

TSS Old School Spotlight: Ad Wolgast (Part 2)

Written by Miguel Iturrate

Tuesday, 26 November 2013 09:43



In March of 1910, the newly minted world champion Ad Wolgast made a triumphant return to Milwaukee, where he was the guest of honor at a banquet attended by politicians and the city's high society. Thousands flocked to the train station upon his arrival, including a brass band and city officials who awarded him with the 'Freedom of the City'.

The March 5th, 1910 edition of the 'Monterey News' announced Wolgast's upcoming wedding, to Eugenia Howey, a local girl he met at one of the beach resorts. In the afterglow of victory, Wolgast flirted with the idea of opening a saloon in his Cadillac, MI hometown as well.

By mid-March, Wolgast was appearing at Kansas City's Century Theatre as part of a 10 week vaudeville show where he is said to have made \$1000 a week. The legendary heavyweight **Jac k Johnson** would be playing the Century the following week. Ad's show consisted of setting up a ring and putting on boxing exhibitions, most of them likely with 'Hobo' Daugherty. Reports from the day say that Wolgast went all out in many of these exhibitions, with little distinction from a real fight. For Wolgast however, it seems he longed for the real fights and was not taken by being on stage.

In May of 1910, he was thrown from a moving car and considered to be lucky to be alive. Ad Wolgast apparently liked to live like he fought, and that is full throttle.

Wolgast would take a few months off recovering from the Nelson fight and enjoying the limelight before he was itching to fight again. After potential title defense fights with **Packey McFarland** and

Owen Moran

did not materialize, Wolgast signed to return to Milwaukee and the Badger Athletic Club on June

10

th

, 1910 to fight

Jack Redmond

. Wolgast fought twice more in 1910, in non-title bouts in Muncie, Indiana and Fon Du Lac, Wisconsin.

A great deal of 1910 was spent on the road, doing publicity for the films of the Nelson – Wolgast title bout that were starting to appear in theaters throughout the country. At one such stop, in Chicago, Wolgast viewed the 'pictures' and is quoted as saying 'The fight was a lot harder, judging from the pictures than I thought it was..... I got more respect for Battling Nelson than I ever had before too, for he took a worse beating than I thought he did'.

Wolgast would stumble out of the blocks a bit in 1911, dropping two fights in a row to the tough **Valentine 'Knockout' Brown**

, one in Philadelphia, the second in New York. At the time, the pudgy, pigeon toed, cross-eyed Brown was a bit of a sensation in the east coast circles because his appearance hid the fact that he could really fight, and these two bouts helped further his reputation.

Wolgast's toughness and gameness were never in question, but he was also starting to seal a reputation as a dirty fighter. An account of the first KO Brown match reads 'Every man, and the few women who were there agree that Wolgast is a fighter. He rushed, he butted, he used the heel of his glove and he did everything known to the fight game, some of which could hardly be called fair'. The first bout was a non-title bout, and the second bout was set so that the title would only change hands with a stoppage, so Wolgast returned to the West Coast beaten but with his title still in hand. In another true reminder of the times, the Philadelphia press reported, 'Women To Attend To-Night's Bouts' as the event around the first meeting catered to the city's wealthy elite.

In another account, this one of the second Wolgast-Brown meeting, the fight was described as a 'savage bout from start to finish' and told of Knockout Brown's manager, Dan Morgan saying 'Just one blow-any kind of punch-and you would have won the title'. Wolgast had escaped and was now hoping to snap a two fight losing streak in his first title defense. Wolgast was lambasted in some corners for not defending the title, with title matches being delayed for various reasons, including theater tours and recovery from an alleged broken arm he received in the Redmond fight, and later reinjured.

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Wolgast had his next fight arranged by Tom McCarey, and after considering opponents such as One Round Brown, Owen Moran, Lew Powell and Anton LaGrave, they settled on **George Memsic**. The

bout was scheduled for Vernon, California on February 22nd

, 1911, the one year anniversary of the Nelson fight. Wolgast had some business instinct and was known to be trying to create opportunities to bring in money. Among the barrage of barbs he received from rival Battling Nelson was, 'He is the cheapest fighter I know', however planning his return for the one year anniversary shows some forethought.

The fight however would be pushed back to March 17th, and would see Wolgast defend his title with a 9th round KO. But, the bout wasn't without problems for the champion, who along with Memsic was arrested after the fight for violating the California anti-prize fighting laws that were in place. The charges against the fighters, referee and promoter were dropped after two days of proceedings determined that the match was a 'boxing contest' and not a 'prize fight', which was described as a match to the finish.

Wolgast took another title defense right away on March 31st, meeting **Anton LaGrave** in a match where both weighed 133 pounds at ringside, just two weeks after the Memsic bout. Wolgast would send LaGrave to the mat in the 5th

for a KO win.

There is consistent evidence Wolgast was now engaged in a battle with the press over his willingness to defend the title and throughout the rest of his career. Wolgast was stung by their portrayal of him as dumb and as an unwilling titleholder. Wolgast went so far as to write a rebuttal stating, 'Now as a starter for this story, I want to say right here that in Michigan, my own state, I have so few actual friends and well-wishers in the sporting editors' chairs that I can stick out one hand and count them on half the fingers'. He went on to address criticism that he was ducking Owen Moran. Moran, a former world champion who had defeated Wolgast in a 6 rounder, was relentlessly pushing hard for a match. Wolgast wrote, 'Am I afraid to meet Moran? No, I have met him. As a greenhorn at the game I stood on equal foot with the Britisher when we fought in New York, and he had several years of ring experience then. He has improved, but I need not brag when I say that my improvement has been so much more rapid than his that there is no comparison.'

Historically, July 4th is a day where big events in boxing history have occurred, and for that day

in 1911, Wolgast signed to meet up with former British world champion

Owe

n Moran

in a rematch. The agreement was reached in March, so despite the fact that Wolgast fought and beat

George 'One Round' Hogan

by KO in 2 rounds in New York City in April and beat

'Oakland' Frankie Burns

by TKO in 17 rounds in San Francisco in a May, there was considerable build-up for the fight.

The **One Round Hogan** bout on April 26th, 1911 was a return to New York City, the mecca of boxing for Wolgast. Wolgast entered the fight with little local credibility, but famed boxing historian Nat Fleischer listed it #10 on his list of 'Fights I Can't Forget'. He describes a chaotic two round affair that saw Wolgast out on his feet and nearly falling out of the ring before being saved by the bell to end round 1, only to take more punishment at the start of round 2 before coming alive and taking it to Hogan relentlessly. Wolgast tired from pouring on the 'pistons' and asked the ref to stop the fight. He sent one more barrage Hogan's way that finally got the ref to say 'enough'. Another boxing historian, Tad, wrote that, 'Of course, Wolgast was the holder of the title, but easterners could never see him before. On that night Wolgast made good'.

Against **'Oakland' Frankie Burns**, at San Francisco's Eighth Street Arena on May 27th, Wolgast comfortably outgunned a game young contender. One account, from the Madison Democrat, offers details – 'Wolgast was never in distress. His speed and strength completely smothered the Oakland boy's offense and he carried the fight to the challenger the whole time.' Burns was cheered for his ability to absorb punishment, but as the end of the match drew near, the crowd clamored with the referee to stop the fight.

The wins must have felt like a big upswing in momentum for Wolgast, and his next fight was the much anticipated bout with **Owen Moran**. The 'Police Gazette' captioned a series of three pictures from the match: "When Wolgast crushed Moran. It wasn't the biggest fight of his life, but he showed class by defeating the little Englishman." Wolgast worked until the 13th

round before sending Moran to the canvas for the finish.

Wolgast would hear the names Battling Nelson and Packey McFarland at the head of a long list of potential next opponents as 1911 rolled on. Wolgast would have a bout of appendicitis in November of 1911 that would extend his time away from the ring until the second quarter of 1912.

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In the first few months of 1912, Wolgast again made the national news for several non-boxing event such as being laid up in bed laid up in bed sick with pneumonia and getting stopped for recklessly driving a vehicle.

Wolgast's return bout was a 4 rounder on May 11th held at Jim Coffroth's Arena in San Francisco, against **Willie Ritchie**, a man who he would later meet again. The two fought to a draw. Wolgast left California, and on May 17th won a NWS over **Freddy Daniels** in Saint Joseph, Missouri. Two weeks later, on May 31st, he won a 6 rounder over **'Young' Jack O'Brien** in Philadelphia.

The second of Wolgast's fights that would go down in the annals of history is his July 4th, 1912 contest with **'Mexican' Joe Rivers**. Many years later, the fight would be recalled as 'the most controversial match of all time'. For Wolgast it was a title defense that was even on paper, with many of the writers of the day not able to prognosticate a winner.

There was a lot of pre-fight hype. Roughly two weeks before the fight on June 24th, 1912, writer Jerome Beatty penned in a column called 'Hitting the High Spots' that 'very few persons are so rash as to predict at this stage of the proceedings which boy will win the Rivers-Wolgast scrap', and he went on to say 'Each has fought good fights and bad fights. Each has a habit of cracking a hand every now and then' and 'It will be a meeting of two of our most prominent erratics'. The match was getting attention and the betting action would be hot around the fight.

As the two combatants entered the ring **Jack Root**, the first ever light heavyweight champion of the world who was in Wolgast's corner describes Ad as being 'cool as a cucumber', while Rivers was 'hot with Mexican impatience to get into action'.

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Most accounts describe a hard fought, grueling battle that was fairly even after 12 rounds. Wolgast suffered a bloody ear in the second round that got worse as things went on. In the 11th round, both men would fall through the ropes.

Accounts of what happened in round 13 vary. The facts are both men struck simultaneous blows and went down in a heap as the round came to close, with Wolgast on top. The referee started the count. The timekeeper rang the bell to end the round somewhere between the count of 4 and 6, Referee **Jack Welsh** is seen to physically help Wolgast stand up. In the end, Welsh counted Rivers out and gave the win to Wolgast, who retained the belt. The crowd, which was bolstered by a heavy Mexican contingent, was in near riot from a Welsh left the ring.

Jack Root, who was there for some of the biggest fights of the early part of the 20th century, called the Wolgast-Rivers fight 'The Fight I Can't Forget'. In a retrospective piece written for 'The Ring' when he was in his 80's, Root labeled it more deeply imbedded in his mind than even the famous Dempsey-Tunney 'Long Count'.

Check back for the final part.

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