

# Max Baer and the Death of Ernie Schaaf

By Michael Hunnicutt – (April 5, 2005)

It has long been considered part of boxing lore that the death of Ernie Schaaf on February 14, 1933 was directly the result of his bout with Max Baer on August 31, 1932. Due for release in June 2005 the movie “The Cinderella Man” a story of the life of Jim Braddock may well allude to Mr. Schaaf’s death at some point in the film and attribute the tragedy to Max Baer. If so, it will repeat what already has been considered fact from the 1956 movie “The Harder They Fall.” “The Harder They Fall,” was the fictionalized boxing story of Primo Carnera. In this movie, the Max Baer character, played by Max himself, spoke according to the script: “You know I’m the guy who nailed Gus (Ernie Schaaf), murdered him for 15 rounds. Don’t know what held him up, but when Gus (Ernie Schaaf) left the ring that night he was a dead man. All your joker did was tap him. I did all the work and they gave your guy all the glory,” your guy meaning Primo Carnera. Since the release of “The Harder They fall” and Max Baer’s appearance in it, whatever information about the death of Ernie Schaaf was minimized. From press clippings gathered by Dan Cuoco from the Baer fight to the autopsy, I will give a more objective view of the events leading to Mr. Schaaf’s death.

Certainly one of the most important and yet least known aspect of Mr. Schaaf’s death was the autopsy report shown accompanying this article . The cause of death was oedema to the brain; this is swelling of the brain. This was inflammation preceded by inflammation of the surrounding tissues of the brain, meningitis. The cause of the meningitis “cannot be known with certainty, but it may be referred to the recent attack of influenza with a reasonable degree of probability.” Perhaps, because Ernie came off two top shelf performances prior to the Carnera bout it would seem less likely he had this inflammation at that time. It was only after he contracted influenza that Mr. Schaaf gave the poor showing he did against Carnera. It seems to me to be fairly cut and dry, but of course, without absolute certainty.

Ernie Schaaf, born on September 9, 1908, was just shy of his 24<sup>th</sup> birthday when he entered the ring to box Max Baer on August 31, 1932. Prior to this bout, Erie had 71 professional bouts including a decision over Max in 1930. He had never been knocked out and was considered an excellent heavyweight prospect with a hard punch, a good chin, and good skills. The 23-year-old Baer was also considered to be an excellent prospect with improving skills. (The fact that Baer killed an opponent, Frankie Campbell in 1930, may have also played a part in the public mind following Ernie’s death; but not until years later).

The 1932 bout between Schaaf and Baer appeared to be a rather cautious affair for the first eight rounds. Both men were warned twice by the referee “for them to fight.” Baer took command of the bout in the ninth round, forcing Schaaf to the ropes and outclassed him with a heavy assault of punches. In the tenth and final round, *“Baer beat Schaaf around the ring and into the ropes with a savage attack to the head and body. Just before the round ended Baer dropped Schaaf to the canvas, but the bell sounded as Schaaf hit the floor... two seconds before the fight ended Schaaf was knocked flat on his face, completely knocked out. He was dragged to his corner and his seconds worked over him for three minutes before restoring him to his senses.”*

On October 20, 1932, Ernie next stepped in the ring with Ed “Unknown” Winston and lost on points in 10 rounds. The author has not found the press clippings for this bout. The rematch on December 12, 1932 was different. Schaaf knocked out Winston in the sixth round. The New York Times reported: *“Winston won the first round, but from there on his rival drove ahead at a pace that earned him one of the most impressive victories he has registered in a local ring.”*

On January 6, 1933, Schaaf met highly regarded Stanley Poreda who had previously decisioned him. Ernie knocked out Poreda in the 6<sup>th</sup> round after flooring him 3 times. The New York Times reported, *“Schaaf Superior to Carnera – Anyone who saw last night’s bout can easily visualize Schaaf battering down the Italian man mountain if the former fights in the manner he did last night.”* This impressive showing installed Ernie as a 7 to 5 odd favorite to beat Carnera.

Now, on February 10, 1933, Ernie fought Carnera and makes a “mediocre showing” so much so that when Schaaf collapsed in the 13<sup>th</sup> round, boos echoed the Garden; *“He (Schaaf) had been dangled, figuratively, on the end of Carnera’s long left jabs, sent off balance not infrequently with Carnera’s ponderous hooks, and smashed by the giant’s awkward right crosses and uppercuts. In every round of the twelve Carnera held the upper hand.”* The films of the bout only seems to bear this out. Perhaps, most importantly, Ernie seemed in this bout not able to ride or roll with virtually any of the punches that he received. His head was continuously being pushed, jerked, and snapped back through the 12 rounds as it was when the final jab in the 13<sup>th</sup> snapped his head back and Ernie collapsed. Under his condition of meningitis at that time, it is remarkable he did not collapse much sooner. Ernie was more than game, he was heroic in his final bout. Ernie died on February 14, 1933 at the age of 24. Following the autopsy results, Lucy Schaaf, Ernie’s mother, consoled Carnera: *“Kindly be assured that I do not consider you in any way responsible for the death of my boy. I feel toward you like I would have wished your mother to have felt toward my Ernie if you had met with some*

misfortune during your bout with him. I thank you for your offers of sympathy and for your expression of admiration for Ernie."

While it can never be said with absolute certainty, it seems now, as then, that Max Baer in a high degree of probability did not fatally injure Mr. Schaaf. In all of the tidal wave of press reports following the Carnera bout and death of Ernie, Max Baer's name was never even mentioned. The culprits were influenza, as noted in the autopsy and Ernie's obituary "just before his bout with Carnera, Schaaf went into reclusion in a religious retreat near Boston to recuperate from an attack of influenza" that produced the meningitis and then fighting with this condition. The reader may form their own conclusions.

My thanks to Dan Cuoco for his personal insights and the press clippings used in this article.

TO ERNIE!

## ***Schaaf Suffered From Brain Inflammation; Ill When He Entered Ring, Tests Show***

Ernie Schaaf, the heavyweight boxer who died in Polyclinic Hospital last Tuesday, four days after being knocked out by Primo Carnera, the giant Italian, at Madison Square Garden, was suffering from an inflammation of the brain before he entered the ring, according to a report made public yesterday by Dr. Charles Norris, Chief Medical Examiner, and Dr. Benjamin Morgan Vance, Assistant Medical Examiner.

Their report was based upon a microscopic examination of the brain. It found that Schaaf's condition probably was owing to an attack of influenza he suffered some weeks before the fight. According to the report, Schaaf's condition was aggravated during the bout by blows not in themselves dangerous, and his condition made him less able to avoid blows.

After relating the circumstances of Schaaf's death at the hospital, and of the autopsy that was performed the same day, the report continued:

"He [Schaaf] had been operated on the day before [that is, the day before his death], exploratory craniotomy and osteoplastic flap being made for the relief of cerebral compression.

"Examination of the head showed no fracture of the skull and no hemorrhage below or above the dura and no central hemorrhage. The cervical spinal cord was normal on inspection and after section.

"Microscopic examination disclosed, in addition to the extreme grade of cerebral compression due to a marked cerebral oedema, a few small hemorrhages of the brain.

"The deceased had a chronic or subacute meningo-encephalitis characterized by lymphocytic infiltrations around the blood vessels in the subarachnoid space and the adjacent cortex. The cause of the inflammation cannot be known with certainty, but it may be referred to the recent attack of influenza with a reasonable degree of probability.

"The meningo-encephalitis obviously antedated the boxing match, but because of its insidious development it would not necessarily give symptoms and would have been highly improbable to detect at the time of the physical examination before the bout. In the ring, however, it interfered with Schaaf's boxing skill so that he was less able to avoid blows.

"In addition, blows not in themselves dangerous aggravated the meningo-encephalitis with the result that oedema of the brain, cerebral compression and paralysis of the left side of the body developed. As these symptoms are similar to those produced by intracranial hemorrhage following head injuries, conditions often amenable to surgery, the operation performed at the hospital was clearly indicated."