

Knute Hansen: A Not-So-Durable Dane

Written by Pete Ehrmann
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Nobody likes to get hit in the head, but when you wear boxing gloves to work taking a hard whack at the office won't set alarms off at OSHA.

Had Knute Hansen been more accepting of that occupational hazard he might have become heavyweight champion of the world when Wall Street barons conspired to take over boxing's greatest title 78 years ago.

Born December 6, 1903, Knud Hansen became "Knute" after he arrived in Racine, Wisconsin from his native Copenhagen, Denmark. Hansen was eight years old, and for the next decade he attended school and in the summer worked at a store hefting 200-pound sacks of flour.

By the time he was 18, and a graduate of Racine high school, Hansen was 6'4" tall – a veritable Shaquille O'Neal for that time. But professional basketball was still a long way off, and the National Football League was in diapers. There was big dough to be made in the boxing ring, however, especially for a heavyweight. In 1921, champion Jack Dempsey and challenger Georges Carpentier had drawn the sport's first million-dollar gate.

When Hansen had his first professional fight on March 4, 1922, winning a four-round decision over Jack Miller in Milwaukee, he was identified by the Milwaukee Journal as "a descendant of an ancient Viking."

After a second win in Milwaukee, Hansen went to New York City, the boxing capitol of the world, on the recommendation of Tom Andrews, Wisconsin's top ring authority, who hooked up the Racine man and veteran managers Joe Woodman and George Lawrence.

Then the story gets murky.

In Andrews' version, Hansen's new handlers took one look at their gangly charge and advised Hansen that the surest way to turn himself into a 200-pound physical specimen guaranteed to strike fear into the hearts of other heavyweights was to go to work for a couple years as a deckhand on schooners hauling merchandise all over the globe.

Hansen himself later claimed that he went to sea only after Woodman and Lawrence sent him schlepping around South America as sparring partner for one of their palookas.

Whether of his own volition or as an escape from drudgery, Hansen did spend the next two years as a seaman on tall-masted sailing ships, visiting exotic ports-o-call and showing off his fighting talent every place he went.

He knocked out Seaman Moore, champion of the British Navy, in a bamboo stadium in Shanghai, and according to Hansen's own account he also worked as a customs man tracking down smugglers in China, and boxed local heroes all over the mainland.

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“Gosh, they thought I was Jack Dempsey!” bragged Hansen later. “That’s a fact. I was hailed like a hero.”

The reception was just a little less subdued when Hansen, now a buff 200-pounder, returned to New York and within five days in August, 1926, belted out South American champion Alfredo Porzio and formidable Quinton Romero Rojas in bouts.

“He looks like the best of the foreign heavyweight crop,” enthused The Ring magazine, which in this instance flubbed its reputation as “The Bible of Boxing” by getting Hansen’s home base wrong.

Although his Racine days were behind him, Hansen always identified himself as being from Wisconsin’s Belle City, and was so introduced before his fights. The Ring wasn’t the only publication to get it wrong. At various times the New York papers located Racine in Minnesota or somewhere in “the Northwest.”

But reporters’ deficiencies in geography would soon be the least of Hansen’s problems. On October 8, 1926, he knocked down German heavyweight champion Franz Diener in the first round at Madison Square Garden. Diener got up swinging, Hansen went into a shell and lost the 10-round decision.

When he dropped a decision two months later to Spanish contender Paulino Uzcudan, the press was merciless.

“The diffident Dane from Racine, Wis.,” wrote Ed Hughes of the New York Telegram, “seems to pack a charlotte russe where something more desirable in a fighting man should function. Hansen spars around a bit, takes a few lusty cracks at his adversary’s chin, and then steps back to survey his fate. If the other fellow weakens, he rips in and finishes him. On the other hand, if the enemy smiles and takes it, Hansen folds up and spends the rest of the bout meditating the easiest way out. That is, whether to hold, grin and bear it, or to flop and have done with it.”

“Knute Hansen is out of the picture,” declared The Ring. “He can box, but he can’t take it. His heart is not ‘there.’”

On November 4, 1927, they all changed their tune when Hansen, brought in as a late substitute and expected to play the baloney to British heavyweight champion Phil Scott’s grinder, instead knocked Scott down seven times and out in the first round at Madison Square Garden.

All of a sudden Racine’s great Dane was the talk of the heavyweight division. When champion Gene Tunney retired on July 31 1928, promoter Tex Rickard pronounced the 23-year-old Hansen the best of all the contenders and the likeliest to prevail in a tournament to determine a new champion of the world. Rickard went so far as to claim that “all the other heavyweights are afraid of him.”

Rickard’s loud enthusiasm for Hansen seemed odd, given the latter’s in-and-out performances

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in the ring. But the promoter wasn't Hansen's only friend in high places. Wall Street financiers Sprulle Braden and Walter P. Chrysler, the auto tycoon, led a group of millionaires who invested in Hansen. Several of them were also stockholders in Madison Square Garden, Rickard's promotional bailiwick. New York Times columnist John Kiernan took to referring to the fighter in the argot of the stock market as "Knute Hansen Pfd."

But before Hansen's coronation could be effected, his original managers, Woodman and Lawrence, went to court to assert their claim to his pugilistic services, and for the ensuing year the fighter ducked more summonses than punches. Hansen went abroad, won a decision over European heavyweight champion Riccardo Bertazzolo in Copenhagen, and returned in the summer of 1928 with a bride whose background was as grandiose as Hansen's own.

Damura de Rabinowitz was daughter of a Russian nobleman who escaped the 1917 Communist revolution and fled to France.

"Hansen's father-in-law is still a very wealthy man," reported the New York World. "He has given Knute two years to make what he can from the boxing game. Then Knute will join him in business if he fails at his own."

But the latter prospect seemed more unlikely than ever when out of the confusing Hansen managerial sweepstakes emerged a true thoroughbred. Known as the "Maker of Champions," Billy Gibson had steered Tunney himself to the heavyweight title. Now, for a reported \$12,000, with all the other claimants to the Dane getting a cut of future purses, Gibson aimed to take Hansen along the same path as front man for the Wall Street barons.

Many were dubious. "One of the most puzzling situations in professional boxing today is the hurrah now being raised over Knute Hansen," wrote George F. Downer of the Milwaukee Sentinel. "If this shows anything, it proves to what a low estate the whole heavyweight division has fallen. Hansen, who has the size, speed and cleverness to be a real heavyweight champion, has proved himself anything else but whenever put to a real test."

Former lightweight champion Benny Leonard had been managed by Gibson. In a column syndicated by the New York World, Leonard wrote, "For a fellow who is doing no fighting and apparently, so far as I can see right now, isn't figuring on doing any for some time, Knute Hansen certainly is grabbing a lot of publicity and creating quite a controversy." Then: "Wouldn't it be a laugh is some Palooka, thrown in there with Hansen in his first fight since he's come so thoroughly into the spotlight, should whack him on the chin and knock down the whole house of cards? Wouldn't it, though?"

A pretty astute fellow, that Leonard. Three months later, on December 4, 1928, journeyman bruiser K.O. Christner – a 20-1 underdog – pounded the darling of Wall Street into a virtual coma in eight rounds. It took them 15 minutes to revive Hansen, and he was still so out of it as he stumbled to his dressing room that he asked a handler for a special favor: "Go and eat a nice red apple for me."

Billy Gibson promptly followed Tunney back into retirement, and Walter Chrysler & Co. moved

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on to more profitable investments. Hansen continued to fight for a couple more years, but won just one out of 10. And that was because the other guy was disqualified. Knute was knocked out five times, and once he got the hook for falling down without being hit.

In 1933, a newspaperman named Henry M'Lenore found Hansen in Paris, painting pictures of posies.

“He quit the ring, he says, when he felt himself getting goofy,” M'Lenore wrote. “Knute classes himself a ‘neo-realist.’ Maybe he didn’t quit soon enough.”

But the Melancholy Dane at least got to eat plenty of nice red apples on his own. He was 80 when he died on May 1, 1984.