

Gateshead Great

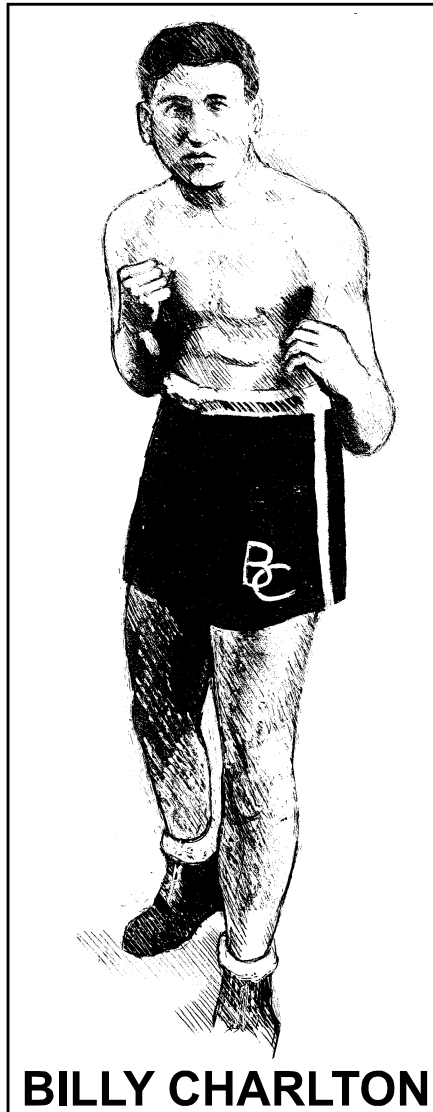
by Richard Barber

Billy Charlton from Gateshead was a good, honest featherweight who campaigned throughout most of the 1930s. He faced such luminaries as Dick Corbett, Nel Tarleton, Benny Caplan, Tommy Hyams and the former world featherweight champion Freddie Miller who hailed from Cincinnati, USA and who was one tough fighter and a southpaw to boot. When he fought Billy he had taken part in around 200 fights to Billy's dozen. Admittedly Freddie was on the way down but he certainly couldn't be taken lightly.

In fact, Billy fought Freddie Miller twice in 1938; let's hear the story in his own words:

"My first bout with Freddie Miller was a gruelling affair, for me anyway, and truth to tell I felt a wee bit apprehensive for I had seen Miller box on two occasions, once against Benny Sharkey whom he kayoed in the first round, and again, against 'Seaman' Tommy Watson when he kayoed Tommy in three.

To say I wasn't nervous at the idea of going in with the ex-world champion would be spinning the tale a little, but being nervous and being afraid are two different things; I was afraid of no-one during my career and always being fit and well I knew that I would



BILLY CHARLTON

give a good account of myself.

When I knew the bout was signed I began training in real earnest, as if it were for the world title. On the morning of the contest my manager, Joe Shepherd, and I left by car for Liverpool and arrived there about 1pm whereon we settled at the hotel before going along to the public baths to try my weight, which we found was

just right. The official weigh-in took place at 2pm. Miller and I both passed the scales okay, so it was off to our hotels for a meal followed by a lie down.

At nine o'clock that evening we entered the ring to do battle and Miller was swathed in towels that covered his whole body and arms. Through my mind went the stories of how he may have 'Plaster of Paris' powder on his gloves so that if they were sprayed with water they would harden up quickly, thereby giving him that terrific punch which used to put the opponents away so quickly. Well, why worry about that thought I, he has to get one on me first and it's up to me to see that he doesn't. Mind you, the time it took them to get the gloves on him made me wonder. Mine were on and I was ready for what seemed ages before they had Miller ready for the fray, but at last all was ready and we were waiting for the bell.

I had my orders from Joe Shepherd that I was to let this fellow do all the work. During the first round I was very careful and took Joe's advice. 'Wait and see what he has to offer' I thought. Well, he seemed to do nothing at all and, believe me; the first round was very quiet indeed.

He was awkward, being a

southpaw, for I had never even sparred with one that I could remember. Still, as Joe had told me, he was the ex-champ and the crowd would expect great things from him. Well, nothing to fear during the first round thought I. Maybe he was about finished now and on the way out so I said to Joe, "I'll have a go at this fellow, he doesn't seem to be the man I thought he was." "You won't", said Joe, "Just let him do all the work and you be ready for anything he does." I thought to myself that I would just pop my left hand on his nose and see what he does.

So at the bell I go straight for him and lead a fast left hand. Whoops ... it seems like someone has put a sword through my stomach. I clutch both hands to my solar plexus and bend over doubled up, my knees hit the floor, and then my head and I roll over on my back. I'm lying all crouched up staring at the lights above, the glare is hurting me but I can't move a finger for I am absolutely paralysed. Every muscle in my body is useless but I can see and hear. The referee is saying "three, four, five" and I can do nothing. Then, as suddenly as it came, it is gone. As the referee says "seven" it goes and I roll over onto my face and jump up at "nine". I feel fine and the ref must have thought so too because he just let the bout continue and I dance away from Miller trying to get under his right lead so that I can throw one of my left

hooks. Believe me; I didn't try any more of my fast left hands.

During the interval of the second round Joe gave me a coating for being such a fool but I still believed it was a lucky punch and this time I'd get him. I didn't say anything to Joe but, once again, I go out at the bell and straight at Miller with my fast left hand. Miller must have been expecting this, for again I'm on the floor holding my stomach, completely paralysed as before. This time the pain leaves me a lot quicker than it did the first time but I took my time in rising and once again got up at "nine." From then on I am again very careful, waiting for Miller to do the work. You can imagine the roasting I got from Joe Shepherd when I got back to my corner at the end of the round!

I was still not convinced that Miller was all that they cracked him up to be and couldn't understand what I had been doing wrong, there must be something that I was doing wrong but I just couldn't put my finger on it. I still cannot see what Miller has except that terrific left hand punch into the solar but, anyway, I'm determined to get this fellow somehow and if there were lucky punches I was going to see if he could still put them on me.

Straight at the bell I'm over at him and make with my left hand. Whoops. There it goes again and I'm on the floor again wondering what I was

doing wrong. My mind was trying to puzzle this one out as I'm there on the floor. The pain was going away much quicker now and at the count of "four" I rolled over onto my face ready to get up but I thought I would put it on a little for the crowd. When I rose at "nine" the crowd were with me and gave a great cheer. By this time I was beginning to get the hang of Miller's southpaw right hand lead so I got much more of the round. If I could only cotton on to his left hook to my solar plexus I felt sure that I could lick him.

I got 'played war' with again when I got back to my corner at the bell but I didn't get any advice on how to tackle this fellow. All I got was "Let him do the work, he was the champ and if the crowds boo, they are booing him." Well, that was not my way of boxing, no sir. I was in there to give the crowd my best and give of my best I would. This time at the bell I didn't go straight for him but let him come to me. He did, but always very slowly, creeping forward, swinging a long right aimed for the left hand side of my face. I naturally move backwards and to my right. It's not long before I am in a corner as I feel the ropes at my back. What should I do? Lead to him and try to get out of the corner? I lead with my left and he pushes it to his right, and then whipped that famed left hook into my solar once again. Whoops, I'm on the floor again! But this time I have

tumbled to it. Of course, when I box an orthodox boy, which I always had, I'd lead with my left hand and raise my right glove my face for it is a million to one that my opponent will automatically flash out his left hand also. This is just what Miller waits for, he being a southpaw and nearly always boxing orthodox boxers, waits for the lead knowing that the orthodox man will raise his right arm to protect his face from the left counter of his opponent. Yes, we orthodox boys leave our solar plexus wide open for the likes of Freddie Miller but never again will 'Charla' do it, no sir! From the sixth round onwards it was touch and go. I thought I had much the better of the contest from then on but lost on points, though Joe Shepherd and many more believed I should have had a draw. I knew that any man who could put me on the floor four times must surely have beat me but I told my manager that he would never put me on the floor again and, that given a return, I'd most certainly lick him.

Due to the controversial result I was given a second crack at Freddie Miller for which I trained like the devil. Joe got me a left-handed sparring partner and I felt sure nothing Miller could do could stop me from licking him this time. Believe me, I really felt confident.

We travelled down to Liverpool on the morning of the bout and, as usual, went to get my weight checked first.



FREDDIE MILLER

We found that I was just two or three ounces over so I had ten minutes in a Turkish bath just to make sure. Boy, I felt so lovely and fit after that short time in the lovely hot room, two Millers couldn't beat me.

During the fight I just kept popping my left hand onto his nose, moving backwards to my left and, at the times he swung that right hand, I would duck under it and try like hell to get my famous left hook onto his chin.

Coming back to my corner at the end of the tenth round I said to Joe Shepherd, "I'll have a go at this fellow Joe, I think I can knock him out." "You'll do nothing of the sort, son" replies Joe, "Just put your head back on the cushion and listen to the betting boys". I laid my head back and I heard the shout, "I'll give anyone nine to one on Charla to win with the draw thrown in, and they can have the world champ." Joe said, "There's no-one accepting that son, so just box clever, don't mix it and don't let Miller get that left hand into your guts". "Right Joe", said I and for the next two rounds I just boxed clever, keeping out of trouble.

After the final bell Miller ran over to his corner, draped his gown round his shoulders, bent down to get out of the ring when the referee pulled him back and lifted up his arm in victory. To say who was more amazed, he or I would be hard to tell. I know it helped to break my spirit and my love of the sport. I

loved the game so much, I lived clean, and I trained so very hard. I had given up so much for the sport like being in bed early for a good night's sleep, I ate what I was told, and I never went to dances or late nights out. Just everything I did was for the betterment of being a boxer. I firmly believed that the referees were honest and straight, yes, I trusted everyone and believed that it was really a sport when, after all, it was just a business. What do I do now I thought? Do I give up the game and just go to the gym to box for fun. Or do I carry on and hope for the best. Like, if you can't beat them, join them.

One consolation that I did however receive from Pete Reilly, Miller's manager, was that after Miller's retirement our second fight was not included in Miller's record in 'The Ring' record book due to the fact that Miller felt he had not won that fight. My manager told Reilly to include the omitted bout in Miller's record so that it will always be there, like an unwanted ghost, a haunting reminder of Billy Charlton."

I'm glad to say that his experience with Freddie Miller didn't make Billy give up the fight game and he fought many more times until he, too, retired in 1940.

Richard Barber

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BOXING NEWS