

## THE SHATTERING OF A BOXER'S DREAM

It was a beautiful Sunday in San Francisco. Fred Mahan was excited. Today he was making his first ever parachute jump.

Perfect flying weather, thought Col. Harry Abbott, who would fly the plane for Mahan's jump, and he had every confidence in the parachute that Mahan would use - it was a new type that he, himself, had invented.

There were a few unusual circumstances involved, however. Abbott's plane was a single-propellor, two-seater biplane and Mahan would have to climb out of his front seat and onto the wing, in order to make his jump. It was a little tricky, but Abbott only had to make sure to keep the plane absolutely level while Mahan was crawling out onto the wing.

Men, and women, too, were making parachute jumps all the time now. After all, flying was no longer a novelty and neither was parachute jumping in 1930. Besides, Mahan was a very tough, and courageous young man - a fact he had demonstrated over and over again, the last time as recently as four days ago, on February 19, when he had knocked out Arizona Joe Rivers at San Francisco.

Fred Mahan was a welterweight boxer and a veteran of 100 ring battles. For the last fourteen months he had fought the majority of his fights in California, becoming a very popular drawing card due to his aggressive, two-fisted, boring-in style. He had already contested for the Junior Welterweight Championship, in Los Angeles, on May 28, 1929, losing a thrilling match to Champion Mushy Callahan. Mahan had put Callahan on the canvas in rounds one and two, only to have the champion make a sensational comeback to floor Mahan for the count in round three. That terrific scrap had the 10,000 fans on hand, at Los Angeles' Olympic Auditorium, roaring with their cheers for the efforts of both fighters.

Unfortunately, no matter how loud the cheering was, Fred Mahan could take no heed of it. Fred Mahan was a deaf-mute and had been since he was eight months old.

Mahan had been born in Bracketville, Texas in 1906. His real name was Frederico Mesa. He took the name Mahan from his stepfather, William Mahan, after the early death of his father and his mother's remarriage.

Despite his hearing and speaking handicap, Fred Mahan had developed into an otherwise strong and physically active young man. When he was in his early teens he gravitated to boxing. A quick learner, he soon became a proficient fighter

THE SHATTERING OF A BOXER'S DREAM

and in 1923 turned professional. While he couldn't hear the bell beginning and ending each round, his feet felt the bell's vibration as it reverberated through the ring floor.

For the next five years, and sporting a nickname that aptly described his plight, Fred "Dummy" Mahan, he confined his activities to Texas where he built up a loyal coterie of fans who flocked to see him rack up victory after victory. In 1928 he ventured east for the first time, scoring several crowd-pleasing knockout victories in Columbus, Ohio.

In late 1928 he moved his ring activities west, to California, where he came under the guidance of a new manager, Fred "Windy" Winsor, former soldier and railroad brakeman. Winsor was all enthused over the potential of his new fighter. In the first match under Winsor's management, Mahan scored five knockdowns in knocking out Johnny Priston in two rounds at San Francisco, on January 9, 1929. After one more crowd-pleasing bout, Winsor arranged for the junior welterweight title match against Champion Mushy Callahan.

Even though he lost that match, Mahan was still popular and much in demand for other bouts in California. He was still young enough, he was only 23 years old and Manager Winsor felt that Mahan could soon again be in line for another championship match. Having just run up a streak of four straight knockout wins, Mahan was scheduled to face former lightweight champ, Jimmy Goodrich, in five days.

However, Mahan himself wanted something else much more - he wanted to hear; hear voices, hear noises, hear the roar of the crowd when he fought. For Fred "Dummy" Mahan, gaining his hearing became an obsession. Doctors didn't seem able to help. One day, in August 1929, just after a bout in Los Angeles, he learned of a theory that seemed promising. "Take a plane ride, and have the pilot make a steep dive," he was told. "The shock to the nerves in your ears, while you're in the dive, might help you to hear."

Mahan tried it. He went up in a plane, near Los Angeles, and had the pilot dive several thousand feet. But, it wasn't a success. Still not convinced, he resumed his boxing career and then made arrangements to go up in Col. Harry Abbott's plane on Sunday, February 23, 1930. Only this time he would jump in a parachute from five thousand feet. This time, maybe this time, it would be successful and his dream would be realized.

It was a beautiful day and perfect for flying. Col. Abbott, a veteran Berkeley, California flyer, wrote out careful instructions and went over them with Mahan, before they got into the plane. Abbott stressed, "When you get out

THE SHATTERING OF A BOXER'S DREAM

on the wing - jump - and then count six, before you pull the rip cord."

Mahan looked at Abbott's lips, forming the words. He nodded. He looked over the written instructions. He nodded vigorously. "Let's go," he seemed to be saying, even though he couldn't speak.

Manager "Windy" Winsor confronted Mahan, "Don't do it, Fred. Don't jump. I'm worried," he remonstrated, pleadingly. Mahan pulled himself away and walked to the plane. Winsor had tried to persuade him against the jump from the first moment that Mahan had planned it.

Several thousand spectators had gathered at Mills Field, San Francisco's municipal airport, to witness Mahan's attempted feat. Parachute jumps were still relatively rare in 1930 and thrilling to watch.

Col. Abbott took off, with Mahan in the front cockpit. After a few minutes of flying, Abbott reached the intended altitude and levelled the plane. He reached forward and touched Mahan's shoulder. He signalled that now was the time.

Mahan clambered out of his seat and, holding on to the wing struts, got out onto the wing. The crowd strained to see. A roar went up as they spotted the figure on the wing, and then it was still as all eyes waited.

Out on the wing Mahan stood, as erect as he could, then he jumped, but inexplicably pulled the rip cord as he did so. For a moment thousands of eyes registered confusion, then transmitted shock.

The chute was caught on the tail of the plane and Mahan was left dangling and snarled. Then, the crowd watched in horror as a figure catapulted away from the plane.

The chute had torn apart as it caught on the plane's tail and almost before the pilot could even be aware of what had happened, Mahan was plummeting 5,000 feet to the ground. The thousands of people on the ground watched in dreadful fascination as the body plunged from the sky, falling into a meadow near the airport.

Shortly afterward, Col. Abbott landed and said that Mahan had pulled the rip cord too soon after jumping, before he was well clear of the aircraft. As it opened, the parachute struck the stabilizer of the plane, he said, and the fighter was hopelessly entangled.

THE SHATTERING OF A BOXER'S DREAM

Mahan's manager was beside himself in deep shock. He had watched, helplessly, as his fighter twisted through the air and fell to his death. He sorrowfully reproached himself, "Why didn't I stop him from jumping?"

A subsequent inquest absolved the pilot, Col. Abbott, of any blame, calling Mahan's death an accident. In Bracketville, Texas, Mahan's mother and stepfather bemoaned the loss of their son as another of the cruel blows that fate had handed him - and them, a childhood disease that rendered him deaf and dumb and now a terrible accidental death.

The world of boxing, at least in California, mourned for a short time, at this sudden loss of a talented young fighter, but soon became pre-occupied with its thinking of the myriad of other young and talented fighters in its midst, such as the new heavyweight sensation out of Livermore, with thirteen knockouts in eighteen fights, Max Baer.

Fred "Dummy" Mahan was a successful and respected boxer, whose impossible dream was shattered, along with his life, on a beautiful Sunday in San Francisco, February 23, 1930.

Bob Soderman