

Name: Bill Brennan
Career Record: [click](#)
Alias: Bill Shanks, KO Bill
Birth Name: Wilhelm Schenck
Nationality: US American
Hometown: Louisville, Kentucky, USA
Born: 1893-06-23
Died: 1924-06-15
Age at Death: 30
Height: 6' 1"

Career Overview

Because **Bill Brennan** is one of those fighters over whose career the rumors of organized crime hung like a mist, it is hard to determine fact from fiction in terms of his career and life. What is indisputable is Brennan's talent. He was a hard-punching, world class fighter who thrilled crowds but was often underrated by the press of his era. Regardless of his critics and mobster connections, no one can dispute that he gave boxing legend [Jack Dempsey](#) two of his toughest fights in 1918 and 1920. Brennan fought a total of 102 professional bouts, many against the best heavyweights of his generation, during a decade of prizefighting.

Early Years

Born Wilhelm Schenck, Bill was of German stock. Raised in poverty in Chicago at the turn of the century, he learned to fight in the streets. When he turned to prizefighting (still an illicit and often illegal enterprise) as a career, he changed his name to shield his family's reputation as well as to hide his German background. He turned professional in 1913, during the Great War, and feared that the name Schenck would turn crowds against him. Irish fighters, on the other hand, were always popular. So he became Bill Brennan and had his first fights for pay that year, against otherwise forgettable pugs from the Midwest. As a regular job, however, he worked as a barkeep and those who came to see him fight began to affectionately call him "the Battling Bartender." By 1916, Brennan was campaigning as an up-and-comer in New York. He knocked out veteran fighter [George Rodel](#) in twice that year, two of the fifteen successful knockout wins in twelve months. Also that year he suffered his first pro loss, to St. Louis' Joe Cox, a seventh round disqualification. He would later avenge the defeat by flattening Cox in three. In 1917, Bill thrice fought [Battling Levinsky](#), the defensive specialist who was the former light heavyweight champion of the world. Their first bout was a twelve round draw, the second a decision win for Brennan, the third a decision for Levinsky. Also in 1917, he fought a ten round no-decision bout (official decisions were officially outlawed in New York at the time) against popular New York heavyweight [Jim Coffey](#). Though the fight went the distance and no decision could be announced, ringside reporters wrote that Bill had his opponent in trouble on several occasions. He was getting good notice in the papers now, praise for both his punching power and his defensive capabilities.

Dempsey Fights

If 1917 had been the year of Brennan's ascent into nationwide attention, 1918 threatened that status. The year started out well enough, a draw with Levinsky in a fourth bout. A leading contender for the heavyweight crown worn by [Jess Willard](#), Brennan was matched with fellow knockout artist Jack Dempsey on February 25, 1918 to determine who has the right to challenge for the title. Dempsey dominated the fight, but Brennan showed grit in surviving the onslaught. Reporters praised the beaten man for his bravery in lasting until the sixth round. Rising from five knockdowns during the course of the bout, Brennan could not rise when floored for the sixth time in six rounds. He had suffered a dislocated his ankle and literally could not stand up.

The loss to Dempsey and failure to secure a title shot briefly put Brennan's career in a freefall. In 1919 he lost decisions to heavyweight contender [Billy Miske](#) and future hall of famer [Harry Greb](#), but rebounded later in the year with four successive knockout wins against forgettable opponents. On into 1920 he continued this kind of success against mediocre opposition until finally a title shot came his way in the form of a rematch with Dempsey, who had taken the title from Willard. Dempsey and most sports writers expected Brennan, who had not scored a noteworthy victory against a top level fighter in three years, to be fit as fodder, a push-over win for quick cash. Rumors surfaced, however, that Brennan had a backer in Chicago bootlegging kingpin Al Capone, who allegedly wanted to take advantage of the odds in Dempsey's favor by betting on the underdog. Whatever the case, certainly nothing that took place inside the ring that night of December 14, 1920 at Madison Square Garden was planned.

There is little attention given today to the hard fight between Dempsey and Brennan for the title, but it was, according to the New York Times, "one of the most vicious and closely-contested fights in history." Brennan certainly improved upon his performance in their first engagement. In the second, he stunned Jack with an uppercut. However, Brennan mysteriously failed to follow up on the advantage and the champion survived the round. The rest of the fight was a competitive slugfest, with Dempsey digging into Brennan's body and Brennan landing hard shots to Dempsey's head. Bill began to focus on the champion's ear and, by the fight's conclusion, Dempsey's ear "looked like a cross between a veal cutlet and a bloody sponge." In the twelfth, a right-left combination from the injured but determined champion dropped Bill for the count.

Death

With part of the \$30,000 he earned against Dempsey, Brennan purchased a speakeasy nightclub in Manhattan, Club Tia Juana, which he managed while continuing his boxing career. He continued to face no-hope competition, racking up win after win in locales as diverse as Havana, Cuba and St. Paul, Minnesota. On the rare occasions he stepped up to face a ranked contender, however, Brennan was beaten. He retired in 1923 after back-to-back knockout losses against [Luis Angel Firpo](#) and Billy Miske. Focusing on his speakeasy, Brennan allegedly ran into business trouble with mobsters. He supposedly refused to work with them and on June 15, 1924, at four in the morning, was shot dead at the Tia Juana. He was thirty years old. Police arrested three men they believed to be responsible, but only one was convicted. Joseph Pioli, alias Frank

Rossi (or Rassi), was sentenced to twenty years at Sing Sing Prison, but was paroled in 1938.

Sources

Kahn, Roger. [A Flame of Pure Fire: Jack Dempsey and the Roaring '20s profile](#) at Cyber Boxing Zone

Disputed Facts

- Dec. 12, 1920 NY Times article mentions his birthplace as being County Mayo, Ireland on June 23, 1893.
- His killers were Frankie Rassi (a.k.a. Joseph Pioli) and James Hughes (who went by Terry O'Neill in the ring). Rassi had earlier served prison time for murdering his brother on New Years Eve 1923. Police believed Brennan's murder was due to a quarrel over boot-legging, alcohol being illegal in the United States during this period. He left a wife and three-year-old daughter.
- The linked record shows Brennan's verified fights. His published records, such as in *T.S. Andrews' World's Sporting Record Book* series, *Ring Battles of Centuries*. etc. list a number of fights for which newspaper accounts have not yet been found. Possibly they might be located in Louisville, Kentucky newspapers, and in newspapers of Chicago (but not in the *Chicago Tribune*), Indiana, etc. Here is a list of unauthenticated listings from Brennan published record:
 - 1914: Al Goodale, W ko 1; Tom Devlin, W ko 2; Mike Cantwell, W ko 2; Frank Bowers, W ko 3; Billy Irons, W ko 1; Jack Cameron, W ko 1; Frank Cline, W ko 3; Frank Heider, W ko 4; Jack Hubbard (Jumbo Wells), W ko 14. Jeff Davis, W ko 3; Art Nelson, No decision 10.
 - 1915: Joe Morris, W ko 5; Paddy Kelly, W ko 3; Jim Tompkins, W ko 1; Bud Adams, W ko 4; Billy Clay, W ko 3; George Cotton, W ko 2.
 - 1916: Tim O'Neil, W ko 3; Joe Lennox, W ko 2; Charley Emerson, W ko 2.
- CBZ [page](#)
- Harry Greb Site [page](#)
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Reno Evening Gazette
23 Jan 1920
Sporting Memories
By
Al Spink

The fight at Kenosha between Bill Brennan and Bartley Madden the other night, in which Bill won the decision after ten lively rounds of milling proves that big Bill's defeat at the hands of Jack Dempsey at Milwaukee in February, 1918 was a fluke, pure and simple. Madden, a magnificent looking man, game as a pebble and strong as a giant, battled all the way with Brennan and showed himself a fighter of the first class.

For the first three rounds it was even Stephen, but after that big Bill took the lead and led all the way. His splendid showing proves him the best heavyweight seen in these parts for a long while, and this does not even bar Dempsey.

Leo Flynn, Brennan's manager while here, told the whole story of Brennan's defeat by Dempsey. and it gives an entirely new coloring to that battle and proves than Brennan is fairly entitled to another chance at the champion."It was in January, 1918," said Flynn, "that Brennan, while in New York, received two offers, one to fight Dempsey for a \$1750 guaranty, and the other to meet Tom Cowler for a \$1500 certainty. I asked Brennan which offer he wanted to accept and he replied: "Take the Dempsey offer. I know I can beat him and it's the best offer anyhow."

"Brennan had boxed with Dempsey in a New York gymnasium and he had no trouble with him. He thought he could beat him easily. So instead of training properly, Bill took things easily. When he faced Dempsey that night Bill weighed 21 pounds, or 30 pounds more than his best weight. In the second round of the fight Brennan slipped and broke his right ankle. While suffering from the break Dempsey was able to knock Bill down twice, but he got up, and on the one leg he fought five more rounds, and in the fifth round, with broken ankle and all, he gave Dempsey a punch in the face that made him stagger to a far corner and stay there the balance of the round. And there he stayed until I threw a towel into the ring, considering it a crime to allow Brennan, in his condition, to go on any further.

Today Bill is so certain that he can whip either Carpentier or Dempsey that he will fight either on a winner-take all basis." As a matter of fact, Brennan has a much better record than Dempsey and is certainly entitled to a battle with the latter. As a Knocker-out, Brennan has beaten all records. Out of eighty-five fights he has scored sixty eight knock outs.

Unlike Dempsey, Brennan did not want to be drafted, but enlisted in the navy of his own free will and did his best in the war with the best of them Like Dempsey, he is only twenty-six years of age and like Dempsey too he is at this writing at the very top of his fighting power. Bartley Madden, whom Brennan outpointed, is a stronger and better-looking man than Dempsey. Madden, like Brennan is twenty-six years of age. He was born in County Galway, Ireland, and created something of a sensation in In New York when he knocked out Jim

Coffey in a fight for the Irish championship.

Madden's parents live in Dublin and he will visit them this year when he crosses the pond with his manager, Lichtenstein, to challenge the winner of the Dempsey - Carpentier fight, providing that battle is pulled off on foreign soil, as it is pretty certain to be.

Madden, although a big fellow, standing five feet, eleven inches, weighing 190 pounds and with a reach of seventy inches, is very light on his feet, boxes as fast as Packey McFarland and is always aggressive in action. That Madden is a great fighter is proven by the fact that he has fought three draws with Brennan and whipped such good men as Jim Savage, Jack Herrick, Tom Cowler, Battling Levinsky, Homer Smith and "Wild" Bert Kenney. He has also fought draws with Battling Levinsky, Billy Miske and Tom Gibbons. He has never lost a referee's decision.

And that Brennan, too, is a wonderful fighter is proven by his victory over so good a man as Madden. Madden like Brennan did his bit in the war and no stones can be thrown at him on that score. It was early in 1914 that he joined the British forces and he was on the fighting field until the latter part of 1915, when after receiving injuries in battle, he was invalided home.

Like Tom Sharkey, Madden spent nearly all of his early days at sea. He was a sailor before the mast, sailed under many flags and has visited all parts of the world. Eastern critics who saw him defeat Coffey and others believe him the equal of any man living.

Among those who admired both Madden and Brennan was Charles Cochrane, the English promoter, who came to Chicago for the purpose of signing up Dempsey for a match with Carpentier, to be brought off in London. Cochrane wired Kearns, Dempsey's manager from Chicago, telling him that he was ready to give Dempsey \$200,000 to go to England and fight Carpentier. Cochrane told of how he stood ready to deposit \$200,000 in a Chicago bank to be paid to Dempsey as soon as he had fulfilled his part of the contract.

Cochrane received no reply to this only bona fide offer made Dempsey to fight Carpentier, but the next day he read in the morning newspaper of how Jim Coffroth, one of the owners of the Tijuana race course near San Diego Cal., had offered \$400,000 to Dempsey to fight Carpentier to fight there. . "Mr. Kearns is evidently spoofing and trying to make me raise my offer. I shall pay no more attention to him. On completion of my theatrical business I shall return to England and arrange for Brennan or Madden to come over and meet Carpentier.

"The Frenchman is the drawing card, anyhow, and no matter who he meets the match will draw big money. Now that I come to think of it, there might be some objection in England to Dempsey anyhow, due to his war record, which I knew nothing of until I reached this country. Brennan and Madden have fine war records, so no one can have any objection to their trying for international honors, and now that Dempsey has turned down the liberal offer I have made him I may bring either Brennan or Madden over to try the issue, for, just as I said. Carpentier is himself a great card on the other side and is sure of a capacity house without reference to the man that faces him."

