(This article is co-authored by Bill Schutte)

In the late 1800s, when prize-fighting was a much more rough-and-tumble game than today, the only fights John L. Herget lost happened outside the ropes. And then the other guys cheated.

One hundred fourteen years ago it was written of Herget, whose ring name was Young Mitchell, that he was “perhaps the best middleweight in America in his time, Jack Dempsey not excepted.”

The reference was to the renowned 19th century middleweight champion called “The Nonpareil.” By definition, nothing tops a nonpareil (“Something of unequalled excellence”), but since Dempsey lost three fights in his career and the worst Mitchell ever got was a draw, maybe the nickname went to the wrong fighter.

They never did put it up for grabs in the ring, because Dempsey was Mitchell’s mentor and best friend, and a highlight of the latter¹s career was avenging the famous and controversial “pivot punch” KO suffered by Dempsey at the hands of George LaBlanche.

Born in San Francisco in 1868, Herget was 16 and barely weighed 100 pounds when he and his friend Dinny Sullivan pooled their money to buy a set of boxing gloves. A few weeks later, they were in opposite corners at Harry Maynard’s downtown boxing club. After introducing “Young Sullivan,” Maynard decided on the spur of the moment that his opponent deserved a famous fighting surname, too, and introduced Herget as “Young Mitchell,” after British heavyweight champion (and future John L. Sullivan opponent) Charlie Mitchell.

Birth may have given Dinny the brighter marquee billing, but nature compensated for that and the 5’6¾” Mitchell's fairly dainty appearance by endowing him with attributes that, in those days of skintight gloves and fights-to-a-finish, counted a hell of a lot more than a macho handle.

It took them ten minutes to revive Bob Turnbull after Mitchell flattened him in seven rounds on May 29, 1885, and one of the loser’s seconds lammed out of the Wigwam Theater fearing his man was dead. It was Mitchell’s fifth KO in six fights (the other he won on a foul), and what happened to Turnbull – who’d twice stayed the limit with Dempsey – convinced the other West Coast featherweights that there were healthier ways to make money than fighting Mitchell.

So from the East came Jack Kennan, recognized as American lightweight champion, whose advantages over the 17-year-old Mitchell in size, experience and skill seemed so overwhelming that before their fight the police made them switch to gloves with more padding than the standard three-ounce mitts.

For thirty rounds, Mitchell’s backers probably wished that headgear and full body armor had

been ordered, too, as the kid took a pasting. But then those bigger gloves must've felt like anvils to Keenan, and with the great Dempsey egging him on from his corner, Mitchell started doling out the hurt. In round 35, the champion went down for keeps.

Over the next eight years, Mitchell would fight up to 47 rounds at a crack. But his longest contest ever, and one that made news all over the world, only lasted 34 rounds.

Make that three days and 34 rounds.

On November 29, 1885, Mitchell and Billy Hamilton of San Jose were to fight to the finish in a popular picnic area near San Rafael, California. Too popular, it turned out, because among the thousand or so people who made a beeline for the site was Sheriff Jake Gordon, who stood up as the fighters got ready to rumble and announced that no illegal prize-fighting would be done in Marin County as long as he wore a badge.

The ring was dutifully dismantled and the following day it went up again in a barn in Berkeley, in next-door Alameda County. Mitchell and Hamilton waged a heated battle for ten rounds, but not as frenetic as the dash for cover when, in round eleven, the county sheriff showed up to restore law and order in his domain.

A day later, the Mitchell-Hamilton roadshow landed in Alviso, in Santa Clara County, and the fighters went at it for 23 more rounds. As Mitchell was belaboring Hamilton in the latter's corner, a Hamilton backer brandishing a butcher knife jumped up and announced that he would rip Mitchell a new one if he knocked Hamilton out. Some accounts say that Mitchell did it anyway, while others gave the only fight in recorded ring history fought over three successive days in three different counties to him on a foul. (In either case, that business with the pigsticker certainly proved that there's never a cop around when you need one.)

Mitchell weighed just 130 pounds when he knocked out Tom Cleary for the Pacific Coast middleweight belt in 1886, and the year after that the pickings were so slim at home that he went to Australia and dazzled Down Under fans and foes alike with his skill and stamina. His fight with Jack Hall was only declared a draw after 46 rounds because after the 33rd round Hall, who'd been knocked down repeatedly, did nothing but sprint away from Mitchell.

Mitchell's 40-rounder with Peter Boland for the national lightweight title, fought for three hours in a rainstorm, also ended up a draw. The American subsequently outpointed Boland, and upon his return stateside he successfully defended his coastal middleweight title by again knocking out Tom Cleary in a 30-round fight that raised eyebrows as soon as Mitchell entered the ring. Anyone who thinks today's fighters are the last word in sartorial splendor ought to have gotten a load of Mitchell in knee-length pink tights, brown stockings, and what the *San Francisco Chronicle* described as "a rather aristocratic-looking pair of check-tweed fighting shoes." Around his waist was "a natty black velvet belt, ornamented with silk woven flowers."

When a New Yorker called Sailor Brown couldn't beat Mitchell in the ring, he beat him to the Western Union telegraph office and sent out a widely-circulated story proclaiming him the

winner of their fight. The man-bites-dog report was subsequently corrected.

On August 28, 1889, the boxing world was shook to its foundation when The Nonpareil bit the dust against LaBlanche, a roughneck from Quebec who was getting the worst of it until he used the backhanded “pivot punch” – subsequently declared illegal – to lay Dempsey out in their San Francisco fight.

Dempsey retained the middleweight belt because “The Marine,” as LaBlanche was known, came in one pound over the agreed-upon weight of 160. But the KO against him stood, and when LaBlanche and Mitchell were matched on February 20, 1891, the man the *Police News* called Dempsey’s “pupil, ardent follower, Baptist scholar, and most profound exponent” ran twelve miles and punched the bag for two hours and fifteen minutes daily to square accounts for his pal.

He did, stopping LaBlanche in 12 rounds. Trouble was The Marine was a thorough schnook who, in the middle of his fight with Dempsey, offered to lay down for $500. And there was ample evidence that he splashed in the Mitchell fight.

Mitchell was blameless, though, and after he stopped Reddy Gallagher in thirteen rounds it was widely said that the pupil had overtaken the master – Dempsey – as the best middleweight around.

Since neither man was interested in putting that to the test, Mitchell wound up his undefeated career dispatching a succession of lesser lights. However, his last official fight, against Jim Ryan on December 1, 1893, was declared a draw after the pesky police stopped it in the eighth round.

While unhappy with his own performance, Mitchell – who’d not fought in over a year – was even unhappier with that of referee Jack McAuliffe, the lightweight champion, and spent the next two months challenging McAuliffe to a fight. On February 9, 1894, McAuliffe called on Mitchell and suggested they bury the hatchet not in the ring but on a tour of San Francisco nightspots. Off they went for a convivial evening that went south when, as they left the last saloon on their itinerary, McAuliffe turned and sucker-punched Mitchell, and proceeded, with several confederates, to kick the stuffing out of him.

Mitchell was back in the news for another extracurricular fight that occurred on March 21, 1897. He was running a popular tavern himself then, into which walked an already soused Mysterious Billy Smith, whose reputation as the dirtiest fighter in boxing history has survived numerous determined challenges through the years. Smith rushed at Mitchell and took a swing at him. In the battle that ensued, Mitchell had the upper hand until Smith got hold of his right pinkie finger with his teeth and chewed until, reported the *San Francisco Call*, “he was almost black in the face” and Mitchell’s digit was almost severed. After finally prying Smith off, some other patrons chased him out of town.

As for Young Mitchell, he reverted to his birth name, was elected a county supervisor, ran a hotel, and died in 1945 at 77. For some reason he has always fallen through the cracks at Hall

of Fame voting time – an injustice that, unlike that sprawling marathon battle with Billy Hamilton, has gone on way too long.