

Billy Miske: The St. Paul Thunderbolt By Clay Moyle: Win by KO Publications, 2011

Did he have a death wish?

FIVE YEARS TO LIVE
Miske was told the terrible news at the age of 24 but he fought right up to the end**Miske's remarkable story is of a man who seemed to have no fear, even when he was dying**

Despite being inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 2010, it's unlikely that many readers outside Minnesota will know much about Billy Miske. My own sense of him, if I had one at all, was as one of those tough opponents who kept popping up on boxing records in the years after the First World War, a handful for any fighter, not one to be taken lightly by anyone, but never quite good enough to win a world title, either at heavyweight or light-heavy.

In many ways, reading Clay Moyle's comprehensive biography — surely the first and last word on its subject — simply confirmed my vague impressions of Miske. Like many of the best fighters of his period, he fought everybody — won a few, lost a few, was robbed of decisions a few times. Miske's list of fights reads like a Who's Who of boxing in the 1910s and 20s. He fought Harry Greb, possibly the most dangerous man ever to set foot in the ring, on a number of occasions, and even managed to come out of their first fight with a draw on a newspaper decision, though in fairness Greb had stepped in at the last possible moment as a replacement for a fighter with a tooth abscess. He fought Jack Dempsey three times — their first decision was also a newspaper draw, their second a points loss, and their last (when he challenged Dempsey for the heavyweight crown) a third-round knockout for the champ. Miske's record also records wins against Battling Levinsky (whom he fought twice in two weeks in October 1916 — those were the days!), Tommy Gibbons, Fred Fulton, Gunboat Smith, and the ever-villainous Captain Bob Roper,

unsurprisingly disqualified for low blows in their first fight in 1922 (has anyone ever written a biography of this infamously dirty journeyman? He's a regular cameo performer in biographies of fighters of the period, and always gouging, biting, or aiming well-timed uppercuts at the balls). Billy Miske is one of those fighters who are testimony to the extraordinary strength in depth of boxing during this period — or, to turn that proposition on its head, one of those fighters who would certainly have won a world title if he'd happened to be born at a quieter time for the fight game.

What sets Billy Miske apart from the others, though, and makes his story especially worth hearing, is not so much his quality as a fighter but, alas, the manner of his death. In 1919, when he was 24 years old, he was diagnosed with Bright's Disease, morbid inflammation of the kidneys producing fevers, vomiting and

severe testicular pain, which at the time was treated with diuretics, laxatives and the severe regimen known as the Hay Diet, which stipulated the total separation of acidic and alkaline foods in meals. The problem with the Hay Diet was that it didn't work. Miske was given five years to live.

More than almost any other condition, you'd think that Bright's disease would rule out a career as a fighter — especially when facing opponents like Roper, for whom the testicles and the kidneys were irresistible targets. But Billy Miske kept on fighting right up to his death, age 29, on 1 January 1924. What this means is that Miske got into the ring with some of the most ferocious characters in boxing history while he was terminally ill. Even in an age of legendary Iron Men, this one really takes the biscuit (it's hard to imagine a mere tooth abscess preventing him from fighting). One inference from

this would be to conclude that Miske was simply insane. And frankly, he must have been, though the story's more nuanced than that. Having been diagnosed with Bright's Disease, he poured all of his money into a car dealership. When that failed, he felt he had no option but to return to fighting. The tale of fighters returning to the ring through economic necessity and doing themselves serious damage in the process is unfortunately a familiar one to any follower of boxing, but the case of Billy Miske takes this to grotesque new heights — or, rather, lows. Still, without wishing to stray into pop-psychology, it's legitimate to ask whether Billy Miske had a death wish. Why else would a dying man fight Jack Dempsey?

These are speculations for the novelist rather than the biographer. Clay Moyle is to be congratulated for recording Billy Miske's life and achievements so meticulously.

