzsimmons arrived in San Francisco in the spring of 1890. By January of 1891 he had fought and beat "Nonpareil" Jack Dempsey, knocking him out in the 13th round. Bob Fitzsimmons won the World's middleweight championship. He defended the middleweight title just once before setting his sites on the heavyweight title held by Jim Corbett.

By March of 1897 Jim Corbett was in his fifth year as the heavyweight champion of the world. At this time in Fitzsimmons career he had been in this country seven years, having fought many fights with men that outweighed him by as much as 30 pounds. On September 5th of 1893 Fitzsimmons fought seven bouts in one evening in Chicago. He won all seven by KO, the longest two fights going 5 rounds.

When the two finally did meet in "The fight of the century," Fitzsimmons was 34 years old to Corbett's 30 years of age. Outweighed by sixteen pounds, Fitzsimmons took a brutal beating throughout the first thirteen rounds of the fight. In the 14th round Fitz landed a punch to Corbett's solar plexus that some newsmen later called, "The shout heard round the world." It was one of Fitzsimmons' six inch short, sharp, damaging punches that dropped Corbett, who let out a horrifying gasp said to be heard throughout the entire crowd.

Fitzsimmons held the heavyweight title until he met Jim Jeffries at Coney Island in 1899. At 167 pounds Fitz underrated the 206 pound Jefferies. Jim Jefferies won the heavyweight title with an 11th round knockout.

In 1900 Corbett challenged Jefferies for the heavyweight title. "Gentleman Jim" was kayoed by Jefferies in the 23rd round. A 1903 rematch was even less of a challenge for the bigger, stronger Jefferies, who stopped Corbett in 10.