Jack Dempsey—
Oregon Boxer

Boxing fans are familiar with Jack Dempsey. But few realize the original fighter with that name lived in Oregon’s Willamette Valley. Dempsey’s more famous heavyweight counterpart garnered most of the praise. Yet to those who know boxing, the middleweight champion now at rest in an Oregon cemetery was himself an especially gifted pugilist.

Born John Edward Kelly in 1862, he’s now dubbed The Non-Pareil (without peer) to avoid confusion with the more famous heavyweight champion also known as Jack Dempsey. The more famous Dempsey was born William Harrison Dempsey on June 24, 1895 and was but 5 months old when the earlier fighter sharing his ring surname died.

That task was accomplished by The Manassa Mauler, the famed world heavyweight champion also known as Jack Dempsey. The more famous Dempsey was born William Harrison Dempsey on June 24, 1895 and was but 5 months old when the earlier fighter sharing his ring surname died.

For his first match, legend says Kelly the Irish immigrant barrel maker agreed to stand in for a missing fighter in Long Island, New York. Kelly won that match using the ring name Jack Dempsey.

Records vary, but according to the International Boxing Hall of Fame, Dempsey The Non-Pareil won 58 fights, 8 by knockout and lost only 3. He had 8 draws and 4 “no-decisions.” Sports historians have long ranked the original Jack Dempsey an outstanding fighter. In 1954, The Non-Pareil was elected to the Ring Boxing Hall of Fame.

45 Round Fight

Perhaps his most interesting bout was against Johnny Reagan on December 13, 1887. That fight began outdoors at Long Island, New York in torrential rain. By the fourth round, the ring was reportedly underwater. The event was relocated miles away as the rain turned to snow. Dempsey won by knockout in the 45th round.

Kelly eventually married and settled here in Oregon, where he spent his final years battling tuberculosis, his most formidable foe. Plenty of intriguing stories have been told about Jack Dempsey. 16 years after his death, Dempsey’s friend and former pupil, Joseph Askey, sojourne all the way from Baltimore, Maryland to Portland, Oregon’s Calvary Cemetery to leave flowers for his fallen friend. For a time, Dempsey’s burial site was said to be unmarked. This inspired Dempsey’s attorney, M. J. McMahon, to pen ‘Jack Dempsey’s Grave.’

Far out in the wilds of Oregon on a lonely mountainside, where Columbia’s mighty waters roll down to the ocean side

Where the giant fir and cedar are imaged in the wave, overgrown with ferns and lichens

I found no marble monolith, no broken shaft or stone

Dempsey Family Gravesite

John Kelly aka Jack Dempsey, The Non-Pareil

Life Events of Jack Dempsey, The Non-Pareil

- December 13, 1862
  Born John Kelly in County Kildare, Ireland.
- April 7, 1883
  Kelly takes the ring name Jack Dempsey and wins his first bout in 21 rounds against Ed “Bug” McDonald. (Long Island, New York).
- July 30, 1884
  Defeats Canadian George Fuljames and considered the welterweight & middleweight champion (Staten Island, NY).
- February 3, 1886
  Successfully defends world middleweight title vs. Jack Fogarty (TNC).
- March 6, 1886
  Retains world heavyweight title vs. George LaBonne (Larchmont, NY).
- December 13, 1887
- February 18, 1890
  Retains world middleweight title against Australian Billy McCarthy in San Francisco, CA.
- January 14, 1891
  Loses middleweight title to Bob Fitzsimmons in New Orleans, LA.
- November 6, 1895
  John Kelly aka “Jack Dempsey” dies in Portland, Oregon of tuberculosis.

Biography:

John Kelly aka Jack Dempsey, The Non-Pareil

Tale Of The Tape

Stats for Jack Dempsey
“The Non-Pareil”

Height: 5’ 11”
Weight: 128-152 lbs.
Age at first bout: 20
Age at final bout: 32
Record: 58+- Wins/3 Losses

No rose, no shamrock, could I find, no marble here to tell, where sleeps in this forsaken spot, immortal Nonpareil.

A winding wooded canyon road, that mortals seldom tread, leads up this lonely mountain, to the desert of the dead

Oh, Fame, why sleeps thy favored son, in wilds, in woods, in weeds, and shall he ever thus sleep on, Interred his valiant deeds?

'Tis strange New York should thus forget, its “bravest of the brave” and in the fields of Oregon, unmarked, leave Dempsey’s grave.

Dempsey Family Gravesite

Jack Dempsey, The Non-Pareil

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