

**S**tanley Ketchel's journey to his lofty position in the boxing world was a short but spectacular one. It began outside of Grand Rapids, where he was born Stanislaus Kiecal on September 14, 1886 to parents of Polish descent. His father Thomas was a laborer and his mother, Julia, a homemaker. At age 15, she gave birth to Stanislaus and a son named John the following year.

Growing up on a dairy farm, Stanislaus worked with his father and filled his spare time with dime novels about frontier outlaws like Jesse James and Billy the Kid. He discovered early on that he had a knack for fighting and was expelled from school in the eighth grade for beating up a local bully. At the age of 15, he hopped a westbound train.

Looking for odd jobs or handouts, Stanislaus wandered across the country for a year, sleeping in mining camps and working for food. He passed through Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, and Utah before landing in Butte, Montana with a new name: Stanley Ketchel. Butte was a booming copper-mining town with more than its share of saloons, theaters, honky-tonks, and fight clubs.

At a fair in Butte, Ketchel saw a boxing booth and decided to try his luck. A "barker" tossed him a pair of gloves and challenged him to last three rounds with the champ for a dollar. The teenager knocked out the star with one punch, took the money, and decided that fighting was the easiest way to make a living. He was immediately offered a job as a bouncer and boxing-booth fighter at the Casino Theater, taking on all comers for \$20 a week. "I

hit them so hard they use[d] to fall over the footlights and land in people's laps," Ketchel later recalled.

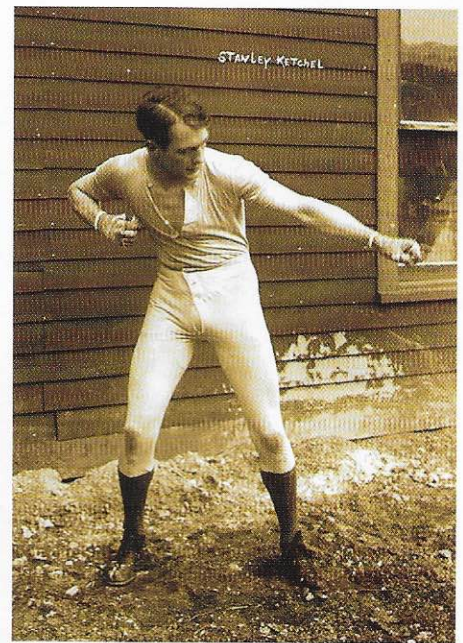
Without formal training and with little more than natural strength, quick reflexes, and a strong chin, Ketchel turned professional in May 1903. In his first recorded fight, he knocked out Kid Tracy in one round, then lost a six-round contest to a boxing instructor named Maurice Thompson. Undeterred, Ketchel continued to hone his craft in Montana and fought his first 41 matches there—building an impressive record of 36 wins, two losses, and three draws.

Wild Bill Nolan, the owner and operator of the Casino Theater, searched for a nickname for his rising young star. Nolan suggested "Kid Ketchel" or "Cyclone Kid Ketchel," but Stanley refused. He was later surprised to hear himself introduced as "The Michigan Assassin." The "Assassin" moniker stuck, and the newspapers loved it.

Ketchel's explosive, nonstop style and high knockout percentage attracted large crowds to his bouts, including many females who were drawn to his good looks and muscular physique. Ketchel enjoyed his newfound popularity and developed a reputation as a womanizer.

Short on competition in Butte, Ketchel moved his campaign to California in 1907. There he won his first three fights and fought a 20-round draw against Joe Thomas, who touted himself as world's champion. In attendance for the Thomas contest was promoter James Coffroth, who had bet heavily on Thomas. Impressed with Ketchel's commanding performance, Coffroth invited the fighter to a rematch at his newly built Mission Street Arena near San Francisco. Ketchel won the scheduled 45-rounder by knockout in the 32nd round, and claimed the world middleweight championship for himself.

In February 1908, Ketchel faced off against Mike "Twin"



Upper: Ketchel was proud of his middleweight championship belt. Lower: The boxer was one of the inaugural inductees into the International Boxing Hall of Fame. All photos courtesy of the author.