

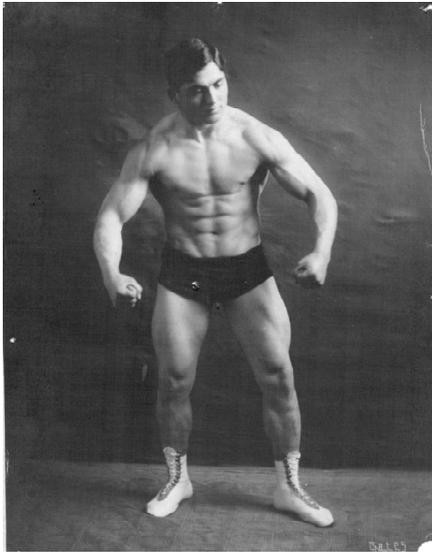


## Jim Londos: The Golden Greek of Professional Wrestling

- ▶ “What exactly is this Jim Londos anyway? Is he an ‘industry’ or the embodiment of Greek power? ... When a victory of his is announced, the Greeks everywhere tremble with excitement. Londos represents their longing, their national symbol, and their national pride.”
- ▶ -Macedonia, 1936



## Early years



- ▶ Born in 1894 in Koutsopodi, Greece
- ▶ Emigrated to the U.S. as a 15-year-old with \$20 in his pocket
- ▶ Started wrestling friends on mattresses
- ▶ Hitchhiked to San Francisco and joined a YMCA. Within two years, was top light-heavyweight on Pacific Coast

## Struggling to reach the top

**Wrestling Match**

**BOB MANOGOFF, THE TERRIBLE TURK**  
—VS.—  
**JIMMY SAMPSON, THE SLIPPERY GREEK**

**CITY AUDITORIUM, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21.**  
**BIGGEST WRESTLING MATCH OF SEASON.**  
**The Turk must throw the Greek twice in an hour.**

**2—FAST PRELIMINARIES—2**

**Wrestling Starts at 8:30. Main Match at 9:15.**  
**Admission 50c, 75c and \$1.00. Ladies Free.**

- ▶ Champions of era dominated by Midwest farm boys (Lewis, Stecher, Gotch)
- ▶ Undersized at 5-8, 195-200 pounds
- ▶ Was his own booker, manager and advocate
- ▶ Ethnicity and prejudice; US cut off immigration after WWI

## Business changes

- ▶ Scandals and double-crosses plague wrestling
- ▶ State investigations found challengers had to turn over house deeds to get a match
- ▶ Attendance sinks; MSG draws 3,500/avg for five shows in 1928-1930
- ▶ Londos remains most popular wrestler, however



## 'The rebirth of wrestling'

- ▶ Londos defeats Dick Shikat on June 6, 1930, at Phillies Stadium
- ▶ Pa. commissioner: "Wrestling has come back into its own."
- ▶ Wrestling factions are aligned (if only temporarily)
- ▶ First four shows at MSG draw 20,000-plus fans



## Greatest drawing card of his time

- ▶ First to draw crowds of 40,000-plus overseas with record 90,000-plus (70,000 in stadium) in Athens in 1933. Record held until WM3.
- ▶ 1926-1934: drew 10,000-plus on 62 occasions, runner-up (Sonnenberg) had 16. Only three buildings held 20,000.
- ▶ January 1934, three world championship matches in one week in Detroit, Chicago and St. Louis drew 52,000 total
- ▶ Gate for 1931 estimated at \$1.5 million (\$32 million today); for 1930-34, estimated at \$5 million (\$106 million today)



## Doing this without TV, social media or federation

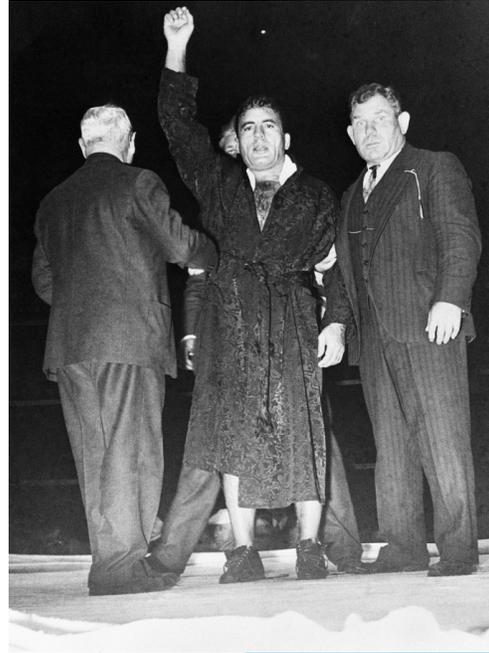


- ▶ 1935 Minneapolis: three appearances averaged 8,900 fans. Other 26 shows in MPLS averaged 3,100.
- ▶ 1937-38, return from nine-country world tour to Detroit. Drew 21,000 and \$40,000 in two shows; Nagurski (as champ) drew \$2,000 in same venue.
- ▶ Sought out by Greek premiers Venizelos, Tsaldaris and Metaxas. Walk-in access to Hoover White House.
- ▶ Immortal match with Ed Lewis, 1934 in Chicago: 35,625 fans at Wrigley Field, gate of \$96,302 (\$2.25 million today), not topped for 18 years

## What made him special?

- ▶ Blue-collar and underdog appeal with immigrant back story.
- ▶ Impressive physique, first true matinee idol - important then as now in wrestling.
- ▶ Dignity and bearing, respect for opponents and the business, never badmouthed anyone.
- ▶ Exciting style. "Frank Gotch, dead these many years, could have thrown Londos all night long. But Londos, in being thrown, would have been more interesting to watch." - *Damon Runyon*

**BUT MOST OF ALL ...**



## He made people care - and that's different than believing

- ▶ Rope-a-dope and comebacks with counterholds - a smaller man thinks his way out of trouble
- ▶ Audience connection - create a story in which they are invested. Give them an outlet to cheer or boo. Make them feel better about themselves. Do it with excellence and commitment so they take a lesson home.
- ▶ "Acrobats, athletes, body-builders, performers. It's a contest and it's a play. It's a performance and it's a show. It's theater but it's real. It's true that way." - *Jim Londos*
- ▶ *More at LondosBook.com*

