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EVENSEN, BRUCE J. *When Dempsey Fought Tunney: Heroes, Hokum, and Storytelling in the Jazz Age*. Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996. Pp. xvii, 123. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$16.95 pb., \$34.00 cb.

His having written a scholarly book dealing with sports journalism would be reason enough to praise Bruce J. Evensen. Few media historians dare set foot in the field, for reasons, perhaps ironically, that Evensen details when he examines the struggle of professional values implicit in Dempsey-Tunney coverage between sportswriters and the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE). In the 1920s, the ASNE fussed over the “Typhoid Marys of Journalism,” who did little more than feed the American public’s “craving for stimulation” (p. 49). Then, as now for some scholars, sports journalism was suspect and fell somewhere beyond the pale of true journalism. Fortunately for sport historians open-minded enough to consider the sports pages as serious historical sources, the reasons to praise Evensen and his *When Dempsey Fought Tunney: Heroes, Hokum, and Storytelling in the Jazz Age* extend well beyond the mere existence of the text. Evensen, an associate professor of communications at DePaul University, offers new and important insights into an area of journalism and sport history too often neglected.

While the Golden Age of Sport in the 1920s and the Jack Dempsey-Gene Tunney heavyweight championship fights can hardly be considered neglected subjects, Evensen’s focus, as his subtitle indicates, is not on the fight or the fighters. Randy Roberts in *Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler*, to cite one particularly brilliant example, has covered that topic thoroughly. In fact, Evensen uses Roberts’s research productively. Rather, the text Evensen examines is not exclusively or even primarily that of the fights or fighters but the texts produced about them by the nation’s sportswriters, the storytellers who buy into the heroes and hokum of the bouts. Evensen argues that the struggle between sportswriters and newspaper editors over “tall-tale telling in the nation’s sports pages” parallels the physical struggle between Dempsey and Tunney. The stories about fights, the training build-up, and the aftermath were parts of a single story, Evensen argues, “the story of living in America during the 1920s and what Americans wanted to believe about America and their place in it.” Read as such, the mass-mediated texts, both

in print and especially the radio broadcasts in 1927 of the Dempsey-Tunney bouts “depicted a cultural collision between two warring tendencies in the early modern living—the struggle of the individual versus the communal” (p. xvii).

In covering the Dempsey-Tunney fights, sportswriters, Evensen observes, were “writing social history while serving their own interests” (p. xvii). They wrote of Dempsey’s exploits as the individual man of the frontier as if he were “always 12-foot tall” (p. xvii). Tunney, on the other hand, was the colorless, decidedly more civilized faux intellectual from Greenwich Village. Evensen is particularly strong when he traces these conflicting typologies in the stories produced on the famous long-count rematch in Chicago in 1927. Grantland Rice, for example, even early in the fight saw Tunney “run and dance away” from Dempsey’s “wild and flailing fists” (p. 111). Dempsey was depicted as if he were an unchained force of nature; Tunney appeared to Damon Runyon, among others, as the first fighter to be produced and even marketed by an urban business culture.

Evensen’s analysis of the fights’ mass-mediated texts does not stop with this fairly obvious typology, however. His freshest and most stimulating contribution is his analysis of the role of mass media in extending the social ritual of participation at the fight to the American public and the media’s key role in producing the notion of the civic spectacle connected with a sporting event that is commonplace today. Regardless of which fighter an individual backed (and Dempsey, of course, was the popular favorite), on fight night “the largest crowds to ever gather on the North American continent” (p. 123) listened to the radio broadcaster or gathered in public places to listen to men with megaphones offer a blow-by-blow account of the contests. Even after the fights had ended, the crowd lingered, discussing the details of the bout and merits of the combatants. In the bare-knuckle era of the nineteenth century, fight fans did the same thing, but they did it, more often than not, in small groups in saloons. For those millions not physically present at the fights in 1926 and 1927, “mass communication had connected . . . communities, if only for an evening” (p. 123). In that important respect, Evensen maintains, mass-mediated coverage of the Dempsey-Tunney bouts served as precursors of the power of the print and electronic media of future decades.

A real strength of Evensen’s research is his detailed analysis of the mass media’s role in helping to promote the fights as civic spectacles for Philadelphia and New York, a city that sought the 1926 fight, and then Chicago. Tex Rickard’s one-man effort to promote Goldfield, Nevada, during the Battling Nelson-Joe Gas fight in 1906 grew to the point two decades later that municipal officials, the business community, and the media of the host cities joined forces with Rickard in promoting a civic sporting spectacle. Couched within that effort was the struggle pitting the ASNE against sportswriters. In many states, boxing was just a few years away from being illegal and a Biblical passage or two away from being considered immoral. Opinions about the morality and wisdom of staging the fights in Philadelphia and Chicago were discussed and shaped in the sports pages. The “brute” Dempsey might be battling the “student” Tunney in the ring, but the

cultural battle over hokum and civic spectacle was at least as revealing about the nature of Jazz Age America and the America that awaited in ensuing decades.

No commentary on *When Dempsey Fought Tunney* would be complete without remarking on the vibrant quality of Evensen's prose. His research is rich and meticulously detailed. His descriptions of the fights (some borrowed from newspaper accounts, some written by him) are stunning in that they make seventy-year-old events sound as lively and exciting as if they happened last night.

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