

RAGING BULLCHIPS

By M. Wilson

Things were different in the Roaring Twenties. Boxers fought at least once a month. Baseball really was the national pastime. Athletes did their talking in newspapers instead of into TV cameras. And sports fans wore their naivete as proudly as they would any uniform.

Just as that chaotic decade was coming to a close, a series of bizarre price fights took place in and around Chicago. These fights cast a dark shadow over the National Pastime and nearly destroyed what little dignity existed in the worlds of professional boxing and football.

In 1929, a gangly gust of Texas-bred wind named Arthur Shires was attracting attention in his first full year as first baseman for the Chicago White Sox. He was hitting .312 and was considered a strong defensive player. He also was earning quite a reputation as a fighter.

Early in the season, he was content to punch out opposing players or an occasional spectator. But, when that didn't seem to quench his aggressions, our slugger turned on his own dugout. More specifically, on Sox manager Lena Blackburne.

Shires won the first bout with a decisive TKO over his 42 year-old mentor. Then, unafraid of threats of being traded, he forced a rematch late in the year.

Several club officials tried to stop this second melee, but it was the club's traveling secretary, Lou Barbour, who got caught right smack in the middle. Once he discovered he couldn't stop the fight, he decided to unleash a few of his own frustrations by biting a nearby -- and unsuspecting -- thumb.

Unfortunately, that thumb was his own! And the bite wound required eight stitches.

When the scrap was all over, Shires had recorded his second victory and had dubbed himself Arthur "The Great."

Trade talk continued fore a while, but, after a miserable 59- 93 campaign, it was Blackburne -- not Shires -- who was fired. With that news, south side baseball fans prepared to hibernate during the cold Chicago winter. Their sleep didn't last long. They were abruptly awakened the day after Thanksgiving by this pre-Ali poem of Shires' which appeared in the morning newspaper:

Great Arthur's been a chump,
And now he's lived to rue it.
Fought fights gratis
It cost him bucks to do it.
Henceforth when Arthur blacks an eye,
Folks'll pay to see it happen.
The kid's a pugilist no doubt,
And soon he'll be a scrappin'.

Well, Chicago's number two fight promoter, James C. Mullen, lunged at the whole idea. Remember, the nation's economy was suffering in 1929, and boxing -- a very popular sport up until then -- was taking more than its share of the punishment.

Fans weren't about to spend their money on anything but name cards, and that kind of overhead was slowly strangling small promoters like Mullen. No wonder he quickly signed Arthur "The Great" Shires for his ring debut for Monday, December 9, two weeks away, without even having an opponent in mind.

Things began to look up for Mullen. Shires' fee was a meager \$1,000, obviously a very small percentage of a gate that was sold out in just two days. The promoter was also thinking about all the money he would rake in once his fighter started fighting big name boxers.

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Meanwhile, Arthur's training program was a bit unorthodox, to say the least. He did actually go into a gym once ... but that was only to help the Golde Clothes basketball team down the Monons of Lafayette, Indiana, 43-20. He didn't think it necessary to do any sparring. However, he did call a press conference to talk about his wardrobe.

"I'll never," said Arthur, "be caught entering the ring with anything but the most entrancing silk dressing gown money can buy. I also plan to wear trunks in blended series, running largely to the royal shades of purple, cardinal red and the like, set off with rich gold braid. Some of these costumes I shall purchase myself, of course, but I expect most of them to come as gifts from my admirers, subject, of course, to my approval.

"I also want to have some striking insignia on the back of my robe -- something more ornate than the Marine dofunny Gene Tunney (former heavyweight champion) wore. But I can't decide whether to make it the White Sox insignia, the seal of my native state -- Massachusetts, my adopted state -- Texas, or simply 'The Great Shires.' Or I might decide to honor one of the four colleges I attended."

This was truly Arthur at his greatest!

There was still the question of whom he was to fight. With only four short days left before the scheduled bout, promoter Mullen rushed a letter he had just received to Chicago *Tribune* sports columnist Edward Burns. It was said to be from a friend of Lena Blackburne's in Cleveland and it made quite clear the sender wanted a piece of the flamboyant first baseman:

This picking on a man many years older than himself, a man who all his life has been a pacifist with his fists, a man who wouldn't hurt a fly, is the work of a coward. Shires' tactics are those of a hijacker. Now I'm about the size and weight of Shires, have had a few fights myself, and it will give me great pleasure to face the much self-advertised tough boy from Texas in the ring and avenge the wrongs done my friend Lena Blackburne. I'm not rich, but it won't cost you much more than the price of a ticket to Chicago. Please give me the opportunity to prove to you and Chicagoans that Shires does most of his fighting orally.

Dan Daly

When Shires read the letter, he called another news conference. He smiled one of his best smiles and told reporters, "That chump is getting himself in for a lot of cuffing. A lot of these flat-footed bums seem to think I'm some sort of pushover who's never been inside the ropes. I never heard of this Daly and I don't care what kind of truck he drives."

So, it was official. Art Shires' first legitimate opponent was to be Mysterious Dan Daly.

Chicago was suddenly thrust into a widespread guessing game. Who was Dan Daly? Well, one of Burns' readers -- obviously a trivia buff -- recalled that there was a Dan Daly who had once stayed nine rounds with former heavyweight champion Jess Willard. Another source swore he knew for sure that the mystery man was the legendary Jack Johnson.

The most reliable guess, however, seemed to come from Charles V. Miller, a Lincoln Park forester, who firmly identified Daly as his very own boyhood hero, Otto Schilner ... a man who, said Miller, was highly principled and stood 6'6" and weighed 225 pounds.

Oh how the tension was building!

It went even higher when Gen. John V. Clinnin, Chairman of the Illinois State Athletic Commission, threatened to revoke the fight permit until he personally met Daly ... or Schilner ... or Johnson ... or whoever he was. Well, the chairman and the rest of Chicago had to wait until the very last bus from Cleveland rolled into town the Sunday night before the fight.

When he stepped off that bus, the city was filled with sighs of both relief and disappointment. He wasn't the same Daly who fought Willard. He wasn't Jack Johnson. He wasn't even the gigantic Schilner. He

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was just a mere mortal ... a 22-year-old, 6'2", 206-pound amateur pugilist who claimed seven knockouts to his credit.

Most important, he was a man who, he assured all of Chicago, hated "braggarts."

At weigh-ins on Monday morning, he told the press: "I understand Mr. Lou Comiskey, one of Mr. Shires' employers, is to have a seat at ringside. I don't wish to injure Mr. Comiskey, but I don't want him to be surprised if his loud first baseman lands right on top of his (Comiskey's) bosom."

So, the scene was set. The roller rink at White City Amusement Park was filled. Mysterious Dan Daly stood scowling in one corner: Arthur, dressed in a crushed raspberry robe trimmed in black and gold, with ART -- The Great -- SHIRES on the back, was in the other. Then, when the ring announcer introduced "the pride of baseball," the crowd went wild.

The bell rang and for 21 full seconds this odd couple traded a flurry of rights and lefts with no pretense of any defense. Then, as suddenly as the whole thing had begun back in November, it was over. Some said it was a right; others swore it was a left. Whatever it was, it laid Mysterious Dan Daly out for the ten count ... plus three or four minutes.

The Great was the talk of Chicago.

Rumors said Daly would get another chance; there was also frequent speculation that Arthur would fight the city's amateur champ next. Then sports-minded Chicago businessman Charles Bidwell announced he would put up a \$5,000-winner-take-all purse if Shires would go in the ring against one of Bidwell's Bentley- Murray Printing Company employees -- 55 year-old boxing veteran, Ted McCafferty.

None of these matches ever materialized ... and the reason was a birthday party!

You see, while Shires was trading punches with Daly, Chicago Bear center-linebacker George Trafton (a member of Pro Football's Hall of Fame) was across town celebrating one of his birthdays. He claimed it was his 28th ... but friends who recalled his stories of an army hitch in 1917 and '18 after graduating from Notre Dame, found 28 a little hard to swallow.

Whatever his age, he and his pals were feeling no pain when the result of the Shires-Daly fight came over the radio.

Trafton's friends all praised Shires; big George (6'1", 230 lbs.) scoffed at him. Furthermore, the Bear center said he could whip any puny baseball player with just one hand. That crack was more than Garland Grange (George's teammate and Red's brother) could resist.

Grange quickly telephoned Mullen at the roller rink and, before he hung up, he had challenged Art Shires on Trafton's behalf. Everyone at the party laughed and cheered big George ... then memories of the challenge faded amidst morning headaches.

But Mullen didn't have a headache. He had visions of greenbacks dancing in his head as he phoned George that Tuesday to pin down details of an upcoming fight. However, in the very bright light of day, George Trafton saw no particular reason to battle the ferocious first baseman and he told Mullen so. That's when the promoter mentioned a \$1,000 guarantee and a percentage of the gate ... and when Trafton regained his muddled memory.

Sure, he would fight The Great on Monday, just six-and-a-half days away.

At this point, we need to put things in their proper perspective. Baseball and boxing were the key sports of the period. Professional football, on the other hand, was regarded with all the respectability of an alley fight. In fact, local papers often neglected to post the scores of home team games. But, if any Bear player (other than Red Grange) was known to the average Chicagoan, it was George Trafton.

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Trafton's unusual notoriety is best explained by quoting a fellow Chicago Bear: "George is the toughest, meanest, most ornery critter alive." And, in later years, the public would discover this aggressiveness was equaled only by his persistence.

In 1930, the Chicago Bears did not offer him a contract. Instead, they told the press he had retired. Big George squelched that report by releasing the following statement:

"Although the Messrs. Halas and Sternman did not offer me a contract, I've joined the squad anyway and am going to make them give me back my old job at center."

He played every game in 1930. Then, again in 1931, Halas, planning to build with youth, would tell Trafton he was through. George would vow he would be the Bears' starting center in the season opener ... and he would be right. The same old problem would pop up again in 1932. The newspapers would carry the coach's line-up for the coming year and George's name would not be on the list. But he would show uninvited for practice and, at the age of 31-plus, beat out all competition.

This was George Trafton, Arthur "The Great" Shires' next ring opponent. And, what had started out as a party gag, was now the prime topic of Chicago conversation. Unfortunately, not all the conversation was favorable.

For example, there was the talk coming from the Benevolent and Protective Brotherhood of Professional Pugilists. This group of assorted fighters and handlers publicly denounced the scheduled bout. Joe Sherman, brotherhood president, instructed his ethics committee to investigate the fight, then issued this stance: "The members of the brotherhood feel their art is being taken too lightly and that the promoters are showing a tendency to pack the premises at the expense of the finer phases of pugilism."

Sherman also made sure Shires and Trafton were aware all professional fighters were members of his brotherhood, including any sparring partners they might encounter during the week. This was not a threat he said. He was merely cautioning both so-called boxers as to the hazards of the sport and didn't want his organization blamed for an injury which might accidentally be inflicted by a "brother."

He should not have opened his mouth ... because, as soon as he had, the sports writing community was quick to help him put his foot in it.

What about the fight in New York the same night as the Shires-Daly contest, they asked. Wasn't that between two of Sherman's brothers? Hadn't the first round gone without one, single blow being landed? Then, in the second round, when the knockout finally came, wasn't it caused by a crushing blow to the shoulder? And, hadn't the loser earned the instant moniker, Fainting Phil Scott?

Obviously, all these embarrassing questions ended the brotherhood's threats. But that wasn't the end of all threats.

Just prior to the much-publicized fight, two characters with obvious -- but unnatural -- bulges under their armpits paid Trafton and his manager, Garland Grange, a visit. They wanted to know who was going to win. Trafton proudly announced he was; they said wrong.

The two football players decided their boxing careers were over. They wanted no part of a fixed fight ... and they didn't want to take up residence in the crowded Chicago River. But, before they could let Mullen know the deal was off, they had another visitor.

They recognized him immediately as the infamous "Machine Gun" Jack McGurn. (McGurn would be killed a few later in a gangland war.) Now it was his turn to ask who was going to win the fight. When George sheepishly repeated that he was, McGurn said good. He was glad to hear everything was on the up-and-up, and urged both Trafton and Grange to let him know if anyone was to suggest otherwise.

When they told him about the other two guys, McGurn assured them he would take care of everything. He wished George luck and left. The two thugs, like Sherman's brotherhood, were never heard from again.

So much for Trafton's training program, the brotherhood and gangsters. But what was The Great up to all this time? Surely, he wasn't in training.

Of course not! Instead, he was making plans for his third fight. Remember, a football player just wasn't the celebrity a baseball player was in 1929. So, Art went shopping for one of his own kind and he came up with cross-town rival Hack Wilson. The Windy City really went wild with that news and, now, the rest of the country was beginning to notice.

Up on the north side, Cub slugger Wilson had heard about all the money Shires was getting for putting on gloves, and he was eager to get in on the profit sharing. But money wasn't his only motive. A few months earlier, he had lost a fly ball in the sun during the fourth game of the World Series ... and second-guessers had been accusing him of blowing the championship ever since. By whipping Shires, thought Wilson, he could be a good guy once again.

Meanwhile, Jim Mullen was ecstatic. Just a few weeks before, he was unable to make ends meet; then the Shires-Daly affair put him in the black; the Shires-Trafton battle was already a sell-out; and, now, he was thinking of renting one of Chicago's two baseball parks for the Shires-Wilson confrontation.

By the time December 16 rolled around, the city was in a frenzy. Mullen was counting his chickens. Shires was all scarlet and gold braid. And Trafton was reluctant! In fact, just five minutes before the fight, he wanted to call the whole thing off ... not from fear, but from pride.

You see, the final phase of his training program had been to play a quarter of the New York Giant game the day before the fight. During that brawl, George made a bone-crushing tackle on the Giants' rugged fullback Tony Plansky ... and gave himself a handsome black eye.

Now, with the crowd growing impatient, Trafton was concerned with the shiner ... and his image. He didn't want anyone to think that Shires had done that to him. Instead, he insisted the crowd, the press, and the listening radio audience he told just how he got the black eye, before he would put one foot in the ring.

As the ringmaster was doing that, Trafton had another visitor. This one didn't have a gun, but he did have a snoot full of booze. He staggered up to big George, leaned on the center's shoulder and announced that he -- and only he -- had the secret to beating The Great. He remembered how Shires had charged across the ring to get to Daly, so, if Trafton just stuck out his big left hand, Shires would surely run smack into it.

And that, said George's unofficial trainer, would be all there was to that. The plan sounded logical to Trafton: finally he was ready.

Shires had been ready. He felt gorgeous and was strutting around in his crimson robe. Trafton, in a Chicago Bear-blue robe, was quite drab in comparison, only his size and three full ringside rows of his teammates seemed in his favor. Most of the cheers were for Art.

Then the bell rang! Shires started with the same sort of wild burst of energy he had used to put poor Mysterious Dan Daly away so quickly; but big George's long left arm held him off. Art tried again; no success. Everyone in roller arena howled for Trafton to swing, unaware he was content to wait for Shires' suicide plunge into the extended glove.

Art charged again: still nothing.

Maybe Trafton decided his tactic really was impractical, or maybe he just got tired of holding up his heavy glove. Whatever the reason, in the middle of round one, he suddenly dropped his guard and joined The Great toe-to-toe in the center of the ring for a pier-six brawl ... much to Arthur's chagrin.

A ponderous right hit him smack on the chin. His knees buckled and he grabbed Trafton's legs in desperation. Somehow he managed to regain his footing without a count, just in time to stumble into a

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thundering right uppercut that could have -- and should have -- ended the match. He went down for a two count, stood halfway up as the bell rang, then wilted without being touched again.

His corner help was able to revive him and he came back in round two filled with determination. But little else. In the first few seconds, he wandered into a wild right hand that finished the fight.

Oh, don't be confused. That right didn't knock Shires out, it was just the last semblance of a punch thrown inside the ring the rest of the night. From that moment on, the brave gladiators came out of their corners only to loiter and pant in the center of the ring. To offer a little non-violent variety, first would seem to chase the other around, then they would trade places. Once, if only by accident, they did meet face-to-face, toe-to- toe. Deafening cheers pleaded for a knockout, but both men's arms appeared welded to their sides.

The football player was accustomed to hostile crowds. He laughed and even managed to wave to his fellow Bears. Shires, last week's tough guy, could only muster a weak smile far below his standard fare. Obviously, both were praying for the bell to ring before they fell from exhaustion.

Carroll "Pat" Flanagan, who was describing the fiasco to the radio public, didn't see any humor in Trafton's chatting with his ringside comrades, so, in the best broadcasting tradition, he called it like he saw it. That was a mistake! His microphone was just outside the ring and right in front of Bear guard Bill Fleckenstein. When Fleck heard Flanagan's negative comments about his teammate, he threw the most damaging blow of the night -- a stinging right to the announcer's chops. Flanagan's blow- by-blow account signed off ahead of schedule with a strained, "I've been struck!"

The crowd, by now, was aware the fight inside the ring was going nowhere, so it began to create its own amusements. Since camera flashbulbs of that era often made explosive pops when they went off, many startled by-standers instinctively attacked the photographers. Other by-standers then instinctively attacked the attacking by-standers. Confusion took over.

The aisles were jammed with private squabbles and the fans outside the roller rink mistook all the noise inside as a response to an exciting boxing match -- a match they were missing. So, they broke through windows and crashed the gate to see what was happening.

Just as everything was about to get out of hand -- and before the police could arrive in force -- the Shires-Trafton bout was over and semi-silence awaited the judges' decision. The referee raised George's hand; the crowd cheered; and the apparent silliness of it all squelched the impending riot.

The purse for both men set a new record for previous amateurs boxing in a professional ring. Nevertheless, Hack Wilson lost interest in fighting Shires ... or Trafton, for that matter. And poor Jim Mullen had to forget about ever hobnobbing with the very rich.

Only Arthur "The Great" Shires refused to throw in the towel. Two days after the Trafton fight, he signed a vaudeville contract to take his boxing prowess on the road. He explained that, by doing battle on the stage rather than in smoke-filled arenas, he was merely avoiding trouble with all the various brotherhoods and boxing commissions.

His first stop was Buffalo. There, on December 26, he KO'd Bad Bill Bailey with the same devastating style he had revealed in his debut bout. In fact, his method was so similar, he disposed of Bailey in just 82 seconds. It also caused a suspicious Chicago sports writer, who was in New York for the fight, to compare the two opponents as well as the two bouts. Bad Bill Bailey, insisted the riled writer, was -- without a doubt -- Mysterious Dan Daly in disguise!

A closer look at Shires' vaudeville contract revealed he was to meet Mean Mike Haley, the Snarling Street Car Conductor, in Philadelphia ... and then Sullen Sam Staley, the Unreasonable House Detective, in Detroit.

Could it be, the national press asked, that Daly-Bailey was also the scheduled Haley and/or Staley? There was never an official answer to that question because, instead of going to Philadelphia or Detroit,

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Art Shires went directly to the office of baseball commissioner and white-haired totalitarian, Kenesaw Mountain Landis. When he got there, the old man told him one more "fist fight" would mean no more baseball.

So, The Great reluctantly returned to first base. And Daly- Bailey-Haley-Staley went back to oblivion. But Trafton stayed in the ring for a while. He knocked out a husky gut named Rudy Hoffman and was crowned the Non-Boxing Heavyweight Champion of the World. Then he was floored in the first round by giant Primo Carnera, early in his bogus climb to the real heavyweight title.

All these shenanigans took place in a little more than one month, and by early 1930, boxing gloves were back in the more capable hands of full-time pugilists ... until 1971. One day, sports fans read in their morning paper, basketball legend Wilt "The Stilt" Chamberlain had issued a formal challenge to former heavyweight champion Muhammed Ali to step into the boxing ring with him.

Ali toyed with the possibility for a while, then decided on a serious comeback instead. That's when a certain Chicago promoter suggested the basketball player take on some other talented athlete for what he dubbed the Non-Boxing Heavyweight Championship of the World.

If Chamberlain would buy the idea, the promoter had a ready and willing opponent waiting in the wings. At first, he wouldn't say who it was. Then, after some prodding, he told the public his contender was a rugged, but little known, linebacker for none other than the Chicago Bears. But, by this time, Wilt lost interest and the Non-Boxing title went back into retirement.

Oh, by the way, the name of that linebacker was -- believe it or not -- Bill "The Spoiler" Staley.