

Corbett vs. Fitzsimmons/St. Paddy's Day 1897

Written by Sam Gregory

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In the middle of February 1897, Bob Fitzsimmons and James J. Corbett arrived in Carson City, Nevada to prepare for their heavyweight title fight to be held on St. Patrick's Day. It was the most anticipated prizefight of the century, featuring the two most prestigious heavyweights of the late 1800s.

It was a smart move going to Carson City early, because both fighters needed to acclimate themselves to the higher altitude (4000 feet above sea level). Neither had experienced competition under those conditions.

The reigning heavyweight champion, "Gentleman" Jim Corbett, was born and raised in San Francisco to an upper middle class Irish family. College educated, he learned to box at San Francisco's Olympic Club under the guidance of boxing trainer Walter Watson. Corbett brought a new style of boxing to the ring. He was not your stereotypical boxer. He was renowned as an innovator in boxing, using fast jabs and hooks and with a new style of footwork few fighters at that time had ever seen.

Bob Fitzsimmons was born in England of Irish parents who moved to New Zealand when Bob was very young. He spent his formative years working in his older brother's blacksmith shop. There he developed a work ethic – as well as the strength that would enable him to eventually capture titles in three different weight divisions. Fitzsimmons also used his stamina to tremendous advantage. He was accustomed to training on a daily basis. It didn't matter whether he was preparing for a fight or not. Fitzsimmons trained himself and regulated his own work and diet.

Fitzsimmons rode the train from New York across the country to Carson City. Fitz stopped along the way to give exhibitions and almost always received the red carpet treatment. As an added attraction, Ruby Robert would fight any man in the town hall to raise a little extra expense money.

At 10:30 AM on the day of the fight, the Fitzsimmons entourage set off for the arena. At their arrival, Fitzsimmons laid down to rest. Former lawman Bat Masterson and a few of his hired hands were at the entrances relieving the spectators of their "blue hardware."

A few minutes after midday, with a pale blue robe thrown lightly around his shoulders, Fitzsimmons made his way through the tunnel from his dressing room to the ring. The fans seated on the east side of the amphitheater were the first to see him and they let out a roar which was echoed by the crowd of 4000. An even more enthusiastic reception greeted Corbett as he made his way to the ring. Wearing a brown eiderdown dressing gown, a smiling Corbett stepped in the ring. Luminaries John L. Sullivan and Nevada Governor Sadler were introduced to the cheering crowd.

Corbett was the bigger man. Fitzsimmons was announced at 167 pounds. Corbett weighed in a

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full sixteen pounds heavier.

Both men were tentative in the opening round, but Fitzsimmons suffered a dislocated right thumb. The heavy hitting started in round two with Corbett landing some hard shots to Fitzsimmons' head. By the fourth round Corbett was ahead. By the fifth round Corbett came out determined and on the offensive. Fitz countered with a quick rally of body punches, but Corbett rocked the challenger's head back with a solid right to the jaw which drew blood from his nose and lip.

The sixth round was like a barroom brawl, with both fighters swinging furiously. Few punches landed, but there was plenty of clinching and wrestling. Fitzsimmons face was pouring blood, something that was not lost on Corbett. He threw a swift right to the jaw and dropped Fitzsimmons for a nine-count.

Fitzsimmons slowly turned the tide, and by the twelfth round had taken control of the fight. In the thirteenth Fitz hit Corbett with a short, sharp jab that sent one of Gentleman Jim's gold teeth flying into ringside seats. Seizing the opening he had been looking for, Fitzsimmons feinted a right to the jaw, and when Corbett brought up his guard, Fitz shot a right to the heart and a left that landed with paralyzing force to Corbett's solar plexus.

Corbett was down and counted out. A new champion was crowned thanks to what remains to this day one of the most famous single punches in heavyweight history.