

## The Legend of James J. Jeffries

Written by Aaron Tallent

Friday, 04 October 2013 09:30

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James Jackson Jeffries is best remembered lying on the canvas looking up at Jack Johnson in the 15<sup>th</sup> round in Reno, Nevada. After spending six years out of the ring and gaining a lot of weight, the former heavyweight champion had left his farm to answer the call of white supremacists and face Johnson in 1910. Most Americans born since then ask why this was even considered a legitimate call.

One question that is generally not asked is why white America felt its best hope was in a fat alfalfa farmer who been out of the ring for six years. In actuality, few heavyweight champions have cut as impressive a figure as Jeffries. He stood 6 feet, 2-½ inches, and weighed 220 pounds and was called “The Boilermaker” because he didn’t only look like one; he also worked as one before taking up boxing. Even with that size, he could run 100 yards in 11 seconds and high-jump 5 feet, 10 inches. *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Walter Christie wrote that Jeffries could have been a world champion shot putter and hammer thrower if he had put his mind to it.

He came along during boxing’s most racist and xenophobic period and reflected its views. Yet it was also a time when the heavyweight champion fought 25-round bouts and was affectionately beloved and known by nicknames. For example, John L. Sullivan was “John L.”, Jim Corbett was “Gentleman Jim”, Bob Fitzsimmons was “Fitz” and Jeffries was “Jeff”.

He was the most dominant champion of this era too, holding the title for longer and defending it more times (8) than any heavyweight titleholder before Joe Louis. Sullivan called him, “The pioneer, the master, the inventor, the greatest fighter and the greatest figure in ring history.” Jack Dempsey said, “His record shows that he went up against all manner of men from the scientific boxers to the heavy sluggers, and nobody ever came within a mile and a half of beating the real Jeffries.”

The story of how his career began only added to his legend. While working as boilermaker, a boxer showed up at his place of work and threatened to “whip any man in town.” Jeffries generally had a calm disposition, but as he said, “I would rather fight for three hours than make a speech for three minutes” so he was not going to try to reason with him. Jeffries had no

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boxing skills, but still managed to knock the bully out with his freakish strength.

Word of his feat spread across the land and Jeffries was encouraged to take up boxing. In 1895, he began fighting bouts that may have been amateur, professional or off-the-books during a period where that distinction was a bit relative. In April of 1897, he officially turned professional with a 2<sup>nd</sup>-round knockout of Theodore Van Buskirk.

His rawness in the ring would be honed later that year in a draw with Joe Choynski, one of the top contenders of the era. A shot from Choynski broke Jeffries' nose and smashed several of his teeth. From that point on, he modified his stance to what became known as the "Jeffries Crouch", which had his neck hunched over with his right protecting his face and his left serving as the equivalent of a medieval war hammer. It wasn't pretty, but it was one of the most effective stances in the history of the sport.

For the next 18 months, Jeffries smashed through the division, earning a title shot with Fitzsimmons. One of the most devastating punchers in history, especially for his size, Fitzsimmons invented the left hook to the body and had won the title from Corbett more than two years earlier. Jeffries would be the New Zealander's first title defense.

The two met in June of 1899 in the New Coney Island Sporting Club with \$100,000 in wagers (\$2.7 million today) surrounding their bout. Jeffries weighed 206 pounds to Fitzsimmons' 167 and controlled the fight from start to finish. In the 11<sup>th</sup> round, he hit Fitzsimmons with a powerful left hook and followed up with a right. The soon-to-be ex-champion fell to the canvas and turned over on his side. A count was unnecessary and he was dragged to his corner by his handlers.

As he exited the club, Corbett said to the crowd, "Well boys, an American has the championship."

In November, Jeffries fought his first title defense, a rematch with Tom Sharkey. The two had fought to a 20-round Jeffries decision in 1898 and this bout was no different, lasting 25 rounds at the Coney Island Athletic Club. In the final round, Sharkey slipped to the floor in a clinch, pulling off Jeffries' glove. As referee George Siler tried to put it back on, Sharkey went after him and the two had an awkward exchange of missed shots. The bell rang with Siler standing between them.

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At the end of the hour and 40-minute fight, Sharkey had a cut eye and cut ear. Jeffries' neck, which had taken lefts from Sharkey the entire fight, was described by *The New York Times* to be as "raw as a piece of meat." In the end, Jeffries was given the decision in what may have been the toughest defense of his career.

Jeffries expected a reprieve when he faced John Finnegan in April of 1900, but he probably did not expect the shortest heavyweight championship fight in history. He went on the attack early, knocking Finnegan down with a vicious left. Finnegan rose after a few seconds and Jeffries put him down again with a left. When he got up a second time, Jeffries buried a left in the pit of Finnegan's stomach. As he stood up for a third time, Finnegan was crying and his handlers ran to him as he reeled against the ropes. The fight lasted a total of 55 seconds.

A month later, Jeffries finally met Corbett in an inevitable showdown in front of a crowd of 7,000 at Coney Island's Seaside Athletic Club. The two were perfect foils for each other. Jeffries was the brute, while Corbett was the showman and scientific puncher. In the 14<sup>th</sup> round, Corbett busted Jeffries' nose with a straight left. Two left hooks to the face in the 23<sup>rd</sup>

round bloodied Jeffries' nose again, but he responded by putting Corbett on the ropes and sending him to the canvas with a hard left. Referee Charlie White counted him out as Corbett rolled over twice.

Jeffries then headed back to California and fought two non-title bouts before facing Gus Ruhlin in 1901 in Mechanic's Pavilion in San Francisco. The two had battled to a draw in 1897, with Jeffries putting Ruhlin down in the final seconds of the 20<sup>th</sup> round, only to be saved by the bell. For the rematch, the two fought four intense rounds. Then in the fifth, Jeffries pushed Ruhlin to the ropes and knocked him down with a barrage of shots. He made it to his feet, but quit in the final seconds of the round.

"I certainly had no difficulty in whipping him, and had the fight gone on the result must have been the same," said Jeffries. "Ruhlin was in poor wind, and I cannot say that he even had the courage and force that I expected to encounter in him."

The most exciting bout of Jeffries' championship run came when he next faced Fitzsimmons in a rematch in San Francisco in July of 1902. Fitzsimmons had toyed with retirement in 1900, but

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had returned to the ring with a newfound vigor. When he faced Jeffries the second time, he hit him at will from the fight's start to its sudden finish. However, in the eighth round, Jeffries managed to corner Fitzsimmons, as he often did in bouts. He missed a wild right, but finished him with a left hook to the body and a vicious right cross. Fitzsimmons fell to the canvas and Jeffries stood over him with cuts over both eyes and blood running from his nose and mouth. The fact that Fitzsimmons went on to win the light heavyweight title a year later makes Jeffries' win even more remarkable.

In July of 1903, Jeffries gave the finest performance of his career in a rematch with Corbett at the Pavilion. He dominated the fight from start to finish, putting Corbett down in the fourth and sixth rounds. In the 10<sup>th</sup>, Jeffries sent him to the canvas with a left hook to the body. Corbett got up, but was finished by a right to the same spot. The next year, he destroyed Jack Munroe in the second round in the final fight of his career.

At that point, the division was officially cleaned out of white contenders. As Jeffries wrote in his autobiography, "I was 29 years old, in fine physical condition and anxious to fight when I realized how Alexander felt when he sighed for more worlds to conquer. There were no more heavyweights left for me to meet, and I found no pleasure in the idea of going around and knocking out a lot of young fellows with more courage than skill or strength."

Jeffries was the first heavyweight champion to retire with the title and the boxing community was not sure how to handle it. He was actually given the option to pass it along to the fighter of his choosing and there was speculation that he would give the belt to Fitzsimmons, who had become his friend. On the day of his retirement, though, Jeffries announced that he would leave the belt to the division for the the contenders to fight for it.

"I am glad to get out of the limelight," he said. "The championship has brought me no happiness; nothing but cheap notoriety and a little money."

In retirement, Jeffries enjoyed an opulent lifestyle that added 50 extra pounds to his fighting weight. He tended to his alfalfa farm and hunted. He visited Europe and drank its beer and visited its brothels.

But he never really left boxing. When asked, he would publicly toy with the idea of reentering

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the ring. In 1907, Tommy Burns knocked out Bill Squires to lay the definitive claim to the heavyweight title. Jeffries was the referee.

“Burns can have the title, unless he should be defeated by some foreigner,” he said. “That’s the only chance to get me back in the ring.”

Jeffries made that statement seven years before half of Europe went to war over the assassination of an Austrian archduke so one can cut him a little slack over that comment. It’s the fact that his statement actually applied to African-Americans too. As he was getting in shape in 1909 for his bout with Johnson, the African-American heavyweight champion was preparing for a bout with Stanley Ketchel.

“Should Stanley [Ketchel] win [against Johnson] I would discontinue training as the title would be where it rightfully belongs,” said Jeffries.

Ketchel lost and on July 4, 1910, Jeffries came out of retirement to be embarrassed by Johnson. Because of the pace of technological advances, the only good film of Jeffries in the ring is that loss. As Jim Carney, Jr., wrote in “*Ultimate Tough Guy*,” his biography of Jeffries, “An equivalent would be if the only good film of Muhammad Ali was his comeback failure against Larry Holmes.”

No fighter’s legacy was as adversely impacted for a return to the ring as Jeffries’. Then again, no boxer’s comeback represented the worst of mankind the way his did either. It is probably fitting that he is remembered for lying on that canvas despite his greatness beforehand.

[Comment on this article](#)

### **Radam G says:**

Great piece, Pugilist Scribe Aaron T. You da MAN! Nice right-to-the-truth weaving and hard-facts heaving. You taught all the haters, posers, pretenders and \_\_\_\_\_ that they need to handle the truth or be leaving.

FitzSimmon was indeed the first great "little man of boxing. And in this day and time he gets no

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credit. And he indeed is the inventor of hooking to the body, primarily to the liver, to take out biggies. Just another note about him, he was also the inventor of shift punching and hooking off the jab.

I know this great copy was about J Jeffries, but I had to bite off it to get in to hollering at the haters, posers and vaporers that the whole truth -- not make believe and alternate reality -- will always roll up in this Universe. Holla!

### Hop says:

[QUOTE=Radam G;38004]Bob FitzSimmons was indeed the first great "little man of boxing." And in this day and time he gets no credit.[/QUOTE]

Well, at least he's often referenced in conversations about the careers of Michael Spinks, Michael Moorer, and (especially) Roy Jones, Jr., all of whom (as you know) followed in his unique footsteps. That's more than can be said for most anyone [I]else[/I] of his vintage.

RJJ mentions Fitzsimmons @ the 2:30 mark in this clip (all of which I find most interesting, by the way): [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBw\\_q1rCa40](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBw_q1rCa40)

### Radam G says:

That was right on, Hop. But I was referring to the fanfaronades, posers and cyberspace phonies as the ones who knows nothing about Bob Fitzsimmons and don't give him credits for or know about his contributions. Dude, I get fed up with know-nothings agitating that only a certain ethnic is superior in boxing. And certain ethnic groups never contribute anything. But everybodee and dey mamma in da know know that lateral movement and certain type of punches were introduced by Filipinos. The "shoulder roll" and also "sticking and moving" by Italians. Bobbing and weaving by the Irish. And standing straight up and carrying the left low and jabbing and stabbing by the Polish. And the list goes on.

Matter of fact, one could go to boxrec and LEARN, but haters, posers and lazy arses will claim that Radam G put that and this on boxrec because he is WHATEVER! YUP, right! Holla!

### Hop says:

@ Radam

Yeah, I've pretty much given up on the types you describe. You almost never get anywhere. So forget about them. But I'm a true boxing fan and yet have a [U]TON[/U] to learn (from the likes of you, Shadow, Da Vinci, BrownSugar, Carmine Cas, etc.). I consider my knowledge very lacking.

BTW, are you Filipino?

### Radam G says:

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Oo! Straight-up Chinoy and Pinoy. Holla!

### **The Shadow says:**

Hop, you should try jumping in the ring one time. Your awareness of the subtleties of the fight game will open soooo much more. A lot of things go unseen by the untrained eye because it happens so fast.

Sometimes you can hear the fighter analysts became agitated with the ignorance of their respected, renowned, distinguished broadcast partners. At least Showtime defer to Malignaggi's insights. Sometimes he will point stuff out and the production crew will find it during the break in between rounds!

@Radam, awesome trivia. What Italians came up with the shoulder roll? This guy on Youtube found fight footage from 1905 of someone scoring a knockout with the shoulder roll.

Just earlier today I found a video of OLD George Foreman doing a pull counter(!). I'm going to repeat that. Earlier today I found a video of an OLD George Foreman pulling off a PULL COUNTER on the same card as Mike Tyson.

People say George Foreman was old and slow. Hell no. Old George was wily and smart, lulling people with devious deception of fleetness. He had plenty of speed for an old guy. That's just not the rhythm in which he fought. Even Roy Jones said that.

A lot of what you see is simplified reality because complex actuality is too difficult for the masses to (take the effort to) comprehend.

Myths in boxing are aplenty. Sometimes more so than the mythologies of old and fiction of false prophets.

Sadly, writers without ring realization reduce the tales of the ring to revisionist recollections, redundant rhetoric and straight up tales of mythology.

That video was awesome! False prophet Roy Jones is not.

### **Hop says:**

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I have no doubt this is all 100% correct. I will never lose that deepened aspect of respect for those regarding a subject [B][I]who have actually 'been there'[/I]/[B] -- whether we are talking about boxing, poverty, or war. I don't mean to simplistically suggest that personal firsthand experience [U]automatically[/U] makes one's view on every related issue infallible, but it does - to my mind - give one's words a 'weight' which cannot be manufactured any other way.

To every man on this site who has stepped through the ropes and laced up the gloves, just know that you have Hop's abiding respect. I'm never wanting to come off as that obnoxious, shallow 'bleacher expert'. (roll eyes)