

JOHN JARRETT



THE GREAT
BENNY
LEONARD

MAMA'S BOY TO
WORLD CHAMP

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CHAPTER ONE

BENJAMIN LEINER was born in Manhattan's East Village district on 17 April 1896. His mother, Minnie, was German, born in Berlin, while his father, Gershon, was a Hebrew who first saw the light of this world in Austria-Hungary. Benny had four brothers and three sisters and Gershon toiled 72 hours a week in a sweatshop to support his family.

In the sectioned-off Jewish turf around Eighth Street and Second Avenue where Benny grew up, violence was an integral part of every boy's daily education.

'I was a skinny, puny youngster and apart from my legs, very underdeveloped,' he would tell Leo Fuller of the *Topical Times* many years later. 'I was the butt of the fierce Irish "Micks" the Italian "Wops" and the hoodlums of a dozen different races. On Eighth Street, I was free to play on the sunbaked cobbles for 200 yards. Outside of that distance was No Man's Land and running an errand for my mother was a journey fraught with real danger. One day I was trying to sneak to the grocer's with a quarter clutched in my hand when about a half-dozen members of the Sixth Street Boys appeared and grabbed me. They bounced me around and kicked me all the way home. I was limping badly and minus the quarter.'

Benny's mother consoled him but there was little sympathy from his Uncle Max, who took him by the shoulders and asked the

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frightened boy, 'Why is it the other kids always wipe the street with you? I'm going to take you to the Silver Heel Club on Saturdays and you'll get a little boxing instruction there.'¹

Uncle Max was a member of the club and every Saturday afternoon he and his fellow members would have a bunch of kids in off the street to fight in the back yard. Young Benny learned quickly and by the time he was 11 years old he was boxing kids older than himself. Before he was much older he was champion of Eighth Street and Uncle Max fixed him up to fight a tough little Irish kid named Joey Fogarty, the Sixth Street champion.

Benny had developed good boxing skills and was able to handle Joey, a stronger, heavier boy. It was in the corner between rounds that he suffered punishment, from his enthusiastic seconds, and when 'time' was called he was glad to get back to the action. The bout ended with Benny proclaimed the winner. His purse of 60 cents soon evaporated when his pals dragged him to the hot dog stand at the corner of the street.

In 1911, Benny was 15 and working in a printing plant. He became friendly with a guy named William Areton, who ran a billiards parlour on the East Side. Known as 'Buck' Areton, he would later have a few fights as Joe Malone and go on to become a trainer, eventually working with Max Schmeling. They would work out together and Areton encouraged Benny to think about having a professional bout for which he could receive five dollars. The kid finally agreed and told his pal to make the fight. Areton took Benny to the old Fordon Athletic Club, where Moe Smith was the matchmaker.

Smith looked the pair over, then said, 'OK, you're on next Saturday against a kid called Mickey Finnegan, four rounds.' Benny was delighted, but he was also worried. He feared his parents would

1 Ken Blady *The Jewish Boxers' Hall of Fame* 1988

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find out he was going to fight for money and told Areton what was bothering him.

Joe Leslie, a friend who had accompanied the pair to the club, suggested the name of Leonard. Leslie was on the stage at the time with Eddie Leonard, the minstrel, and that's why he made the suggestion. Benny and Areton agreed and thereafter it was Benny Leonard instead of Benny Leiner. Benny outpointed his man by a mile in the first round but in the next, Finnegan landed one on the nose and the claret from Benny's beezer flowed freely. They came out for the third round when Leonard slugged his opponent all over the ring but with the blood streaming down Benny's face, the referee became scared and halted the fight, awarding the bout to Finnegan. As no decisions were rendered in those days, Leonard insisted that he had won and so his record shows, though actually he was stopped.²

'Benny was a wonder right off the reel,' Areton told boxing writer Ed Van Every. 'He was just about the fastest thing in the way of a boxer I had ever looked at. He sure was the class from the start and could soon lick any kid his size. Benny would have won easily had he been permitted to continue. The truth is that the decision went to Mickey Finnegan and Benny Leonard lost his first fight. For this fight Benny received the sum of five dollars, but you never saw a more downhearted kid. All he could keep on saying was, "Why did they stop the fight?"'³

Areton soon got his boy back in the ring and Benny went through nine fights, winning five by knockout. New York was still in the no-decision era and Benny was considered a winner in the other four contests. But in March 1912, young Leonard struck a bad patch. Coming home from a fight one night, Benny was unable to hide his black eye, much to the distress of his mother. She was still weeping when her husband came home from the sweatshop.

2 Nat Fleischer *Leonard the Magnificent* 1947

3 Ed Van Every *Charleston Gazette* West Virginia 30 January 1925

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Gershon was not so upset, especially when his son handed him 20 dollars, his purse for the fight. 'All right, Benny, keep on fighting,' he said. 'It's worth getting a black eye for 20 dollars. I am getting blackened for 20 dollars a week!' But there was more distress for Mama Leiner, caused by a Jersey City Irishman named Joe Shugrue.

Nat Fleischer recorded, 'Shugrue, an aggressive battler, tore into Benny from the start. He didn't give Leonard a chance to get set and Benny, to avoid punishment, kept back-peddalling. Joe had a sort of rolling action and hit from a crouch like Jim Jeffries. This made him a tough target. Shugrue forced the action for two rounds and in the third he caught Benny with a beautiful solar plexus wallop that knocked the wind out of Leonard and made him gasp for breath. The bell came to Benny's rescue.

'Then came a hectic fourth round. One of Benny's blows caught Joe on the chin and put him to the canvas. When Shugrue got to his feet, he set after Benny like a tiger after its prey. A right to Benny's eye almost blinded him. He kept rubbing the optic and retreating but Shugrue gave him no rest. A crushing right to the chin dropped Leonard to his knees. He dragged himself to his feet when a smash from Joe's left hand landed on Benny's mouth and knocked him against the ropes. A tattoo on the jaw sent Benny down again. The referee thought Benny had suffered sufficiently and halted the bout.

'Benny sobbed. He thought the knockout, the first he suffered, would put an end to his career. But Shugrue walked to his corner, patted Benny and remarked, "Kid, you've got it. Other fighters were kayoed and came back. You'll do the same."

Legendary former heavyweight champion James J. Corbett was writing a column for the newspapers some time later, and he recalled the Shugrue and Fleming defeats. 'When Leonard and Shugrue met in what was the fourth or fifth fight of Leonard's career, the bout was halted in the fourth round. Earlier in the fight, Shugrue's glove had touched the floor and become covered with

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rosin. Every time after that when he hit Leonard's face the rosin dust flew into the youngster's eye. In the fourth he was in a blinded condition and the contest was stopped.⁴

Two months later, young Leonard crashed to another knockout defeat. Boxing Frankie Fleming at the Madison AC in New York, the young Canadian smashed a left to the chin in the third round and Benny fell into the ropes. He was still dazed in the fourth and Frankie took the points. Round five and a series of body punches followed by a left hook to the jaw finished Benny for the evening. 'They won't get me any more,' he said to Areton as they walked to the dressing room. He insisted on meeting Fleming again and held his own through the ten rounds. It was a better fight but with no winner, a no-decision bout. Fleming thought that he had won and claimed to have newspaper clippings supporting his claim. 'I may say that Benny Leonard was one fighter I think I owned.' He was the only fighter to beat Leonard twice.

Billy Areton, following the knockout defeats suffered by Leonard at the heavy hands of Shugrue and Fleming, questioned his ability to move Benny in the right direction. There was no misunderstanding between them as they broke their partnership, and Benny was for a short period working with Louis Wallach, brother of the better-known Leach Cross. But Wallach decided to accept an invitation from another fighter, Patsy Cline, to handle him in a Californian campaign. Wallach figured he would make more money with Cline than he could get working with Leonard, a decision he would live to regret in the years ahead as Leonard rose through the ranks to become a world champion.

'The true story of how Billy Gibson became the manager of Leonard was told by Benny to me on a trip we made to Billings Hospital at Fort Harrison,' wrote Fleischer in his book. 'Benny had

4 James J. Corbett *Chicago Examiner* 28 August 1917

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engaged in close to 50 fights before he ever met Gibson. Gibson had never seen Leonard in action but consented to give him a tryout at the request of Billy's matchmaker and partner, Tom McArdle, provided Benny would accept a bout with tough Teddy Hubbs, at the time an excellent attraction at the Fairmont Club and popular with the fans. Gibson also informed Benny that he would be given \$50 for the fight and, as was customary in those days, 25 per cent of whatever tickets he sold. Both Benny and his manager were eager for the opportunity to show at the club and signed.⁵

When Benny told Uncle Max his good news, they formed a club with the neighbourhood boys and together they sold about 400 tickets for Benny's fight with Hubbs at \$1.50 per head. Benny cut in for about \$150, with the Fairmont receiving \$300 for staging the fight. Billy Areton was also delighted that Gibson was taking charge of Benny's affairs. In the fight with Hubbs, Leonard gave Teddy a lesson and was given the newspaper decision after ten rounds.

Benny was developing into a fine boxer but in his 48 bouts up to when he joined Gibson, he had only scored 14 knockouts. It was troubling the young boxer and he asked his new manager what he could do to increase his punching power. Gibson advised heavy training and slower footwork. Billy also handed his new boy over to George Engel, a trainer and manager of top fighters such as middleweight champions Harry Greb and Frank Klaus, featherweight Eddie Campi and California light-heavyweight Bob McAllister. He would later train heavyweight champion Gene Tunney for Gibson.

There are several versions of how Leonard developed the knockout punch that sparked many of his later victories. Training in the gym one day, Benny explained his problem to veteran fighter Willie Lewis. 'I don't understand it, Willie,' he said. 'I think I'm punching right but something is missing.'

5 Nat Fleischer *Leonard the Magnificent* 1947

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Lewis offered to look Benny over in the gym and try to find the answer. He found it. After watching the youngster in a training session, Willie offered his advice. 'You're doing everything right,' he said, 'but you're not getting the proper leverage behind your punches. Try rolling on the ball of your right foot, like this,' and Willie demonstrated. Leonard tried it, and it was the answer.

Leading American trainer Mannie Seamon worked with Leonard through seven of his eight championship years from 1917 to 1925. 'Clever as he was, Benny wasn't a great hitter. I worked on him for months trying to correct all the little things which make the difference, and then one day it came to him in a flash. It was all a matter of hitting properly. His well-directed punches at one time wouldn't have cracked an egg – and then as a result of all his gym work, suddenly, without warning, he started hitting like a sledge-hammer.

'It was just a matter of acquiring the knack and once he'd got it, he never lost it. Had I tried to alter his style to cause him to find that punch, it might never have worked. But it came, and I was happy. Benny had four brothers, Willie, Charlie, Murray and Joey. Charlie was a very good puncher, the type who could knock a guy out with a single punch, and when the two of them got going in the gym there were no hard measures – it was a real fight every time. They just looked as if they were going to kill each other. Those gymnasium bouts did him more good than it's possible to estimate, and were a contributory cause to his development of an analytical mind which led him always to live his fights over again, to make sure he never repeated a mistake.'⁶

Benny had previously been trained by Doc Robb and George Engel, and Engel was never shy of telling of his work with Leonard. Talking to Nat Fleischer, he said, 'One fighter I made a champion

6 Mannie Seamon *Sunday Empire News* London 3 October 1978

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was Benny. A few weeks after Gibson became the manager of Leonard, Benny made a poor showing in one of his fights. Gibson always liked a puncher and he realised that Leonard was clever but couldn't sock. He got disgusted and believe it or not, he wanted to give Benny away. When I heard this, I went up to Billy and remarked that I would be happy to assume full management of the lad and pleaded with Billy to give Leonard to me.

'He replied, "George, if you like that kid so much, there must be something to him. You don't go after any but the good ones. No, I'll keep him but I'm going to ask you to train him into a puncher."

'We made a deal on that and I was with Benny for some time. I learned that Benny hadn't had anyone to teach him anything. He didn't go on the road and seldom punched the bag. Well, I changed all that. With proper training he became a real hitter and in a little more than a year under my supervision, he knocked out Freddie Welsh to win the world lightweight title.'

Corbett wrote in this 1917 column, "When the natives began to call him "The Powder Puff Kid" it hurt Leonard a bit and he asked Gibson to let him loose with his punches. "Not yet – not for a year or two," answered the wise Gibson. "First of all, you are going to learn how to box better than any man at your weight. After that, you can begin to learn the knockout tricks." So he began to school him and quickly did Benny learn the knack of sending crashing blows to head and body. A few months ago, Gibson was satisfied that Benny Leonard had learned every trick of the trade – that the boy he had discovered in 1912 and nursed along for five years was a ring master.

"Now, Benny," said Gibson a few months ago, "go out and knock 'em out as fast as you feel like. They can't hurt you. Let loose.'"⁸

7 Nat Fleischer *Leonard the Magnificent* 1947

8 James J. Corbett *Chicago Examiner* 28 August 1917

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Benny became one of the best punchers in the business, racking up 71 knockouts in winning 91 fights, with many more in no-decision bouts.

So who taught Benny Leonard how to punch? Willie Lewis? Mannie Seamon? George Engel? Billy Gibson? Maybe all four? Or maybe just Benny himself.