

One of the Greatest Heavyweight Fights of All Time

Written by Sam Gregory

Tuesday, 14 September 2004 18:00

When Billy Conn turned pro on January 28, 1934 at the age of 17, he was immensely under-rated, certainly a fighter who wasn't thought of as Hall-of-Fame quality. Getting off to a slow start as a professional prize fighter, Conn lost six of his first fourteen fights. Then in September of 1935, other than one draw, Billy Conn managed to string together a 26 fight win streak. By the age of 19 Conn, also known as "The Pittsburg Kid," had defeated three former world champions; and in July of 1939 won the vacated World Light Heavyweight Championship by beating Melio Bettina. During the 26 fight win streak of his light heavyweight career Conn beat fistic greats Fritzie Zivic, Babe Risko, Vince Dundee and Teddy Yarosz.

Billy Conn always fought the best fighters possible, as exemplified by fighting and winning back to back non-title fights against the reigning world middleweight champion, Fred Apostoli just five months before winning the light heavyweight title. A month after winning the title, Billy Conn kayoed future heavyweight title challenger Gus Dorazio in eight rounds while still retaining the light heavyweight crown.

Billy Conn had clearly earned the right to be called "One of the greatest light heavyweights in boxing history." Being a brilliant and flashy light heavyweight, Conn had also been enjoying consistent success against bigger fighters. His constant clamoring for a chance to fight Joe Louis, motivated by a 13th round knockout of Bob Pastor, a 183 pound man that gave Louis a tough fight, convinced Conn of his ability to take on Joe Louis for the heavyweight championship.

In May of 1941 Billy Conn relinquished the light heavyweight championship to fight Joe Louis for the heavyweight championship of the world. Joe Louis wanted a June fight, and since Billy Conn looked to be the only possible opponent, the fight was scheduled for June 18, 1941.

Billy Conn fought Joe Louis at the Polo Grounds in New York City in a fight that turned out to be one of the greatest heavyweight fights of all time. The fight was proven to be one of the toughest of Louis' career. And for Conn, he was outweighed by more than 25 pounds and at a further disadvantage in height and reach.

In his autobiography Joe Louis said, "I made a mistake going into that fight. I knew Conn was kinda small and I didn't want them to say in the papers that I beat up on some little guy so the day before the fight I did a little roadwork to break a sweat and drank as little water as possible so I could weigh in under 200 pounds. Chappie was as mad as hell. But Conn was a clever fighter, he was like a mosquito, he'd sting and move."

Louis clearly under-estimated the great light heavyweight. Boxing historian Bert Sugar wrote of the fight, Conn carried into the ring, "His consummate boxing skill, his flashy left hand the center piece, (that) made him a lineal descendant of Gentleman Jim Corbett, the first of the great scientific boxers," also with a great defense, "Conn could block punches with his arms, elbows and gloves, and further nullify his opponents punches by 'rolling' with them," also having

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“Remarkable recuperative powers, having been knocked down only twice in his career and haven gotten up both times.”

For the better part of thirteen rounds, the beautiful jabbing, feinting, and maneuvering of Conn gave him the advantage in the fight. Louis did have his moments when he stunned Conn with a left hook in the 5th, cutting his eye and nose. By the 8th round dehydration set in on Louis and he began to tire badly. By the 12th round Louis was completely exhausted with Conn ahead on two of three scorecards.

Then Billy got cocky and overconfident at the part of the fight when he knew he was winning on points. Conn decided to trade punches with the heavy hitting Louis, as the two were slugging it out Louis landed a powerful left hook to the jaw of Conn. He followed that up with an even harder right as Conn was almost ready to collapse. Billy had little left but courage as Louis battered his body with lefts and rights until the crushing right landed with only two seconds on the clock to end the thirteenth round. A finishing right from Louis' TNT fist brought an abrupt end to the dazzling show.

Overconfidence caused Billy Conn's downfall in the fight. Even losing the fight by a thirteenth round knockout, Billy Conn came close to defeating The Brown Bomber.

The fight went down in boxing history as one of the ten greatest heavyweight fights of all time.