

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. They are generally not very large people—there are few Mexican heavyweights—but the enthusiasm of Mexican fans for their smaller pugilists is huge. Julio César Chavez can draw over 100,000 fans to the Estadio Azteca in Mexico City, where even Primo Carnera would look the size of an ant from the upper seats. A 1993 compilation lists 159 Mexicans out of a total of 4,010 active boxers in the world (around 4 percent) and 60 former and current world title holders who are Mexican.¹ However, these developments are relatively recent. Until the 1920s, boxing was underdeveloped and little appreciated in Mexico. In the late 1800s, a few socially elite men boxed in fencing academies, and foreigners occasionally promoted professional fights, which featured non-Mexican boxers.² Early-twentieth-century bouts in Mexico City were held in tents, theaters, and *frontones*, often between unskilled and mismatched opponents, and were poorly advertised and attended.³ The Teatro Lirico and the Fronton Nacional (now the Palacio Chino movie house) were among the scenes of fights in the 1920s. More important bouts and the exhibitions of visiting foreign celebrities, such as Jack Johnson and Jack Dempsey, were held in the city's bullfight arena before large crowds of spectators.

A survey of the sports coverage of the principal Mexico City newspapers during the early twentieth century indicates a noticeable growth in activity and interest in boxing beginning in 1919, and further increasing after 1923. The timing of this phenomenon correlates with the residence of Jack Johnson in Mexico, visits of other internationally known boxers to the capital, and the rising fame of Jack Dempsey and his 1925 visit to Mexico City. The presence of foreign boxers in Mexico and newspaper coverage of their activities, both in and outside Mexico, along with slowly diminishing violence in the nation and the concomitant increasing level of sport activity during the 1920s, were important factors in the rise of boxing in Mexico.

The time boundaries of this study are arbitrarily placed at Johnson's arrival in Mexico (1919) and Dempsey's second loss to Gene Tunney (1927), after

1. *Computer Boxing Update* 1993 (Blackwood, NY: Ralph Citron, Inc., 1993).

2. William Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 32-35; Raúl Talán, *En el 3er. Round* (Mexico, D.E.: no pub., 1952).

3. Gustavo Casasola, *Seis siglos de historia gráfica de México* 1325-1925, Vol. IV (Mexico: Editorial Gustavo Casasola, 1968), 2215-2217; Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club*; Talán, *En el 3er. Round*.

which the Manassa Mauler's prominence waned. The period of Johnson's residence and Dempsey's visits in Mexico City was an eventful and traumatic time for Mexico. The Revolution had left the nation in an unstable and fragile condition. Daily occurrence of internal violence by bandits, revolutionaries, and the Mexican army was only overshadowed at times by threatened war with the United States.⁴ U.S. pressures on Mexico, including several instances of armed interventions and U.S. acquisition of over half of Mexico's original land area, had not tended to produce great love of norteamericanos among Mexicans. However, this generalization did not extend to U.S. professional athletes such as boxers or major league baseball teams, whose performances and standings were frequently reported in the Mexico City dailies.⁵ Major heavyweight bouts held in the U.S. were featured extensively in the Mexico City press, 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 utilized for reporting important U.S. boxing events in Mexico City and other major population centers of the republic.

Jack Johnson in Mexico

Jack Johnson's residence in Mexico City (March 1919 through early 1920) and his public appearances stimulated Mexican interest in boxing, at least in the capital. Johnson's fame and style made him a hero to sporting Mexicans.⁶ In Mexico, Johnson continued to live much as he had lived in the U.S. and in Europe, and he was very much in the public eye—at a time when there had been little interest in boxing in the nation and Mexican boxers were virtually unknown. However, Johnson's reported business and personal behavior and unexciting

4. Every few days, trains were assaulted, dynamited, burned to the ground. Rarely a week passed without news of some rebel officer's capture and summary execution. After ex-General Aureliano Blanquet was killed, his head was cut off and put on public display in Veracruz (*El Universal* [Mexico City], 19 April 1919). A photograph of the grisly head sitting on a table was a front-page item in Mexico City papers. U.S.-Mexican relations were being strained by incidents of American casualties in Texas border areas resulting accidentally from Mexican gunfire, incursions of U.S. troops and airplanes into Mexico in pursuit of bandits/rebels, the supposed abduction of American consul William Jenkins in Puebla, and reactions of American petroleum interests to proposed reforms of Mexican mineral ownership, regulatory, and tax laws. U.S. Secretary of State Lansing urged President Wilson to declare war on Mexico over the "Jenkins affair," and U.S. diplomatic recognition of Mexico was delayed until 1923 because of the petroleum question. See Lorenzo Meyer, *Mexico and the United States in the Oil Controversy, 1917-1942* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), 71; and Lester D. Langley, *Mexico and the United States: The Fragile Relationship* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 17.

5. Richard McGehee, "Sports and Recreational Activities in Guatemala and Mexico, Late 1800s to 1926," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 13 (1994): 7-32.

6. Jack Johnson became the world heavyweight champion by defeating Tommy Bums in Australia in 1908. He defended his crown several times later in the U.S., but fled the country in 1913 after having been convicted of Mann Act violations. He then boxed, wrestled, and performed with stage groups in Europe and Argentina until his famous bout with Jess Willard in Havana in 1915. He spent the next years in Spain before traveling to Mexico in 1919. His life in the U.S. and elsewhere was marked by a love of fast cars and beautiful (white) women, a tendency to break contracts and leave bills unpaid, great athletic talent and a relaxed attitude toward boxing, and supreme belief in himself. See Jack Johnson, *Jack Johnson is a Dandy: An Autobiography* (New York: Chelsea House, 1969); Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: The Free Press, 1983); Denzil Batchelor, *Jack Johnson and his Times* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1956); Al-Tony Gilmore, *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1975); and Finis Farr, *Black Champion: The Life and Times of Jack Johnson* (New York: Scribner, 1984).

exhibitions detracted from his potential contribution to the advancement of boxing in Mexico.

Johnson and his wife Lucille left Spain on the steamship *Esperanza* in late March 1919 and arrived in Veracruz on the 24th of that month.⁷ In his first Mexican interview in Veracruz, Johnson stated that he had thrown his 1915 fight with Willard in Havana, with the understanding that he would be allowed to return home to the U.S. for a rematch. This admission did not inspire great confidence that his future bouts in Mexico would be fought honestly. Johnson's promoters said they had telegraphed Willard offering him 30,000 dollars and expenses to come to Mexico to fight Johnson, with Johnson's earnings to be donated to the Red Cross.⁸

Two days later, Johnson was met at the train station in Mexico City by an excited crowd of more than 2,000 people. A band played bullfight music and his fans screamed "Viva Johnson" and "Bravo Jack," as they tried to get close enough to touch the ebony hero. A reporter who interviewed him in his hotel was as impressed by Johnson's wardrobe as anything else. He described Johnson's baggage as equal to that of an operatic tenor's; the 18 trunks contained "90 suits, 50 pairs of shoes, and the entire output of a necktie factory."⁹

A couple of weeks after his arrival in Mexico City, Johnson made news in a long article in *El Universal*. The front-page story on this day was the death of Emiliano Zapata, an important leader of the Mexican Revolution. But back on page seven, with the title "Yesterday's Social Note," was an 1,800-word account of Johnson's adventures in Sanborn's restaurant, the "House of Tiles," still one of the city's landmarks. The previous afternoon, Johnson had gone to Sanborn's for lunch but was refused service on the orders of the American owner. Johnson left and went to another restaurant, where he ran into an acquaintance, a Mexican general, and told him what had happened. The general was indignant and promised Johnson he would make Mr. Sanborn apologize and provide him service. Three hours later, Johnson returned to Sanborn's accompanied by three generals, two colonels, and several other officers. They sat down at a table and ordered ice cream. All were served except Johnson. Three of the officers looked up Sanborn and demanded service for Johnson, but Sanborn refused. A large, rowdy crowd gathered in the store as the discussion grew increasingly heated. One of the colonels called for police support and a group of 25 gendarmes and their captain positioned themselves in the alley outside. Mrs. Johnson appeared on the scene and scolded Sanborn. One of the officers threatened to close the establishment, another told Sanborn he was going to take him out in the street and beat him up,

7. Johnson's own reporting of his travel was confused; he reported leaving Spain on March 28, 1919 (*Jack Johnson is a Dandy*, 111).

8. *El Universal*, 25 March 1919. The newspaper referred to the proposed Johnson/Willard bout as the "barbarous spectacle of boxing." On 31 March, a *Universal* sportswriter reported that Johnson was then the hottest topic in sport and also alluded to the possibility that the city authorities, leery of the sport's legitimacy, would not permit boxing exhibitions in Mexico City.

9. *Ibid.*, 27 March 1919. Johnson's manager, Luis Andrade, told the reporter that Johnson would fight Jack Dempsey within the next six weeks.

and a lawyer prepared to strike Sanborn with his cane-until Mrs. Johnson protested. Finally Sanborn conceded, shook Johnson's hand, and ordered ice cream served to the entire party.¹⁰

Groups of businessmen from Chicago, Dallas, and other areas of the U.S. were visiting Mexico City during this period to promote trade, and frequent news items reported their activities, including receptions given them by Mexican president Venustiano Carranza. Johnson made the papers again four days after the Sanborn's incident as a result of his allegedly threatening bodily harm to one of the businessmen from New Orleans.¹¹

Johnson's training sessions attracted fans who watched him shadow box, perform exercises, and hit the punching bag so hard he broke its rope. Afterwards, those who knew English would talk with him. Others consulted their English handbooks and tried a few phrases on him, and Johnson answered them with "all right," although neither they nor he understood anything that was said. While Johnson relaxed with his admirers, two blond American women helped him get dressed.¹²

In his first exhibition, on June 22, Johnson toyed with a smaller man named Bob Roper for 10 rounds-to the audible disapproval of the fans who had come to see a display of Jack Johnson power. Seated near the ring, Mrs. Johnson quietly watched the bout, and "don Jack, whenever he could in the clinches, cast loving and tender gazes at his beautiful wife." During the fight, some spectators expressed their disappointment with Johnson's defensive performance by screaming insults at him, producing a disturbance that was quelled by the police. One reporter theorized that Johnson had not wanted to use up Roper, as he was his only visible opponent for future matches.¹³

In early July, Johnson again made news. The headline read "Twenty Policemen Required to Pacify Johnson." A lawsuit had been brought against Johnson alleging that he accepted 20,000 pesos to come to Mexico to participate in boxing exhibitions, and subsequently refused to honor his contract or return the money. A judge ordered the confiscation of Johnson's automobile and sent three officials

10. *Ibid.*, 11 April 1919; Roberts, *Papa Jack*, 211. According to the *Universal* reporter, Sanborn's refusal to serve Johnson was because "some of Sanborn's clients would not approve of it." It is not clear whether this phrase refers to American or Mexican clients, or both, or whether the supposed disapproval would be due to Johnson's race, his legal status in the U.S., or some other factor. However, the reported statements of the military officers refer constantly to race, and during the harangue General Rodriguez reminded Mr. Sanborn that he had been fined 150 dollars (by the general himself) in Tampico for the same offense, that of not serving ice cream to a Negro. The Mexican reporter's approach to the story was lighthearted and humorously critical of the Mexican element. His sentiments seemed to be with Sanborn.

11. *El Universal*, 15 and 16 April 1919.

12. *El Demócrata* (Mexico City), 20 June 1919.

13. *Ibid.*, 17, 18, and 23 June 1919; *El Universal*, 19,22, and 23 June 1919 and 14 July 1919. Before the exhibition *El Demócrata* had predicted it would be a landmark event for sport and explained that it would not be a bloody spectacle or fight to the death, but rather a contest of strength, stamina, and agility, suitable for all "virile amateurs." The JohnsonRoper match "would initiate in Mexico this sport of physical energy and rigorous application of rules." Advertisements for the exhibition included a list of the Marquess of Queensberry Rules that would be used. The bout was filmed, and the boxers' performances were said to "contrast the agility and strength of the black man and the knowledge and elegance of the white" (*El Demócrata*, 23 June 1919). When Roper arrived in New Orleans, he said he had paid Johnson a lot of money for two months of training and instruction that he received in Mexico and that Johnson was in great shape (*El Universal*, 11 July 1919).

to deliver the court order and take possession of the car. Johnson was out and his wife refused to release the car. She telephoned her husband to come home and had her servants lock the doors, so the officials could not take the car. The officials became alarmed and requested police assistance. Five policemen came to their aid, but by then a furious Johnson had arrived with five friends, and the terrified Mexicans fled the scene. However, they soon returned with 10 armed police and their lieutenant in the instant that Johnson tried to remove his car. When he saw his escape blocked, Johnson, in the grand tradition of Hernán Cortes burning his ships on the beach at Veracruz 400 years earlier, proceeded to rip out some essential parts of the motor, so the police would not be able to drive his car. They had to hire some laborers to drag it away.¹⁴ Johnson appeared in court a week later to answer the new charges of threatening the authorities, etc. The judge ordered him to jail but waited while a Johnson friend went for the 1,000-peso bail and then released him. Before leaving the court, the judge had his picture taken with Johnson, who also obliged *El Universal's* photographer by lifting a man over his head like he was lifting a straw doll.¹⁵ A few days after Johnson had intimidated the Mexico City gendarmes with his imposing figure, the city government decided to arm the police.¹⁶

Also in July there was announced a wrestling match between Johnson and a supposed Russian champion named Sudakoff. The city government denied their permission for a (boxing) match between "el negro" Johnson and Sudakoff on the grounds that such activity was "immoral and barbarous." Also, probably thinking of the crowd disturbance at the Johnson/Roper exhibition, it was predicted that the proposed event might "provoke disorders." Johnson appealed to the Federal District, which overruled the city's decision, but there was no further mention of the match and it may not have taken place.¹⁷

In August, Johnson fought Jerry Smith in the Venecio Theater in Tampico with bets supposedly as high as 10,000 pesos. Smith was so much smaller than Johnson that the crowd began protesting as soon as he appeared. Johnson spent the first two rounds laughing, and the screams of the crowd for their money to be refunded and the promoter to be imprisoned led to the fight being stopped by the municipal president and the police commander. The ticket sales were impounded and taken to the city treasury.¹⁸

14. *El Universal*, 2 and 4 July 1919. *El Demócrata* (4 July 1919) expressed satisfaction that Johnson, "who was known to be causing disturbances on a nearly daily basis and offered the constant menace of his fists," would be deported for his resistance to court officials and police. A judge eventually ruled against Johnson in the contract dispute (*El Universal*, 28 November 1919).

15. *El Universal*, 8 July 1919. The paper deplored the judge's posing with Johnson and the "public admiration of brute force ... which in the form of Prussian militarism had recently been defeated," even though it was their own photographer who took the pictures, which they happily published!

16. *El Demócrata*, 5 July 1919. Until then, only a very small number of policemen, the 300 mounted units, had been armed. There was no direct indication that the Johnson incident sparked arming of the police, but the timing is interesting.

17. *Ibid.*, 3, 4, and 13 July 1919.

18. *El Universal*, 18 August 1919.

Later that month, the English boxer Tom Cowler was in Mexico City and challenged Johnson to a mid-September match.¹⁹ In early September, Johnson appeared in court again, this time as the accuser. He said he had invited Cowler to Mexico, given him a 600 dollar advance, and was already advertising their bout, when he learned that Cowler had run out on him. Johnson found out that Cowler had caught the train for Laredo and wanted the Mexican police to capture him before he could leave the country.²⁰

In September, one of Johnson's representatives contacted Jack Dempsey proposing a Johnson/Dempsey fight to be held in the northwestern Mexican state of Sonora.²¹ While the seriousness of this proposal was open to question, news items such as this one continued to keep Jack Johnson's name before the public.

Apparently, Johnson's most successful Mexican exhibition was with Kid Cutler, an old acquaintance whom he had boxed many times. They met in Mexico City's bullfight arena, "El Toreo," on Sunday, September 28, with 3,000 spectators in attendance, and although their fight itself was not considered interesting enough to report at all, a newsworthy event did take place at ringside. A preliminary bout ended with a controversial action of the referee, Antonio Sarabia. Sarabia left the ring amidst tremendous whistling and yelling from the crowd and was immediately approached and criticized severely by one of the judges. They argued heatedly, the crowd still going wild, and Johnson and Cutler climbed into the ring, hoping to calm the situation down. The program seemed to be back on track, the two boxers leaving their corners to begin the first round, when two shots rang out. Military and police officers pulled out their pistols, people dove for cover, and bedlam returned to the arena. What had happened was that referee Sarabia had borrowed a pistol from a friend, returned to ringside, and shot the judge who had criticized him. The chief of the secret police, along with General Juan M6rigo, one of the principal figures in the Sanborn's incident, overpowered Sarabia and controlled him until the police could take him away.²²

Johnson made the Mexico City papers several more times before leaving the capital for Baja California early in 1920. In November of 1919, *El Universal* published a page of caricatures and doggerel verse titled *Calaveras de El Universal*.²³

19. *El Dem6crata*, 21 August 1919.

20. *El Universal*, 4 September 1919. Roberts' biography of Johnson mentions Cowler as one of Johnson's opponents, and an inventive and florid Johnson biography by Denzil Batchelor even reproduces conversation that was supposed to have taken place between the two boxers during their fight, but I saw no evidence that the match ever materialized (Roberts, *Papa Jack*, p. 211; Batchelor, *Jack Johnson and his Times: 165-166*).

21. *El Dem6crata*, 30 August 1919.

22. *El Universal*, 21 and 29 September 1919.

23. *Ibid.*, 2 November 1919. The verse (with my translation) was as follows:

Este boxeador fiff,	This boxing dandy
en Mexico un h6roe fue,	was a hero in Mexico,
aunque Sanborn le hizo - !fu ...	although Sanborn wouldn't serve him.
Pero el general Faf6	But General so-and-so
le dijo: - Amigo, ten fe,	told him: Have faith, friend;
que si alguno te hace jrn6!	if somebody turns you away,
yo a todos les hago m6.	I'll make him pee in his pants.

Calavera has several meanings, including "skull" and "rake" (or playboy). A skeletal Jack Johnson appeared on the page of *Calaveras* as "Johnson *Fifi*." *Fifi* was a slang term for elegant dressers, so Johnson *Fifi* meant roughly "Johnson the Dandy."

Late in November, Johnson appeared in *El Toreo* again, this time as a bullfighter.²⁴ In his autobiography, he appears as a magnificent matador, repeating his supposed earlier successes in Spanish bullrings.²⁵ However, the Mexican advertisements suggest the idea that the show was to be a farce, and since bullfights were banned in Mexico City at the time, that seems a likely assumption.²⁶ The results were not reported.

Johnson's last exhibition reported in Mexico City was with his nephew, Gus Rhodes, in January of 1920. The program included punching bag and medicine ball work and a show of strength where Johnson was to overcome the combined force of 20 spectators, 10 with each arm.²⁷ It was also reported in January that Johnson had been challenged by Sam MacBea (probably Sam McVey) to a 25-round fight with a bet of 100,000 dollars, but there was no indication that any such fight was held.²⁸ In his last mention in Mexico City papers, Johnson was to referee a bout between two Mexicans on February 21. Another referee was actually used, so Johnson may have already left the city by that date.²⁹ He traveled by train, mule, and boat to Baja California, where he opened a saloon and cooled his heels for a few months before giving himself up to U.S. authorities at the border in July. His own account of the trip from Mexico City is in typical Johnsonian style. According to Johnson, the Yaqui Indians who waylaid the train in Sonora not only had heard of Jack Johnson-he was a great hero to them.³⁰

24. *Ibid.*, 19 November 1919.

25. Johnson, *Jack Johnson is a Dandy*, 106-107 (Spain), 113 (Mexico).

26. *El Universal*, 22 and 23 November 1919. The ads on these two dates said Johnson would do some serious bullfighting, but they featured cartoon drawings and mentioned a comic troupe that would perform. Bullfighting had been banned by President Carranza in the Federal District and the entire country in a 1916 decree on the basis of its being uncivilized. However, the Sunday afternoon spectacle was readily available by public transportation a short distance out of Mexico City, at the Tlalnepantla plaza. During this period, *El Toreo*, in Mexico City's La Condesa district, was being used for a variety of functions, including opera. An Italian group that included Enrico Caruso gave classic opera performances there every Sunday during October 1919. In December of 1919, both houses of the congress were reported as voting to reestablish bullfighting, but Carranza felt the spectacle was against the principles of the Revolution and would not approve it. Nevertheless, weekly corridos were being advertised for *El Toreo* during December, and on 5 January 1920 a note in *El Universal* said the senate had not acted yet on the decree ratified by the lower chamber, and that bullfights were continuing.

27. *Ibid.*, 1 and 12 January 1920.

28. *Ibid.*, 13 January 1920.

29. *Ibid.*, 14 and 23 February 1920. In January it had been reported that training with Johnson had greatly improved Mexican boxer Honorato Castro (*ibid.*, 19 January 1920).

30. Johnson, *Jack Johnson is a Dandy*, 115-116. Johnson's accounts of his status and prominence in Mexico in general seem inflated. He reported frequent visits with President Carranza (*ibid.*: 112-113), who he said asked his views on international politics. Johnson claimed that Carranza even provided him with escorts of soldiers when he needed to travel to areas "infested by bandits or revolutionists." This description fit much of the country at the time, and military escorts were generally provided most trains, no matter who was on board. Johnson explained his decision to move to Lower California as a result of deteriorating conditions due to the Obregon-Carranza conflict. However, influenza was killing large numbers of people in Mexico City during the early months of 1920, and this may actually have been the principal reason he decided to leave the capital. The newspapers occasionally mentioned meetings of Carranza with a variety of people, including visiting American businessmen, but not with Johnson. In 1919-1920, both Carranza and Obregon had much more pressing concerns than Jack Johnson on their minds.

Boxing in Mexico and Mexican interest in foreign matches, 1919-1924

Johnson's residence and adventures in Mexico drew public attention to boxing. A few weeks after his arrival, his name was considered sufficiently recognizable that its mention in the newspapers required no explanation of who he was. Interest in boxing was on the rise in the country in 1919 and the early 1920s, with Mexican boxers such as Patricio Martinez Arredondo,³¹ Mike Febles, Honorato Castro, Carlos Pavon, and Tommy White, as well as many foreign boxers, increasing their activities in Mexico City.

The Dempsey-Willard bout of 4 July 1919 in Toledo, which made Dempsey champion, was reported in 36 column-inches in *El Universal*.³² *El Universal* devoted 135 column-inches, spread over three days, to the Dempsey-Carpentier bout of 2 July 1921. The newspaper received cables from New Jersey giving the progress of the fight and put out bulletins that attracted a large crowd to their offices. There were only four bulletins, since the fight did not last very long. Progress of the fight was also communicated by the paper to nearby towns such as Toluca and Pachuca by telephone.³³

Boxing activity in Mexico City in 1923 involved both Mexicans and foreigners, and the Mexican boxing commission was founded that year.³⁴ The Argentine Luis Angel Firpo visited Mexico City for a few days in June and knocked out American heavyweight Jim Hibbard a few seconds into the second round of their fight in El Toreo.³⁵ Sam Langford's July fight with Jim Tracey in El Toreo received good coverage.³⁶

El Universal devoted almost an entire page to a round-by-round description and commentary on the July 4 Dempsey-Gibbons fight in Shelby, Montana,³⁷ and Firpo's fights with Willard and Dempsey received considerable press attention. As a Latin American, Firpo was the great favorite in Mexico and his defeat of Willard on 12 July 1923 was well received.³⁸ Articles on preparations

31. Martinez Arredondo was perhaps the fieriest Mexican fighter of the era; at the end of a 1920 bout in which the referee disqualified him, he tried to bash the referee. This official, an ex-pugilist himself, held his own with a couple of good barefisted punches until the police took over and hauled Martinez off to jail (*El Universal*, 13 March 1920).

32. *El Universal*, 5 and 6 July 1919.

33. *Ibid.*, 2 and 3 July 1921.

34. Casasola, *Seis siglos de historia gráfica de México*, 2216.

35. *Excelsior* (Mexico City), 18 June 1923. Beginning a week before the match, it was advertised in the papers every day. Ringside seats were priced at 25 pesos, a much higher price than what was being charged for other fights and other forms of entertainment. Mexican president Alvaro Obregón came to El Toreo with the intention of meeting Firpo, but a hard rain drove him away before the fight began. Firpo had been met at the Mexico City train station "by the most enthusiastic crowd that ever greeted a prize fighter since the time of Jack Johnson," and one writer said that many were judging the 20-round fight to be the biggest boxing event ever staged in Mexico, but the newly formed Mexican boxing commission, after observing Hibbard's performance in the YMCA on 13 June, decided that his lack of skill only warranted an official designation of "exhibition" for the bout (*ibid.*, 15, 16, and 17 June 1923).

36. *El Universal*, 6, 13, 14 and 16 July 1923. Langford refused to fight during the day because the sunlight hurt his eyes. He was 48 years old at this time and nearly blind. Tracey was 26 years old and billed as the champion of Australia and New Zealand. The boxers' measurements offer an interesting contrast. Langford was 5 ft. 6 in. tall, weighed 178 pounds, and had a 69-in. reach; Tracey was 6 ft. 3/2-in., 210 pounds, and had an 81 1/2-in. reach. Langford knocked him out in the fourth.

37. *Ibid.*, 2 and 5 July 1923.

38. *Ibid.*, 13 July 1923.

for the Firpo-Dempsey fight began a week before the 14 September 1923 match.³⁹ *El Universal's* coverage of the fight was the biggest operation of boxing publicity to date. Over a two-week period, more than 1,100 column inches were devoted to the boxers and the fight, including several entire pages of the newspaper. Firpo was again the favorite in Mexico. He was the first Latin American to fight a world champion and many dreamed of his winning the title. *El Universal* set up a clearinghouse to receive bets in a candy shop and contracted a direct cable service from the New York ring. Ten minutes after each round, the results were displayed on screens atop three downtown buildings and in two movie houses and also on screens or blackboards in three hotels. In addition to the United Press cable service, information received by radio was transmitted by telephone to the screens on buildings and in theaters. Within five minutes after the fight ended, *El Universal Grafico* had an extra on the streets. A little later a second extra reported details. The tobacco company *EI Buen Tono* had recently installed a radio tower, and they successfully transmitted the fight results to receivers in Guadalajara, Toluca, Pachuca, Queretaro, and other cities.⁴⁰

After Dempsey defeated Firpo, a Mexico City promoter sent a telegram offering Dempsey 25,000 dollars for a four-round exhibition in *EI Toreo*. The newspaper article said that Dempsey had expressed his desire to come to Mexico three years earlier, but at that time there was not sufficient interest in boxing in the country.⁴¹

The major boxing news in Mexico in 1924 was Firpo's September 11 fight with Harry Wills.⁴² A few days before the fight, *El Universal* published a long interview with Dempsey conducted by one of their correspondents in Los Angeles. Dempsey predicted that Firpo would knock out "el negro" and that he would certainly fight the winner.⁴³ Most of the attention of the Mexican papers was on Firpo, including descriptions of his training activities, appearance, and problems with alleged Mann Act violations.⁴⁴ One pre-fight article which was part of more than a half page related to Firpo and Wills was insulting to both men. It described the appearance of both as being unusual; Firpo as being exceptionally ugly "for a race that was customarily beautiful," and Wills as being "less ugly than what was generally expected for blacks." The writer detailed all the facial features that he considered repulsive in the black race.⁴⁵

39. *Ibid.*, 8 and 10–19 September 1923.

40. *Ibid.*, 14–16 September 1923. On 19 September, a small advertisement in *El Universal* indicated that a film of the fight would be shown soon in one of the city's movie theaters, but there was no further mention of it.

41. *Ibid.*, 17 September 1923.

42. *Ibid.*, 3 and 6–13 September 1924.

43. *Ibid.*, 5 September 1924.

44. *Ibid.*, 6, 7, and 11 September 1924. Firpo had arrived at the port of New York accompanied by a young Cuban woman whose papers were not in order, and she was sent back to Cuba. The boxer was accused of bringing her to the U.S. for immoral purposes and was arrested but soon freed on bail. Right up to the day of the Wills fight, Firpo was hounded by the director of the New York Civic League and other religious leaders, who were trying to get the Wills fight stopped and Firpo deported. They additionally claimed that the Argentine had committed another Mann Act offense shortly after his fight with Dempsey the year before.

45. *Ibid.*, 9 September 1924.

Mexican reporting of black boxers always referred to them by their race, using terms such as "negro" (Spanish for black), "negrito," "de color" (colored), and "prieto" (dark). Reporting of the Firpo-Harry Wills fight showed distinct preference for the Argentine, but the Mexican position could be explained by sympathy for a fellow Latin American, rather than aversion to the black boxer. *EI Universal's* cable service direct from New Jersey brought the round-by-round results, which were presented in the screens of four movie theaters and in two other buildings. The news of Will's victory was called a shock and was said to have been received generally in Mexico with a chill and sadness.⁴⁶

Distinctly racist comments were made later in the month when Kid Allen, a black boxer from El Paso, Texas, fighting in Mexico City, was described as having a skull 20 millimeters thicker than a white man's. The writer concluded by saying that black men's faces seem to be made for a punching bag.⁴⁷ Although black boxers were offended occasionally in the Mexican press, they were welcome in Mexico City rings, and racial commentary, from the days of Jack Johnson onwards, may have served to generate additional spectator interest in pugilism.

Further evidence of rising enthusiasm for boxing in Mexico City in 1924 includes the inauguration of a new boxing arena in El Tivoli del Eliseo, featuring Wild Cat Ewing against Kid Rich, the Oklahoma Cyclone, in the inaugural fight, and the staging of a bout preceding a soccer game in the Franco-Ingles baseball park.⁴⁸ Numerous minor American boxers had been active in Mexico City rings for several years, and amateur boxing championships were held in Mexico City. Georges Carpentier was known not only from news of his fights, but as an actor in movies seen in Mexico City.⁴⁹ Interest in sport in general had been heightened by Mexico's first participation ever in the Olympics in 1924, and during the next two years, selection of national teams and other preparations for the 1926 Central American Games kept sport before the Mexican public.

46. *Ibid.*, 12 September 1924. A *Universal* reporter seeking reactions to the fight results in Mexico City noted shock and disbelief in the gymnasiums he visited and a "lack of enthusiasm" at the American Casino (with the exception of the black doorman, who seemed quite satisfied). However, at a Buenavista (railroad station) bar he found "no less than two dozen faithful fans of Harry Wills celebrating the triumph of their racial brothel."

47. *Ibid.*, 13 September 1924. Interviewed before their Mexico City match in the Frontón Hispano, Kid Allen and his white opponent Bobby Green put a racial slant on the fight. Allen said he wanted to repeat what Wills had done to Firpo, and Green was "hurt by the victory of the New Orleans Negro and was going to punish Allen" (*ibid.*, 12 September 1924).

48. *Ibid.*, 12 and 16 September 1924.

49. American boxers included Chick Kid Brown, Kid Savage, Jim Smith, Paul Sampson, Battling Norfolk, Cyclone Turner, Roughhouse Bums, Battling Duce, Tiger Flowers, Dal Hawkins, Sonny Goodrich, Tilly Kid Herman, Kid Joe, and Kid Thomas. In 1922, Carpentier played Mexico City in the movie, "El Hombre Maravilloso" (The Marvelous Man). Also in 1922, at the Parque Unión baseball field a "battle royal" was held, with four boxers fighting simultaneously (*Excelsior*, 24 December 1922). The socially elite Club Deportivo Internacional won the amateur boxing championship of the Federal District in 1923, with competition being held in El Toreo and the Frontón Hispano Mexicano over a period of several months (*ibid.*, 24 December 1923).

Dempsey's 1925 visit to Mexico and Mexican newspaper coverage of the Dempsey-Tunney matches

In 1925, the efforts of Mexican boxing interests to attract the world heavy-weight champion to the country were finally successful. Jack Dempsey's visit to Mexico City in October of that year was a truly spectacular event, overshadowing the attention that had been given to any other sports figure, foreign or Mexican.⁵⁰ From October 15 onwards, the theater and movies page of the papers carried advertisements for his exhibition every day. News items reported progress of his trip. He was accompanied by his wife, personal secretary, two sparring partners, who would be his exhibition opponents, and a representative of Jimmie Fitten, promoter of Dempsey's upcoming Mexico City exhibition. On October 26, a crowd estimated at between 5,000 and 10,000 met Dempsey at Colonia station, and neither police billyclubs nor soldiers' fixed bayonets could keep his admirers away from him. After two attempts to get him into a car, the police and soldiers were overwhelmed by a group of at least 1,000 fans who lifted Dempsey to their shoulders and carried him to his hotel.⁵¹

Dempsey spent the next days training, visiting the newspapers and the American ambassador, and touring breweries and cigarette factories. He was featured in many newspaper advertisements, endorsing Buick and Chrysler automobiles, Buen Tono cigarettes, Dos Equis beer, and typewriters. The ad for the L.C. Smith Company pictured Dempsey operating one of their typewriters and said their machines were stronger than Willard, because they stood up to Dempsey's hands. Special trains were to bring fans from Toluca, El Oro, Puebla, Guadalajara, Veracruz, and other cities, to see the champion.⁵² In addition to Dempsey's exhibition, the evening's card included fights for the championship of the Federal District and of Mexico.

On October 31, Dempsey presented an acceptable, although unexciting, exhibition. *El Universal* reported that Dempsey "played with his first victim, the sight being quite a comedy." The second "made some sort of a show at boxing with his employer. Jack hit him once or twice and finally knocked him out." One writer said Dempsey knocked out this opponent three times. Each time, Dempsey

50. *El Universal*, 18-20,22-23,25-28,30-31 October 1925; 1-2,6 and 8 November 1925; *Excélsior*, 25-31 October 1925. As individual athletes, some bullfighters, both Spanish and Mexican, received good press coverage, but nothing like that given Dempsey. Dempsey's rise to fame began with his beating Jess Willard for the heavy-weight crown in 1919 (only a few months after Jack Johnson's arrival in Mexico). He was known to Mexicans not only through Mexican reporting of his bouts in the U.S. but also through newspaper advertisements (e.g., endorsement of an iron diet supplement in *Excélsior*, 12 June 1923) and the showing of some of his films in Mexico. In his autobiography, Dempsey described Mexican enthusiasm for one of his movies that was shown during his visit to Mexico City (Jack Dempsey, with Barbara Piattelli Dempsey, *Dempsey* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977): 176-177). Also see Randy Roberts, *Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979) for general Dempsey background.

51. *El Universal*, 27 October 1925. The day after Dempsey's arrival, a Mexican (José Rodríguez) brought a lawsuit against him alleging that the champion had stood on the running board of Rodríguez's new car to yell "Viva Mexico" to the crowd, and by the time Dempsey's admirers carried him away, the car had been totally demolished (*Excélsior*, 28 October 1925).

52. *El Universal*, 28 October 1925.

would bend over and pick up his man and then knock him out again.⁵³ A film of Dempsey's "terrific" exhibition and other activities in Mexico City was shown in 10 movie theaters. *El Universal* was so proud of paying Dempsey 5,000 pesos for the film rights that they put a copy of the contract and check on display in their offices for the public to see.⁵⁴

Dempsey's visit to Mexico City was described as an unprecedented success and it was said that some businessmen were interested in bringing him back for a title fight. After eulogizing Dempsey as boxer and person, one writer recalled Jack Johnson's demonstrations of strength and skill in Mexico and described Sam Langford as a local favorite "because he was an humble person ... whose star had dimmed." The writer went on to disclaim any prejudice against the black race, but said, "... one always feels some difference between a person of ebony skin and one of the white race (or even whitish) and we are more pleased when in a fight between a black and a white, the white man wins."⁵⁵

The day after his appearance in El Toreo, Dempsey left Mexico City on the Laredo train, having contracted other exhibitions in Monterrey and Tampico. During the night of November 4, Dempsey and party fled Monterrey, apparently in a rented car, and were able to cross the border into Texas before they could be apprehended by Mexican police. Dempsey was accused of breaking a contract for an exhibition in Tampico and of gambling. The night previous to his flight from justice, Monterrey police had found him playing cards in his hotel room, from which the agents confiscated 50 pesos and his deck of cards.⁵⁶

Dempsey's less than triumphal exit from the country after his 1925 visit did not diminish Mexican enthusiasm for him in his championship match with Gene Tunney the next year. The capital's papers began publishing Dempseyffunney articles over a month before the 23 September 1926 fight, with coverage extending throughout the month. *El Universal* again contracted a direct cable service from ringside and also received fight news by way of the tobacco company's radio station. Bulletins of the fight results were presented on a blackboard in the paper's classified ads offices, on screens atop two buildings, and in the Palacio movie theater.⁵⁷

El Universal proudly published the contents of their 44 bulletins side by side with those of their major competitor, *Excelsior*.⁵⁸ However, *Excelsior* was no

53. *Ibid.*, 1 November 1925. In the pre-exhibition publicity, Dempsey's sparring partner/opponents were described as Jack Lee, Navy champ of the Pacific, and Jack League, champion of the American Army, "neither of whom had ever been knocked out" (*ibid.*, 31 October 1925).

54. *Ibid.*, 5 November 1925.

55. *Ibid.*, 2 November 1925.

56. *Ibid.*, 5-6 November 1925. An explanation of Dempsey's failure to appear in Tampico was issued by *El Universal's* office in New York. They said that while in Monterrey Dempsey had received news that the man in charge of publicity for the proposed Dempsey-Wills fight was claiming that Dempsey would refuse to fight Wills, and that Dempsey hurriedly left Mexico in order to rush to Los Angeles and deny the truth of this statement. A news item originating in Tampico said that Dempsey decided to skip his exhibition there because the American members of the Colonial Club of Tampico threatened to boycott the fight in protest of Dempsey's avoidance of service in the recent war in Europe.

57. *Ibid.*, 22-25 September 1926.

58. *Ibid.*, 24 September 1926.

slouch in reporting the fight. They dedicated many pages to their coverage, including a scientific explanation of why Dempsey had lost.⁵⁹ Although Dempsey had been the favorite and the predicted victor in Mexico, Tunney seemed to be an acceptable substitute hero. Now it was Tunney's turn to promote Dos Equis beer.

In 1927, Mexico City sentiment was again with Dempsey in his rematch with Tunney, and the newspapers outdid themselves with their coverage. *El Universal* used a powerful radio receiver to hear the transmission from ringside. Their Spanish translation then went to General Electric's recently installed Mexican station for rebroadcast to radios in the capital and other Mexican cities. Radios donated by General Electric were set up in the lobbies of the YMCA and several hotels. The bulletins could also be heard in eight stores that sold radios and through loudspeakers on Paseo de la Reforma, the capital's grandest avenue, and in the Plazuela Guardiola.

Bulletins were sent to nine movie theaters and to screens above two buildings. Telephone lines were made available for the public to call in for information. Finally, from a tower on top of the Hotel Regis, courtesy of General Electric, a white light would indicate that Tunney had won and a red light, Dempsey. Broadcasts of the fight were also received in other Mexican cities and were transmitted to the public by way of screens and loudspeakers and through radios in stores.⁶⁰

Mexican boxers' first participation in the Olympics

Mexico intended to include boxing in the first Central American Games of 1926. They held a selection tournament, but no boxers came from Cuba or Guatemala, and the event was not held.⁶¹ Three boxers were included in Mexico's second representation in the Olympics (1928), and one of them won two matches before being eliminated. Mexico's first Olympic medal in any event came in boxing in the 1932 Los Angeles games, a silver medal for the flyweight Cabanas.

Conclusions

Interest in boxing in Mexico and newspaper space (and newer types of information delivery to the public) dedicated to boxing, in absolute terms and in relation to other sports, increased during the period of study, and in comparison with earlier years. Much of this increased emphasis on boxing can be attributed to the participation of foreign boxers such as Jack Johnson, Sam Langford, Luis Angel Firpo, and Jack Dempsey, in Mexican rings and to the emergence of 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.

59. *Excelsior*, 24 September 1926.

60. *El Universal*, 7-25 September 1927.

61. Richard McGehee, "The Origins of Olympism in Mexico," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 10 (December 1993): 313-332.

Regarding Johnson's and Dempsey's relative impacts on boxing in Mexico, there is little common ground for comparison. When Johnson arrived in 1919, Mexico was a shambles. The ex-champion's first statement to the Mexican press, regarding his 1915 fight with Willard, shed doubt on the seriousness of his future bouts in Mexico. However, his physical stature, personality, and life style were attractive to sporting Mexicans, and his activities in Mexico were well publicized over a period of several months. In 1925, Dempsey was the current world champion-the first to visit Mexico. His fights had been reported extensively in the Mexican press and his movies shown in the country. Since 1920, Mexico had become more peaceful and had experienced five years of growing boxing activity and news coverage. There is also evidence of racial consciousness in Mexico, and it is likely that being white was a factor in Dempsey's popularity, which was probably the greatest that Mexicans had ever accorded an athlete, foreign or national, at that time.⁶²

62. An article in the *The New York Times* (2 November 1925) noted that 20,000 people saw Dempsey's Mexico City exhibition and suggested that Dempsey was the most popular foreigner who had ever visited Mexico. (*El Universal* on 1 November 1925 estimated the attendance at 15,000.)