

"SAILOR" TOM SHARKEY ... "IRON MAN"

By Tracy Callis, International Boxing Research Organization (IBRO).



Tom Sharkey was a crude brawler from the "Old School." At the sound of the opening bell, he attacked, throwing bombs until the end. He was a rough and durable violator of rules. To him, the rules were simply restrictions that kept a real fight from taking place.

He grabbed the elusive Jim Corbett, wrestled him to the floor and began to pummel him. He pinned Jim Jeffries' left arm under his own, causing Jeff's glove to come off and when the referee stepped in to put it back on, Sharkey took a murderous swipe at big Jim. He frequently pushed referees aside and occasionally hit at them. He head-butted, hit on breaks, held and hit, hit after the bell and got away with it.

He was short and squat with excessively broad shoulders and a huge, deep chest upon which was tattooed a colorful star and sailing ship. His motto was "Don't Give Up the Ship." He used a straight-up stance but at 5-9 he was still a low target. His nose was crooked and his left ear was cauliflowered (a gift from Gus Ruhlin in their 1900 bout). Face-to-face confrontations with several all-time greats only worsened the condition of the ear. It is said his hands were strong enough to bend silver dollars. In style, he was aggressive and ever striding forward towards his man, throwing powerful haymakers.

Sharkey once said, "The bigger they were, the better I liked it. I knew I could cut them down to my size" (see UP Release, April 17, 1953). In the article, "I Fought the Best of Them" (1939 pp 29 30), he wrote, "I made them all back away from me. I had to carry the fight to them, including Jeffries."

There is no doubt that Sharkey could hit. In an era of brute strength, where the capability to take it was a must and knockouts were hard to score, Tom scored 37 knockouts in 54 bouts (almost 70 percent).

The "Sailor" fought the best men of his time. Twice each he fought Jim Jeffries, Bob Fitzsimmons, Jim Corbett, Peter Maher, and Joe Goddard. He fought both Gus Ruhlin and Joe Choynski three times. He also met John L. Sullivan and Jack Monroe.



Boxing writers have long been in awe of the natural savagery and iron will of Sharkey. One boxing historian described Sharkey as an "animal of a man that swarmed all over his opponents." Hall-of-Fame writer Gilbert Odd called him "a rugged fighter who depended more on toughness than skill." John J. Romano (Everlast Boxing Record 1929 p 57) called Sharkey, "Game and aggressive to the core." Stanley Weston described Sharkey as "one of the most durable heavyweights of the olden era." Diamond (1954 p 40) wrote that "Tom Sharkey was a veritable nightmare to heavyweights. He never became champion, but with a little luck he might have been ... He was very strong and muscular and had great power of endurance. He would sail in like a whirlwind, let go with both arms - and keep on slugging. His great weakness was that he couldn't block a punch and left himself wide open." He observed: "Sharkey's punches, often wild and erratic, were always dangerous."



Durant-Bettmann (1952 p 120) said, "Sharkey was a tough, squat battler who had the misfortune to appear when there were many great heavyweights on the scene. He fought them all but could never quite win the crown."

Willoughby (1970 p 360) writes, "One of the greatest of the old-time 'near-champions' was the rugged sailor, Tom Sharkey, who fought all the leading contenders of his day." Burrill (1974 p 175) writes Sharkey was "regarded by some as an uncrowned champion."

Robert E. Howard, writer, boxing enthusiast, and creator of "Conan the Barbarian" left an unfinished essay on the The Iron Man, "Sharkey was a raw novice; Choynsky a trained veteran. Choynsky smashed Sharkey over the ropes and out of the ring. The Sailor landed on his head on the concrete with all the heft of his 190 pounds. That would have caved in most skulls like an eggshell. Sharkey climbed back into the ring and knocked Choynsky out." According to official records, there was no knockout.

Another historian, John McCallum (1974 p 51) pictured "Sailor Tom" as "a rugged, sawed-off Pier-Sixer with a brassbound sea chest of a torso and a rawhide constitution, who gave Jeffries his hardest fights."

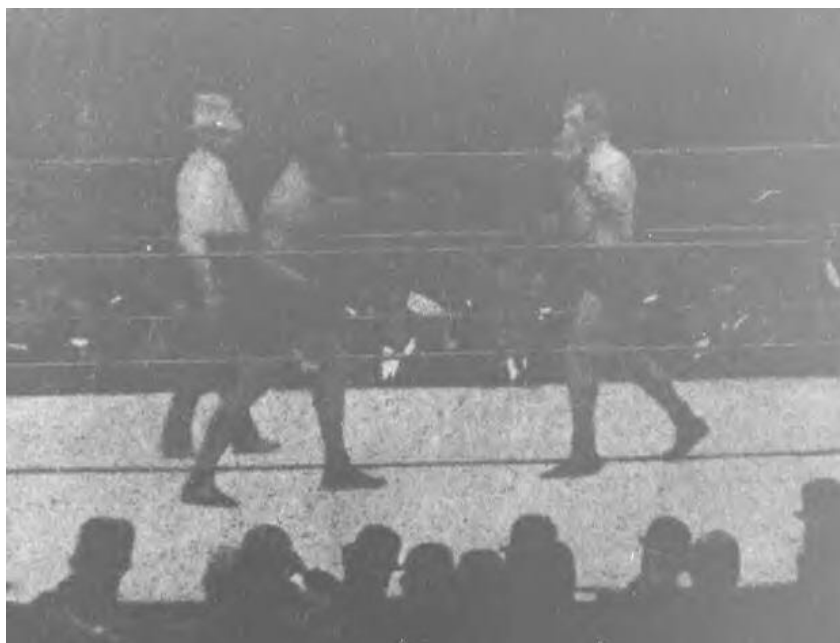
Jim Jeffries, himself, called Tom Sharkey his toughest opponent. In his autobiography by Fullerton (1929 p VII), he twice put Sharkey's name in capital letters. He called Sharkey the roughest, gamest, and most willing fighter in the world (see Lardner 1972 p 131).

These two "Iron Men" fought twice for a total of 45 rounds. The first bout lasted twenty rounds and each man was "busted up." Following his close, disputed decision loss to Jeffries in their first bout (1898), Sharkey vowed to defeat Jeffries in the second bout or die trying. He almost died. His nose was broken, two ribs cracked, his face cut up, and his left ear swollen to the size of a grapefruit. The second fight, went 25 grueling rounds.

Promoter Bill Brady described a little-known fact - Jeff's fight with Sharkey at the Coney Island place was memorable not only for its own sake, but also because it was recorded in the movies in the first film ever taken under artificial light. The story of how the lights were so hot they burned both men bald-headed is well known. It isn't so well known that the cameras broke down during the middle of the last round of the fight and had to be taken over again some time later. Sharkey wanted to "fight for real" but finally Brady convinced him to re-enact the last round.

Indeed, this second fight (1899) is rated among the all-time classics with both men dealing out and absorbing considerable punishment, "a collision of natural strong men."

Durant (1976 p 51) says that Sharkey was "... the rugged sailor who might been champion in almost any other era of the ring."



Charles Mathison, old time boxing man, was of the opinion that "Sharkey was so rough and ready that Gene Tunney would have to be at his very best to outpoint him."

TAD, boxing writer of the 1920s, wrote "Sharkey would raise Cain with the boys of today. What a battle a Dempsey-Sharkey affair would have been."

Perhaps the most fitting legacy for the Sailor was given by his namesake, Jack Sharkey, the Boston Gob. Shortly before his death, in an interview with Mike DeLisa, the former Heavyweight Champion was shown a large photo of Tom Sharkey. Jack looked at the picture, silent for a long while, then said softly - "Now that was some fighter!"

It is the opinion of this writer that Sharkey was a Rocky Marciano "look-a-like" and a "near-equal" of the great "Rock" in ruggedness, power and size. He had the bad luck to fight when Jim Jeffries, Bob Fitzsimmons, and Jim Corbett were around. Had he fought in any other period of history, he probably would have been a champion.

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