

punched, Johnson would parry it, tie him up and render him ineffective.

In the seventh, Johnson made a futile attempt to end the contest early. He charged Willard with a flurry of blinding lefts and rights that sent Willard back-pedaling and flailing his arms like a man trying to ward off a swarm of bees. Though staggered momentarily, at the end of the round, Willard returned to his corner unhurt.

By the 15th round, the pace had slowed and the momentum of the fight had shifted. Johnson's age and lack of conditioning were beginning to show as Willard subtly picked up the pace. Now the aggressor, Big Jess began to stalk Johnson, trying to open his defense with feints and jabs. At the end of the round he landed a power punch that made Johnson's golden smile disappear.

At the end of the 22nd, Johnson gestured to Jack Curly to escort his wife from the stadium. He sat wearily in his corner, expressionless, staring across the ring at the better man, continuing to wilt in the scorching heat. By the end of the 25th round, the outcome was inevitable.

The bell rang for the 26th, and Johnson had to be called out of his corner by referee Welsh. The champion lumbered to the center of the ring and made a last ditch effort to strike a telling blow by reaching through Willard's octopus arms, landing a left-right combination to Willard's face with no effect.

Next the fighters squared up in the center of the ring, their left feet planted in front them when suddenly Willard stabbed a left jab to Johnson's face and followed with a devastating right to Johnson's stomach. The

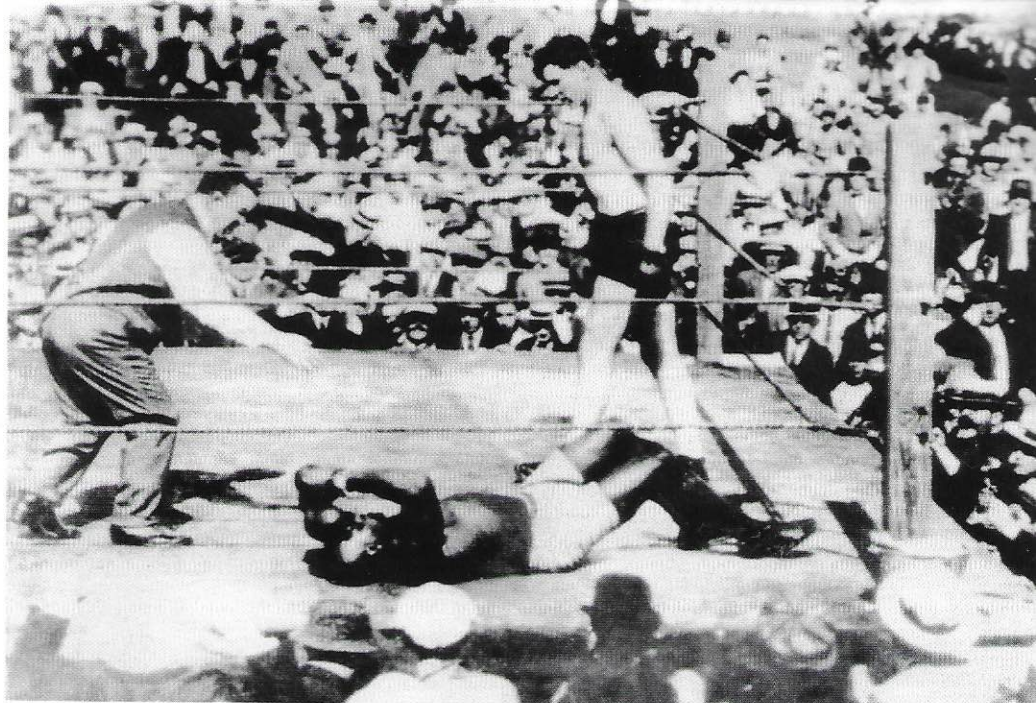
"If Johnson threw it, I just wish he threw it sooner. It was hotter than hell down there." —Jess Willard

champion grimaced and fell forward into a clinch. They wrestled around until Welsh broke them apart.

Willard cautiously plodded forward, saw an opening and fired a feint at Johnson's stomach. He then delivered a lightning quick straight right that landed on the point of Johnson's chin, and the champ went down. He slumped to the canvas, rolled over on his back and was counted out.

Johnson lied motionless with his right arm shading his eyes from the scorching sun. He made no attempt to rise as Willard's hand was raised in victory. Pandemonium broke out in the stadium as straw hats were flung high into the air against the deafening roar of the crowd. The "White Hope" era was over.

After the fight Johnson accepted defeat by stating, "I've been beaten fairly by youth and condition." But later he would publish a sworn statement in *Ring Magazine* claiming he "threw" the fight for \$50,000 from Jack Curly and a pass to return to the United States. "Shading my eyes



Johnson made Willard look clumsy in the early going. But badly out of shape and fighting in devastating heat, the champ was worn down in the bout, scheduled for 45 rounds. In the 26th, the challenger finished him with a right to the chin. Johnson would later claim he threw the fight.

from the sun was proof of the fix," said Johnson.

Why would anyone wait 26 rounds in the blazing heat to take a dive? Johnson claimed Curly agreed to deliver the payoff to his wife at ringside. Johnson specified \$500 bills so the package would be small and quickly counted. When the package finally arrived in the 25th round, "Lucille gave me the signal," said Johnson. "I replied that everything was O.K. and she departed. In the 26th, I let the fight end as it did."

"Nobody ever took Johnson's charges of fakery seriously," said Curly. Willard stated simply, "If Johnson threw it, I just wish he threw it sooner. It was hotter than hell down there."

After Havana, Willard did a run on Broadway for \$5,000 per week, but made his fortune on a cowboy tour with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. In 1919 he starred in a feature film. He also lost his title that year to Jack Dempsey, who destroyed him in three rounds.

Johnson and Lucille left Cuba at the end of April for Spain, where Johnson continued his boxing career. He opened an advertising agency, acted in films, tried his hand at bullfighting and even worked as a spy for the Americans. In 1919, he drifted to Mexico, opened a café and petitioned for his return to the United States. He finally surrendered to federal authorities in July 1920 and he served 10 months of his one-year sentence. Lucille divorced him in 1924. Johnson made a comeback of sorts after prison against second-rate fighters and had his last bout at 51-years-old.

On June 10, 1946, on his way to the Joe Louis-Billy Conn rematch in New York, Johnson was refused service at a restaurant in Raleigh, North Carolina. He sped away in his new Lincoln Zephyr, lost control, and hit a utility pole and was killed. He was 68-years-old.

The bout left its mark on Cuba where boxing became national pastime. The island crowned its first world champion in 1931 when Kid Chocolate (Eligio Sardiñas) took the junior lightweight title. ❖

F. Daniel Somrack, a film producer, also wrote Boxing in San Francisco.