

TSS TIME MACHINE: The Murder of Stanley Ketchel

Written by Aaron Tallent

Monday, 09 September 2013 21:10



When a great boxer dies, sportswriters everywhere make encapsulating statements about him. As time goes on, many of them are forgotten until only the wittiest, pithiest quote survives. For the great middleweight champion Stanley Ketchel, the surviving statement came from John Lardner: “Stanley Ketchel was 24 years old when he was fatally shot in the back by the common-law husband of the lady who was cooking his breakfast.”

The quote certainly seems fitting. Born Stanisław Kiecal in 1887 in Grand Rapids, Michigan, he was the only one of his friends who would dive into the Grand River from moving freight cars off of high bridges. At 12, he left home and lived hand-to-mouth roaming the American West. In Butte, Montana, he worked as bouncer and decided to become a professional boxer at the age

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of 16 because as he put it: “I don’t fight only because I like it. I fight also because I can make more money at it than I could be shoveling sand around the equator—and make it a lot quicker.”

And make it he did. Ketchel earned an estimated \$100,000 in the ring (\$2.4 million in today’s dollars) and spent most of it through fast living and generosity. He laid claim to the middleweight title at 20 and waged war over it for the next three years with fighters of the caliber of Billy Papke and Hugo Kelly. When he was finished, he had become the standard for which all middleweights would be measured for the first half of the 20th Century.

On October 16, 1909. Ketchel fought the most famous bout of his career, a heavyweight title match with Jack Johnson. The famous story is that both fighters agreed to carry the fight as long as possible to maximize their film profits. However, when Johnson lowered his guard in the 12th round, Ketchel sent him to the canvas with a vicious right. Johnson got up and responded with one of the most brutal knockouts ever captured on film, taking out four of Ketchel’s front teeth.

Less than one year later by a day, Stanley Ketchel would be dead. But the last year of his life and his subsequent murder were, at the very least, complicated.

The weeks and months that followed the Johnson fight were simply awful for Ketchel. First, his long-time manager, Willus Britt, died unexpectedly 12 days after the bout. Ketchel was devastated and quickly spiraled into heavy drinking and the nightlife of San Francisco, his home at the time.

Then he lost his championship belt. Not in the ring, in a hotel in Chicago. The diamond-studded belt, valued at \$1,200 (\$29,000 today), was never found.

The hard living began to affect his performances in the ring as well. 1910 was full of unexceptional performances, by his standards, and also cancellations. In March, Ketchel fought to draw with future middleweight champion Frank Klaus in Pittsburgh. He suffered a broken hand in the fight and then had to cancel his April 10 title fight with Hugo Kelly in New Orleans.

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Ketchel returned to the ring in late April to face Sam Langford, the best boxer to never receive a title shot because of his race. The two met in Philadelphia in a six-round no-decision, non-title bout that was supposed to be a precursor to a future middleweight title fight in San Francisco. It turned out to be a ho-hum affair with the majority of the newspaper reporters in attendance giving the decision to Langford.

Ketchel fought three more times, knocking out Porky Dan Flynn and Willie Lewis within a span of 11 days. In his final bout, a fifth-round knockout of Jim Smith on June 10 in New York, Ketchel waved to the ecstatic crowd and hopped over the ropes to leave the ring. Little did anyone know that it would be the last time he would do so.

Up next for Ketchel was a trip to Reno, Nevada, for the “Fight of the Century” between Johnson and Jim Jeffries. When Ketchel entered Jeffries’ camp, the former heavyweight champion said, “I don’t want you here. You have been fooling around with that Negro and I don’t think you belong here at all.” At first Ketchel grinned, then Jeffries said, “Put that fellow out,” and he was escorted out of the camp.

Ketchel only embarrassed himself further by concocting a plan to save Jeffries from humiliation by Johnson. When being introduced in the ring as a celebrity guest, he would walk over to Jeffries to shake his hand and then knock him out cold. When promoter Tex Rickard learned of his plan, he put a number of measures in place to make sure Ketchel came nowhere near Jeffries on the day of the fight.

By August, his health had deteriorated to a point where he had to cancel a fight with Bill Lang in New York. Ketchel first went to Grand Rapids, then to Conway, Missouri, to the ranch of longtime family friend Colonel H.P. Dickerson. Ketchel had bought 32,000 acres of land outside of Grand Rapids so the time at Dickerson’s would allow him recuperate and make money off the land he had purchased.

From there, things became murky. Dickerson hired a ranch hand and housekeeper, a husband and wife named Walter Hurtz and Goldie Smith, through a local employment agency. When they arrived, Dickerson told them that Ketchel was in charge.

Ketchel’s health seemed to be improving. In early October, he accepted an offer of \$30,000 to

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defend his title against Sam McVea in Paris. However, it would never happen.

On the morning of October 15, Smith was serving breakfast to Ketchel, who sat with his back to the door, when Hurtz entered carrying the champion's .22 caliber rifle. Ketchel always carried a .45 revolver, but had sent for the rifle so he could personally rid the farm of gophers and other rodents.

"Throw up your hands," ordered Hurtz.

Ketchel did not realize how serious Hurtz was and began to turn towards him. Hurtz responded by shooting him in the back. The bullet went through Ketchel's right lung and he fell to the floor.

Hurtz quickly ran out of the house, stopped and then went back inside. He took Ketchel's pistol and hit him in the head with it. As he ran into the yard for the second time, he yelled to ranch foreman C.E. Bailey, "Ketchel can't tell me how to run my business." (Initial news stories reported that Ketchel had reprimanded Hurtz for his treatment of a horse.) Then Hurtz went on the lam.

Dickerson was immediately summoned to his ranch. When he went to Ketchel, the mortally wounded fighter whispered, "Take me home to mom, Pete." Ketchel then lost consciousness.

The situation was hopeless since the bullet had hit a vessel in Ketchel's lung and his pleural cavity was filling with blood. Dickerson nevertheless chartered a train with three physicians to transport Ketchel to Springfield, Missouri, which was about 40 miles away. Ketchel briefly regained consciousness around 6:00 pm that evening, but his condition quickly worsened and he died in Springfield Hospital.

In the days that followed, authorities learned that Hurtz's real name was Walter Diple and he was a deserter from the U.S. Navy. To make matters worse by early 20th Century morality standards, he and Smith were not even married.

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Dickerson offered a \$5,000 award for Diple, but not dead or alive, just dead. In fact, when Diple was arrested after a man named Thomas Haggard informed police that he was staying at his home in Niangua, Missouri, Dickerson refused to pay him. Haggard had to take him to court to collect his reward.

Goldie Smith was arrested as well and both were charged with murdering Ketchel. A trial date was set for January of 1911.

When hearing of Ketchel's murder, the heavyweight champion Johnson said, "It's really too bad about poor Stanley. He was a great fighter. Not a boxer, but a real fighter and there are not many real fighters in the game."

Ketchel's funeral was held in Grand Rapids on October 20. Before his coffin was even placed in the ground, middleweight contenders began staking their claim for the title. Langford, Kelly, Papke, Klaus and Eddie McGorty all made their case for why each of them was the rightful champion. In the end, Klaus defeated Papke and Georges Carpentier to win the vacant title in 1913.

When the trial took place in January, the prosecution argued that Diple and Smith had conspired to murder Ketchel. Unbeknownst to the two, Ketchel had given most of his estimated \$10,000 in money and jewels to Dickerson for safekeeping. However, he normally carried \$500-1,000 in cash. Both the money and a five-karat diamond ring on his finger were taken from him after he was shot. In addition, Smith normally set his place at the table facing the door, but on that particular morning, the table was set for his back to be to the door.

The defense pulled no punches, claiming that Ketchel had raped or tried to rape Smith and threatened to kill her if he told anyone. Diple's attorney argued that the two were innocent because of the "unwritten law," which gave a husband the right to kill any man who violates his wife.

The defense then raised the notion that Dickerson's machinations in the case, the gathering of witnesses and reporting of stolen money, were because he was actually Ketchel's father. When Julia Ketchel, Stanley's mother, was asked by reporters if that was so, she said, "That's an embarrassing question and I do not like to answer it unless necessary. However, if on my

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answer to that question hinges the conviction of Stanley's murder I will tell the whole truth in regard to it."

She never had to tell even part of the story. Dickerson was too emotionally distraught to attend the trial the day Smith and Diple testified. Neither he nor Julia Ketchel was called to testify and for those reasons, the judge ruled that the question of Stanley's paternity was irrelevant.

The jury deliberated for 17 hours before returning with first-degree murder convictions for both Diple and Smith. Because the two were sentenced together and executing women was considered inhumane at the time, both were given life in prison.

The case was appealed to the Missouri Supreme Court, which determined there was no evidence that Smith had conspired to murder Ketchel. She left prison on May 9, 1912, moved back to Springfield, married a fourth husband and spent her last days selling items from her front porch. Diple was paroled in 1934 and died of kidney disease in Utah in 1956.

Did Ketchel really rape Smith or was the whole event a bungled robbery? No one will really ever know because there is no evidence to really answer that question today. However, a couple of facts following the trial do shed some light on whether Dickerson was Ketchel's father. Despite being unwilling to pay the reward for a living, breathing Diple, Dickerson did spend \$5,000 on a 12-foot marble monument to stand over Ketchel's grave. He also turned Ketchel's room at his ranch house into a bit of shrine. On the anniversary of his death, Dickerson would shut himself in it for days and drink and cry.

If Ketchel wasn't Dickerson's son, he sure did love him like one.

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Radam G says:

Wow! Nice copy! Some secrets will not and cannot be held in a grave. It seems that they always punch their though to the light and never give up the fight. Again, nice copy! Holla!

amayseng says:

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fascinating read, just when I thought I had a bad year this man lived quite an up and down ride....

only a coward shoots another man in the back, or sucker punches another man. same thing in a way.

SouthPaul says:

Excellent read.