



Billy Papke was Ketchel's most competitive foe. Still the "Michigan Assassin" managed to best him three out of four times. And the one loss was highly controversial.

Sullivan, an East Coast fighter who also claimed to be champion. Ketchel knocked him out in the first round and gained general recognition as the undisputed middleweight king. He was just 21 at the time.

Ketchel's first title defense was a knockout in 20 rounds against Sullivan's brother, Jack "Twin" Sullivan, also a former champion. He then beat Billy Papke, the "Illinois Thunderbolt," by decision in 10. He topped Hugo Kelly by a knockout in three, then beat Joe Thomas for a third time. In September 1908, he lost his championship belt to Papke by a knockout, but the bout was mired in controversy.

Before the opening bell, it was customary for fighters to touch gloves. As the referee finished his prefight instructions, Ketchel extended his hand for a shake and Papke smashed him in the face with an explosive, blinding punch that drove him into the ropes. As Papke pressed the action, the dazed and confused Ketchel was unable to defend himself. He was knocked down four times in the first round and his right eye was closed at the start of the second. He fought round after round with determination and heart, but it wasn't enough. The fight was stopped in the 12th, and Billy Papke was declared the new middleweight champion.

Ketchel was enraged by the cheap shot and immediately petitioned for a rematch. It was scheduled for two months later with Papke a 10-7 betting favorite. Meeting in the center of the ring for the referee's instructions, Ketchel looked at Papke and said, "There will be none of this handshaking business after the bell. Shake hands now, and come out fighting." (This last sentence has been used as a referee's command ever since.)

This time, Ketchel was in complete control. At the first bell, he unloaded a barrage of punches from every angle on Papke and never let up. Ringside reporter W.O. McGeehan wrote, "Hatred inspires every blow in the fight. Papke's stubborn courage is of no avail before the power of the Assassin." A pulverizing body blow crumpled Papke in the first round and from then on, it was all Ketchel.

Ketchel told his rival, "It took you 12 rounds to stop a blind man. I'm going to let your eyes stay open until the 11th so you can see me knock you out." In that round, an explosive left dropped Papke to the canvas. "It was a punch that shook his entire frame and sent his head crashing against the wooden platform," wrote McGeehan. "Pain [w]racked [him] and with his heart beaten out of him by body punches in the first few rounds...it was all over in