

Jazz Age Journalism's Battle Over Professionalism, Circulation, and the Sports Page

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While on his way to Washington to attend the fourth annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Will Owen Jones, the editor of the *Nebraska State Journal*, rode for 500 miles beside the brother of a sports promoter who bragged his brother had spent \$24,000 "sugaring" sports writers and editors in 1925 to assure a "cooperative" press.¹ The boast embittered the veteran editor who had joined ASNE to advance "the integrity of the profession" at a time in which its reputation seemed most at risk. "Tainted news" in sports columns and "entangling alliances" with boxing promoters struck Jones and his allies as the most visible evil of Jazz Age journalism.² Their "deodorizing mission" investigating sports departments found the "young giant" the "enfant terrible" of American journalism. Jones's committee was charged with the responsibility of "bringing malefactors to justice" and saving the industry from the "little, cynical minority who prey on newspapers" and bring all its members into disrepute.³

The case of America's senior editors against their sports departments was launched in the "high resolve" of a noble knight "with shining sword in hand." However, the effort "to seek out and expose every improper attempt to influence the press" was defeated by forces operating inside and outside Jazz

1. Summaries of rancorous debates within the newly created American Society of Newspaper Editors over the operation of "the sporting department" dominates proceedings of that organization between 1926 and 1929, the peak years of the so-called "Golden Decade" when Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney fought for million-dollar purses and record crowds. See *Problems of Journalism*, 4 (1926), pp. 107-108, and *Problems of Journalism*, 5 (1927), pp. 97 and 100.

2. Jones's staunchest ally among the self-consciously self-respecting senior editors who launched ASNE was Casper S. Yost, the veteran editor of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, who organized fellow editors in an effort to "clean up" the profession by rescuing it from abuses. This sober sense of a reformer on a mission fills his letters to his wife Anna Parrott Yost on April 24, 1922, April 25, 1922, and April 26, 1922, the dates on which the ASNE is founded at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City. My thanks to Robert Warren Yost, grandson to Casper Yost, for copies of those letters.

3. The determination of ASNE to do something to curb excessive promotion of professional sporting events as well as other abuses in the nation's newspapers is echoed in the industry's trade press. See "A Major Operation," *Editors and Publisher*, February 16, 1924, p. 36: "Our Faith and Action," *Editor and Publisher*, February 23, 1924, p. 44: "Editors Mean Business," *Editor and Publisher*, May 3, 1924, p. 26.

Age journalism.⁴ A determination to curtail the growth and independence of the sports page was resisted by publishers and circulation managers intent on “playing sport to the limit.” Their research revealed one out of every four readers bought a paper primarily because of its sports page, making it the single most important stimulus to circulation.⁵ Self-conscious promoters of journalistic ethics urged their colleagues to deplore story-telling guided by “box office receipts.” But their moralizing was met by the realization that “since the war the public mind has become highly excited” and the editor who ignored America’s fascination with the fight game and professionalized sports “invited suffering.”⁶

This study analyzes the bitter controversy within Jazz Age journalism over the emergence and increasing independence of the sports page. At issue in ASNE’s investigation of newspaper sports departments was a conflict over journalistic ethics and professional discipline between competing visions of mass media’s relationship to its audience. The old guard within establishment journalism took a paternalistic approach to sports reporting, deploring the corruption of the fight game and its negative impact on youth, while urging fellow editors to “educate the youth of America” on the wholesome benefits of amateur athletics. They were opposed by pragmatic newcomers, who saw story-telling as self-promotion. They reasoned that touting sports heroes and boxing bouts as civic spectacles was a way of boosting circulation and furthering their own careers.

An examination of how seven newspapers in three cities covered the first Jack Dempsey-Gene Tunney title fight illustrates the unsettled state of Jazz Age journalism. Newspapers in Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, the three cities where Tex Rickard labored during the summer of 1926 to stage “the greatest battle since the Silurian age,” were unexpectedly warm in welcoming the fight. At the same time, tabloid papers in Chicago and New York, scolded for “gathering garbage from the gutters of life,” vigorously opposed the “flare, blare and hokum” of a Dempsey-Tunney title tilt in their

4. *Problems of Journalism*, 2 (1924), p. 121 and *Problems of Journalism*, 1927, pp. 97, 101 and 108.

5. ASNE’s senior editors deeply resented what they considered the “unholy alliance” between unscrupulous sports promoters, self-promoting sports editors and writers and business-minded circulation editors. It was not only that puffing professional sports lowered the reputation of journalism, in their estimation, but that it violated their authority of what went into and what should be kept out of their papers. Thin sense dominates ASNE proceedings in the late Twenties. See particularly the discussion in *Problems of Journalism*, 7 (1929), pp. 26-29.

6. Typical of the criticism of the excesses found in Jazz Age sports reporting is Stanley Woodward’s *Sports Page* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949). As a widely respected senior editor on the *New York Herald-Tribune*, Woodward acknowledged that the sports page was no longer “a low form of art” but made a “legitimate, constructive and valuable” contribution to the field. What he deplored was the exaggeration and “ballyhoo” that became a customary part of sports reporting. See his introduction, particularly x and xi, pp. 35-38 and his chapter on the “Boxing Writer,” pp. 163-173. As much as Woodward and others despised what they considered the sports writer’s “pandering” to reader interests, others argued that responsible editors needed to recognize that the war and its aftermath had whetted the population’s appetite for excitement. See the remarks of Paul Bellamy, editor of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* in *Problems of Journalism*, 1924, pp. 111-126. Bellamy maintained this view years after. See also his letter, dated December 4, 1954, to Mrs. James O. Poole, daughter of an ASNE founder; the letter is in the unprocessed collection of the Marvin H. Creager Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

towns.⁷ The apparent contradiction is a commentary on the complex relationship between mass media, sports promotion and cultural change during the decade of the Twenties.

The Careful Cultivation of a Heavyweight Champion

Although historical hindsight probably sees Babe Ruth as the most celebrated sports celebrity of the 1920s, circulation managers knew that no personality sold more newspapers during the decade than Jack Dempsey. That was why at the close of the “Golden Decade” those managers voted the Manassa Mauler the “greatest stimulus to circulation in 20 years.”⁸ Dempsey’s persona as “giant killer,” though greatly aided by his third-round knockout of the six-foot six-inch champion Jess Willard on July 4, 1919, had been carefully cultivated in the mass media by his wily manager Jack Kearns, long before the title fight. Dempsey was a little-known Western fighter with skinny legs, a high-pitched voice and a mediocre record over largely unknowns when an Oakland, California, tavern brawl brought the 165-pound 21-year-old to Kearns’s attention.⁹ Kearns, himself a former fighter, wrestler, gold weigher, gambler, cemetery plot and Bible salesman, operated on the principle that “like a strip teaser, I always figured you couldn’t get anywhere without exposure.”¹⁰ During his two-and-a-half-year drive to the title, Dempsey spent nearly as much time making the rounds of newspaper offices as he did fighting. The result was that a carefully cultivated image of “America’s perfect fighting man” began to emerge.¹¹ Dempsey’s determination

7. For the hyperbole that often attached itself to the relatively infrequent Dempsey title defenses, see Paul Gallico, *Farewell to Sport* (New York: Knopf, 1940), pp. 9-29, and Rand Roberts, *Manassa Mauler* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1979), pp. 183-188. The most scathing attack on tabloid journalism is Oscar Garrison Villard’s *Some Newspapers and Newspapermen* (New York: Knopf, 1926), pp. 191-193. See also Villard’s *Prophets, True and False* (New York: Knopf, 1928); Frederick L. Allen, “Newspapers and the Truth,” *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1922, pp. 44-54; Ernest Greuning, “Can Journalism Be a Profession? A Study of Conflicting Tendencies,” *The Century Magazine*, September 1924, pp. 687-702; “Sell the Papers! The Malady of American Journalism,” by an anonymous newspaper man, in *Harper’s Magazine*, June 1925, pp. 1-9; Nelson A. Crawford, *The Ethics of Journalism* (New York: Knopf, 1924), pp. 186-239; and Leon N. Flint, *The Conscience of a Newspaper: A Case Book in the Principles and Problems of Journalism* (New York: D. Appleton, 1925), pp. 292-299.

8. Woodward, p. 38

9. Dempsey’s defense of Kearns in an Oakland tavern fight led the 33-year-old manager, who was down on his luck and between fighters, to take a chance on the youth. See Dempsey’s remarkably candid account of his early boxing days in Jack Dempsey and Barbara Piatelli Dempsey, *Dempsey* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 62-66.

10. Jack “Doc” Kearns and Oscar Fraley. *The Million Dollar Gate* (New York, Macmillan, 1966). p. 98.

11. The understanding that newspapers were an important ally in promoting fighters while forcing reluctant champions to defend their titles precedes the 1920s but is developed into a high art during that era. Richard K. Fox, publisher of the popular *National Police Gazette*, was long a nemesis of Boston strongboy John L. Sullivan and loudly promoted a series of contenders, including Paddy Ryan and Jake Kilrain, for the heavyweight title. See John L. Sullivan, *Life and Reminiscences of a 19th Century Gladiator* (Boston: James A. Hearn, 1892), pp. 42-47. James A. Cox, “Mr. Jake vs. the Great John L.,” *Smithsonian* 15, December 1884, pp. 152-158. Kearns’s brilliance in keeping Dempsey’s name before the public stemmed from his wide contacts with sports writers and his intuitive ability to keep creating “good copy.” See Dempsey, pp. 69-76. Also, Grantland Rice, *The Tumult and the Shouting: My Life in Sport* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1954), pp. 117-127. Nat Flesicher, *Fifty Years at Ringside* (New York: Fleet, 1958), pp. 118-119; Paul Gallico, “The Golden Decade,” in Harry T. Paxton, *Sport, U.S.A.* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1961), pp. 172-175.

to "make a name for myself" along with Kearns's care in making sure the young fighter was not overmatched led to a succession of early knockouts and some media attention. Otto Floto, the Denver sports editor and wrestling promoter hired by H. H. Tamm of the *Post*, had arranged several of Dempsey's bouts with Colorado miners in the pre-Kearns era. By July 1917, he was touting Dempsey as a legitimate contender for Willard's title.¹² The aggressive promotion of New York City and San Francisco sports rooms was doing Dempsey and Kearns as much good as his October 1918 knockout over leading contender Gunboat Smith. Warren Brown, of the *San Francisco Examiner*, and syndicated sportswriter Damon Runyon, whom Dempsey considered his first friend in the fight game, were now urging Willard to meet this promising challenger. Kearns copied the articles and sent them to other sportswriters. Dempsey copied the articles and sent them to his mother in Salt Lake City. After eight largely anonymous years of riding the rods and fighting in tank towns for two-dollar purses, he was suddenly "somebody."¹³

Dempsey's defeat of the rapidly aging and long inactive Jess Willard, the "Great White Hope" who had defeated Jack Johnson for the heavyweight title four years before, splashed a new and virile champion across the nation's sports pages. Kearns made sure Dempsey looked the part, pickling and tanning Dempsey's face and upper body to give the fighter the appearance, according to Runyon, of "a saddle-colored demon."¹⁴ James P. Dawson of the *New York Times* saw Dempsey's six knockdowns of the helpless Willard in the first round of their bout as "the most awesome spectacle in the history of the American ring."¹⁵ The *Chicago Tribune's* Harvey T. Woodruff, a veteran ringside watcher, could not remember a man "as bewildered, bruised and practically helpless" as the 37-year-old Willard had been when the

12. The Dempsey-Floto friendship is described by Dempsey in Dempsey, pp. 28-30. Floto's early jump onto the Dempsey bandwagon is promoted in the pages of the *Denver Post* on the day after Dempsey won the heavyweight title. See the July 5, 1919, issue, p. 8, where Floto is praised by fellow sports writer Rick Ricketson for being "the original man to predict Dempsey would be the next champion." Dempsey's triumph permitted the paper to bash competing papers by observing, "other sporting writers who have never seen Dempsey didn't hesitate on advising the public how to lose their money (on the title fight). But the *Post's* sports pages are edited without prejudice for the public. The dope comes from where the big things are doing and is not a re-write of hearsay comment." Floto's "discovery" of Dempsey served to substantiate his claim as the West's leading boxing authority. See his obituary in the competing *Rocky Mountain News*, August 5, 1929, p. 2, and *Denver Post*, August 5, 1929, which mourned the passing of "the dean of the world's sports writers."

13. Dempsey observes that Kearns's "exuberance and sales pitch" made it "hard to refuse the man" and was every bit as important as the challenger's left hook in winning a heating with the nation's sportswriters. See Dempsey, pp. 67 and 70-71. Runyon's affinity for Dempsey was rooted in their common Colorado past. While born in Manhattan, Kansas, Alfred Damon Runyon was raised by his printer father on the Colorado frontier. Dempsey and Runyon shared a similarly rootless childhood, as their fathers endlessly sought an elusive motherlode. See Jack Dempsey and Barbara Piatelli Dempsey, "The Destruction of a Giant." *American Heritage* 28, April, 1977, pp. 72 and 74. Also, see Runyon's obituary in the *New York Times*, December 11, 1946, p. 17.

14. See Runyon's famous account of the Dempsey-Willard championship fight in the *New York American*, July 5, 1919, p. 1. The Hearst syndicate would carry Runyon's story across the country along with a photograph of the new champion provided by Hearst's International Film Service.

15. *New York Times*, July 5, 1919, p. 1. It should be added that Dempsey's ability to stand over Willard after each knockdown, rather than returning to a neutral corner, allowed him to pound away at his opponent before Willard regained his feet.

“relentless” Dempsey had finished with him.¹⁶ Ring Lardner, writing for the Bell Syndicate, now suggested he had only been “kidding” when he predicted Willard would win the fight. He had known all along that Dempsey was “a devil-dog.”¹⁷ Like most of the nation’s major dailies, the *Kansas City Star* gave prominent front-page play to “the hardest puncher in the history of the ring,” a man “who pounds home blows like a great riveting machine.”¹⁸ Grantland Rice, the nationally syndicated sportswriter of the *New York Tribune*, was certain Dempsey’s ascendancy would mean “unparalleled popularity for the sweet science” of professional boxing.¹⁹

Paul Gallico, the Columbia University graduate who became sports editor of the *New York Daily News* in 1923 after staging a one-round boxing exhibition with Jack Dempsey, believed Dempsey greatly benefitted from those sportswriters and editors who were determined to “find personalities we could cultivate.” Dempsey was made to order. “He was a great human story,” Gallico observes. “The bum who learned to wear silk.” In an era of personal publicity, the press saw to it that “you knew Dempsey better than a member of your own family.”²⁰

The effort to portray Dempsey as both fistic superman and everyman “fighting our battles” in a cold and increasingly impersonal world in which the forces of industrialization, urbanization and bureaucratization impinged on the efficacy of individual initiative played well to Jazz Age readers. The reason, according to Gallico, was the high level of “national gullibility and essential psychological simplicity” that characterized the period. “We were like children let out of school,” he remembers. Fights could be transformed into morality tales and fighters could be personified as good and evil in mortal combat. “It was all great, innocent ballyhoo,” Gallico says. Both writers and readers were overwhelmed by the hype. “We loved our daily tales. We were swept away by it. We were all suckers for the theology of good guys and bad guys.”²¹

16. *Chicago Tribune*, July 6, 1919, Section A, p. 1. Woodruff’s comments were syndicated across the Midwest and West.

17. *Chicago Tribune*, July 5, 1919, p. 9.

18. *Kansas City Star*, July 4, 1919, p. 1.

19. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 5, 1919, p. 1. Rice remembered Dempsey as “a hungry fighter” during his days as a little-known, Kearns-promoted heavyweight. His thorough dispatch of Willard, which Kearns later claimed was aided by loaded gloves, could transform Dempsey into “a killer, a superhuman wildman.” See Rice, pp. 116-118 and 130-131. Promoting heavyweight bouts was a “golden fleece,” Rice admitted, and assiduous play in the press had helped make Dempsey “the greatest individual drawing card in the history of sport.” See Grantland Rice, “The Golden Fleece,” *Collier’s*, September 17, 1927, p. 9.

20. Gallico, *Farewell to Sport*, pp. 98-99 and 103-105.

21. Paul Gallico, *The Golden People* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 13-28. Perhaps no period in American history has been analyzed more than the Twenties. Henry F. May claims in *The End of American Innocence: A Study in the First Years of Our Time, 1912-1917* (New York: Knopf, 1959) that a growing cynicism marked the end of the war. See his introduction and pp. 363-398. William E. Leuchtenburg in *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958) sees the 1920s as a moral crossing for American national character. An excellent summary on the literature of the 1920s as a “nervous” generation is Roderick Nash, *The Nervous Generation: American Thought, 1917-1930* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1970), pp. 5-32. See also, John William Ward, “The Meaning of the Lindbergh Flight,” in John William Ward, *Red, White, and Blue: Men, Books, and Ideas in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University, 1969), pp. 21-37, and Lawrence W. Levine, “Progress and Nostalgia: The Self-Image of the 1920’s in Lawrence W. Levine and Robert Middlekauff, *The National Temper: Readings in American Culture and Society* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), pp. 287-302.

The Jazz Age Debate Over Journalistic Professionalism

The ballyhooing of the Dempsey-Willard title fight and the Dempsey title fights that followed struck many of the nation's senior editors as a symptom of what had gone "terribly wrong" with Jazz Age journalism. The 50-percent rise in sports coverage in 63 of the nation's largest newspapers during the first two decades of the twentieth century demonstrated to them that "ham-minded men" now ran the "newspaper business." Publishers in league with circulation managers and sports editors were "forcing newspapers to be ham hooks with which to get their ham." Their first allegiance was to profit not public service. ASNE's founding fathers feared the triumph of crime news, sports, illustrations and advertising in the daily press and the reduction in space devoted to editorials and letters to the editor would kill socially responsible journalism. Newspapers, they argued, were becoming "gigantic commercial operations" appealing to "larger and larger masses of undifferentiated readers" through exaggerated sports pages and tall-tale telling of professionalized athletes.²²

This institutional analysis, however, missed the broader context within which the rise in sports coverage operated. America-watcher James Bryce, writing at the turn of the century, suggested the nation's sports pages reflected and encouraged a middle-class "passion for looking on and reading about athletic sports." According to social historians, as sports gained respectability with the middle class in the early twentieth century, it became associated with personal regeneration, social renewal, and "a desire to live forever." The image of Teddy Roosevelt as the national embodiment of vigor further legitimized preoccupation with sports as a test of individual capacity and character. By the 1920s, an estimated 12 million Americans watched boxing matches or fought themselves each year. Fifteen million watched football or played the sport. Ten million attended a baseball game. Four million golfed. One million played tennis. Two hundred thousand ran track. One hundred thousand played soccer. Sports had significantly rationalized the leisure time of a growing fraction of the middle class and was celebrated in the popular literature of the youth culture as a proving ground for

22. The complaints of Yost and other organizers of the American Society of Newspaper Editors fill their organizational minutes. See Minutes of the American Society of Newspaper Editors organizational meeting, April 25, 1922, pp. 1-3. American Society of Newspaper Editors Archives. Newspaper Center. Reston, Virginia. Edward S. Beck, a veteran editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, was one of ASNE's founding fathers. See his article, "A.S.N.E. Remains Enduring Memorial to St. Louis Editor," in *The Bulletin of the American Society of Newspaper Editors*, June 4, 1941, p. 3. Criticism of over-indulgence in crime and sports news was also being raised outside journalism. See *Problems of Journalism*, 1924, pp. 114-115; Silas Bent, *Ballyhoo: The Voice of the Press* (New York: Liveright, 1927), p. 42. and Simon Bessie, *Jazz Journalism: The Story of the Tabloid Newspaper* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1938).

the thoroughly modern man and woman.²³

Four billion dollars was spent on seats to sporting events during the decade of the 1920s, a trend not lost on circulation managers of the 12 billion newspapers annually produced in the United States. Dempsey fights got million-dollar gates and raised short-term circulation 50 percent in some cities. The wire services were taking notice. During September 1926, the month of the first Dempsey-Tunney fight, Associated Press established a separate sports department with eight men assigned to cover the big bout. Just before the fight, four more reporters were hired. United Press followed by trebling its sports coverage to participating papers. International News did the same, raising from 5,000 to 45,000 the words it daily filed dealing with sports. Eight hundred reporters would cover the fight and file two million words on it, all-time highs. Thirty million listeners on a 39-station radio network would listen to the fight and tens of thousands more would gather in front of newspaper offices to hear round-by-round summaries of the fighting.²⁴

On the eve of the Dempsey-Tunney title fight, ASNE investigators found that 40 percent of all local news coverage was now devoted to sports, with the number rising to 60 percent in many of the largest dailies. A survey of 125 newspapers, one third of them published in cities of less than 50,000, found a daily average of 15 percent given to sports. Editors confessed they were "worn out" trying to keep their sports department from "going hog wild." City editors and managing editors, already overburdened by their regular duties "were uncertain how this young giant should be handled." Publishers did not care how

23. James Bryce, "America Revisited: The Changes of a Quarter Century," *Outlook* 79, March 25, 1905, pp. 738-739. Donald J. Mrozek, *Sport and American Mentality, 1880-1910* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1983), xv-xx and 230-234. Orrin E. Klapp, *Heroes, Villains and Fools* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 27-28. Bruce Kuklick, *To Every Thing a Season: Shibe Park and Urban Philadelphia, 1909-1976* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1991), pp. 11-30. David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1990), pp. 201-227. See also, Benjamin G. Rader, "Compensatory Sports Heroes: Ruth, Grange and Dempsey," *Journal of Popular Culture* 16, 1983, pp. 11-12; John R. Tunis, "Changing Trends in Sports," *Harper's* 170, December 1934, p. 78; Alan Woods, "James J. Corbett: Theatrical Star," *Journal of Sport History* 3, 1976, pp. 174-175; Robert Goldman and John Wilson, "The Rationalization of Leisure," *Politics and Society* 7, 1977, pp. 185-186; Allen Guttmann, "Who's on First?, or, Books on the History of American Sports," *Journal of American History* 66, 1979, pp. 353-354; Benjamin G. Rader, "The Quest for Subcommunities and the Rise of American Sport," *American Quarterly* 24, 1977, pp. 368-369; John Rickards Betts, "The Technological Revolution and the Rise of Sport, 1850-1900," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 11, 1953, pp. 250-256.

For the role of mass media in facilitating the rise of sport in the early Twentieth Century, see James E. Murphy, "Tabloids as an Urban Response," in Catherine L. Covert and John D. Stevens, eds., *Mass Media Between the Wars: Perceptions of Cultural Tensions, 1918-1941* (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1984), pp. 59-61; Sut Jhally, "The Spectacle of Accumulation: Material and Cultural Factors in the Evolution of the Sports/Media Complex," *The Insurgent Sociologist* 12, 1984, pp. 43-44 and 53-55; Douglas A. Noverr and Lawrence E. Ziewacz, *The Games They Played: Sports in American History, 1865-1980* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983), pp. 71-72 and 87-88; Robert H. Boyle, *Sport—Mirror of American Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), pp. 26-28 and 40; John T. Talamini and Charles H. Page, *Sport and Sociology: An Anthology* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973) pp. 419-428; Wayne M. Towers, "World Series Coverage in New York City in the 1920's," *Journalism Monographs* 73, 1981, pp. 3-11; Jesse Frederick Steiner, *Americans at Play: Recent Trends in Recreation and Leisure Time Activities* (New York: Arn Press, 1970, a reprint of New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933), pp. 98-100. *Problems of Journalism*, 1927, pp. 112-117.

24. Harry Edwards, *Sociology of Sport* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey, 1973), p. 33; *Problems of Journalism*, 1927, p. 85; *Problems of Journalism*, volume 6 (Washington: American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1928), pp. 12-15; *Problems of Journalism*, 1929, p. 26. Woodward, pp. 35-38.

big the sports page got “so long as it had advertising.” The message to many editors was “we’re not giving sports enough space.” When the sports peg ran long, they were told “to cut something else.”²⁵

The greatest threat to the integrity of the profession, argued ASNE’s senior editors, was not the size of the sports department but the independence of its operation. ASNE investigators found that three of every four sports departments edited their own copy and sent it directly to the composing room. The others followed customary procedures and sent their copy through the general copy desk. Senior editors charged that this permitted sports editors and reporters to get away with things “that would not be tolerated on any other page.” Ghosting articles and books under the signature of fighters and other sports celebrities, while promoting fights and other commercialized events, permitted sports writers to supplement their \$25 weekly salary.²⁶ Heywood Broun, a syndicated columnist for the *New York World*, with long ties to sports promoters, promoted himself as the “highest paid reporter in the country.”²⁷ Broun’s hero, Damon Runyon, a celebrated sports writer for the Hearst syndicate, explained that puffing paid not only the reporter but his paper. That was why Marshall Hunt, a sports writer for the *New York Daily News*, thought publishers competed with one another for “sports celebrities they could cultivate.” Hunt’s colleague Paul Gallico thought playing big fights as “high drama” was only giving circulation and readers what they wanted. A daily circulation leap for all U.S. newspapers of five million in five years appeared to prove the point.²⁸

Some within ASNE’s newly created committee on sports contended that increasing sporting department staff salaries would help keep sports departments free from entanglements with fight promoters and staged events. The *Milwaukee Journal*’s Marvin Creager argued that better salaries would make the sports page a more “honest” page. ASNE conservatives, many of whom had worked their way up in the newspaper business and remembered the days of “Greeley, Bryant, Dana and Henry Watterson,” remained unmoved. With the sudden death of Will Owen Jones, their cause was led by Malcolm Bingay of the *Detroit News*, a former sports editor with the News while a teen-ager. Morality was not a matter of money, Bingay bristled. The media “circus” over the Dempsey-Tunney fight convinced him that “somebody is getting something” for the \$2-million promotion of a fight likely to be “the worst in the history of the heavyweight division.” He urged his colleagues

25. *Problems of Journalism*, 1927, pp. 98-100; *Problems of Journalism*, 1928, pp. 12-15.

26. *Journalism Bulletin*, 2, January 1926, pp. 30-31; *Problems of Journalism*, 1926, pp. 99-100; Bent, p. 41; Towers, p. 5.

27. “Personal Journalism Is Coming Back—Broun,” *Editor and Publisher*, March 15, 1924, p. 7.

28. Jerome Holtzman, *No Cheering in the Press Box* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), pp. 17 and 72; Gallico, “The Golden Decade,” p. 173; Gallico, *Farewell to Sport*, 3-4 and 103; Woodward, p. 38.

to consider what the creation of sports spectacles was doing to “the ethics of journalism.”²⁹

“Gee Whiz Emotion” in the “World’s Greatest Boxing City”

Self-conscious defenders of journalism’s Jazz Age reputation might talk a good game but when it came to promoting circulation by backing the Dempsey-Tunney title bout their papers were often first in line. Chicago’s *Tribune*, which promoted itself as “the world’s greatest newspaper” and was arguably its richest, gave front-page play on July 18, 1926, to boxing promoter Tex Rickard’s press conference promising to stage the championship fight at Chicago’s Soldiers Field sometime in September. Only 14 months before Col. Robert McCormick had moved the paper to a 36-story castle on the Chicago River, complete with Gothic gargoyles, grotesques, and tower. His paper now employed 4,000 people, a quarter of the city’s population when the *Tribune* was founded by McCormick’s grandfather Joseph Medill 78 years before. The paper’s 700,000 daily circulation and 100,000 columns of annual advertising made it the largest and most prosperous of America’s morning papers.³⁰

McCormick saw no contradiction in “working to advance the dignity of the profession” and fight promotion. Though he personally preferred polo and fox-hunting to fisticuffs, McCormick saw “promoting commerce” as the *Tribune*’s first order of business and that meant backing Tunney’s overripe claim that staging the bout “will make Chicago the greatest boxing city in the world.” The chairman of the city’s Methodist ministers might “deprecate the whole thing,” but the paper gave far more attention to bout backers like Chicago Cubs president Bill Veeck who were certain the fight “would be another step in the process of making this city the all-around sports center of the country.”³¹

29. *Problems of Journalism*, 1927, pp. 98, 103, 105 and 107. See also the unprocessed collection of Marvin H. Creager’s papers at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin Collection No. M62-180. The collection includes an undated typewritten draft by Creager titled “The Aim of the News and Feature Departments at the *Milwaukee Journal*” and an article by Dale Wilson, “Marvin Creager and the Kansas City Crowd,” appearing in *Historical Messenger* of the Milwaukee County Historical Society, September 1961, pp. 2-4. Each explains his support for a “robust” sports department in serving the interest of readership and circulation. On Creager’s leadership within ASNE see “*Milwaukee Journal* Reflects Its Editor’s Character.” *The Bulletin of the American Society of Newspaper Editors*, September 15, 1926, p. 1. Also, a letter from Paul Bellamy, editor emeritus of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* to Mrs. James O. Poole, Creager’s granddaughter, on the occasion of Creager’s death. The letter is dated December 4, 1954, and speaks of Creager’s “rare qualities” of leadership. See Creager Papers. Malcolm Wallace Bingay’s career is described in *New York Times*, August 22, 1953, p. 17. His concern for the “integrity of the profession” is reflected in the article “A Dream Came True,” which appeared in his “Good Morning” column of the *Detroit Free Press* shortly after the death of ASNE founder Casper Yost on May 30, 1941.

30. *Chicago Tribune*, January 3, 1926, p. 8, and July 18, 1926, p. 1; Joseph Gies, *The Colonel of Chicago* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979), pp. 101-103; Lloyd Wendt, *Chicago Tribune: The Rise of a Great Newspaper* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1979), pp. 382-386; Philip Kinsley, *The Chicago Tribune: The First Hundred Years*, 1 (New York: Knopf, 1943), vii-x; Frank C. Waldrop, *McCormick of Chicago* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 94.

31. For McCormick’s journalistic philosophy, see “Colonel McCormick Defines a Newspaper,” in *Editor and Publisher*, November 8, 1924, p. 9; Gies, pp. 101-105; Wendt, pp. 386-387; *The Bulletin of the American Society of Newspaper Editors*, June 4, 1941, p. 1; Oscar Garrison Villard, *Prophets, True and False* (New York: Knopf, 1928), p. 302; *Problems of Journalism*, 1 (Washington: American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1923), pp. 14-21; Randy Roberts, *Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University, 1979), p. 188; *Chicago Tribune*, July 11, 1926, part 2, p. 2, July 20, 1926, p. 17, July 21, 1926, p. 19, July 22, 1926, p. 13, July 29, 1926, p. 15, and August 1, 1926, part 2, p. 4.

Across town in a warehouse “unventilated since the days of Queen Victoria,” William Randolph Hearst’s *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, the *Tribune*’s hated rival, cloaked itself as “civic servant” in opposing the bout. Warren Brown, the paper’s seasoned sports editor, knew all about boxing ballyhoo. At the urging of Dempsey’s canny manager Jack Kearns, Brown had puffed the former Colorado hobo, seeing the “coloring” as “good copy.” Dempsey never forgot his friends. After becoming champion he hired Brown to do the publicity in advance of his 1921 title defense against George Carpentier. Five years later, Brown was no longer on the bandwagon. Boxing had only been legal in Illinois for three months, Brown wrote, barely enough time to prepare the city for the ballyhoo of a heavyweight championship fight. Brown’s suspicion seemed rooted in his certainty that Rickard was using Chicago to force New York’s Athletic Commission into approving Dempsey’s title defense against Tunney.³²

Brown’s critique seemed out of character for the *Herald and Examiner* and William Randolph Hearst, the publisher who was a great fan of boxing. Hearst would be ringside when Dempsey eventually fought Tunney and his papers were not hesitant to educate readers on “boxing’s splendor.”³³ Hearst knew a good fight built readership. His circulation wars with Joseph Pulitzer a generation before had been fought through vastly enlarged sports departments and separate sports sections culminating in training camp coverage of James J. Corbett’s title defense against Charlie Mitchell.³⁴ The passion in the Hearst press for reaching “the great middle class” with “gee whiz emotion” and entertainment had made it anathema to journalism’s “respectable” establishment? But Rickard’s plan to “kid Chicago into helping Tex” led the *Herald and Examiner* to self-consciously defend “working class interests.” Brown noted that only state residents could stage a fight under Illinois law. And regardless of what “other papers thought” Brown did not think Rickard “fool enough” to turn a \$2-million gate over to a local promoter.³⁶

32. Villard, *Some Newspapers and Newspapermen*, p. 193; Harvey Warren Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum: A Sociological Study of Chicago's Near North Side* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1929 and 1976), pp. 1-16; W. A. Swanberg, *Citizen Hearst* (New York: Scribner's, 1961), pp. 182-183; Jesse G. Murray, *The Madhouse on Madison Street* (Chicago: Follett, 1965), ix, xi, xii, and 421; Oliver Carlson and Ernest Sutherland, *Hearst: Lord of San Simeon* (New York: Viking, 1936), pp. 49 and 174; *American Mercury* 16, March 1929, pp. 336-337; Dempsey and Dempsey, *Dempsey*, pp. 68-69 and 140; Rice, *The Tumult and the Shouting*, pp. 116-118; Bob Considine and Bill Slocum, *Dempsey: By the Man Himself* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), pp. 56-59; Roberts, pp. 16-19.

33. *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, July 23, 1926, pp. 1, 9, 11.

34. William Henry Nugent notes in “The Sports Section.” *American Mercury*, 16, March 1929, pp. 336-338 that Hearst quadrupled the *New York Journal's* sports coverage within months of buying that paper in 1895. Pulitzer’s *World* and the *New York Herald-Tribune* retaliated by devoting 40 percent of their local news coverage to sports.

35. Hearst’s journalistic philosophy and its relationship to sports coverage is seen in “In Interview Hearst Speaks Plainly of Policies of His Organization.” *Editor and Publisher*. June 14, 1924, pp. 3 and 4. See also Wayne Andrews, *Battle for Chicago* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946), pp. 233-254; Ferdinand Lundberg, *Imperial Hearst: A Social Biography* (New York: Equinox, 1936), pp. 149-163; John Tebbel, *The Life and Times of William Randolph Hearst* (New York: Dutton, 1952), pp. 129-141; Ben Hecht, *A Child of the Century* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), p. 351.

36. *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, July 24, 1926, p. 6; Swanberg, p. 390.

The *Tribune* would have none of Brown's "sour grapes." Sports writer Walter Eckersall, who had made his reputation as a University of Chicago football player, argued the city should not fumble its chance to become America's fight capital. As rival promoters bickered over the bout. Westbrook Pegler wrote that the "grand ballyhoo" was nothing for Chicago "to get a ruddy inflammation over." When local promoters threatened to take Rickard to court, the *Tribune's* July 25 cartoon has fans shouting "throw 'em out" and "bring on the cauliflower."³⁷

The *Tribune* did a quick course correction a day later when Rickard abruptly pulled out of the city and took his fight to New York. Pegler implied Chicago sportsmen were inexperienced in bribe-taking, so Rickard decided "to pay the ice bill in Gotham." Sports editor Don Maxwell charged Rickard must have thought Chicagoans "nitwits" to think they would take his fight talk seriously. Eckersall implied the paper had called the promoter's "bluff." But Brown would have none of it. "The *Herald and Examiner*," Brown boasted, "was the first and only newspaper in Chicago in on the real score."³⁸

Tex Rickard's whirlwind courtship of the Chicago press illustrates the difficulty self-consciously respectable Jazz Age journalists had in curbing excesses in competitors. It became a question of physician heal thyself. *Tribune* editor Edward S. Beck had helped launch ASNE as a way of "advancing the dignity of the profession." Yet, his boss, Col. Robert McCormick, saw no contradiction between good journalism and puffing on the sports page. "The charge is perfectly true," McCormick admitted. "A newspaper is conducted for profit and must earn its living." Hearst's critics in the self-consciously respectable press liked to charge him with "lowering the whole tone of American journalism." But when it briefly appeared that Dempsey would fight Tunney in Chicago, it was the supposedly shrill voice of the Hearst press that appeared comparatively muted and, in the end, got it right.³⁹

Reporting the Fight for the "Best" People

The second round in Tex Rickard's struggle to stage the Dempsey-Tunney 1926 title fight was fought in New York but followed Chicago's

37. *Chicago Tribune*, July 23, 1926, pp. 15 and 18, July 24, 1926, p. 15, July 25, 1926, part 2, pp. 1 and 5. Wendt, p. 359.

38. *Chicago Tribune*, July 26, 1926, p. 17, July 27, 1926, p. 17, and July 29, 1926, p. 15; *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, July 28, 1926, pp. 9 and 11.

39. Beck hosted the first meeting of five Midwestern editors that led to the creation of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. The exploratory meeting was held in February 1922 at Chicago's Blackstone Hotel and was attended by Beck of the *Tribune*, Erie Hopwood of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Charles H. Dennis of the *Chicago Daily News*, George E. Miller of the *Detroit News* and Casper S. Yost of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*. See Minutes of the American Society of Newspaper Editors organizational meeting, April 25, 1922, p. 1. ASNE Archives. Also, Alice Fox Pitts, *Read All About It!—Fifty Years of the American Society of Newspaper Editors* (Washington: American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1974), p. 3; *Problems of Journalism*, volume 1 (Washington: American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1923), pp. 14-21; *The Bulletin of the American Society of Newspaper Editors*, June 4, 1941, p. 3. For McCormick's view of journalistic professionalism and the sports page, see *Editor and Publisher*, November 8, 1924, pp. 3 and 4. Also, Villard, *Some Newspapers and Newspaperman*, pp. 14-20.

press pattern. The *New York Times*, a pillar of respectability in the journalistic community, embraced the bout, and the *New York Daily News*, the Jazz Age's leading tabloid, panned the contest. The reason for the clash was not only professional rivalry but how each paper saw boxing in relation to readership. James P. Dawson, the veteran boxing writer on the *Times*, observed that Rickard's "Midas touch" at promotion and Dempsey's "punches of paralyzing force" had transformed boxing from a "vulgar" sport to a national obsession. Dempsey's career, he noted, was eagerly followed by "the 'best' people." Dempsey's seven-year rule as "fistiana's Tiger Man" meant combined gates of \$15 million and made a Dempsey match, even for the *Times*, "a great attraction."⁴⁰

The "startling" news that Dempsey would fight Tunney in Yankee Stadium on September 16, 1926, reached Adolph S. Ochs days before the anniversary of his thirtieth year as publisher of the *New York Times*. Ochs had sent the paper's circulation soaring from less than 19,000 to more than 350,000 by cultivating the *Times*' reputation as "a clean newspaper of high and honorable aims" among New York's socially approved readership.⁴¹ But editorial page editor Gareth Garrett thought Ochs' ambition "to produce a highbrow newspaper for intellectuals" was guided by his working-class background and innate sense of "crowd consciousness."⁴² This had led to 13 pages of coverage when Dempsey knocked out Georges Carpentier in July, 1921, and the fighter's symbolic emergence in the *Times* as the embodiment of the frontier spirit.⁴³ Two years later, *Times* ace reporter Elmer Davis anointed the champion "an Assyrian king" when he whipped Tommy Gibbons.⁴⁴

While the *Times* promoted itself as the paper of choice for "serious-minded readers," Joseph Patterson's *New York Daily News*, launched in 1919, had become the best-selling paper in America by "thinking visually." Patterson's managing editor Philip Payne believed "the rush of big city living" meant each story must be "told in a flash with the reader feeling he's actually seeing the event." Critics demeaned the story-telling technique as "common pandering to the meretricious tastes of the masses." Ochs hoped

40. James P. Dawson, "Boxing," in Allison Danzig and Peter Brandwein, eds., *Sports Golden Decade: A Close-up of the Fabulous Twenties* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries, 1948), pp. 38-43. Dawson is also interviewed in Holtzman, pp. 27-42. On Dempsey as a crowd favorite, see Randy Roberts, "Jack Dempsey: An American Hero in the 1920's," in Paul J. Zingg, ed., *The Sporting Image: Readings in American Sports History* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988), pp. 274-275. Also, Gallico, *The Golden People*, pp. 69-77.

41. "American Newspapers as a Whole Are Clean, Free, Capable and Meet Responsibility Honestly: An Inspiring Interview with Adolph S. Ochs," *Editor and Publisher*, February 16, 1924, pp. 1, 4; Elmer Davis, *History of the New York Times* (New York: New York Times, 1921), pp. 223-226; Meyer Berger, *The Story of the New York Times, 1851-1951* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), pp. 527, 565.

42. R. C. Conuelle, "Remembrance of the *Times*: From the Papers of Gareth Garrett," *The American Scholar* 36, 1967, pp. 433, 434, 443 and 444; Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), pp. 106-115; Edwin Emery, *The Press and America: An Interpretative History of American Journalism* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 483-500.

43. The *New York Times* of July 3, 1921, was to devote 13 full pages of coverage to the Dempsey-Carpentier title fight.

44. Roger Burlingame, *Don't Let Them Scare You: The Life and Times of Elmer Davis* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1961), pp. 95-96. See also, *New York Times*, July 5, 1923, p. 1.

the “office boys” and “stock girls” who bought the *Daily News* “to look at pictures and read little snatches of news” would one day be “trained” to read a really honest paper.⁴⁵

Central to the popularity of the *Daily News* was the vitality of its sports page. The paper’s sports editor and featured columnist was 28-year-old Paul Gallico, an unabashed friend and admirer of the champion and one of the chief architects of Dempsey’s image as “the seductive and glowering visage of Lucifer, the Dark Angel, the symbol of manliness, courage and virility for his generation, who overshadowed his era.” Gallico observed that the wordplay “nurtured a generation’s aggressions” just as it “stoked our imaginations.” It made boxing “a very human and thrilling story you could relate to.”⁴⁶

Gallico’s colleague Marshall Hunt saw the sports page of the *Daily News* as a news maker as well as circulation stimulator. The key was to “latch onto sports celebrities we could cultivate.” None cultivated to better effect than Dempsey. The champion’s image as “perfect fighting man” with his “bottomless well of cold fury” made him eminently exploitable. During his seven-year reign as champion, through a messy divorce, a trial for avoiding the draft, and a marriage to a Hollywood starlet, Dempsey became public property. “Readers came to feel they knew him intimately, his virtues, his failings, his strengths, and his weaknesses.” So when Dempsey went into the ring “there was more than a title at stake. The human being whom we either loved or detested, admired or despised, was entering a kind of public ordeal, and we simply had to be there, either in person or by the proxy of our newspaper or radio.”⁴⁷

The *Daily News*’s enthusiasm for Dempsey did not mean it supported Rickard’s proposed Dempsey-Tunney pairing. Since the state boxing commission had already gone on record insisting Dempsey defend his title against Negro champion Harry Wills, Gallico wrote a Dempsey-Tunney fight would signal “a colored man may not try for the heavyweight championship of the world.” Tunney’s open letter to the *Daily News* charging state commissioners with “incompetency” and “politics” in blocking the Dempsey-Tunney tilt soured Gallico further on the fight. “The fighting marine” with a penchant for “75 cent words,” Gallico wrote, had “attacked the dignity of the state of New York” by “giving a swift kick to its athletic commission.” Tunney retorted that “only a knave or a fool” would believe a “crackpot” like Gallico. Gallico responded that was why the “nice people” backed Tunney, while everyone

45. Payne is interviewed in “What Is the Lure of the Tabloid Press?” *Editor and Publisher*, July 26, 1924, pp. 7 and 34. For critiques of the tabloid press in general and Hearst’s cheap dailies in particular, see Gies, pp. 46, 74-76. For appreciations of Patterson and background on the *New York Daily News*, see *New York Times*, May 27, 1946, pp. 1, 22 and 23 and *Chicago Tribune*, May 27, 1946, pp. 1, 3 and 18. Also, Gallico’s interview in Holtzman, pp. 69-70. John Chapman, *Tell It to Sweeney: The Informal History of the New York Daily News* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961). For Patterson’s identification with working-class readers, see his novel, Joseph Medill Patterson. *A Little Brother of the Rich* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Gregg Press, 1968, originally 1908).

46. Gallico, *The Golden People*, pp. 69-70, 87-90.

47. Holtzman, pp. 17-18, 62-65, 72. Also, Gallico, *The Golden People*, p. 77.

else wanted to see Dempsey “knock the book-reading dude back to Shakespeare.”⁴⁸

The Times could see “no good reason” to delay the Dempsey-Tunney fight. Dawson charged the State Athletic Commission had been “overzealous” in insisting Dempsey first fight Wills. “Having waited quite a few years to see something happen,” Dawson wrote, the public could be forgiven for thinking the commission “lost in a fog.” The thousands who greeted the champ when his train arrived in New York had cast their vote with the Times, the paper explained. By August 18, plans for staging the bout seemed scuttled when the state licensing board refused to sanction the match. Dawson warned state commissioners that if New York refused the championship bout, it would never be fought.⁴⁹

Within 24 hours of Dawson’s dire prediction, Tex Rickard, who had made his money as a Texas cattleman turned Klondike faro dealer, announced a pact with Philadelphia officials to host a Dempsey-Tunney title fight on September 23.⁵⁰ While the *Times* lamented the loss of the contest, the *Daily News* claimed victory in the fight to protect the interests of the “common man.” The *Times* calculated the city would lose “millions” in missing its chance at the fight but the *Daily News* predicted “no serious depression in the Empire state.” The *Times* thought Tunney “a nice young man” upon whom “the oracles smiled.” But to Gallico he remained “a no account clerk in an arrow collar,” “a tactless youth” who could take his business elsewhere.⁵¹

“An Epoch-Making Occasion”

If ASNE’s coterie of self-respecting editors had hoped for the press in any city to stand up to the temptation of touting the Dempsey-Tunney title fight, their chances appeared best in Philadelphia. The city’s three establishment

48. *New York Daily News*, July 28, 1926, p. 26; July 29, 1926, p. 32; July 31, 1926, p. 20; and August 3, 1926, p. 28.

49. *New York Times*, August 2, 1926, p. 14; August 5, 1926, p. 14; August 6, 1926, p. 9; August 13, 1926, p. 13; and August 18, 1926, p. 16.

50. Rickard was a fascinating character, widely respected by the sporting press, who was expert in playing a high-stakes game as the nation’s number-one boxing promoter. See Mrs. Tex Rickard and Arch Oboler, *Everything Happened to Him: The Story of Tex Rickard* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1936). Also, Jack Dempsey and Charles J. McGuirk, “The Golden Gates,” in *Saturday Evening Post*, October 20, 1934, pp. 10-11 and 73; Gallico, *Farewell to Sport*, pp. 92-93; Gallico, *The Golden People*, pp. 179-193; Dempsey and Dempsey, *Dempsey*, pp. 209-225. Rice, *The Tumult and Shouting*, pp. 134-137; James Chinello, “The Great Goldfield Foul,” *Westways*, 68, September 1976, pp. 27-30; Jack Kofoed, “The Master of Ballyhoo,” in *North American Review*, March 1929, pp. 282-286. See also Rickard’s obituary in the *New York Times*, January 7, 1929, pp. 1 and 24.

51. *New York Times*, August 18, 1926, p. 16, August 19, 1926, p. 1 and September 25, 1926, p. 16; *New York Daily News*, July 31, 1926, p. 20, August 3, 1926, p. 28, and August 24, 1926, p. 32; Gallico, *Farewell to Sport*, pp. 81-90. For background on Tunney’s portrayal in the press see Gene Tunney, “My Fights with Jack Dempsey,” in Isabel Leighton, ed., *The Aspirin Age, 1919-1941* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949), pp. 152-168; Alexander Johnston, *Ten and Out! The Complete Story of the Prize Ring in America* (New York: Ives Washburn, 1927), pp. 222-226; John Durant and Edward Rice, *Come Out Fighting* (New York: Essential Books, 1946), pp. 92-107; Tim Cohane, *Bypaths of Glory: A Sportswriter Looks Back* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 79-92; Gene Tunney, *Arms for Living* (New York: Wilfred Funk, 1941), pp. 112-126 and 135-141; Gene Tunney, *A Man Must Fight* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1932), pp. 213-240; Nat Fleischer, *Gene Tunney: The Enigma of the Ring* (New York: The Ring, Inc., 1931), pp. 63-90.

papers—the *Inquirer*, the *Public Ledger* and the *Evening Bulletin*—had given the Quaker City 266 years of faithful service. Their long-standing cooperation with city commercial interests in “advancing the city’s material and cultural progress” reflected equal attention to civic boosting and self-promotion. As Fred Fuller Shedd, the veteran editor of the *Evening Bulletin* and chairman of ASNE’s committee on ethical standards saw it, young reporters needed to learn that circulation and public service went hand in hand. David Smiley, the editor of the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* and an ASNE board member, saw the “creation of an ethical organization of American newspaper editors” a critical defense against the “Typhoid Marys of Journalism” who preyed upon reader sentiment and gullibility and risked ruining the reputation of the profession.”

In the summer of 1926, however, Philadelphia and the twice-jilted Rickard were well suited for one another. Rickard’s \$100,000 earnest money and the hope the city might realize \$5 million more in staging the championship bout were perceived by Philadelphia’s establishment press as a last-gasp effort to bail out the city’s financially strapped sesquicentennial celebration. The \$23-million, seven-month extravaganza was advertised as a way of “restoring Philadelphia to its place at the forefront of American cities” but floundered when politically controlled construction contracts and poor weather left the fairgrounds half finished weeks into the celebration. The struggle to suspend Philadelphia’s 132-year-old “Blue Laws” and keep the sesquicentennial open Sundays alienated many in the city’s Protestant community and did little to quiet more than 700 sesqui creditors who filed suit to recover their losses.⁵³

Just before the sesquicentennial opened, local promoters Herman Taylor and Robert H. Gunnis failed to persuade city fathers to sanction a Dempsey-Wills title fight. The mayor’s office, supported by the city’s establishment press, demurred a heavyweight championship bout, charging it was “inconsistent” with Philadelphia’s cultural past. The real objection, however, was the fear the fight would cut into the sesquicentennial’s gate. But by mid-August, a desperate city hall was ready to reconsider. It had been forced to borrow \$5 million to keep its sesquicentennial doors open. City religious leaders charged the Dempsey-Tunney fight would “debase” the city celebration and transform it into “a commercialized game of

52. See *Problems of Journalism*, 1923, p. 122-123. *Problems of Journalism*, 1924, pp. 38 and 128-129. *Problems of Journalism*, volume 6 (Washington: American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1928), pp. 25-29. *Problems of Journalism*, 1929, pp. 49-50. For collaboration between Philadelphia’s establishment press and the city’s commercial and business leaders see “New Modified Plan for the Celebration of the Sesquicentennial Anniversary of American Independence.” Sesquicentennial Exhibition. Collection No. 587. Also, April 7, 1926, and April 12, 1926, entries in Louis F. Whitcomb Sesquicentennial Papers. Collection No. 1936. Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

53. Entries of June 11, 1926, June 12, 1926, June 24, 1926, and July 2, 1926, in the Whitcomb Sesquicentennial Papers detail efforts by the Sesquicentennial Commission and the city’s establishment press to put the best face on the celebration’s deepening financial crisis. See also *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, June 30, 1926, pp. 1 and 8, July 8, 1926, p. 8, July 23, 1926, p. 8, and July 24, 1926, pp. 1 and 8; *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, July 13, 1926, p. 10, and July 23, 1926, p. 10; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 4, 1926, p. 8, and August 9, 1926, p. 6.

graft, fakery and greed.” But the *Inquirer*, the *Public Ledger*, and the *Evening Bulletin* marginalized this protest and hyped the fight. Daily banner headlines parroted Rickard’s promise “the greatest crowd ever” would attend “the greatest boxing event ever” in “the greatest stadium ever” in what Mayor Freeland Kendrick was calling “an epoch-making occasion.”⁵⁴

Taking their cue from Rickard and the sesquicentennial’s press office, the story of the Dempsey-Tunney fight was promoted as cultural spectacle and civic forum. The “historic clash” was “a fitting tribute” to the city and the nation, readers were told, because each fighter was a “type.” The *Bulletin* described Dempsey as a perfect “Neanderthal” with “the backward sloping brow of a man born to be a fighter.” Tunney was a character out of Frank Merriwell with “a full and well-developed forehead—the head of a student athlete.” The *Public Ledger* saw Dempsey as a fighter with “killer spirit” and built up the relatively little-known Tunney as “a man of destiny.” The *Inquirer* gave eight-column play to each fighter’s pledge to knock the other out and ran daily installments on each fighter’s life.⁵⁵

In the days leading to the fight, Philadelphia’s establishment press attempted to outdo one another in coverage. Expanded picture and cartoon coverage supplemented banner headlines and daily reports from each fighter’s camp. Tunney’s unanimous 10-round decision over the slow-footed Dempsey in a driving rain may have been “the worst fight in the history of the heavyweight decision,” if an agitated Malcolm Bingay might be believed, but that did not stop Philadelphia’s establishment press from pronouncing it an unqualified success. The *Evening Bulletin*, whose 74-year-old publisher William McLean had built a reputation for “socially responsible journalism,” was the big winner. When the fight first came to Philadelphia, McLean told his readers to “beware of the ballyhoo blitz.” The day after the fight the paper ran 47 separate stories on the bout and boasted a circulation of half a million,

54. *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, August 6, 1926, p. 15, August 19, 1926, pp. 1 and 17, and August 23, 1926, p. 1; *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, August 19, 1926, pp. 1, 3 and 21, August 20, 1926, pp. 1 and 2, and August 23, 1926, p. 1; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 19, 1926, pp. 1 and 19, August 20, 1926, pp. 1, 10 and 15, August 21, 1926, pp. 1 and 15, August 26, 1926, p. 15, August 27, 1926, p. 17, August 29, 1926, p. 18, and August 30, 1926, p. 15.

55. For cooperation among sesquicentennial public relations, Rickard’s office and Philadelphia’s establishment press in promoting the fight see news releases dated August 30, 1926, through September 23, 1926, in Sesquicentennial Exhibition. Collection No. 587. Historical Society of Pennsylvania. For details on the sesquicentennial publicity apparatus, see *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, July 29, 1926, p. 16. For Rickard’s deft use of the press, see Gallico, *Farewell to Sport*, pp. 92-99; Dawson in Danzig and Brandwein, pp. 38-43. See also *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, September 2, 1926, pp. 18 and 27; *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, September 4, 1926, p. 19, September 12, 1926, p. 24, and September 15, 1926, p. 15; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 19, 1926, Sports section, pp. 1 and 2.

third largest in the nation. As Shedd later explained it, a sense of “community service” and circulation often went hand in hand.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The first Dempsey-Tunney heavyweight championship bout postponed but did not prevent bankruptcy of Philadelphia’s sesquicentennial celebration. After Will Owens Jones died, Malcolm Bingay led senior editors in protesting the “corrupting practices” of journalism’s sports departments. But that did not stop Bingay’s paper from giving the fight front-page banner headlines nor in broadcasting it over its owned and operated radio station. When it came to the sports page in general, and boxing in particular, one Jazz Age editor admitted, an editor’s “intelligence is revolted” but his “editorial judgment warmly approves.” Conservative editors might accuse tabloids of “creating Frankensteins” in their exaggerated preoccupation with personal publicity and professionalized sports, but as this article indicates they were not above journalistic overkill themselves.⁵⁷

The *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times*, twin pillars of self-respecting journalism during America’s Jazz Age, were more eager to stage the Dempsey-Tunney carnival in their cities than were their hated tabloid rivals. And Philadelphia’s establishment press embraced the championship bout as a way of boosting the city’s shaky finances and their own circulations. Their actions showed the moral ambivalence with which senior editors greeted the rise of sports-celebrity and mass-mediated cultural spectacle during the decade of the 1920s.

Looking back across 30 years, Paul Gallico, one of the most thoughtful of the Jazz Age sports writers, observed that it was hard to tell how images of fighters and their great battles became fixed in the popular imagination. Was it simply the work of wily sports promoters and the sports writers with whom they were informally teamed? Or were sports writers simply reacting to the public’s mercurial perception of its heroes and anti-heroes in an age of personal publicity? Whichever, the nation’s press had played its part. he was

56. For the promotion of the Dempsey-Tunney fight in Philadelphia’s establishment press, see *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, September 13, 1926, pp. 1, 20 and 31, September 14, 1926, p. 22, September 16, 1926, p. 1, September 17, 1926, pp. 1 and 22, September 18, 1926, pp. 1, 16 and 17, September 20, 1926, p. 1, September 21, 1926, pp. 1 and 20, September 22, 1926, p. 22, September 23, 1926, pp. 1 and 24, September 24, 1926, pp. 1, 23 and 26, and September 25, 1926, pp. 1 and 15; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 14, 1926, p. 1, September 15, 1926, p. 1, September 16, 1926, pp. 1 and 19, September 17, 1926, pp. 1 and 17, September 18, 1926, p. 1, September 19, 1926, p. 1, September 20, 1926, p. 1, September 21, 1926, p. 1, September 22, 1926, p. 1, September 23, 1926, pp. 1 and 19, September 24, 1926, pp. 1 and 24, and September 25, 1926, p. 1; *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, September 12, 1926, p. 24, September 17, 1926, p. 30, September 18, 1926, p. 30, September 19, 1926, p. 1, September 20, 1926, p. 1, September 21, 1926, p. 30, September 22, 1926, p. 1, September 23, 1926, p. 1, September 24, 1926, p. 1, and September 26, 1926, p. 24. For background on William McLean, see Emery, pp. 527 and 749. *New York Times*, July 31, 1931, p. 17; *The Encyclopedia Americana*, 18 (New York: Americana Corporation, 1963), p. 78; Edwin Emery, *History of the American Newspaper Publishers Association* (Minneapolis University of Minnesota, 1950), pp. 38, 58; *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, July 23, 1926, p. 8.

57. *Detroit News*, September 21, 1926, p. 1, September 23, 1926, p. 1, and September 24, 1926, p. 1; *Problems of Journalism*, 1927, p. 108; *Problems of Journalism*, 1929, p. 27.

certain, in the rise of sport during the interwar period. The era of “wonderful nonsense,” as Pegler had pegged it, required chroniclers who understood the need of readers to vicariously experience the triumph of physical beauty and brute strength in the square ring. To Gallico’s way of thinking, “we saw ourselves above the fallen foe,” that was why “everyone wanted to be like Jack Dempsey.”⁵⁸

Against such sentiments, the gentlemen of the press were powerless to defeat the “enfante terrible” of journalism’s Jazz Age: the modern sports department. This young giant’s enthusiastic story-telling linked self-promotion to circulation in a new era of personal publicity. Their win would change the course of twentieth-century journalism.

58. Gallico, *The Golden People*, pp. 21-24, 98-99.