JACK DEMPSEY

(ed. note - Red Smith wrote Jack Dempsey's obituary before Red died. The New York Times kept it on file and ran it when Dempsey died. It was the last column by Red Smith to appear in the New York Times. IBRO member Johnny Shevalla, a great admirer of Red Smith, offers it as his contribution to this Journal.)

Jack Dempsey was one of the last of a dwindling company whose exploits distinguished the 1920's as "the golden age of sports."

His contemporaries were Babe Ruth in baseball, Red Grange and the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame in football, Bobby Jones and Walter Hagen in golf, Bill Tilden, Helen Wills Moody and Suzanne Lenglen in tennis, Johnny Weissmuller and Gertrude Ederle in swimming, Paavo Nurmi in track, Man o' War, the racehorse, and Earl Sande, the jockey. But none of the others enjoyed more lasting popularity than the man who ruled boxing between 1919 and 1926.

Strangely, though, Mr. Dempsey's popularity never approached its peak until he had lost the championship. He was reviled as a slacker during World War I, and although a jury exonerated him of a charge of draft-dodging, the odium clung to him until the night Gene Tunney punched him almost blind and took his title.

"Lead me out there," Jack told his trainer after that bout. "I want to shake his hand."

`Honey I Forgot to Duck'

Back in their hotel, Estelle Taylor Dempsey was appalled by her husband's battered face. "Ginsberg!" she cried, using her pet name for him. "What happened?"

"Honey," the former champion said, "I forgot to duck."

From that day on, the gallant loser was a folk hero whose fame never diminished. Almost 23 years after he lost the championship, he was having breakfast with friends in Chicago, where Ezzard Charles and Jersey Joe Walcott were to box the following night for his old title, left vacant by the retirement of Joe Louis. A stranger passing their table recognized the old champion.

"Jack Dempsey!" he said, offering his hand. "Oh, boy, Jack, do I know you! Do I remember how you gave it to Jess Willard back there in Toledo!" Leaning forward, he put his face close to Jack's ear, and his voice dropped to a conspiratorial level. "I hope you beat hell out of that guy

tomorrow night," he said and turned away.

Speechless for an instant, Mr. Dempsey stared after him. "Well, I'll be damned," he said. "He thinks I'm still champion!"

Free Spender and Soft Touch

To many, Mr. Dempsey always remained the champion, and he always comported himself like one. He was warm and generous, a free spender when he had it and a soft touch for anybody down on his luck. After retirement from the ring, he made his headquarters in New York in Jack Dempsey's Restaurant, first at the corner of 50th Street across Eighth Avenue from the old Madison Square Garden and later at 1619 Broadway, where his partner was Jack Amiel, whose colt, Count Turf, won the Kentucky Derby.

At almost any hour, Mr. Dempsey was on hand to greet friends and strangers with a cordial, "Hiya pal," in a voice close to a boyish treble. (He wasn't much better at remembering names than Babe Ruth, who called people "kid.") He posed for thousands of photographs with an arm around a customer's shoulders or - if the customer preferred, and many males did - squared off face to face. Autographing tens of thousands of menus, he never scribbled an impersonal "Jack Dempsey" but always took the trouble to write the recipient's name and add "good luck" or "keep punching." His ebullient good humor was even demonstrated against the occasional drunk who simply had to try out his Sunday punch on the old champion.

Grantland Rice said Mr. Dempsey was perhaps the finest gentleman, in the literal sense of gentle man, he had met in half a century of writing sports; Mr. Dempsey never knowingly hurt anyone except in the line of business.

A Tiger in the Ring

In the ring, he was a tiger without mercy who shuffled forward in a bobbing crouch, humming a barely audible tune and punching to the rhythm of the song. He was 187 pounds of unbridled violence. That isn't big by heavyweight standards, yet in the judgment of some, this black-browed product of Western mining camps and hobo jungles was the best of all pugilists. In 1950, a poll by The Associated Press named Mr. Dempsey the greatest fighter of the half-century.

Certainly nobody surpassed him in color and crowd appeal. He drew boxing's first million-dollar gate in fighting Georges Carpentier, boxing's largest paid attendance in his first bout with Tunney and the biggest "live" gate in

their second meeting. As champion, Tunney received $990,445 for the latter fight, which grossed $2,658,660. He gave Tex Rickard, the promoter, his personal check for $9,555 and Mr. Rickard wrote a check for $1 million, the biggest purse ever collected for a single performance in sports before the days of closed-circuit television.

Dempsey was less than two weeks past his 24th birthday but had been through more than 80 professional fights, some unrecorded, when he burst upon the championship scene like a mortar shell. It was July 4, 1919, a blistering day on the shore of Maumee Bay outside Toledo, Ohio. Awaiting the opening bell as challenger for the heavyweight title, the 6-foot-1-inch contender was tanned and fit at 187 pounds. But he looked no more than half the size of Jess Willard, the champion, a pale tract of meat measuring 6 feet 6 1/2 inches tall and weighing 245 pounds.

7 Knockdowns in 3 Minutes

Three minutes later Willard looked like a case for the coroner. He had been down seven times, and one left hook had broken his cheekbone in 13 places. Thinking the seventh knockdown had ended the fight, Dempsey and his manager, Jack (Doc) Kearns, left the ring but were called back.

After two more rounds the helpless Willard was spared further damage when one of his seconds signaled surrender by throwing a towel into the ring.

Now it was Dempsey, heavyweight champion of the world, and the bottom line of his record read: "KO 3." But the winner's jubilation was tempered by the discovery that Mr. Kearns had bet $10,000 of their guarantee on a first-round knockout, taking odds of 10 to 1, and the remaining $17,500 had gone for "training expenses," an omnibus term in the manager's lexicon.

In a ghost-written autobiography many years later, Mr. Kearns took partial credit for the destructive effect of his man's punches. He wrote that he had used plaster-of-paris bandages on Dempsey's hand and that these had hardened into casts inside the gloves after being doused with water. Dempsey denied that his gloves had been loaded, and the tale never won general acceptance because Doc Kearns was known to be a creative artist who seldom let truth spoil a good story.

The destruction of Willard convinced boxing men of the new champion's greatness, but the public was slow to accept Dempsey because of his war record. Ostensibly doing essential work in a Philadelphia shipyard, he had posed for a news photograph holding a riveting gun and wearing overalls,

with patent-leather shoes. The fancy footgear raised noisy doubts about his contribution to the war effort.

More than two years after the armistice, Mr. Rickard capitalized on this unfavorable publicity to build up the first million-dollar gate. Carpentier, the light-heavyweight champion, had been decorated in the French armed forces. When Mr. Rickard matched Dempsey with the Paris boulevardier in a wooden arena called Boyle's 30 Acres in Jersey City, the "hero" became a sentimental favorite over the "slacker." A crowd of 80,183 paid $1,789,238 to see Dempsey win by a knockout in the fourth round.

Having broken all financial records, Dempsey and Mr. Kearns proceeded to break the city of Shelby, Mont. After an oil strike near their small community, Shelby boosters gave way to delusions of grandeur and promised the champion $250,000 to defend his title against the light-hitting Tommy Gibbons. The promotion laid an egg, but Mr. Kearns collected the entire guarantee and had a locomotive and caboose waiting to rush the money and the champion's party out of town as soon as Dempsey had won on points. Behind them, the banks that had put up the cash closed. Shelby had a hole in the seat of its civic breeches for a generation.

To those who saw it, the Dempsey-Firpo bout of 1923 was the most wildly exciting one ever fought for the heavyweight title. Luis Angel Firpo of Argentina, unpolished and untamed, dazed the champion with a right to the jaw seconds after the opening bell. Only half-conscious, Dempsey dropped Firpo four times. Then Firpo knocked the champion into the press row, where reporters instinctively raised hands and shoved to protect themselves. Thus aided, Dempsey got back into the ring and put Firpo down once more before the bell. Two more knockdowns finished the Argentine in the second round.

The Firpo fight was Dempsey's fifth title defense (he had knocked out Billy Miske and Bill Brennan before meeting Carpentier). Three years later he made his sixth and last against Tunney, the Shakespeare-loving veteran of the Marine Corps who had moved into heavyweight ranks after winning the American light-heavyweight championship, losing it and winning it back.

"I never seed anything like it," Mr. Rickard said, watching 120,757 customers crowd into the huge horseshoe in Philadelphia then called Sesquicentennial Stadium. The promoter had been told the fight would draw big in Philadelphia, but he had not dreamed what a stir it would make.

JACK DEMPSEY

Starter Is Late Scratch

Down in Maryland, for instance, was a racing official named Jim Milton. He was the starter when the Havre de Grace track opened in 1912, and when he retired half a century later he had started every race at that track except the last one on the program on Sept. 23, 1926. He left that to an assistant starter and caught a train for Philadelphia and the fight.

Many years afterward Mr. Tunney was told about Mr. Milton's only dereliction. "He probably was betting on Dempsey," he said. If he was, he lost. Jabbing and circling through a drenching rainstorm, Tunney won going away.

One day less than a year later, the pair met again in Soldier Field in Chicago in a match that would make Dave Barry the world's most widely known referee. In the seventh round Tunney was knocked down for the first time in his life.

Gracious outside the ring, Dempsey in battle was no slave to the rules. Not many years ago, when Joe Frazier was champion, he was scandalized by films of Dempsey crouching over a fallen Firpo ready to slug him as he rose. "That's bad for boxing," Frazier protested.

With Tunney on the floor, it did not occur to Dempsey to retire to a neutral corner until Barry stopped the count and led him across the ring. Returning, the referee started the count all over, Tunney got up at "9" - it was established that he had had about 14 seconds to recuperate - and won a clear decision, scoring a knockdown in the eighth round. To this day, the Dempsey cult believes Tunney was saved by the long count; Tunney always insisted he was in full control throughout.

That was the last time around for Dempsey as a fighter of importance. Thirty-two years had passed since his birth on June 24, 1895, in Manassa, Colo., to Hyrum and Celia Dempsey, who had paused there with their brood on a meandering journey from Mudfork, W. Va. Manassa was only one of many stops for a nomadic family, but years later the fact that Mrs. Dempsey had given birth there inspired Damon Runyon, the sportswriter, to dub the new champion the Manassa Mauler.

Hyrum Dempsey was a tough, restless descendant of Irish immigrants who had quit a job as schoolteacher to venture west. There was a strain of Indian blood in both parents revealed in the baby's blue-black hair and high cheekbones. They named him William Harrison Dempsey and called him Harry, but at 16 he went his own way and adopted his own names.

The first was Kid Blackie. For about three years he fought under that name in mountain mining camps. Between saloon bouts he worked in the mines, shined shoes, picked fruit and hustled, riding the rods on trains and sleeping in hobo jungles. Meanwhile, his older brother, Bernie, was boxing as Jack Dempsey, having borrowed the name of an oldtime middleweight known as "the Nonpareil." One night in Denver, Harry substituted for Bernie and was introduced as Jack Dempsey. The name stuck.

He was managed for a while by one Jack Price and later by John (the Barber) Reisler before he and Mr. Kearns became partners. They started slowly but picked up speed as they moved. By the time they reached Maumee Bay and the rendezvous with Willard, Dempsey's record included 21 first-round knockouts. If any other puncher ever dealt such swift destruction to so many, the record books do not report it.

Willard had won the championship in 1915 and defended it once in a 10-round no-decision match with Frank Moran in 1916. On Feb. 15, 1918, an item in The New York Times reported that Dempsey had knocked out Fireman Jim Flynn in one round, adding that Willard had agreed to meet the winner of a bout between Dempsey and Fred Fulton.

That bout took place on July 28, 1918. It lasted 23 seconds. One punch was thrown, a right by Dempsey. Fulton was counted out and his name entered in the long list of Dempsey's victims - Gunboat Smith, Carl Morris, Bill Brennan, Billy Miske, Battling Levinsky, Arthur Pelkey. There wasn't a heavyweight of repute Dempsey hadn't beaten, except Willard.

After taking care of that oversight, the new champion took his time about defending his title. In 1920 he took on two of his old victims, Miske and Brennan, and disposed of them. In 1921 he beat Carpentier, in 1922 he rested, and in 1923 he beat Tommy Gibbons and Firpo. Three years intervened before he fought again and lost to Tunney.

Attracted to the Stage

Like John L. Sullivan, Jim Corbett and other champions before him, he gave the stage at least as much attention as he bestowed on the ring. He accepted a featured role on Broadway in a play called "The Big Fight," directed by David Belasco. The feminine lead was Estelle Taylor, his wife.

In his early days in the mining camps, he had been married to Maxine Gates, a saloon piano player, but not for long. Miss Taylor was a star of silent films whom he met in

Hollywood. After their Broadway adventure, they went back to Hollywood and made a movie called "Manhattan Madness," which was also a disaster.

By this time Dempsey and his manager had fallen out. A series of suits and countersuits kept them in litigation right up to the Philadelphia match with Tunney in 1926. The distraction was no help to Dempsey in his preparation for the bout, but when he lost, he did not mention this as an excuse.

He had learned that fighters suffer many distractions. "Some night," he told a young boxer, "you'll catch a punch between the eyes and all of a sudden you'll see three guys in the ring against you. Pick out the one in the middle and hit him, because he's the one who hit you."

Mr. Dempsey and Miss Taylor were divorced, and he married the singer Hannah Williams. They had two daughters, Joan in 1934 and Barbara in 1936. He and Miss Williams were divorced in 1943.

In 1958 he was married for the fourth time, to the former Deanna Piattelli, who survives. He later adopted her daughter from a previous marriage. She took the name Barbara Dempsey and helped him write his 1977 autobiography, "Dempsey."

In 1938 Mr. Dempsey was the first winner of the Edward J. Neil Memorial Plaque, awarded by the New York Boxing Writers Association to the man who had done the most for boxing that year. He was elected to the Boxing Hall of Fame in 1954. Except during World War II, when he enlisted in the Coast Guard and was commissioned a lieutenant commander, he remained identified with the ring, as a referee of boxing and wrestling and a participant in various promotions.

In the early days of Louis's reign as champion, Mr. Dempsey lent his name and restaurant facilities to a "white hope" tournament, a term that had survived in boxing long after its racial implication had evaporated. Dropping into Dempsey's, John Lardner, the writer, saw a horde of young males devouring steak and chops.

"Finest bunch of white hopes ever assembled," the proprietor said proudly.

"What about him?" Mr. Lardner asked, indicated a husky young black in the middle of the pack. Mr. Dempsey fetched him a slap on the shoulder.

"You got a good eye for a fighter," he said. "He's the best prospect in the bunch."