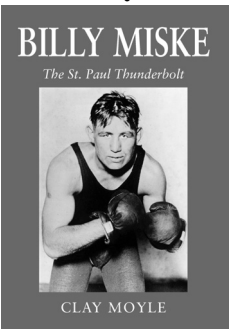


New Bio Sheds Light On Fighter's Tragic Life And Career

Review by Don L. Stradley



If you grew up during the 1960s, 70s, or 80s, when boxing magazines were plentiful and still paid respects to the past, you may know the story of Billy Miske. He was the fighter who

learned at the height of his career that he was fatally ill with a kidney ailment. Lacking money, he continued fighting to provide for his family. The tale was always told in the tone that writers like Jimmy Cannon enjoyed, hard-boiled but sentimental. Even the toughest fight fans couldn't read about Miske without getting a lump in their throat.

The Miske story took place in the 1920s, but it had legs. When W.C. Heinz compiled *The Fireside Book of Boxing* for Simon and Schuster in 1961, he included Minnesota writer George Barton's touching tribute, *Billy Miske's Last Christmas*. That story, and variations of it, would occasionally be reprinted in *The Ring* and *Boxing Illustrated*. Even *Sports Illustrated* gave the Miske story a spin in 1984 and again in 1999, allowing Miske to stay on the periphery of boxing lore, alongside such famous tales as Pancho Villa's mysterious death, and Stanley Ketchel being "fatally shot in the back by the common-law husband of the lady who was cooking his breakfast." Two things kept Miske's legend from looming larger: he never won a title; and he was from Minnesota. Had he been from New York, he would have benefited from having the world's loudest media horn broadcasting his tale. He could've been boxing's version of Lou Gehrig.

Clay Moyle's new book, *Billy Miske, The St. Paul Thunderbolt*, (\$29.95, 199 pages, hardcover, Win By KO Publications) helps us understand Miske's place in his era. Miske was as good as a fighter can be without being "great." Indeed, when Miske and Jack Dempsey were both young fighters on the rise, they fought to a 10-round

draw. Dempsey beat Miske in two later bouts, but he often cited that draw with Miske as being pivotal in his career. Miske, though, remained on a second tier of talented fighters, a cut above the likes of "Gunboat" Smith, and Fred Fulton, but not quite as good as Dempsey or Harry Greb. It is likely that his failing health played a part in his limitations, but he remained a rugged contender up until his final bouts.

Moyle, who gave us an excellent biography of Sam Langford in 2008, provides a detailed, fight by fight look at Miske's career. The fight recaps are interesting, as are the tidbits in between. Although some of the extra info, such as an unnecessary summary of Dempsey's career, slows the momentum of Miske's story, much of it is fascinating: cops battling a crowd at a Brooklyn bout between Miske and Jack Dillon; the "sneak" fights arranged on the sly before prizefighting was made legal; the impact of World War I on the sport. To Moyle's credit, he doesn't shy away from the less attractive aspects of the era, and hints that at least a couple of Miske's bouts were fought at less than full speed. At a time when fighters fought many times per month, the occasional "arrangement" to go easy was inevitable. This doesn't make Miske a villain. If he took part in a few shams, he was simply a working man trying to make a buck.

If the Miske book falls a bit short of Moyle's Langford bio, it is probably because Langford's epic life is a hard act to follow. A Miske bio is also daunting because much of Miske's life was never documented. We never quite understand how he could keep his condition a secret and continue fighting. And it would've been nice to learn more about Miske's wife, although the few facts Moyle gathered about her are interesting.

"There were definitely parts of Miske's life that I couldn't uncover that were very frustrating to me," Moyle told *Boxing World* via email. "For example, I wish I could have

uncovered a lot more detail concerning things like his childhood and how he and Marie met, their courtship period, etc. I looked everywhere I could possibly think in search of that type of information...but I just never came across anything like that.

"I also talked with his grandsons and was hoping they might be able to help me fill in some of those gaps, but they just never thought to solicit that type of information from their grandmother when they were younger and she was still alive. I think that kind of detail would have enriched the story."

Still, despite the rough edges, *Billy Miske: The St. Paul Thunderbolt* is a commendable look at a forgotten fighter. According to Moyle, Hollywood might be calling, too.

"A writer/director/producer in California named David M. Rosenthal is interested in making a movie about Miske and we've reached an agreement on a price for the book's film rights if he's able to obtain financing for the project. Billy's story could make for a great movie if it was done right," Moyle told *Boxing World*.

One of the beloved aspects of the Miske story is that his wife was a singer, and he wanted to buy her a piano for what turned out to be their last Christmas together. Miske's wife, protecting her husband's legacy, allegedly spurned offers from Hollywood to make a film of Miske's life. It's interesting to imagine the sort of feature that could've been produced in the old studio system. Back then it might've starred Jimmy Cagney, or Gary Cooper. It would've been filmed in luscious black and white, and would have a sweeping musical score. In 2013, who knows what Hollywood can do with it? But if it is handled with care, and ends with a lone shot of that piano, there won't be a dry eye in the house.

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