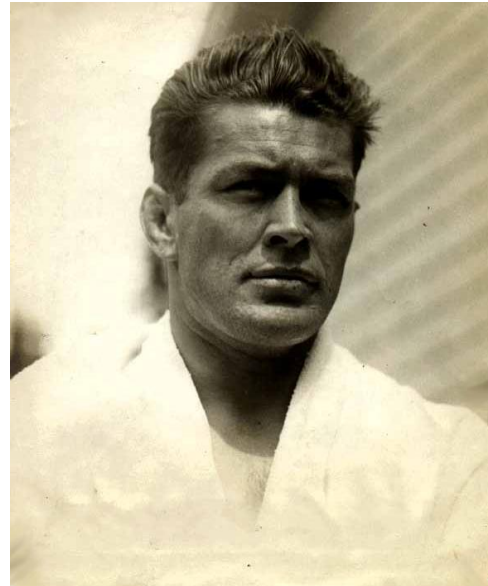


James Joseph “Gene” Tunney

Irish born and Americans of Irish descent dominated the sport of boxing from the 1850's to the first two decades of the 20th Century. In 1890, Irish-American boxers held five of the seven division championships. For working-class Irish, watching the sport of boxing was a means of lifting spirits after a day of back-breaking labor, and, for some, to become a boxer was the means to a better paying job. Their heroes were Irish boxers, one of the best being Gene Tunney.

Gene Tunney, christened James Joseph, was born in 1897 to Irish immigrants, Mary and John Tunney of Kiltimagh, Co. Mayo who immigrated to the United States in 1880. The family settled in Greenwich Village in 1897, close to John Tunney's work as a stevedore on the Hudson River docks. Mary and he raised seven children, three boys and four girls. James Joseph, the oldest son, acquired his nickname Gene from his youngest sister's having trouble pronouncing his name Jim. Gene was a small, slight child, very athletic but usually came home from school loaded with school and library books which attracted the local neighborhood bullies. At age ten his father gave him a pair of boxing gloves in order to defend himself. His father had boxed in Ireland and at some "smokers" in New York. But like many of the Irish immigrant parents of that era, they hoped their son would become a priest not a boxer.



Gene graduated from St. Veronica's in Greenwich Village where he excelled in athletics and academics. He appeared in many of the school's theatrical productions, with a special interest in Shakespeare, able to recite by heart many of the soliloquies. When he graduated in 1911, he stood 5 feet 3 inches and weighed 115 pounds. He attended De La Salle Academy in the East Village for only one year as his family needed his financial support. His father worked twelve hours a day and only earned \$15 a week. Gene got a job as an office boy for \$5 a week. Within a year he increased his salary to \$11 a week, supplemented by a part-time job as the athletic director in boxing fundamentals at a recreation center in a local public school.

In the spring of 1913, Tunney at the age of 16, now six feet tall and 135 pounds, began his boxing career with a sparring match with a friend. Green and untrained, Tunney, nonetheless, showed enough potential that several

fight promoters urged him to continue fighting. Drawn away from boxing by the physical pain of the ring and by a promising career in a local steamship company, Gene discovered that boxing was in his blood. From his early bouts, Tunney was learning to box. His baptism by leather gloves encouraged him to become a professional boxer on July 2, 1915. He won his first fourteen professional fights, earning him the attention of the local newspapers and a large following in Greenwich Village. His father still would not go to see him fight, and he and Gene's mother continued to hope that their son would study for the priesthood.



As so many patriotic Americans did during WWI, Tunney enlisted in the Marines on July 17, 1918. After basic training at Parris Island, his company was shipped to France to a staging area for American forces. But his company was not to see battle as the Germans surrendered on November 11, 1918. While at a boxing program at his base which was staging base championships in various classes, Tunney was encouraged to fight, owing to a fighter's not showing up. He easily won his first fight as a Marine. The popularity of the programs within the military is believed to have helped the sport of boxing to gain wide support and led to its legalization in the states when the troops returned to civilian life. As a result of his success as a Marine fighter, Tunney was given more time off from his duties to train. He went on to fight and win matches with professional boxers both American and French. Within two months, he won eighteen consecutive fights. Eventually he captured the American Expeditionary Forces light heavyweight championship in Paris

. After nine and a half months in France, Tunney was discharged on August 18, 1919. When he enlisted in the Marines he was six feet tall and 158 pounds; he was now 6'1" and 175 pounds.

His confidence being bolstered by his performance in winning the AEF light-heavyweight championship in Europe, Tunney decided to continue his boxing career. In his return to boxing Tunney won sixteen of his twenty-one fights by knockouts. In spite of his record Tunney was not getting much attention in the sporting pages. As indicated in Jack Cavanaugh's book *Tunney: Boxing's Brainiest Champ and His Upset of the Great Jack Dempsey*, fighters who paid sports writers got more coverage than those, like Tunney, who did not. Tunney agreed to let his manager arrange payments to widely published writers like Damon Runyon and others. This led to better press coverage in the New York papers and, because Runyon

was syndicated, in other big city papers. His career was now in full bloom and his exceptional record of success in the ring would put him on a collision course with the great Jack Dempsey.

The only loss that Tunney had in his professional career of seventy-one wins and one loss was to Harry Greb, known as "The Pittsburgh Windmill" and the "King of the Alley Fighters. Greb was noted for his unorthodox style of rapid-fire punches, both legal and illegal, thrown from impossible angles. Fighting for the world light-heavyweight championship, Tunney was completely overwhelmed by the style of the more experienced fighter and his rejection of illegal tactics. Greb and Tunney were to meet three more times, with Tunney winning one decision and with two no decision matches. But it was the two fights with Jack Dempsey that were to be his greatest accomplishment but, ironically, did not add to his popularity.

Jack Dempsey, "The Manassa Mauler," was the Roaring Twenties' most famous personality who rose from poverty to rule the ring as heavyweight champ. Born in Manassa, Colorado, he left school after the eighth grade to seek work. He learned his trade as a boxer in saloons and bars by challenging any man to fight him. In 1914 he became a professional boxer. He took the heavyweight crown from Jess Willard who outweighed him by fifty-eight pounds. Dempsey successfully defended his crown five times before he agreed to box Tunney. On September 23, 1926, Gene Tunney beat the great champion in a ten-round decision before the largest crowd, 123,757, ever to witness a boxing match. Dempsey and most boxing fans were confident that Dempsey would defeat the lighter Tunney within two rounds. The puncher Dempsey would overwhelm the stylish boxer Tunney, the experts said. When Tunney took the first round, the sports writers and fans were stunned as Tunney slugged it out with the "man killer," making Dempsey look inept in his inability to land telling blows. The pattern of the boxer landing the punches and the slugger being slugged lasted for ten rounds. Tunney, being virtually unmarked and the champ a mass of cuts and bruises, won all ten rounds on the scorecards of the two judges.



A year later on September 22, 1927, Tunney and Dempsey met in Soldiers Field, Chicago, before a larger crowd, 145,000, in a rematch that became famous as the "Battle of the Long Count." The 1920's was the era of Al Capone whose power and influence in Chicago was legendary. Rumors of fixes with boxers taking a "dive" were all over town. Capone was said to have bet \$50,000 on Dempsey to win. Clearly, more than a boxing championship was at stake. Capone's money was dwarfed by Dempsey's

iconic popularity in America . The crowd at Soldiers Field that night roared when in the seventh round Dempsey knocked down Tunney, but the knockdown count by the referee was delayed as Dempsey did not return to a neutral corner, as required by the Illinois rules of boxing. This delay gave Tunney enough time to recover from Dempsey's stunning blow to his head and later to win the fight on a decision. It was one of the biggest sports controversies ever in the United States . That controversy may help to explain why Tunney, who beat Dempsey twice, could not lay a glove on Dempsey's position in American's Pantheon. Not in life but in death, Dempsey KO'ed Tunney: Jack Dempsey's obituary in the New York Times ran on page one and was 3000 words; Tunney's obituary was on page twenty-two and ran 750 words.

Gene Tunney was to win one more fight before retiring on July 28, 1928 at the age of thirty-one. His retirement was conducted in the same dignified manner as his earlier life. Tunney married Mary Josephine (Polly) Lauder, heiress to the Carnegie fortune, on October 4, 1928. When Tunney married, he was himself rich as he earned close to one million dollars after the second Dempsey fight, equivalent to eleven million in current dollars. At his wedding were Thornton Wilder, the playwright, and John McCormack, the Irish tenor. The Greenwich Village lad became not only a resident of Greenwich , Connecticut but also a lecturer on Shakespeare at Yale. He counted as his friends many famous authors, he attended the opera, and, as one of Dempsey's body guards was to remark, "He read books." He went on to become an executive and board member of many corporations.



At the age of 43 in 1941 at the request of Navy Undersecretary James Forrestal, Tunney accepted a commission in the Navy as a lieutenant commander to set up a physical fitness program for student pilots. Later he set up a program for the entire Navy. Tunney and his wife raised four children, three boys and one girl. One of his sons, John, was to serve in the United States Congress as a senator from California . Gene Tunney died in 1978 at the age of 81. A good deal can be inferred about this exceptional Irish-American

from his grave marker, which reads:

James Joseph Tunney
1897-1978
World War I - France
Pvt. U.S. Marine Corps.
World War II - Capt. U.S. Navy

(Written by Joseph McCormack, November 2007)

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