

## THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

# Heavyweight champs brought boxing to desert

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The new rules for the Heavyweight Boxing Championship of the World in 1927 required that a fighter retreat to a neutral corner for the count, instead of standing over, taunting the fallen competitor. The change resulted in a major sporting controversy. The heavyweight championship rematch in September 1927 between Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney saw Tunney dominating until Dempsey downed him in the 7th round. It was the first time Tunney had ever been dropped to the canvas. The referee's start of the count was delayed until Dempsey retreated to the neutral corner, giving Tunney extra time, as much as five seconds more, to recover. Boxing fans still debate the outcome of the "Long Count" fight.

Wikipedia recounts: "What is not in dispute is that the public's affection for Dempsey grew in the wake of his two losses to Tunney. 'In defeat, he gained more stature,' wrote the Washington Post's Shirley Povich. 'He was the loser in the battle of the long count, yet the hero.' Tunney said that he had picked up the referee's count at 'two,' and could have gotten up at any point after that, preferring to wait until 'nine' for obvious tactical reasons. Dempsey said, 'I have no reason not to believe him. Gene's a great guy.'"

The gentlemanly exchange between the pugilists became legendary. Tunney and Dempsey became good friends and would visit each other regularly, often connecting in Palm Springs.

Dempsey's friend Dave Margolis purchased the Howard Manor from Bob Howard in a handshake deal and invited Dempsey to invest. Michael Margolis recalled: "Dave Margolis was my grandfather, and I knew Jack Dempsey as 'Uncle Jack.' The hotel had a 'Jack Dempsey room' filled with boxing memorabilia. The restaurant walls were lined with portraits of mostly actors and singers who had been guests. My grandmother's favorite song was 'Tiny Bubbles,' which she would often request of the lounge band. Dave loved working at the Howard Manor. He was there in the dining room nearly every evening, going from table to table to make sure all the guests were happy."

As a result of his investment, Dempsey spent a considerable amount of time in Palm Springs, entertaining at the hotel and hosting parties at the supper club frequented by celebrities like Frank Sinatra, Howard Hughes, Ronald Reagan, Kirk Douglas, Zsa Zsa Gabor and his fellow champion boxer, Gene Tunney. The Desert Sun always covered the happenings: "The Manor's opening bubbled like the good French champagne that was served."

The newspaper reported that "Dave Margolis' Howard Manor welcomed the new season in bubbling style on Thursday night ... It was a happy evening, and surprise VIP visitors were Congressman John Tunney and his wife, Mieke, their friends, Phil and Jo Regan ... The



**Heavyweight champions of the world, Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey, in the late 1920s.**

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tables were full and the dance floor crowded ... Congressman Tunney was on a brief visit to the Springs. He is running again for political office in the November election. His famous dad, the all-time boxing great, Gene Tunney, is a friend of the Margolises and his picture hangs among the many in the Manor's interesting Dempsey Room."

Dempsey had been engaged to Mamie Van Doren who was "discovered" by producer Howard Hughes when she was crowned Miss Palm Springs in the summer of 1949 at the age of 18. She broke off the engagement to Dempsey when she was signed by Universal. The comingling of celebrities like her, and Dempsey and Tunney, the boxing champions turned celebrities, cultivated much interest in the sport and in the town.

Local up and coming heavyweight fighter Jim Caufield worked at the Riviera for Irwin Schuman, running the auditorium, and together with welterweight Henry Armstrong created the Palm Springs Boxing Club for teenage boys from the whole valley. Open every day after school, the club trained boys in physical culture and discipline, keeping them out of trouble and in the gymnasium. Eventually housed in a little building that is clearly the cousin of the Frey/Chambers City Hall buildings down the way and originally the Department of Motor Vehicles, the Palm Springs Boxing Club spawned similar clubs in Indio and Coachella that persist today.

Lots of local boxing stars trained or came up here, from Marvin Hagler and Timothy Bradley to Steve Qui-

nonez, Brandun Lee and Duane "Duke" Chronister. (The Coachella Valley has been widely known in boxing circles since.)

Thinking that the Dempsey Room wasn't enough of a museum, Caufield incorporated the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1965, which would later end up in another desert town, Las Vegas: "Caufield, the president of the boxing hall, claims he has spent 17 years trying to find a location for a shrine. 'The boxing hall of fame will be an ever-lasting shrine to the sport,' Caufield said."

The Desert Sun continued to report on the activities of the heavyweight champs who started it all for boxing in the desert. Writer Sidney Phillips summarized at the end of their lives in 1983: "The recent death of Jack Dempsey ended the legend of the 'Three Musketeers' Dempsey, Gene Tunney and Marty Burke. Those three men who were instrumental in uplifting boxing from the pool halls and back lots to Madison Square Garden and million-dollar purses. Burke was a long-time sparring partner of Dempsey, and Tunney, of course, was the boxer who took away Dempsey's heavyweight crown and later beat him again. Dempsey died Tuesday at age 87. Burke, who fought and lost to both Dempsey and Tunney during a one-week period in 1921, said, Jack was the greatest fighting machine ever. His speed was dazzling, his punch murderous and his courage was unmatched. I knew (all these things) because I was his sparring partner for years. I had myself insured for double indemnity."

"All three boxers spent plenty of time in Palm Springs. Dempsey could be seen at his friend Dave Margolis' Howard Manor while Tunney would visit the Spa Hotel, and Burke lived in the city with his movie star son, Paul Burke. The paths of the three men also took them to Palm Springs when Tunney's son, John, ran on the Democratic ticket for Congress. Although a lifelong Republican, Dempsey joined his boxing pals in campaigning for John Tunney ... running the ... pictures (of) the long count Dempsey-Tunney bout at the Indio Fair for a crowd of 2,000 voters. Dempsey and Tunney were on stage and what crowd pleasers they were ..."

(Interestingly, Congressman John Tunney proposed a bill in Congress to clean up the sport by having a Boxing Commission, as not all fighters were as polite or played as fair as his dad, "Gentleman Gene," and his pal, Jack Dempsey.)

Phillips continued: "When Marty Burke was near death at Desert Hospital, I contacted Dempsey through Margolis and explained Burke's plight." Dempsey was distraught over his ailing friend and recommended a sure remedy: "Just start counting over Marty, he'll get up."

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