

No loafers in Heeneey family

. . . and they battled hard for everyone

THEY DID IT THEIR WAY

IAIN GILLIES on local sporting legends.

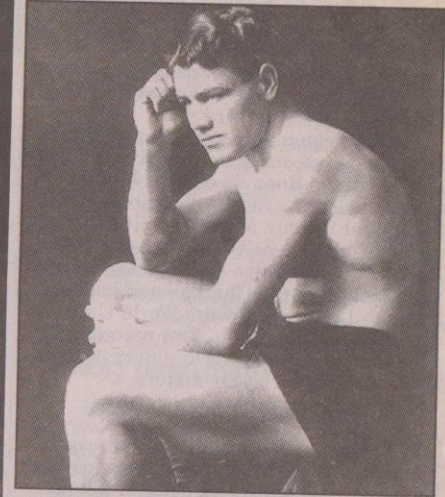
IT IS July 26, 1928. All around Gisborne people are listening intently to their radios as American ring announcer Joe Humphries says: "Now we have the main event of the evening. Fifteen rounds of boxing for the heavyweight championship of the world. On my right, weighing in at 192 pounds, from New York, the champion . . . Gene Tunney. On my left, at 203-and-a-half pounds, from New Zealand, the challenger, Tom Heeneey!"

The referee, Ed Forbes, beckons the two fighters out into the centre of New York's huge Yankee Stadium, capable of seating 100,000, for their final instructions.

Tunney is tall, smiling, wrapped in his old US Marine Corps dressing gown; Heeneey is several inches shorter, thick-set, his muscular body covered by his distinctive Maori cloak, a memento of the homeland he has not seen for more than four years. The fisticuff trail has taken him to Australia, England, Ireland, South Africa and America, and he has beaten many worthy opponents.

Here, at last, is the moment he has always hoped and dreamed about. But only he, and those closest to him, know what a long, hard road it has been. And even his most ardent fans are all too well aware that he faces a massive uphill battle, as Gene Tunney is a champion of champions. After all, the former Marine beat the great world champion and people's favourite Jack Dempsey.

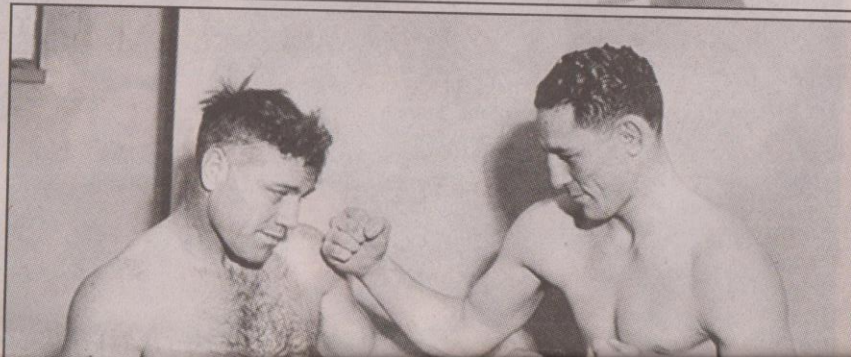
Tom Heeneey is no novice. But he has travelled a hard road to get into this ring with Tunney.



HAVE GLOVES WILL TRAVEL: In his pursuit of boxing's major crown Tom Heeneey, above, travelled the world and earned respect wherever he fought. Above left, heavyweight champion Gene Tunney (second left) and Tom pose for the cameras before their world title bout. Below left, Tom squares off with another great heavyweight, Max Baer (right). Baer won a close fight on January 16, 1931. But it had a controversial ending. Tom went down in the third round, hurt but capable of continuing against his 11-year-younger opponent. When referee Jack Dempsey reached eight in his count, Tom was upright again but the timekeeper signified it was all over. Dempsey had picked up the wrong count. It was the only time in his career Tom was counted out.

news of the fight was relayed to them between rounds.

Despite fighting on with a badly cut



...and the plumber from Gisborne succeed in scaling the heights to the point where he is accepted as a genuine world title challenger?

Tom Heeneey was born in Gisborne the day after St Patrick's Day, 1898, of Irish parentage. He was the ninth child in the family of 10 of Hugh and Eliza Heeneey.

Hugh arrived from County Derry on the sailing ship Caranie in 1878, and Eliza came from County Cork in the Sir William Wallace in the same year.

The Heeneys were noted for their honesty, hard work, hospitality and willingness to share what they had with others less fortunate — a family of New Zealand Irish folk typical of all that is worthwhile in life.

Tom went to St Mary's Catholic School here and it was almost routine for the boys to spend a short time on homework before all would troop out to the old shed in the backyard to "Heeneey's Gym".

This is where Hugh Heeneey taught his sons the art of self-defence.

Martin and Swain, Plumbers and Drainlayers, were Tom's employers and, with his boss, he once laid a ton of iron on a roof in four hours.

Tom also loved swimming and in a strong surf at Waikanae Beach he swam out and rescued two girls in an act of courage that earned him the bronze medal of the Royal Humane Society.

Hugh believed in bringing up his sons in a manner that allowed them to fend for themselves as they advanced through lifetimes of wars and recessions.

The boys all had the gloves on at an early age. But it was Tom's elder brother Jack who really brought him out of the comparative safety of the shed sparring sessions into the competitive ring.

Jack was his father's pride and joy in their early years as he soon showed that the Heeneey heart was better than big and his natural Irish fighter's instinct was needle-sharp.

The trail-blazer of a family sporting saga that stamped Gisborne as a special place, the Heeneys did for boxing here what Tiny White and Ian Kirkpatrick, decades later, did for rugby.

Jack soon showed his class and won the New Zealand amateur welterweight title at Wanganui in 1914.

The 1914-18 World War called. Jack left New Zealand in October, 1914, fought through the mud and carnage of France and Flanders, and when he was on leave



he won the middleweight championship of the New Zealand forces in France and the light-heavyweight title of the British First Army.

He made it back home safely and defeated Laurie Cadman for the professional middleweight championship at Dargaville in 1919. He kept the title for five years.

But this was only the start of the Heeneey legend. Jack's son Darcy won the national amateur welterweight title in three consecutive years — 1937-38-39 — and made the final of the welterweight division at the 1938 British Empire Games in Sydney. But, like his father, Darcy got into a war.

While serving in the navy he put on weight and moved up to the middleweight division. He met some stiff opposition while in the forces but ended up middleweight champion of the Atlantic fleet.

A young man of many sporting talents, Darcy also captained the Poverty Bay Colts rugby team. A good rower, a first-class cyclist and a well-performed amateur wrestler, the Gisborne fighter revelled in any sporting competition.

Not just Gisborne but a nation mourned deeply when it was learned that Darcy Heeneey went down when the HMS Neptune was sunk in a minefield in 1941.

When Tom and his brother Jack had returned from service in World War 1, it was elder brother Jack who kept the Heeneey flag flying high by bossing the middleweight division.

But he also bossed his young brother. Tom had been under-age, 19, when he went into service and on coming back to New Zealand he was still as keen on rugby as he was on fighting.

Jack persuaded him to concentrate on boxing. But it was no easy task. Tom had to be weaned off rugby. Even when he was already committed to professional boxing, he was good enough to play for the Hawke's Bay-Poverty Bay combined team against the 1921 Springboks. The

Boks won 14-8 in one of the toughest matches of the tour.

But Tom's boxing career was soon taking up all his attention. He gave up his plumbing job to concentrate on boxing and it paid off. After a few fights, he beat Albert Pooley for the national professional heavyweight title.

A sojourn in Australia in 1922 brought five wins and two draws from nine fights. But when he returned to resume fighting here, two incidents affected him deeply and nearly caused him to give up the sport.

Not long after he beat Cyril Whittaker on points in Auckland, Whittaker collapsed and died. Investigation revealed that Whittaker had complained of fierce headaches since he had received a kick on the head at rugby some time before.

To make matters worse, when Tom was being encouraged to try to put it all behind him, there was another setback.

He was persuaded to fight Brian McCleary, a clever light-heavyweight who had succeeded him as heavyweight champion during his spell in Australia.

After stopping McCleary in the 14th round of their Christchurch bout, Tom was devastated when told that McCleary had been admitted to hospital and was in a critical condition.

Fortunately, McCleary made such a good recovery that he was able to resume boxing, and even to tour Britain with the 1924-25 All Blacks.

But Tom Heeneey was a badly shaken fighter. He said, "I don't know why they allowed me to hit him for so long. It should have been stopped!"

Did it affect his fighting? Certainly. He lost a lacklustre affair with lanky former King Country bushman Jim O'Sullivan. But he won the return in Gisborne. It was race week and according to all reports Gisborne was buzzing.

The hall was packed for the fight long before the fighters arrived. By 7.45pm over 300 people had been turned away. But they stayed outside the venue and

appeared to have the night under control.

Following instructions, O'Sullivan tried to outslug his opponent . . . a bad mistake. As he opened up, Heeneey hit him with a short right and big Jim went down as though pole-axed.

Referee Alan Maxwell later told the story of some of the craziest moments in a New Zealand boxing ring. He is quoted in Brian F. O'Brien's wonderfully descriptive and authoritative book, *Kiwis With Gloves On*, published by A. H. and A. W. Reed in 1960: "O'Sullivan began to get up as I reached nine. Heeneey rushed across the ring to get to grips with O'Sullivan. Jim, feeling that discretion was the better part of valour, quickly dropped to his knees again. Before Heeneey could connect, O'Sullivan's two gloves were on the floor and I promptly disqualified him. To intimate to O'Sullivan that he was out of the fight, I put my hand on his arm. To my utter consternation, he leapt promptly to his feet and held his hands aloft, thinking he had won on a foul."

It was chaotic as the crowd thought Tom had been robbed. It was only the dimming of the lights and the appearance of many men in blue that cleared the atmosphere and the hall.

Somewhat ironically, in the world title fight Tom began well and it was not until the fourth round that Tunney took command. The ref stopped it eight seconds from the end of the 11th round.

Tunney said afterwards: "Heeneey is a game one. Indeed I have never fought a fighter more game. I pounded enough rights under his heart to drop an ox, yet he came on for more. If pluck alone was enough, Heeneey would be fighting yet."

A week later, Tom had a really big win. He married the love of his life, an American, Marion Dunn.

After chalking up 69 professional bouts, he retired in 1933, buying a bar in Miami, Florida.

On his return to New Zealand for a holiday in 1947, there was a joyous reunion in the Heeneey family as Tom was reunited with his aged mother and his brothers.

Tom served with the United States Navy Civil Engineer Corps in World War 2 and afterwards coached boxing and refereed armed forces bouts in the South Pacific.

He died in 1984 and was inducted into the New Zealand Sports Hall of Fame in 1996.