



Tunney is floored! But he will get 18 seconds to recover—decisive moments for him and Dempsey.

The Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me **by Jack Dempsey**

**Gene Tunney sprawled
on the canvas, stunned;
then came the historic "long count"
which cost the author
the championship but won
him a lifetime of fame**

THE WORLD has been good to me so I'm a little surprised when some well-wisher in my Broadway restaurant reminisces and says, "You really got a tough break on that 'long count'."

What long count? What bad break?

I know what they're talking about—the best thing that ever happened to me! The best thing.

On Sept. 22, 1927—32 years ago next week, by the way—a young boxing stylist named Gene Tunney stopped me from becoming the first fighter in history to regain the heavyweight title. It was a famous fight because sports writers claimed Tunney was favored by a "long count" after I knocked him down in the seventh round.

So these well-wishers offer sympathy year after year and lament about "what might have been."

Well, I know "what might have been" and it isn't all what they see in their rose-colored mirrors reflecting the past. I didn't lose the fight because of a "freak"; Gene Tunney whipped me.

What happened was this: a new rule had been passed which stated that after a knockdown the referee would not start the count until the standing fighter was in a neutral corner. Previously we had stood over a fallen opponent waiting for him to rise so we could batter him again.

A fighter is conditioned to fight on instincts that he develops over the years. I delayed the count by standing near my opponent.

Losing the heavyweight championship of the world, especially after being champ for seven years, wasn't easy to take. But, in retrospect, I've got good reason for calling that moment the best thing that ever happened to me.

At best I didn't have long to go when I fought Tunney. I don't say this to take anything away from Gene; his record as an undefeated heavyweight champion speaks for itself. What's more, I can't honestly say I would have whipped him if we had fought when I was in my prime—it would have been a great fight, though!

This much I do know for certain: even if I had regained my title that night, some other

youngster would have come along soon to lift it. After all, Gene had done it in our first bout when I was a year younger—and *without* benefit of a controversial "long count."

Now I'm in business where small things often make the difference between success and failure. People like to remember me as the guy who "knocked out" the champ and lost.

If I had defeated Tunney and he had then beat me in the inevitable rubber bout—a likely possibility considering my aging legs—I would have been just another champ who lost his title to a better man. There would have been no drama—and, conceivably, fewer satisfactions for me afterward. People come to see me because that "long count" made me more famous than I ever would have been if the record books simply read: Dempsey over Tunney by KO.

SOME guests ask me about the night Luis Firpo's flailing right hand catapulted me through the ropes and right out of the ring. Others ask if I really broke Jess Willard's jaw with my first punch and three of his ribs with my second. But most of them want to know about that "thing with Tunney." They want to know *everything* about it; whether he was really "out" or just taking advantage of the extra time, why I didn't nail him in the next round, etc. I tell them what I'm telling you. That was probably the last solid haymaker I connected with. I could feel the familiar electric jolt right up to my shoulder as my gloved fist made contact with bone. After that the cupboard was bare, and I knew it.

All of us like to be remembered, and I'm no exception. Yes, people would have remembered me even without the "long count"—but not as part of an American legend.

So that's the real story. We live a lifetime, not a single episode. It would have been great to win my title back that night.

Instead I had to learn to be a loser. It was quite a lesson, too. It taught me that defeat and disappointment can be blessings in disguise.

Jack was schooled to stand over opponent, as here with Firpo. Habit took seconds to break but cost him a title.

