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Billy Conn - The Pittsburgh Kid

Paul F. Kennedy

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There has never been a fighter like Billy Conn. Handsome as a movie star and tough as a junkyard dog, Conn threw combinations with the beauty and speed of later masters Sugar Ray Robinson and Muhammad Ali. The kid from the East Liberty section of Pittsburgh began boxing professionally at age 16, as his manager Johnny Ray fed him older, more experienced pros in a "baptism of fire." Conn developed quickly. At age 19 and 20 he defeated most of the world's best middleweights, a division rich with talent. Still growing, by age 21 he won the world light-heavyweight title. After dominating that division, he sought greater challenge in the heavyweight division. He beat three of the best heavyweights, one by knockout and two by easy decision. Only one challenge remained - the great heavyweight champion Joe Louis. Their first fight remains one of boxing's all-time classics, ranked by some as the greatest fight ever. Conn's story transcends boxing. He pursued and eloped with the love of his life, the beautiful Mary Louise Smith, despite her father's vehement and public opposition. Conn and his father-in-law tangled in a chaotic brawl at a lavish christening party at the Smith home. Billy starred in a Hollywood movie, The Pittsburgh Kid, and developed friendships with big stars like Bob Hope, Robert Taylor, and Frank Sinatra. Through all the glamour Billy remained the unpretentious "kid" from gritty Pittsburgh, the city he loved. He became an icon of that city, of the downtrodden Depression-era working class, and of the American Irish. Conn's place in boxing and American folk history has been neglected and forgotten in recent decades. His story of a poor kid with talent and spirit who went for it all is one worth reading.

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