

***Excerpt from “Pulling No Punches: the Sam Langford Story”***

***by Steven Laffoley***

***Chapter 22***

***1911 – “Philadelphia Jack” O’Brien***

Sam was always deft at couching his disappointment in wry humour and easy self-deprecation. “If anybody was to ask who is light heavyweight champion of the world,” said Sam. “I would say, ‘Little Thammy – and no one but.’ Well, I won that lovely little crown in 1911. It didn’t do me much good because it didn’t fit my head, but a long time afterward [another] fighter found it in a scrap heap, dusted it off, said it was his, and made a lot of money with it.”

Sam’s thoughts wandered to the spring of 1911.

“After drawing with [McVea] in Paris, in April of 1911, I came back home, arriving late in May. From then until early in August I fought five fights, winning four on knockouts and going ten rounds no decision with Tony Caponi, in Winnipeg. Then I was matched to meet ‘Philadelphia Jack’ O’Brien in New York.” O’Brien was a tough and talented thirty-three-year-old who held the light heavyweight title in 1905 and once fought a twenty round draw with heavyweight champion Tommy Burns in 1906.

More than 7,500 spectators filled the arena in New York to watch Sam fight O’Brien on August 15. O’Brien was a popular boxer in New York, and though he was past his prime, many locals hoped he would give Sam a good challenge.

For the first round, O’Brien did just that, initially offering an active offense and sound defense against Sam. But the effort did not last long. Sam found holes in O’Brien’s defense and scored with solid, effective punches.

On more than one occasion, Sam dropped O’Brien to the canvas for a short count. In the fifth round, Sam dropped O’Brien again, and

though O'Brien rose before the count reached nine, the referee knew it was over and called the fight.

The *New York Herald* reported "Sam Langford, working on 3rd speed for most of the way, knocked out Jack O'Brien last night at the Twentieth Century Athletic Club in the first minute of the fifth round. The Negro was kind to the Philadelphia dancing master in permitting him to stay as long as he did, for he showed both by his power and his speed that if he cared to put on the accelerator the white man would have been lucky to have lasted more than the first round. After feinting and dancing with his rival for a time the Negro plunged a terrific right into the pit of the white man's stomach and the latter howled from the pain of it. The Negro gave him a hard pounding and all the skill that he could marshal could not avail him. When O'Brien was bending over from the result of the impact the Negro dropped over a short left hook to the jaw and it was farewell for O'Brien. He went down on his haunches half-way through the ropes and then rolled over."

After the fight, Sam was greeted by a friend in his corner. "Sam," his friend said, "you're a champion now."

"What am I champion of?" Sam asked.

"You're champion of the world," said the friend, "Yes, indeed, world's champion light heavyweight."

Sam looked surprised. "Now how did that happen?" he asked.

"In 1903," explained his friend, "Jimmy Coffrot was promoting a fight between Bob Fitzsimons and George Gardner in San Francisco on November 25. He decided the boys should be fighting for something besides a little cash. So Jim told the world that the winner would be declared the light heavyweight champion of the world, and that the weight in that class would go from 159 to 175 which was between the middies and heavies. Bob whipped Gardner. And that made Bob the champ. In 1905, O'Brien knocked out Fitz, and that made O'Brien the champ."

Sam looked amused.

“So, you see,” his friend said, “beating O’Brien tonight makes you the champ, doesn’t it?”

In truth, Sam didn’t know. And it didn’t much matter. “Nobody wanted to fight me for it,” laughed Sam, “so I didn’t do anything. After a while, I forgot about it and then one day, about six years later, Battling Levinsky comes along and says, ‘Well, boys, I’m the light heavyweight champion because I beat Jack Dillon.’ And everybody says, is that so, well, well. And they go along about their business and don’t pay much attention to it until George Carpentier gets over from France and beats Levinsky, and makes a lot of noise about being the champion of a division which I’ve been champion of for about thirteen years.”

The light heavyweight class was not recognized at the time Sam won it, so the claim was just that – a claim. “Of course, I haven’t been what you call the active champion,” added Sam. “I guess maybe you could call me the overgrown champion, but nobody could call me that until a few years ago, because it wasn’t until then that I began to lose my figure. I don’t just remember when I got beyond 175. But it wasn’t so long ago, at that.”

Sam thought about how he likely lost some interest in the game around the time of the O’Brien fight. He liked boxing well enough, but his desire to train and keep his weight in check just slipped away.

“Mind you, I’m not saying that I was such a nasty tough boy that nobody could hear me when I was yelling for fights,” Sam added. “That might have been it, but maybe the real reason is that boys figured it out that it wouldn’t do them half as much good to get whipped by me. So, in these latter years, I never did much training, but even if I didn’t, that doesn’t take away from me four championships which I have held: world’s light heavy-weight champion, English middleweight champion, English heavyweight champion, and Champion of Cambridge Street in Boston.”

He chuckled. “Hot dog, that’s funny,” he said.

Nine days after beating O’Brien, Sam fought Tony Ross at the National Sporting Club in New York City on August 24. The two had

met before in 1908, and Sam had won in five rounds. Ross had recently beaten Joe Jeanette, and there was some hope that he might make a good challenge. But Sam made short work of Tony again, dropping him in the sixth round with a solid left hook.

By the end of August, Sam was again running short of willing opponents. So Joe Woodman negotiated with an Australian promoter, Hugh McIntosh, for a series of fights down under. Motivating Sam was McIntosh's interest in promoting a fight with Jack Johnson.

"I am going to Australia to make him fight me or show him up as a rank coward," Sam told *The Washington Post* that August. "If Johnson can get Hugh McIntosh to agree to give him \$30,000, he'll probably agree to meet me, which means that I'll come back here with the championship of the world. But I'll not be satisfied that Johnson really wants to take a chance until I see him in the ring pulling on the gloves. I've got an old score to settle with this colored gentleman. We met in Chelsea [Massachusetts] five years ago in a fifteen round bout. I weighed 140 pounds then, while Johnson weighed 190."

Sam's smile faded as he thought of Johnson and his conversation with that *Washington Post* reporter.

"He was as much of an unknown as I was and nobody outside of the Boston sporting men paid many attention to us," Sam remembered saying. "It was just after the fight started that I caught Johnson on the point of the jaw and flattened him on the floor like a flapjack. His eyes were rolling, and he almost turned white. When he got up he looked scared to death, and hung on until the gong ended the round. After that he wouldn't mix with me, and just stuck out his left hand, jabbing me in the face the rest of the way. The referee said he won on points, but you can bet that Johnson was glad when it was over." Sam had hoped his version of the fight would goad Johnson into the ring.

Before Sam left for Australia, he fought Joe Jeanette again in New York, winning the bout in a ten-round decision. In October, Sam met Tony Caponi again, also in New York. The referee stopped that fight "in the middle of the third round." Wrote the *Nevada State Journal*, "Caponi was helpless from the beating the big negro fighter had given him."

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At the end of October, Sam said goodbye to his wife Martha and daughter Charlotte and headed across the country by train. On November 1, 1911, he boarded the steamer *Zealander* and departed from Vancouver, British Columbia, for Australia where he would meet Sam McVea again.