

TKO in New Mexico: Las Vegas' Efforts to Sell Itself through the Johnson-Flynn Fight

DAVID J. KAMMER

University of New Mexico

While we often think of the recent efforts of western and sunbelt cities to symbolize their rise in national importance through the acquisition of major league franchises, we often overlook earlier efforts of western towns to gain national attention to spur their growth through sport. Yet, in the decades following the advent of the western railroad lines, several western towns tied their aspirations for national prominence to hosting heavyweight championship fights. Reno, Nevada was the site of the 1910 match between Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries, the first "great white hope," and the oil boomtown of Shelby, Montana was the site of the 1923 match between Jack Dempsey and Tom Gibbons. On Jul, 4, 1912, Las Vegas, New Mexico also hosted a title fight when Johnson returned to the West to defend his crown against a relative unknown, Jim Flynn. Films of the fight support what eyewitness reports argue, that the fight was a fiasco, perhaps the worst exhibition in heavyweight title fight history. One most newspapers labeled "a joke."

However, the events leading to that encounter provide a fine example of western, small town boosterism through sport. The aggressive promotional efforts of leading Las Vegas sportsmen, the active role of the local newspaper in advertising the city through the fight, the city's rivalry with Albuquerque for urban supremacy in New Mexico, and the new state's reckoning with an anti-prizefight lobby converged in the staging of the Johnson-Flynn bout. Having the sporting world's attention for this single event was deemed worth the \$100,000 the local boosters paid promoter Jack Curley to bring the fight to Las Vegas. They reasoned that the fight would repay their investment in a variety of ways, not only with the gate receipts and income for local hotels and restaurants, but also with real estate and business investments fight fans would make upon experiencing the city's ideal climate.

As it turned out, the city took a financial beating and suffered a bruised image as well. Revealing a negative, defensive side of boosterism, many of the townspeople looked for scapegoats. Curley, Flynn, the governor, and the Albuquerque press all became targets. In recent decades as Las Vegas has settled into relative obscurity, it has become known as the town that refused to gamble. Ironically, in earlier efforts to promote itself, it had actually gambled recklessly, committing itself to a sporting event that could never pay off.