

NEAL PEASE

University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee

STANLEY KETCHEL, THE “MICHIGAN ASSASSIN”: THE FIRST POLISH-AMERICAN SPORTS CHAMPION

Ordinarily, one might expect to hear the name of the first great Polish-American athlete mentioned regularly among the prominent figures in the history of the United States *Polonia*, but nothing about the short, violent life of Stanley Ketchel was ordinary. Sport may seem trivial, but it can reveal much about the absorption of immigrants into the ways of life of the United States in the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries. The American republic developed a distinctive sporting culture that the newcomers from southern and eastern Europe found strange and unattractive. Typically, the first generation ignored the strenuous games of the New World, or tried to steer their young away from them as bad influences. It was their American-born sons and grandsons, eager to blend into their native surroundings, who took up these amusements and made them their own; and the more they did so, the more they came to be, and to feel themselves “Americans” of European background rather than transplanted Europeans. Moreover, since success in athletics did not require the advantages of breeding, education, or status enjoyed by the Yankee elite, professional sport frequently offered the descendants of immigrants their first opportunities to succeed and receive acclaim from the wider society. As a result, the first star athletes whose forbears had passed through Ellis Island often became “ethnic heroes,” whose exploits inspired pride within the working class neighborhoods of immigrant peoples, and whose achievements were taken as glamorous proof that they and their offspring could make the grade in America.

Measured simply in terms of his athletic prowess and achievement, Stanley Ketchel, the “Michigan Assassin,” boasted the credentials to be remembered as the pioneering Polish-American sports idol, the athlete who meant to *Polonia* of his era what, for example, the baseball stars Hank Greenberg and Joe DiMaggio came to mean for Jewish- and Italian-Americans three decades later. In 1908,

when he won undisputed recognition as the best middleweight boxer in the world, he became the first Polish-American to claim a major athletic championship in the United States. Not only that, but he was a champion of uncommonly high caliber, acknowledged by contemporaries and later boxing aficionados alike as one of the top middleweights ever to enter the ring.

Yet in spite of his undeniable sporting renown, one accolade Ketchel seems never to have won was acceptance as a genuine “ethnic hero” of *Polonia*. For one thing, although he lived and competed in an era when ethnicity was taken very seriously in American culture, and sports journalism in particular routinely emphasized the ancestry of any successful athlete of immigrant heritage, Ketchel’s Polish roots were rarely mentioned. A boxing enthusiast who got his news from reading the *New York Times* would not have learned of Ketchel’s Polish background until the day after his murder by gunshot.¹ Beyond that, there is curiously little evidence that Polish-Americans took much note of him during his glory days, and less that in later years they saw him as someone to be proud of, as a suitable representative of their community, or as a model for their youth. In large part, the subdued memory of Stanley Ketchel in the lore of Polish America has to do with his reckless life and lurid death. It also highlights the complex intersection of ethnicity, race, and class in the United States of the early 20th century.

Reconstructing the story of Stanley Ketchel is both easy and hard at the same time. On the one hand, the facts and results of his stellar athletic career—the one thing that makes him of any interest to history—is a matter of copious public record, readily accessible in books or internet sites devoted to boxing.² However, sources of information about his life outside the prizefighting ring are scarce and unreliable. Once he emerged from anonymity into fame, fanciful and contradictory legends arose about his colorful but obscure past, and the fighter and his cronies were happy to encourage the mythmaking.³ Told and retold often enough, and with little or no documentation to correct them, these inventions and inconsistencies found their way willy nilly into what passes for published biographical work on Ketchel, almost all of it belonging to the genre of popular

¹ “New York Times”, October 16, 1910.

² See, for example, “Stanley Ketchel”, *BoxRec*, http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Stanley_Ketchel [Accessed: 18. 07. 2012].

³ J. Lardner (2010), *Down Great Purple Valleys*, in: Schulian, J. (ed.), *The John Lardner Reader*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, pp. 3-5; K. R. Nicholson (2011), *Hitters, Dancers, and Ring Magicians: Seven Boxers of the Golden Age and Their Challengers*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, pp. 155-156.

journalism or sportswriting, none of it with pretension to careful scholarship.⁴ The result is that readers of these various accounts will run into considerable confusion regarding the details of Ketchel’s *curriculum vitae*, and even the occasional outright whopper uncritically passed along, such as the demonstrably false tale that he was orphaned in youth by the murder of both parents.⁵

At any rate, the consensus is that Stanisław Kiecal was born in 1886 in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the son of Polish immigrants from the Prussian zone of partition. Grand Rapids was a manufacturing city of modest size that attracted a sizable colony of Poles, primarily—like the family Kiecal—former subjects of Prussia.⁶ When he was twelve years old, the boy ran away from home and took up the life of a hobo, riding the rails into the American mountain West, and eventually settling in Butte, Montana. At some point in his odyssey—either in Chicago, during an extended stopover, or after arriving in rough and ready Montana—a boxing instructor noticed that the pugnacious young drifter was handy with his fists; he took Kiecal under his wing, taught him the rudiments of prizefighting, and persuaded him to drop his unmistakably foreign name in favor of a less exotic *nom de guerre*.⁷ Now calling himself Stanley Ketchel, the apprentice fighter made his professional debut, at age sixteen, in 1903 in auspicious fashion, knocking out his opponent in the first round of a bout in his adopted hometown of Butte.

Over the next three years, Ketchel established himself as a local boxing prodigy, and built a reputation for thrilling savagery inside the ring. He took on all comers in Montana, losing but two of his first forty contests, and winning nearly all his victories by knockout. His style was primitive, but brutally effective: attack, attack again, and keep on attacking, until the other man fell

⁴ The original “biography” of Ketchel is N. Fleischer (1946), *“The Michigan Assassin”: The Saga of Stanley Ketchel*, New York: C. J. O’Brian. Fleischer was a prominent boxing writer and editor and a professionally admiring acquaintance of Ketchel, and his slim, anecdotal volume—emphasizing the fighter’s abilities, smoothing over the less admirable edges of his character, and portraying him as larger than life—set the template for much of the later literature. For books, or sections within books, see K. R. Nicholson, *Hitters...*; G. Kent (2005), *The Great White Hopes: The Quest to Defeat Jack Johnson*, Sparkford, UK: Sutton; M. Paloolian (2010), *Brutality: The Tragic Story of Stanley Ketchel, the “Michigan Assassin”*, Tucson, AZ: Wheatmark; and T. Tarapacki (1995), *Chasing the American Dream: Polish Americans in Sports*, New York: Hippocrene Books. By consensus, the outstanding entry in print on Ketchel, of any length, is Lardner’s *Down Great Purple Valleys*, which first appeared as an article in “True: The Men’s Magazine” in May 1954.

⁵ Ketchel’s parents both died in 1928, the father by his own hand, the mother a few months later.

⁶ E. Szymanski (1964), Polish Settlers in Grand Rapids, Michigan, “Polish American Studies”, Vol. 21, Issue 2, pp. 91-106. Owing to his parental origins in Prussia, Ketchel is sometimes mistakenly described as being of German, or partial German ancestry.

⁷ N. Fleischer, *“The Michigan...”,* pp. 8-11.

to the canvas, unconscious. Though not large as boxers go—his normal fighting weight, in his prime, was slightly less than 160 pounds/72.6 kg—Ketchel packed a mighty punch, and still is universally regarded as one of the hardest hitters “pound for pound”—that is, relative to size—the sport ever has known. His single-mindedly aggressive approach to his craft, reducing pugilism to its primal essence, captivated observers, and left them scrambling for words to describe his ferocity. “The first thing you must understand about Stanley Ketchel,” wrote one leading boxing authority, with evident approval, “is that he wasn’t human”: rather, he more resembled a force of nature, like a tornado, or a maddened beast.⁸ His aura of ruthless competitive fury earned him a series of sanguinary nicknames: “the Michigan Wildcat,” “the Michigan Lion,” “the Wolverine,” and the one that stuck, “the Michigan Assassin.”

His ambition growing, and sensing that he was ready to hit the boxing big time, Ketchel moved his base of operations from provincial Montana into the more visible and better paying fight scene of California in 1907. Before the year was out, having racked up five more victories and one draw, he proclaimed himself the rightful holder of both the welterweight and middleweight titles. These claims were contested, but Ketchel erased all doubt in 1908 by defeating in succession the twin brother contenders Mike and Jack Sullivan, and gaining official acclamation as middleweight champion.

Ketchel would retain his hold on the middleweight crown for nearly the remainder of his brief life. He had a worthy rival for honors within that weight category, the highly regarded Billy Papke. The two fighters squared off four times in the space of little more than a year, with the championship on the line each time. Ketchel lost in his second encounter with Papke in September 1908—his first defeat in almost four years, and the only one he would ever suffer at the hands of another middleweight—and temporarily surrendered the title. But he won it back two months later in decisive fashion, and gained a measure of revenge to boot, knocking out Papke, but only after taking care to mete out punishment over eleven rounds before finishing him off. In the end, Ketchel took three of his four contests with Papke, a pairing still ranked by boxing *cognoscenti* as one of the classics of the sport.

Very quickly, Ketchel had been transformed from a nobody, hustling bouts against overmatched palookas in the boondocks of Montana, into the toast of the boxing world. By this time, he was probably the most widely admired fighter of the day.⁹ He also acquired a taste for the high life that newfound celebrity and

⁸ B. R. Sugar (2006), *Boxing's Greatest Fighters*, Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, p. 60.

⁹ “Stanley Ketchel”, *BoxRec*, http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/St Stanley_Ketchel#Career_Overview [Accessed: 19. 07. 2012].

fortune had opened to him. His pleasures included late hours, drink, easy women, smart clothes, and fast automobiles.¹⁰ With no worlds left to conquer in his own middleweight division, Ketchel set his sights on fighting “up,” competing in the more prestigious and lucrative higher weight classifications. This would lead him to the most famous and vividly remembered fight of his career; indeed, of nearly anyone’s career.

In December 1908, Jack Johnson had defeated Tommy Burns, and so became the first African-American world heavyweight champion. The history of boxing has known few better heavyweights than Johnson. He was also brash, flaunted his success even more conspicuously than Ketchel, and openly squired a succession of white women: in short, he was everything that white America of that time found intolerable in a black man. Immediately, an extraordinary clamor arose from the fight public for the emergence of a “great white hope” to topple the detested but seemingly invincible Johnson, and restore the most glamorous of pugilistic titles to the Caucasian race. After three challengers tried and failed to accomplish this mission, Johnson agreed to defend his heavyweight crown against none other than the king of the lesser realm of middleweights, Stanley Ketchel. The “Michigan Assassin” seems to have cared nothing about the notion of a racial crusade to dethrone his black opponent; indeed, he and Johnson were on good terms, and had much in common, notably an enthusiasm for driving fine cars at high speed.¹¹ Rather, he hungered for the bigger glory and purses that came with the heavyweight championship, and had such confidence in his own abilities that he thought he could win it, in spite of the disadvantages of size and reach he would have to overcome.¹²

The Johnson-Ketchel fight took place in an arena just outside San Francisco on October 16, 1909, and still generates controversy and speculation more than a century later. Considerable mystery surrounds the exact terms of the under the table arrangements everyone agrees must have been made by the principals and their handlers to ensure that the bout would work to mutual benefit. It was literally a mismatch: Ketchel was officially listed as yielding thirty-five pounds/15.9 kg to his bulkier foe, but the true disparity was probably closer to fifty/22.7 kg, and no middleweight, even one as good as Ketchel, would stand a realistic chance to hold his own with the likes of Jack Johnson.¹³ The prevalent belief is that the two camps made a deal: neither Johnson nor Ketchel would go all out to win, or do serious damage to the other, and the main idea was to prolong the scheduled

¹⁰ K. R. Nicholson, *Hitters...*, p. 173.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹² J. Lardner, *Down...*, p. 13.

¹³ D. Badaczewski (2002), *Poles in Michigan*, East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, pp. 42-44.

twenty-round “battle” for as long as possible, in order to maximize profits from showings of a film being made of the fight, and to whet appetites for a rematch with a bigger payday. The film survives, and the visual evidence is consistent with Johnson’s later claim that he toyed with the smaller man through eleven rounds. Then in the twelfth, what had been a halfhearted exercise ended suddenly, and with stunning economy, in a single exchange of punches landed in earnest. Whether as a premeditated double cross, or simply because his competitive instincts got the better of him, Ketchel hit Johnson with a strong right hand to the chin that threw the champion off balance, and sent him to the canvas. Seemingly more surprised and angered than hurt, Johnson rose to his feet, rushed at Ketchel, and flattened him with a haymaker to the mouth that knocked him out cold, stretched full length on his back. In most retellings, including Johnson’s own, the force of the decisive blow left one or more of Ketchel’s teeth embedded in the victor’s right glove.¹⁴

The breakdown of their covert scheme to go through the gladiatorial motions at half speed—if that is, in fact, what happened—apparently left no hard feelings between the two combatants. According to Johnson, after the fight he and Ketchel became “fast friends,” and remained so until the middleweight’s untimely death.¹⁵ In 1910, as Johnson prepared to meet the challenge of a more credible “great white hope,” the former heavyweight titleholder Jim Jeffries, in a bout that gripped American public attention as few sporting events ever have done, Ketchel assisted as a member of the black champion’s entourage, lending advice, moral support, and occasional service as a sparring partner.¹⁶

Ketchel indeed seems to have hoped for a rematch against Johnson, but his career and health went into rapid decline, largely due to his own excesses and lack of discipline. Shortly after the Johnson fight, Ketchel relocated to New York City. Stimulated by the abundant temptations of the big city, his appetite for night life and rowdy entertainment raced out of control. He indulged his familiar vices without restraint, and added new ones. Newspaper stories began to carry frequent reports of incidents of his increasingly erratic behavior, and scarcely concealed hints of his progressive dissipation, alternating with his own

¹⁴ For the Johnson-Ketchel fight, see G. Early (1988), *The Black Intellectual and the Sport of Prizefighting*, “The Kenyon Review”, Vol. 10, Issue 3, p. 106; J. Johnson (1992), *Jack Johnson—In the Ring—and Out*, New York: Citadel Press, pp. 193-196; Ketchel’s Dream of Glory, “Sports Illustrated”, October 18, 1954, pp. 80-81; G. C. Ward (2004), *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, pp. 160-163. For highlights of the fight film, *YouTube*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_gWov_tc50&feature=related [Accessed 20. 07. 2012].

¹⁵ J. Johnson, *Jack...*, p. 196.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178, 186, 196; “New York Times”, October 16, 1910.

unconvincing assurances that he would get himself sobered up and into shape for his next fight. But the wear and tear he was inflicting on his own body revealed itself clearly in a series of diminishing performances in the ring. By summer of 1910, Ketchel was a physical wreck, his frame haggard from weight loss, possibly ravaged by opium, venereal disease, or both. He looked much older than his age. In September, realizing that he had to take drastic measures to reverse his descent into ruin, he decided to accept the invitation of a friend, R. P. Dickerson, to spend some weeks at his ranch outside the village of Conway, Missouri, not far from the larger town of Springfield, for a spell of rest, recuperation, and training.¹⁷

Up until its ultimately fatal conclusion, the respite in the secluded Ozark hills appeared to do him good. The leisurely pace of the countryside appealed to him, and began to restore the ailing "Michigan Assassin" to health and fitness. His original plan had been to stay in rural Missouri just long enough to get back into fighting trim, but he seems to have begun thinking of making the area his home, and sooner rather than later. He spoke of going through with perhaps one last bout, then retiring from the fight game, buying land near Springfield, and settling down to the life of a well to do farmer.¹⁸

What happened next was memorably summarized by the sportswriter John Lardner in 1954: "Stanley Ketchel was twenty-four years old when he was fatally shot in the back by the common-law husband of the lady who was cooking his breakfast."¹⁹ The unmarried couple Goldie Smith and Walter Diple worked as hired hands on Dickerson's ranch. On the morning of October 15, 1910, Diple entered the kitchen of the farmhouse, where he came upon Ketchel and Smith. It is still hard to know what motives Diple had in mind: sexual jealousy, robbery, or anger over a recent argument with the other man, made pre-emptively lethal by the jumpy, hair-trigger knowledge that the fighter always carried a loaded pistol—any of these, singly or in combination, is plausible. Neither is it clear whether Diple walked into the room bearing a rifle, or, as he later claimed, picked one up to arm himself upon sensing danger. After an exchange of hostile words, Diple fired one bullet at Ketchel, piercing a lung. The assailant took money from the pocket of his grievously wounded victim, and fled. Dickerson chartered a train to carry Ketchel to Springfield in hopes of saving his life, but the middleweight champion of the world died that evening, only a day short of a year since he had

¹⁷ A. Daley (1948), *They Always Come Out Like I Say*, "Esquire", June 1948, p. 153; J. Lardner, *Down...*, pp.11-12; "New York Times", July 22, 1909, and October 16, 1910; E. Szymanski (1966), *Newspaper Notes on Poles in Grand Rapids*, "Polish American Studies", Vol. 23, Issue 1, p. 55; G. C. Ward, *Unforgivable...*, p. 242.

¹⁸ "New York Times", October 16, 1910.

¹⁹ J. Lardner, *Down...*, p. 3.

knocked the great Jack Johnson off his feet. Ketchel had said he would be dead before he reached age thirty; the prediction had come to pass with six years to spare. No one could have been much surprised.²⁰

The remains of the slain fighter were returned to his home town of Grand Rapids that had known him as Stanisław Kiecal. As many as a reported eight thousand mourners gathered for his funeral at St. Adalbert's, the Polish church that had been his boyhood parish, and given him his meager schooling: it stood as the largest funeral in the history of the city until that of another native son, President Gerald Ford, nearly a century later.²¹ He was buried in the Polish Holy Cross Cemetery, beneath an imposing tombstone paid for by R. P. Dickerson.²² In January 1911, back in Missouri, Walter Diple and Goldie Smith went on trial on charges stemming from Ketchel's death. The accused couple tried but failed to persuade the jury that Ketchel had provoked Diple's wrath by an attempt to rape the woman, or that Diple had fired in his own legitimate self-defense; both were found guilty of robbery and murder, and sentenced to life in prison. On appeal, Smith's conviction of the more serious crime was overturned, and she was released from captivity in 1912. Diple, on the other hand, served out more than two decades of his term before being paroled in 1934.²³

Few athletes have left so mixed a legacy as Stanley Ketchel. His reputation as one of the greatest champions in the history of boxing is secure. Most calculations credit him with having won 53 bouts over the course of his career, 48 of them by knockout, while losing five, with another five draws. More than a hundred years after his death, he still is ranked by consensus as one of the three top middleweights the sport has known, perhaps indeed the very best.²⁴ His durable stature within the fraternity of fisticuffs was demonstrated by imitation, that sincerest form of flattery, as over the decades that followed more than a few aspiring fighters also chose to ply their combative trade under the name Ketchel, paying tribute to the mythic original while trying to capitalize on his allure.²⁵ What is more, his memory carries with it the additional fascination of the distinctive combination of

²⁰ A. Daley, *They...*, p. 46; J. R. Nash (1983), *Murder Among the Mighty: Celebrity Slayings that Shocked America*, New York: Delacorte Press, pp. 56-68.

²¹ T. Tarapacki, *Chasing...*, p. 71.

²² E. Szymanski, *Polish Settlers...*, p. 104.

²³ R. K. Gilmore (1993), *An Ozarks Melodrama: The Killing of Stanley Ketchel*, "Ozarks Watch", Vol. 6, Issue 3, <http://thelibrary.org/lochist/periodicals/ozarkswatch/ow603d.htm> [Accessed: 6.08. 2012].

²⁴ N. Fleischer, S. Andre (1975), *A Pictorial History of Boxing*, Secaucus, NJ: Castle Books, pp. 207-208, 213; B. R. Sugar, *Boxing's...*, p. 60; „New York Times”, September 10, 1951.

²⁵ H. L. Hannum (1990), *Nick Adams and the Search for Light*, in: Benson, J. J. (ed.), *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, p. 496.

his fierce, atavistic boxing style coupled with something like the aura of genuine, if tawdry, tragedy in its classic meaning, of a life and brilliant career cut short by his own uncontrollable instinct for destruction turned against opponents inside the ring, but against himself out of it. Owing to his hyperbolic persona, the “Michigan Assassin” has inspired some of the most overwrought prose ever to appear on American sports pages. In 1946, the *New York Times* columnist Arthur Daley resorted to astronomic excess to describe Ketchel as “meteoric in every sense of the word, a blazing flash across the fistic heavens—and then extinction.” Five years later, returning to a theme he never tired of, Daley called his favorite boxer “a fighting machine without a flaw. Outside the ring he had more flaws than a dime-store ‘diamond,’ but inside the ropes he was a cruel destroyer of awesome efficiency”; again, the unnerving tendency of Ketchel’s admirers to extol him in terms normally associated with psychopathology, not games.²⁶

The scandalous, colorful drama of the Ketchel legend also has won him a niche in the realm of serious American letters. He is the posthumous subject of a short story by Ernest Hemingway, “The Light of the World,” published in 1933. It is set in a seedy northwoods train station where two outdoorsmen passing through town overhear a pair of aging prostitutes carrying on an argument—spiteful but pathetically touching at the same time—over their delusional or fabricated rival claims to have won the true affections of “the finest and most beautiful man that ever lived,” the famed prizefighter who had been their client. “The Light of the World” is vintage Hemingway, all testosterone and spare dialogue: it was a favorite of its author, though one he complained “nobody else ever liked.”²⁷ Beyond that, John Lardner’s celebrated opening of his essay on Ketchel “Down Great Purple Valleys,” quoted earlier, is routinely praised as the best, most effective lead sentence ever crafted in the journalism of sport. Professional peers hold it in awe. Red Smith, among the most literary of American sportswriters, summed it up as “the greatest novel written in one sentence.”²⁸

In the end, there remain the questions about Stanley Ketchel’s ambiguous ethnic image, so elusive and unfocused in a character otherwise drawn in such hard edged, emphatic lines: Why did his Polishness go so little noticed? And why did the American *Polonia* not adopt him as its own sporting hero? Clearly, in his own day he was seen as having no particular ethnic identity, just did not come

²⁶ „New York Times”, October 25, 1946, September 10, 1951.

²⁷ E. Hemingway (1987), *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Son, pp. 292-297. Hemingway’s comment is taken from the preface he wrote for the first edition of his collected stories, p. 3.

²⁸ A. Beith, John Lardner, A Forgotten Giant of the Sportswriting World, *SI.com*, October 14, 2010, http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2010/writers/the_bonus/10/14/john.lardner/index.html [Accessed 14.08. 2012]; J. Schulian, ix

across to people as being the son of an immigrant. For example, shortly before his death, the *New York Times* reported that the middleweight champ was working out with another fighter: the dispatch casually referred to his sparring partner as an “Italian bantam,” according to the prevailing convention of the sporting press of that era to call attention to an athlete’s ancestral origin—but Ketchel was simply Ketchel, with no corresponding ethnic reference; the same way the *Times* always had described him, as a boxer, pure and simple.²⁹ This was typical. Then and later as well, his Polish background tended to be mentioned only incidentally, or ignored altogether. One reason is that he seems to have left all things Polish behind him when he ran away from Grand Rapids and home to ride the rails. Once he surfaced, his public perceived him instead as a product of the American West, first Michigan, then the mountain West, his chosen place of relocation and personal reinvention: the young hobo turned boxing hellcat whose untamed spirit in and out of the ring matched that of the wide open frontier mining towns of Montana from which he burst into sporting prominence.³⁰ He answered to the all-American nickname Steve, not Stan or Stash. Nor did the virile surname that Stanisław Kiecal made up for himself, Ketchel, convey any ring of foreignness to the American ear. He could have been a character stepping out of the stories of his contemporary, Jack London, who wrote tales of prospectors, hunters, and toughs, denizens of a still wild West—and who, as it happens, popularized the call for a “white hope” to wrest the heavyweight crown from the unwelcome possession of Jack Johnson.

Nor does it appear that his exploits gained Ketchel a broad following among the *Polonia* of the United States. Apart from his native Grand Rapids, where he was celebrated as a local boy made good³¹—as shown by the extraordinary turnout at his funeral—there is little indication that his fame resounded widely in the Polish-American neighborhoods, or aroused collective pride that one of their own had won renown in the New World. Surely time and geography had much to do with this. Ketchel’s moment in the limelight was brief: he became undisputed middleweight champ in 1908, and in little more than two years he was dead. Beyond that, he lived and fought mainly in the West, far from the settlements of Polish immigrants concentrated in the northeastern quadrant of the country; only once in his career did he ever stage a bout in any of the principal citadels of Polish-American population, when he took on Billy Papke in Milwaukee. Few easterners had heard of him until after he had gained the title, and even then he

²⁹ „New York Times”, April 27, 1910.

³⁰ A. Daley, *They...*, p. 46, 153.

³¹ T. Tarapacki, *Chasing...*, p. 71; E. Szymanski, *Polish Settlers...*, p. 104.

remained a distant figure known largely through lines of type in newspapers.³² No doubt Ketchel lived and died with a great many Polish-Americans unaware that he existed, or having no more than a faint idea who he was, or that they had a common ancestry.

Yet even had Ketchel completed a boxing career of normal length, held his middleweight championship a few more years,³³ and become more familiar to *Polonia*, it is most unlikely that they ever would have come to consider him as an athletic “ethnic hero,” whose sweaty successes reflected well on his immigrant group as a whole and signaled its advancement in American society. One reason was the low status of prizefighting in the pecking order of sport in the United States. The game best suited to produce ethnic heroes was baseball, the acknowledged “national pastime” universally identified by Americans with the character and values of their country. On the other hand, boxing functioned as a guilty pleasure of American popular culture. It was the sport of the underclass, only recently emerged from illegality, and notoriously linked with gamblers, criminals, and disreputable types and surroundings.³⁴ One unpleasant but telling sign of boxing’s less than honorable social standing was its openness to competition between whites and blacks as equals. In that day and age, American sports that aspired to respectability followed strict practices of racial separation, generally enforced by tacit “gentlemen’s agreements” rather than explicit prohibition, but no less rigidly applied. In the early 20th century, boxing was the one major American sport that departed from this racist norm, not because it was more enlightened or tolerant as an industry, but because it had no good name to defend, and no ambition to acquire one.³⁵ In other words, Ketchel’s most famous bout—his matchup against Jack Johnson—was something like an offense against the prevailing cultural ideals of social intercourse, and less a symbol of the ascent of *Polonia* in the American hierarchy than of its continued association with undesirables at its bottom levels. Carrying the point further, it is not too much to say that the very image of Ketchel as the raging beast of the ring could

³² „New York Times”, August 17, 1909; October 25, 1941. The „Times” first mentioned Ketchel in its pages on September 8, 1908, nearly half a year after he had become middleweight champion.

³³ An unreal assumption, in any event: Ketchel’s skills were already in sharp decline, due to his self-indulgence, and it is hard to imagine that he could have maintained his grasp on his title for much longer.

³⁴ B. G. Rader (2004), *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, pp. 48-49.

³⁵ *Major Problems in American Sport History* (1997), Riess, S. A. (ed.), Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin, p. 278.

only reinforce the distasteful stereotype of the Polish-American workingman as an unlettered, hard drinking, loutish brute.

Above all, Stanley Ketchel, the “Michigan Assassin,” could not qualify as a hero because he was Stanley Ketchel, in John Lardner’s summation “a crude, brawling, low living, wild-eyed, sentimental, dissipated, almost illiterate hobo, who broke every Commandment at his disposal.”³⁶ He was a great athlete, and a boon companion to friends who shared his tastes for late night carousing, but otherwise an unadmirable young man whose feral nature and destructive behavior pointed toward two possible destinations: prison, or, as in his case, an early grave. Even in Grand Rapids, the hometown inclined to excuse its native son’s flaws, a proposal to enshrine his memory with a historical marker met with objections as an unseemly glorification of a ruffian no mother would wish her son to emulate.³⁷ The first qualification for being held up as any sort of hero, ethnic or otherwise, is not to be regarded as a hellion.

³⁶ J. Lardner, *Down...*, p. 3.

³⁷ T. Tarapacki, *Chasing...*, p. 71.