

Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good fight

Written by Ed Schuyler

Tuesday, 12 December 2006 19:00

The fistic festivities at the Festhalle late on that long ago Christmas Day ended after the punch was served by Sugar Ray.

On the night of Dec. 25, 1950, Sugar Ray Robinson fought Hans Stretz at Frankfurt, Germany. It was his fifth fight in Europe in a span of 29 days.

Robinson, who had relinquished the world welterweight title earlier in 1950, had won Pennsylvania recognition as middleweight champion on a 15-round decision over Robert Villemain of France at Philadelphia. He had defended that title twice.

It was, however, the middleweight title recognized by the rest of the world and held by Jake LaMotta that Robinson wanted. So while awaiting a shot at LaMotta, he sailed to France on the *Liberte*, with an entourage of nine people, including wife Edna Mae, a sister and valet-barber. There were 53 pieces of luggage to haul on board.

The group took residence in the Claridge Hotel in Paris, and on Nov. 8 Robinson stopped Frenchman Jean Stock in the second round before a wildly cheering throng in the Palais des Sports.

"I didn't know what to do," Robinson recorded in "Sugar Ray," his 1970 autobiography, written with Dave Anderson. "I had never been accorded such an ovation. I was a hero for the first time in my career. For all my success, I had never really been a hero in the United States, where Joe Louis was the boxing idol."

Louis had come out of retirement and lost a 15-round decision to Ezzard Charles on Sept. 27, 1950, but by then he was a boxing icon.

On Dec. 9, Robinson heard jeers, not cheers, after he scored a fourth-round knockout of Dutch middleweight champion Luc van Dam at Brussels, Belgium.

"I remember knocking out Van Dam in the fourth round," Robinson said in his book. "As he lay sprawled on the canvas, his wife jumped out of her seat behind his corner and angrily shouted, 'Get up, get up,' as if she were waking him in the morning."

Most of the fans, however, were hollering other things in the belief that the Dutchman had been fouled in the third round and should have been declared the winner. Robinson had landed a body punch, and Van Dam had gone down. He was saved by the bell.

"Robinson left the ring with virtually all 15,000 spectators on their feet booing the victor," the Associated Press reported. The AP account said Van Dam "was holding his own until late in the

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third round when the American uncorked what appeared to be a low blow.”

A week later, Robinson showed up in Geneva, Switzerland, where he scored a 10-round decision over Frenchman Jean Walzack. “Afterward he had lumps all over his head, but I couldn’t knock him out,” Robinson wrote.

Then he was back in Paris, the Claridge and the Palais des Sports. On Dec. 22, he scored a ninth-round technical knockout of Robert Villemain, which drew a gate of \$85,000, a record for the famed arena.

Robinson next went to Germany, where on Christmas Day he was entertained by children who sang Christmas carols under his Frankfurter Hof window. He then went to the Festhall and stretched Stretz in the fifth round.

“In a space of twenty-nine days, I had won five bouts, four by knockout,” Robinson wrote. “I had pocketed nearly \$50,000, and I needed every penny. My entourage had run up a big bill at the Claridge, and Edna Mae had been shopping.”

Robinson’s next fight was in Chicago Stadium, where he became undisputed middleweight champion by stopping Jake LaMotta in the 13th round on Feb. 14, 1951, in what became known as the “St. Valentine’s Day Massacre.”

The Robinson-Stretz card was the only show I could find in the world on that Christmas Day. While there often have been several boxing shows on Dec. 25 in other countries,, the only recorded boxing cards in the United States on Christmas from 1946 to the present that I could find were single shows at Portland, Maine in 1968-69.

For most of the first half of the 20th Century, however, boxing shows on Christmas were quite common until the outbreak of World War II. There was one recorded show in 1942, none in 1943, and one each in 1944-46.

Many great fighters provided Christmas entertainments – Hall of Fame boxers such as Freddie Welsh, Jack Britton, Battling Levinsky, Ted “Kid” Lewis, Benny Leonard, Harry Greb, Tommy Loughran, Fritzi Zivic and Kid Chocolate. Benny Leonard, who would become a great lightweight champion, fought twice in New York on Christmas Day, 1911. He knocked Smiling Kemp in the first round, then he won a six-round newspaper decision over Sammy Marino.

The only Christmas championship fight I could confirm in the United States was in 1933 when Frankie Klick won the junior lightweight title by stopping Kid Chocolate in the seventh round at Philadelphia.

An historic fight was held the day after Christmas in 1908 when Jack Johnson became the first black world heavyweight champion by stopping Tommy Burns in the 14th round at Sydney, Australia.

With no title at stake, middleweight champion Harry Greb won a 10-round decision over Tommy

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Loughran, who would become light heavyweight champion, on Christmas in 1923 at Pittsburgh. Also on that Christmas, Battling Siki, a former light heavyweight champion, lost a 10-round decision to Jack Taylor at Philadelphia, and Corporal Izzy Schwartz won a 10-round decision over Babe Willard at Providence, .R.I.