

The sombre tale of Dempsey's 3rd loss to Tunney

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Tuesday's sad news of the death of former heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey was cause for reflection. In the days before professional teams married with television to dominate spectator sports, Dempsey was a giant in his era in a way few athletes have been since.

This despite having lost the championship to Gene Tunney – twice before the boxing public in 1926 and 1927, and a third time in 1951 in the normally quiet confines of my maternal grandparents' living room.

The first two fights have been well documented. The third battle has been until now a quietly kept family secret. Time to set the record straight.

First, one must understand my relatives. If God hadn't invented them, James Thurber surely would have. Start with Fred and Ethyl Mertz and multiple by three. Now you've got the picture.

My folks were living in New York in 1951 before the Air Force re-stationed my father in England. My mother trekked westward to Cincinnati for one last visit with her folks before heading overseas.

In 1951, the New Wave in American culture was television. My parents, progressive couple that they were, had a set. My grandparents had a set. My great-uncle Gene had a set. My great-uncle Phil, a man with a tight grip on tradition and his money, did not.

Boxing was in its heyday in the '50s. My folks watched fights two or three times a week on the telly. On Friday nights, Mom recalls, Gillette ran newsreels of old-time fights. Looking for a conversation item to share with her older relatives, Mom mentioned how much she enjoyed watching the fights and that she had seen a newsreel of the 1927 Dempsey-Tunney fight. That was the fight when Dempsey stood over fallen Tunney instead of going to a neutral corner. A delay and a long count resulted, after which Tunney got up to beat Dempsey.

The fight had been old news for 24 years when Mom raised the issue. but Uncle Gene and Uncle Phil went at it like the bell hadn't sounded yet. Tunney won fair and square, pronounced Gene, a chipper young man of 55. No, Dempsey was robbed, protested Phil, a more mature and stable 65.

The fight got wicked enough to send the family cats scurrying for shelter behind the African violets. The brothers threatened to reenact the fight right then and there; they were kept apart only by the physical restraint of the womenfolk.

Gene left in a huff, the only way back then that folks who were angry ever left a house. Phil left in a huff. For more than 1½ years to come, they spoke not a word to each other. No more weekly gatherings at grandma's. My grandmother couldn't get her brothers into the same house. "She thought that when Christmas came that surely they'd be over," Mom recalled. They were, but Gene was there in the day and Phil at night and never the twain did meet.

To each war an end must come. With the world in a conciliatory mood at the end of the Korean War, my great-uncles grudgingly made up. By the time I shuffled onto this mortal coil, the rift was healed.

All that brouhaha over one boxing match that none of them were even at. Thank goodness more rational behavior has prevailed in the family since then.

When I was reminiscing about it with my mother the other day on the phone, I couldn't help but think how much more just and dramatic it would have been for Dempsey to win the 1927 fight.

"Well, they showed it on television again today and you could see the official was right, he should have gone to his corner," Mom said.

She must be crazy! I was so mad I hung up.