Leonard, Benny (1896-1947) Encyclopedia Article

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Considered by many as the greatest fighter of American sport's ostensible "golden age," the 1920s, Benny Leonard (born Benjamin Leinert) was one of the few white champions of his era to take on all comers, regardless of race. Nicknamed "The Ghetto Wizard," (Ghetto for his Lower East side upbringing, Wizard for his cerebral, mind over matter approach to fighting), Leonard is generally considered the greatest Jewish boxer of all time. In 1917, at the age of 21, Leonard was lightweight champion, and he held the title for nearly eight years, at which point he retired at his mother's request. Leonard had invested the small fortune he made in the ring, and was apparently financially secure for life when he stepped down as the unvanquished 135 pound champion in 1925. Hit harder by the stock market crash of 1929 than by any opponent, Leonard made an ill fated comeback in 1931, eventually losing to Irish Jimmy McClarnin, who at the time was making a name for himself knocking out Jewish fighters. Nevertheless, Leonard is considered by many, the greatest fighter of the first half of the twentieth century.

Further Reading:

Liben, Meyer. *Justice Hunger: A Short Novel and Nine Stories.* New York, Dial Press, 1967.

Schulberg, Budd. *Sparring with Hemingway: And Other Legends of the Fight Game*. Chicago, I.R. Dee, 1995.

A boxing match between Benny Leonard (left) and Pal Silvers (right), 1931.

Shapiro, Michael. *The Jewish 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Jews of All Time.* New York, Carol Publishing, 1994.