

The Dandy and the Mauler in Mexico: Johnson, Dempsey, et al., and the Mexico City Press, 1919-1927

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Today Mexico is known for its boxers, but until the 1920s boxing was under developed and little appreciated in the country. Early bouts in Mexico City were held in tents, theatres, and jai alai facilities, often between unskilled and mismatched opponents, and were poorly advertised and attended. Exhibitions of visiting foreign celebrities were held in the city's bull fight arena before large crowds of spectators. This research studies the period from Jack Johnson's arrival in Mexico (19 19) to Jack Dempsey's second loss to Gene Tunney (1927), an eventful and traumatic time for Mexico. The Revolution had left the country in an unstable and fragile condition. Daily internal violence by bandits, revolutionaries, and the Mexican army was only overshadowed at times by threatened war with the United States. Jack Johnson's residence in Mexico City (March 1919 through early 1920) and his public appearances contributed to the rise of Mexican interest in boxing. Reports of Johnson's business and professional activities and his exhibitions in Mexico regularly appeared in the capital's major newspapers.

During this period, a number of foreign boxers, including Sam Langford and Luis Angel Firpo, were active in Mexico City rings. The Mexico City press features major heavyweight bouts held in the U.S. and the capital's dailies waged serious competition over which could provide the most rapid and detailed reporting of the fights. As soon as technological breakthroughs in communication were available (especially improved telephone service and the advent of radio), they were used for reporting important U.S. boxing events in Mexico City and other major population centers of the republic. Mexican reporting of bouts involving black boxers always referred to their race, and at times clearly racist comments were made. Reporting of the 1924 Firpo/Harry Wills fight (won by Wills) showed distinct preference for Firpo, but in this case Mexican attitudes could be explained by sympathy for a fellow Latin American, rather than aversion to the black boxer.

Jack Dempsey's visit to Mexico in 1925 was a truly spectacular event, overshadowing the attention that had been given to any other sport figure, foreign or Mexican. Dempsey received a hero's welcome, toured factories, and presented an acceptable exhibition. After leaving the capital, he ran into some problems in Monterrey and had to flee the country pursued by Mexican police. However, Dempsey's less than glorious departure from the country in 1925 did not diminish Mexican enthusiasm for him in his championship match with Gene Tunney the next year or in their rematch in 1927.

Boxing activity in Mexico and Mexican newspaper space (and newer types of information delivery to the public) dedicated to boxing, in absolute terms and in relation to their sports, increased during the 1920s, and in comparison with earlier years. Much of the increased interesting boxing can be attributed to the presence of foreign boxers in Mexican rings and to the emergence of Jack Dempsey as a "heroic" (and white) heavyweight champion in the United States. Maintenance of interest was then made possible by the successes of Mexican boxers internationally, especially boxing victories in the 1928 and 1932 Olympics.