

The Saga of Jack Dempsey's "Loaded" Gloves: Part 2

Written by Aaron Tallent

Thursday, 05 December 2013 00:00



This is the second of a two-part series on the ongoing question of whether Jack Dempsey's gloves were loaded when he fought Jess Willard in 1919.

Jack "Doc" Kearns had stories to tell. He had taken Jack Dempsey from near-hoboism poverty and transformed him into a heavyweight champion; he had staged some of the most financially lucrative fights in history, even the first in Las Vegas; he had also managed other great boxers, including Archie Moore, Joey Maxim and Mickey Walker; and this was all after he prospected for gold in the Klondike.

In the last years of his life, Kearns was serving as a matchmaker for the International Boxing Club and decided to team up with United Press International sportswriter Oscar Fraley to write his memoirs. Fraley had just ghostwritten and published, "*The Untouchables*" for the late Eliot Ness, and was able to tackle Kearns' story.

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The two created an autobiography full of colorful tales, including a visit to an incarcerated Al Capone to discuss promoting him and psyching out Yvon Durelle in a 1958 bout by having Moore wave to his wife after Durelle had thrice sent him to the canvas in the first round. However, every other story paled in comparison to what he had to say about Dempsey's bout with Jess Willard in 1919.

Questions had always surrounded Dempsey's winning of the heavyweight title with such a savage knockout of Willard. As *Sports Illustrated* noted, "Jack Dempsey's devastation of the giant Jess Willard on that broiling Fourth of July in Toledo 45 years ago was so complete—and so unexpected—that a rumor of foul play has persisted to this day: a rumor that Dempsey's gloves were loaded. Willard has long insisted, bitterly, that the rumor is true. Dempsey has always denied it."

Kearns died on July 7, 1963, shortly after approving the final draft of memoirs, "*The Million Dollar Gate*,"

and securing a deal with

Sports Illustrated

to publish two excerpts from the book. One, "The Days of Wine and Bloody Noses," chronicled Kearns managing of and carousing with Walker. The second, titled, "He Didn't Know the Gloves Were Loaded," presented his untold and unpublished account of the Willard bout.

According to Kearns, he knew Dempsey could dispatch Willard inside of the fight's scheduled 12 rounds, but had bet \$10,000 on 10-1 odds that Dempsey would knock him out in Round 1. It was a high-risk, high-reward gamble for \$100,000 and Kearns needed insurance. It's best to let him now describe what happened in his own words.

I had schemed and connived over too many years to let anything go wrong with a bet like that, let alone with the championship of the world. The hell with being a gallant loser. I intended to win.

My plan had to do with a small white can sitting innocently among the fight gear on the kitchen table. I poured myself a nightcap and picked up the can, grinning at the neat blue letters on its side. All it said was "Talcum Powder." Then I latched the kitchen door and went to a corner cupboard that extended from tabletop height to the ceiling. I pulled over a chair and stood on it

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to reach into a niche far back on the topmost shelf. Not even a drunk would have thought of hiding a bottle in that spot. Several days earlier, on an unaccompanied trip into Toledo, I had bought another can of powder. This one was labeled "Plaster of Paris," and I was looking for it now. It was there.

I put the two cans side by side on the kitchen table. Then I found a knife and pried off their lids. I spread out a handkerchief and dumped the talcum powder into it, then knotted the corners together. Next I poured the plaster of Paris into the talcum-powder can and replaced the lid. Set back among the fight gear—the bandages, the Vaseline, the razor blades, the cotton—it looked as innocent as any of them. There was just one more thing to be done. I picked up the plaster of Paris can and the handkerchief full of talcum powder, unlatched the kitchen door and walked the 50 yards to the shore of Maumee Bay, where I pitched the whole business out into the dark waters. That was why the party had to end before dawn. That was something I wanted no man to see. Standing there in the dark, I knew we were as ready as Dempsey's condition and my plotting ability could make us.

It may seem strange but, returning to the house, my conscience was easy. I was a product of the days—have they ever ended?—when it was every man for himself. In those times you got away with everything possible. Turn your head, or let the other guy turn his, and knuckles were wrapped in heavy black bicycle tape or the thick lead foil in which bulk tea was packaged. The net result was much like hitting a man with a leather-padded mallet. The rules were lax then, officials were not at all fussy and there were few boxing commissions.

Plaster of Paris is known in construction as sheetrock or drywall. In theory, when Kearns sloshed water on Dempsey's bandaged hands and then applied the plaster of Paris-laced talcum powder the gloves would be like cement. Of course, the alleged plan did not completely work out for Kearns, since the bell saved Willard at the end of the first round. While he absolved Dempsey of any complicity in his actions, Kearns wrapped up the article by reinforcing how what he did was feasible.

In all his subsequent career Dempsey never inflicted such dreadful damage on an opponent. And he did it to this one in the very first round. There may be those who will wonder how it could possibly be that Dempsey didn't know his gloves were loaded. Actually, it isn't too surprising. He was young, and this was the most unnerving day of his hungry life. Until the bell rang and he slipped the leash, he was like a man who had been hypnotized. Afterward, when I cracked off the bandages and ditched them, he was so numb at being the heavyweight champion of the world that you could have hit him with a hammer and he wouldn't have blinked an eye.

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Sports Illustrated scheduled the article for publication for January 13, 1964. On January 8, the magazine contacted the 68-year-old Dempsey to inform him of the article. Even though he had bitterly broken with Kearns following his bout with Luis Angel Firpo in 1923, he had always credited him for his early success and had even served as a pallbearer at his funeral.

Dempsey sent a letter to *Sports Illustrated*, stating that it would face court action if it published Kearns' story. The magazine said it was going ahead with the piece so he provided his response.

"Ridiculous! I could take an oath. In fact I will," said Dempsey as he raised his right hand in a booth at his New York restaurant. "I hope to God I die right now, and my wife and children, too, if there is any truth in what [Kearns](#) said."

Sports Illustrated also contacted Willard, who was 82 and living a quiet life outside of Los Angeles. Still somewhat bitter from a bout that left him with a shattered jaw, broken ribs, a broken nose, four missing teeth and partial hearing loss, he felt somewhat vindicated.

"I'm glad that Kearns finally was man enough to admit it. First time Dempsey hit me, I knew those gloves were loaded," said Willard, who pointed to his left cheekbone. "Put your hand here. Feel that bone moving around? That's what them cement gloves did to me."

The issue published with a cover that read, "Dempsey's Gloves Were Loaded" and a cautionary editor's note stating, "It is a good yarn; it is also a declaration that a heavyweight champion of the world was robbed of his title and with it the fortune that title came to be worth in the Golden Twenties."

Kearns kept few friends throughout his fast life. Dempsey had many and they came to his defense. Leonard Sacks, his former business manager, said that he and Jimmy de Forest, Willard's trainer, both watched the taping and "there was no possible chance that anything illegal could have been done." The great bantamweight champion Pete Herman said that he owned Dempsey's gloves from the bout and that there was no evidence of plaster of Paris being used.

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"I knew Kearns. I know Dempsey. Kearns word was not to be trusted," said Georges Carpentier, the former light heavyweight champion whom Dempsey knocked out in 1921. "He hated Dempsey, and now in his memoirs is trying to hurt Dempsey again. I believe Kearns' hatred of Dempsey was so strong that it is even working now from beyond the grave."

On January 22, the *Milwaukee Journal* reported that it had debunked Kearns' allegation by applying plaster of Paris to a fighter's fist the way he described. The result was "a thin layer of soft cement, which cracked at a slight touch." Numerous letters to the editor of *Sports Illustrated* reported the same conclusion. In his column the next day, Red Smith applauded the *Journal* for the getting to the truth, but wrote "it's a little saddening the way debunkers are always shooting our most charming legends full of holes."

Not finding the legend or experience charming at all, Dempsey filed a \$3 million libel suit against Time Inc., the publishers of *Sports Illustrated*, in April of 1964. The two reached an agreement in September of 1965, with the magazine stating in its September 27 issue:

Jack Dempsey has been a friend of *Sports Illustrated* since publication began in 1954. He has cooperated with us in the production of a number of stories concerning boxing, and he has also made public appearances in our behalf to promote the business fortunes of this magazine.

We have been his friend, too, and, not wanting to hurt this famous sports figure, we printed his vigorous denial of Kearns's allegations.

Now we are pleased to record a happy ending to this story. Since publication, no evidence has come to us to support the tale told by Kearns, and we support and wholeheartedly accept Jack Dempsey's denial.

Good men, of which Dempsey is one, are sorely needed in boxing in these troubled days.

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As for Kearns' memoirs... "*The Million Dollar Gate*" was scheduled for publication in September of 1964, but the controversy delayed the release until December of 1966. The book that hit the shelves did not include the plaster of Paris story.

Willard died in 1968 at the age of 86. In one of his last interviews, he said, "[Dempsey] must've had something in his left glove. The whole right side of my face was caved in."

We will never know if foul play actually took place on July 4, 1919. Like all humans should strive to be, Dempsey was a much different man when he passed away in 1983 at the age of 87. If he had any secrets from his early days with Kearns, he never publicly shared them, but it's hard to believe something was not askew with this bout.

The New York Times' Arthur Daley summed up the question of doctored gloves when he wrote in 1964, "How else could a single punch splinter a cheekbone into 13 pieces?"

Since that question will never be answered, this fight will continue to raise eyebrows.

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Radam G says:

Wow! Super-great copy. But doubters and haters never stop with their hyped-up jive-turkey super bull-jive-o-gology. Jack Dempsey beat down a skill-less giant of his days, plain and simple.

He didn't need anything in his whup-@\$\$ gloves, because Jess Willard never learned how to fight. He was a stiff that the racists of those days used to get rid of "Unforgivable Blackness" Jack Johnson. C'mon! Jack Johnson made a deal with the devil -- I mean the corrupted U.S. Gov -- to take a dive for \$100,000 in gold.

Jack Dempsey's beat down of Jess Willard was one of most legit of all times. Holla!

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Bernie Campbell says:

I don't care what you glorified leeches convey, Dempsey was a phenomena in post WW1, Speak Easy's, Charleston, 23 scadoo! You fruit benders do not have any clue! Let Stall own do another movie! After the Edwin Valero Story! This time Sylvester gives out glasses with entrance into the friggun Bijou to get into the door!