



Dempsey and Firpo by George Bellows

By Joe Byerly

On September 14, 1923, over 80,000 spectators packed into the New York City Polo Grounds to watch one of the most famous prizefights in boxing history. The heavyweight champion, Jack Dempsey, who stood at 6'1 and weighed around 185 pounds, defended his title against Luis Firpo, the Wild Bull of Pampas. Firpo had two inches on Dempsey and outweighed him by thirty-five pounds. This matchup was so popular it didn't even need commercials or Facebook ads to promote it. For example, Dempsey's train-up prior to the fight drew 3,000 people a day to watch the champ prepare and the gate alone drew \$1.2 million- in 1920's money!

As soon as the bell rang, the two fighters gave everyone their money's worth. Within the first few minutes, both boxers found themselves on their backs after some brutal exchanges. Dempsey knocked Firpo down seven times in the first round and he probably thought he had the fight in the bag. With less than thirty seconds remaining, Firpo caught Dempsey with a blow that sent him through the ropes (head first) onto one of the tables below. The referee began his count.

As the referee counted, Dempsey, with assistance from the ringside writers got back into the ring. He was bloody from the gash on his head after he hit Paul Gallico's typewriter. Even as he tried to regain his wits, the Wild Bull didn't give him a break. Jack continued to dodge punches until the round ended and he was able to stagger to his corner and prepare for the second round. He used to the break to reflect on what just happened to him. The bell rang, and this time Dempsey had learned from his mistakes, he changed his approach- he avoided the same wild punches that caught him in the first round. The two fought for another 57 seconds, and with a right hook to Firpo's chin, Jack Dempsey delivered the winning blow that won the fight.

How many of us have found ourselves in Dempsey's shoes? We believe we are winning in our jobs, our relationships, or the achievement of a personal goal when we catch an unforeseen punch to the face, knocking us out of the ring. It is in these moments that we have a decision to make. We can either let failure defeat us, define us, or develop us.

**When Failure Defeats Us.** Too often we allow unforeseen setbacks to stop us in our tracks. We look up from the writer's table at ringside and see no possible way to get back in the ring. We quickly move through the stages of grief and wave the white flag in defeat. I've seen this happen time and time again throughout my career. A Soldier or leader will make a mistake and when the outcome results in negative feedback, they quit. I've even succumbed to this myself as I've given up on professional goals when I hit unforeseen roadblocks along the way.

**When Failure Defines Us.** Even worse than allowing failure to defeat us, is when we allow it to define us. This can be especially problematic when the cause of the failure was [nothing more than bad luck](#). Too often, I've witnessed leaders in the military fail at a position or a task and allow that event or season of their career to define who they are as individuals. Their heads hang a bit lower and all facets of their life are affected because they see themselves as failures. Out of the three options, this is by far the worst. We have to remember that failure and success are equal partners in helping us gain experience. Thus, there is a third option; we can allow the experience to teach or develop us, and let failure become the seeds for future success.

**Letting Failure Develop Us.** Many of the mistakes I made early on in my career have served to enable my success later on. Like Jack Dempsey, I returned to my corner, licked my wounds, reflected on my failures, and developed a better strategy to win. In a 2014 HBR [article](#), authors Marks, Mirvus and Ashkenas offer some great advice for recovering from "getting knocked out of the ring". First, they suggest that we examine the failure to figure out what happened and determine the causes. Second, we should look for ways to turn the

loss into an opportunity for a future success. For example, if a career door slams shut on us, it might allow us to pursue another path that wasn't available to us before we stumbled. Finally, after we review the options on the table, we seize the right one and move forward.

While the lessons from this article are critical to our resiliency as individuals, I believe that they are equally important to internalize as leaders. Our subordinates are going to fail. And it is our reaction to that failure that helps them figure out whether they are going to allow that failure to defeat, define, or develop them. We can also coach them through the process of reflection through counseling so that they can unpack the failure to find those lessons they can use to enable future success. If our negative reaction to failure is over-the-top or we fail to coach our subordinates through the episode, we might unwittingly instill in them, a fear of failure. Many senior leaders have fallen from grace in the military, not because they failed, but because of unethical behavior that arose out of a fear of failure. Down the road, they cut corners, cheated, fudged numbers, or they covered up setbacks to avoid failure at all costs. This might have been avoided if someone early on in their careers approached their setbacks differently.

Next time life unexpectedly sends you into Gallico's typewriter, don't let it defeat or define you-allow it to develop you. As leaders, this lesson is critical to our success and to the success of our organizations. When our subordinates fail, we should be like the ringside writers and help them back on their feet, if not, they will develop an unhealthy fear of failure. When we view failure or setbacks as the tuition for experience, we learn quicker, and are able to get back on our feet like Jack Dempsey.

Do you have an example of when you turned defeat into development? If so, please share in the comments section below. You never know you might impact by sharing your story.

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