

Limerick's Contribution To Boxing History

Johnson Had Tom

By SEAN O'NEILL

JULY 4, 1910, and it was just an hour after noon when Tom Flanagan pushed his way through the gathering of newspapermen and photographers who crowded the hotel foyer. In the centre of the group stood a tall and smiling negro and Flanagan nodded to him to indicate that all was well.

"At odds of ten to six?" asked the negro, his voice lowered and his eyes no longer smiling. "Yes, Jack," replied the youthful Flanagan, "all the money is on at ten to six."

The negro smiled again, his gold teeth glistening. "O.K.," he said, this time speaking aloud so that all present could hear, "we don't want to keep Mister Jeffries waiting, so let's go."

The group broke up and Tom Flanagan fell into step with the great Jack Johnson and together they walked out into the scorching July sun to face the howling, jeering mob, whose hostile voices continued to ring until the champion and his party drove out of sight.

Hate

It was a long way from Kilbreedy, Kilmallock, to Reno, Nevada, and a big change from the friendly crowds who gathered at the great sports meetings of the Golden Vale to the negro-hating mobs which Jack Johnson could always draw forth. But Tom Flanagan was a travelled man and boxing-wise his journey was still young.

The story of the Johnson-Jeffries fight is well known. I recalled it in some considerable detail in these columns last winter, but what was not mentioned then is that Tom

In A Hot Spot

Flanagan was Johnson's chief second and trusted friend. He was later to become his manager.

Johnson's corner on that day some 54 years ago was no place for the timid. There were 42,000 in the arena and twice as many outside. All wanted Johnson beaten. They wanted, as the great writer Jack London had written, "the golden smile knocked off the nigger's face."

Taunts

And to do it they had brought back out of retirement the legendary James J. Jeffries—the man no one had ever beaten. Never has a sporting contest been so much the expression of racial bitterness.

So confident was the crowd of victory that they had installed the aged Jeffries at 10/7 favourite, and better odds could be had on Johnson if one looked long enough—as Flanagan had done. Even arch-gambler Tex Rickard, who was both promoting and refereeing the bout, believed Johnson would fail.

But, of course, he didn't. Instead he completely outclassed the former champion—battering him into slow and painful defeat and taunting him with remarks such as, "Who's yellow now?" in every round.

Now and then Johnson would clinch and over Jeffries' shoulder would hurtle remarks at ringsiders such as Jim Corbett, who was also Jeffries' chief second. They were remarks probably very much called for as Corbett had not been very selective in his pre-fight descriptions of Johnson.

In exile

But it all added to the tenseness of the occasion and Flanagan and those in Johnson's corner were in mortal danger. One spark could have brought a riot, but somehow it never came. Instead the crowd remained as if hypnotised, watch-

ing the complete and contemptuous demolition of their idol.

Five years later Tom Flanagan was in Havana, Cuba. It was Easter Monday, 1915, and it was even hotter than it had been in Reno. This time the crowd was less hostile. In Cuba there was no racial prejudice, but there were many Americans in the vast throng.

Johnson was conceding a significant weight to the giant from Kansas, Jess Willard and had been in exile during the years previous—in Paris for most of the time—as a year's prison sentence awaited him if he were to set foot on American soil.

Shaded

It was a slow and somewhat dull fight. Johnson was not the fighter of some years back. He won the early rounds, but Willard was catching him every now and then with hard blows to the body and head. In the 25th round Johnson was leaning on whenever he could, but Willard gave him little chance to rest.

At the end of the round, Johnson mumbled to his cornermen to tell his wife, Lucille, to leave the arena. This was done and she left.

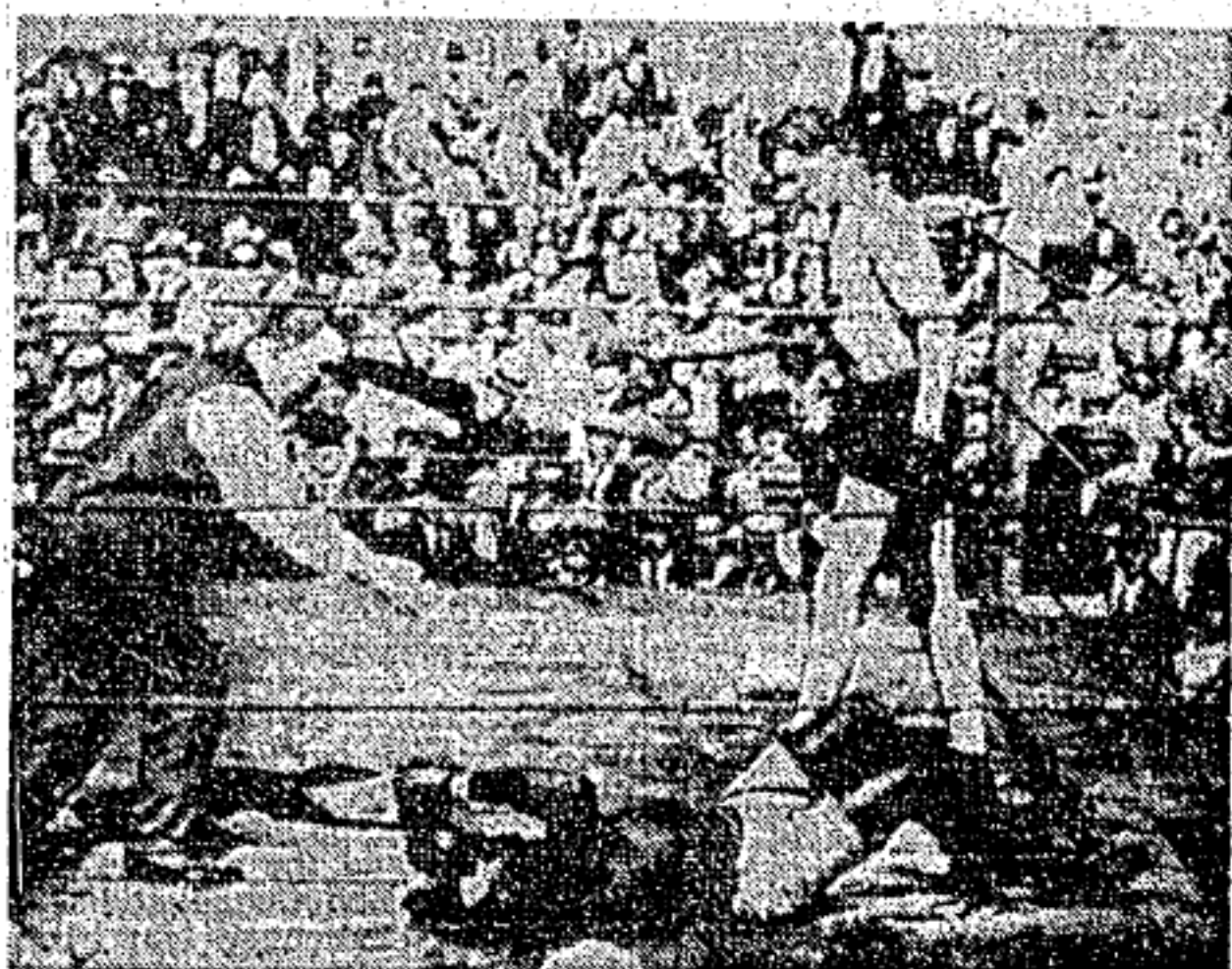
A minute later Johnson went down. He lay there shading the glaring sun from his eyes with his right glove while referee Welch counted him out. His controversial reign had ended and with it boxing's greatest controversy was born.

Confidant

Did Johnson "throw" the fight for a sizable bribe which his wife had been carrying and also in the hope that as a defeated and humbled champion he could return to the U.S.? Did he, as has been said, wink at Tom Flanagan as the decisive count was tolled?

Most reliable fistic authorities insist that he did not—that he was beaten by age and exhaustion. We will never know for sure. Tom Flanagan must have known, but he and Johnson are no longer with us—only the mystery and the speculation still remain.

However, it is interesting to recall that a son of the Shannonside was so much part of it all. Tom Flanagan stood by Johnson when few did. He shared in his triumphs and in his defeats, and to the very end he was his friend and confidant. Limerick's contribution to the great fistic dramas of Reno, of Havana and the other never to be forgotten events of half a century ago was very real.



● THE MOMENT OF TRUTH? . . . Johnson "shades his eyes" from the sun as referee Welch counts him out in the 26th round of his controversial fight with Willard. ©Irish Newspaper Archives