“Nothing so challenges the American spirit as tackling the biggest job on earth.”

~ Lyndon B. Johnson, 1941

The Fourth of July marks the 233rd anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. The elegant signatures on parchment by an unruly combination of American colonists provoked the giant that was Great Britain; and the world was never the same. The giant appeared eight days later when a fleet of warships sailed up the Verrazano Narrows in New York “like a forest of pine trees with their branches trimmed.”

“We must all hang together,” quipped Benjamin Franklin, “or assuredly we shall all hang separately.” The patriots not only hung together, they implemented an unorthodox and by some measures, an absurd strategy to score a technical knockout.

The Fourth of July also marks the 90th anniversary of Jack Dempsey’s destruction of another superior force, in heavyweight champion Jess Willard. There was nothing elegant about it. Dempsey had already made short work of rather large fighters that today could satisfy the definition of “super heavyweight” in Fred Fulton and Carl Morris, but Willard was something else. Known as the “Pottawatomie Giant”, Willard was 6’6 ½ and 245 pounds.

Gunboat Smith, a banger who stood 6’2, also fought Willard. He told Peter Heller that early on, he threw a good shot at Willard and “his hair wiggled a little bit. That’s all. I said ‘Holy Jesus, that was my best punch, no detours, right from the floor, right on his chin.’” Smith decided to move around him and box him from a safe distance. In the tenth round, a frustrated Willard said “come on out here and fight, you big bum.”

“Big bum?” Smith laughed, “I’m hiding behind his goddamned leg!”

Jack Dempsey was smaller than Gunboat Smith. At only 6’1 and 180 pounds he looked like a wee lad next to the champion, so he was listed at 187 to make it look better. A patriotic American with Cherokee blood in him, Dempsey turned the theory of strategic retreat on its head. General George Washington lost battles as a matter of course but kept in mind his ultimate objective, which was essentially to take the Redcoats into deep water and drown them. He made it a war of attrition and non-engagement where the hometown advantage would help the army -and thus the sacred cause- to survive long enough to win. It was a revolution won by military conservatism. The twenty-four year old Dempsey was offended by the very concept of patience. His style of fighting called to mind a drowning man in a whirlpool.

Willard’s fight plan against this challenger was no different than that employed by the current heavyweight champion newly recognized by The Ring: keep the smaller man at the end of his long jab, and douse him with a right cross now and then to keep him honest. That long left jab and waiting strategy baffled even the great Jack Johnson when Willard became the White Hope

Realized. Willard was also throwing right uppercuts in training camp, albeit not at any sparring partners for fear of hurting them. (Like Wladimir Klitschko, Jess was a gentleman.) Dempsey fought out of a semi-crouch and Jess planned to catch that hanging jaw and launch it to the moon. It was no secret that Willard had killed Bull Young with a gargantuan right uppercut in 1913. Some claimed it broke his neck. The giant wasn't an active champion however, having only defended his title once since the win over Jack Johnson. He was even making a go in the entertainment industry. The New York Times carried ads in the sports section for "The Challenge of Chance" which was playing in movie houses in the summer of 1919. In his role as a heroic ranch foreman, Willard would swing his mighty arms and upwards of twenty assailants would "tumble down like tenpins."

Dempsey's sparring partners included Big Bill Tate who was of comparable size to Jess and the middleweight Jamaica Kid. Dempsey knocked Tate cold on June 24 and was chasing Jamaica Kid out of the ring. There was talk of his being "too fine" –that he had peaked too early and had to be restrained from overtraining.

Forget the "Long Count Fight". The killer in a semi-crouch that was Dempsey had fear and death on his mind in Toledo. He wasn't civilized. By the time he lost to Gene Tunney, he had long since brushed off the muck of the back alley and was extending his pinky in tea rooms with celebrities.

Forget the stories about Dempsey loading his glove with an iron bolt or using plaster of Paris against Jess Willard. Both fighters inspected each other's wrapped hands in the ring before the gloves went on, and the gloves went on under supervision. Dempsey's blow was described by a contemporary as about equal to the "kick of an army mule in a tantrum." It's as simple as that. Over half of Dempsey's wins up to that point came by knockout in one or two rounds and the gloves used on that hot afternoon were only five ounces. Interestingly, the ring was not the regulation twenty-four square foot ring but only twenty square feet to accommodate extra press rows. When Dempsey was informed of this change he snapped, "you can make it fifteen square for all I care."

Fifty years after the fact Dempsey was interviewed by the Toledo Blade: "I took one look at Jess and said to myself 'you're not fighting for the title, you're fighting for your life.'" With that attitude, Dempsey came snorting out of his corner to engage the giant. Willard threw a one-two that did no damage, then a jab that was slipped. The two clinched and Dempsey can be seen on the film with his open gloves on the crease of Willard's arms to guard against uppercuts. The referee broke them and Dempsey, itching to unload his artillery, gallops in behind a vicious right to the body, followed by a left hook to the head, a right, and a finishing left hook that sent Willard down for the first time in his eight year career. Willard later said that he "didn't recover" from that left hook until about an hour after he left the ring.

There were six more knockdowns in round one and the star-spangled beat down continued until a bloody towel sailed into the ring. The giant had surrendered before round four and Dempsey was king.
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America's birthday is imminent, but the prospect of an American heavyweight champion is not.

The superpower on the throne comes out of Eastern Europe in the form of Wladimir Klitschko. He is the same size as Jess Willard, with a similar conservative fighting style and a nonviolent disposition. Nevertheless, since 2006 he has dominated freedom-loving Chris Byrd, Calvin Brock, Ray Austin, Lamon Brewster, Tony Thompson, and Hasim Rahman, stopping them all.

Only Brewster had success against Wlad, and only in their first fight where he was losing right up to the moment he landed a left hook, right cross, left hook combination that turned Wlad's legs to lokshyna.

Since then, Wladimir Klitschko's fights have been glorified sparring sessions. He is typically fought from the wrong range by second-rate guys that have no answers for the jab, who are content to allow him to play tyrant and dictate everything that goes on. American heavyweights, once hailed the world for fire-breathing ferocity, seem to be ailing from acute testosterone deficiency. They get an opportunity of a lifetime, a chance to become a heavyweight champion, and then spend rounds passively looking for proof that they are outgunned by Wlad. Boxing fans watch reruns of masochism evolving into surrender.

Whatever happened to the motto "don't tread on me"?

American heavyweights are indeed outgunned –no less than the citizen-soldiers at Breeds Hill or Saratoga. No less than Jack Dempsey. But neither those patriots nor the Manassa Mauler behaved as if their downfall was written in the heavens. No. They rewrote the script: shake your fist at the giant and blast away until you stand on his collapsed frame, and then watch your reputation ascend to the stars.

Klitschko may seem like an empire unto himself but he is no more unbeatable than Jess Willard was ninety years ago.

Trainer Manny Steward, the Kronk guru who has trained over two dozen champions in a career spanning over thirty years, develops ring technicians. Klitschko, despite what some commentators will have you believe, is not a technician in the strict sense of the word. Steward has given him simple strategies which he follows to the letter but he has not progressed as a technician. He does a few things well, but where is the counterpunching skill, infighting, combination punching, body punching, or serious defensive techniques? Wlad has a jab that is sometimes pawing but that can also be of the Liston, lamp post type. He has a hard right and a devastating left hook. His defense is limited to clinches and retreats: That's more or less the extent of his repertoire. It is certainly true that he hasn't had a compelling need to demonstrate other skills, but is that proof positive that his repertoire is any more extensive than we've seen? Unlikely. Boxers cannot hide what and who they are. What you see is the naked truth. Klitschko has a few tools in his tool box that he uses very well. It's his size that presents such problems.

More importantly than what's under the hood is the psychology of who's driving. Wlad has been stopped three times. Ross Purrity, Corrie Sanders, and Lamon Brewster fought him aggressively and were able to bounce shots off of his head until something inside Wlad broke. When dealing with sustained aggression, Wlad seems to panic. When hurt, Wlad has been prone to come apart.

Lamon Brewster did several things in his first meeting with Klitschko that mirrored what Jack Dempsey did against Willard. He bobbed and weaved, slipped the jab, applied pressure, closed the distance quickly when Wlad was in retreat, and punched in combination. Wlad didn't punch himself out as claimed –he was taken completely out of his comfort zone and overwhelmed. It was anxiety that exhausted him. Unfortunately for the man known as "Relentless", the second time he fought Wlad he looked like he was standing in line at a bakery waiting for cherry pies –and he got dozens of them in the form of left jabs.

That part of the script can be rewritten too. "Once in a while," Jess Willard admitted after the Dempsey fight, "I felt my head clearing and instinctively stuck out my long left which had served so well in previous fights. When I saw my opponent slipping easily past that protection, I realized that unless I landed a lucky blow, I was sure to lose."

Giants tend to develop a fairly simple, sedated style that is built around physical control of their opponent. Like the Jess jab, the Wlad jab is the primary instrument of oppression. A nervous jabbing contest may ensue that the smaller man can never win, and once lulled by the hypnotic "tit-for-tat", Wlad will suddenly commit to a right, and then it's "tit-for-splat". Most of the hooks Wlad throws are sweeping hooks to force his man to stay in front of him. When the opponent gets too close for comfort, Wlad clinches and leans on him. It's all about control. He's hoping to wear the opponent out or convince him that it is futile to resist domination. Trainers take note: Wlad is not dangerous when his opponent is. He doesn't punch when he is being punched. This is not only a glimpse into an elemental weakness; it is a key to victory.

Wlad is cautious to a fault. He fights like a man carrying a priceless vase across a mine field, only the vase is his chin and the mine field has been a meadow. The key is to take the control away from him by detonating fireworks under his nose. The key is to fight him like John Paul Jones would. With his ship shattered and sinking under the superior firepower of the British frigate Serapis and his crew decimated, Jones was asked by the British captain if he would surrender. Jones hollered "I have not yet begun to fight!" One of his grenades flew into the main deck battery of the larger ship, ignited the casks of gunpowder, and the Serapis soon surrendered to the Americans.

Jack Dempsey's grenades were no less deliberately launched than those of John Paul Jones. He fought with the savagery of a strategist. The film confirms that the only time he was at Willard's preferred range was when he was passing through to the inside –to the main deck battery if you will. Dempsey was either outside of Willard's reach or inside of his reach, he never stayed where Willard could hit him and he couldn't hit Willard. To get close, he would get low and shoot in behind hard, slashing punches that forced the larger man on the defensive. This allowed Dempsey to take momentary advantage and exploit it with combinations. An off-balance giant is a vulnerable giant. Importantly, Dempsey punched with maximum leverage. He had disdain for anything less:

"I blasted him into helplessness by using my exploding fast-moving body-weight against him."

He blasted him into helplessness and upheld the great American tradition of beating the odds. …..

The Ring Ratings' sixth ranked heavyweight contender has said that he would like to be the Mexican Jack Johnson. But Jack Johnson didn't overcome Jess Willard, Jack Dempsey did. Cristobal Arreola needs to get in serious shape and then someone needs to show him precisely how Dempsey felled that giant ninety years ago.

Arreola was born in East LA. He has the bombs and he has the belligerence.

Does he have the patriotism?
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