

A Brief History of Boxing

The Roped Arena, Ancient and Modern

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In Three Parts—Part I

Boxing is always popular. It is popular in spite of hostile criticism. It has been popular since the origin of athletic sports before the days of Greece and Rome. The following article—one of a series of three—deals in an entertaining and instructive way with the history of boxing from its origin to the present time.

IN all logical probability, wrestling is the oldest of all athletic sports, even antedating foot racing, while boxing became a recognized form of entertainment at a later date than either of these diversions. Foot racing would naturally become a systematized sport among the peoples living upon level ground, where courses and set distances could be prepared. Wrestling, however, being simply physical combat softened to the guise of a friendly exhibition, would be taken up by all races, mountaineers as well as plainsmen. Boxing is the expression of another form of physical combat, as shown in the striking of blows. Two small boys, barely old enough to toddle, will seize each other in such grips as occur to childish minds and muscles, and will roll upon the floor in frantic grapple. That is the symbolism of the wrestling combat, and the idea of boxing will not occur to their youthful intellects for several years to come.

The theory of boxing having been worked out to a point where it was possible to convert a combat to an entertaining sport, rules and regulations would naturally force themselves upon the fighters and promoters. Wrestling became the expression of rough and

tumble battling; boxing was made the expression of cleaner and more impressive fighting. The fundamental idea of the wrestling combat lies in its continuance upon the ground, with both men rolling on the turf—a grappling, choking, limb-wrenching struggle, kept up till one man or the other is helpless. The fundamental idea of the boxing combat lies in keeping upon the feet, inflicting damage by blows instead of grips, and never, under any circumstances, battling while prostrate on the ground.

Having differentiated boxing from wrestling in this manner, the early ring-promoters framed the laws and limitations of the game to suit their ideas of heroic competition. It is impossible, of course, to state just when boxing was made a public sport, to which eager devotees paid their admission money, but it is likely that the Mahrattas and the Rajputs of India developed a code of ring-laws before any of the white-skinned nations. Many historians have always asserted that the earliest recorded boxing match was that between Dares and Entellus, described in Virgil's *Aeneid*, and taking place in Sicily, about 1183 B. C. In India, though, it is stated that boxing—according to the Rajput rules—was

flourishing as early as B. C. 2000, and they ought to know.

The rules of the game, both in ancient Greece and India, were decidedly vigorous, and not a pugilist of the modern day would care to try a bout under those statutes. Greek and Roman fighters—the Romans, of course, copying their boxing laws from the earlier Greek code—reinforced their husky hands with the direct ancestor of the modern “brass knuckle.” The cestus, as the ancient boxing glove was called, was a ring of heavy leather, covered with disks or strips of lead or iron. Take a good old Greek pugilist, weighing in at about 214 pounds, well-trained and gleeful, give him those things and let him take a good swing at the other fellow’s jaw, and there was something doing. The combats of the Olympic Games and of the Roman amphitheatres, must have been the real thing when it came to knockouts and general execution, while it is hard to see how on earth there could have been any fakes in those heroic days. Boxers can fake most beautifully with the soft padded gloves of nowadays, and there were even fakes ad libitum in the barehanded days of the London prize ring—but how could any fellow fake and get by with the cestus?

Up to the time of the Roman Emperors, all boxers seem to have been high-class amateurs. The prizes for which they competed were of a money value, perhaps, of 14 cents—a crown of laurel or wild olive, which the victorious slugger wore proudly in parade around the arena, and then put in mothballs at his home. Between games, he worked at his trade, or diverted his muscles in the gymnasium. There may have been shadow boxing and lots of wrestling in the gyms, but how could the sluggers have trained with the cestus or even worked with sparring partners?

Occasionally the citizens of a Greek town would be so overwhelmed with admiration over the prowess of a boxer that they would board, lodge, and dress

him by public subscription. This was exactly like the sort of stuff they used to pull at many an American college, where the big stars of the football field formerly received board and tuition for their services. It was not considered smacking of professionalism, either, in those gallant days. Per contra, the boxer who was so popular that his town supported him was considered the real thing in the hero line, and nobody thought of questioning his entries.

The rules under which these athletes did strenuous battle were fair enough, when you consider the gloves. Besides the regular laws governing the game, limiting fouls, etc., there was also a regular dueling code for boxing, akin to that branch of the duello under which the foemen drew lots for the first shot. Under these statutes, the boxers drew lots for the first wallop. The man who lost then stood like a statue, and the other gentleman bounced his cestus off the recipient bean. If the bouncee was down and out, the bouncer won without further altercation. If the man who had been swatted kept his feet and had the energy for a comeback, he was then permitted to deliver his smite, which, urged by the memory of what had just been done to the smiter, must have been a biff of sweet attentiveness and hearty purpose. This idea of taking turns at the punch survived for many generations, and even came into vogue when the original of boxing had long been utterly forgotten. We read in *Ivanhoe* of the way the thing was done. If two husky Britons or Normans, in all friendliness and good humor, wanted to try out their hitting powers, they did not engage in combat, but drew lots for “the first buffet.” He who won the toss then bared an arm that resembled a leg of mutton, and pasted the other Briton a frabjous hoist that would have knocked a mule into the middle of next summer. If the gent who had thus been whacked had any ambition left, he came back with the best in his repertoire, after which they

cried, "Well smitten, Hal—let us seek the nutbrown ale!"

The Romans professionalized the boxing game. Their gladiators fought with the cestus, as in the Greek arenas, but for a money prize, and the moneys grew continually larger. In the days of the Coliseum, the purses given were enormous, and when you remember the difference in the purchasing power of the coin must have amounted to a net sum that would make even Jack Johnson envious. It was not uncommon for the directors of the games to hang up purses that would equal in buying power, \$50,000 in our money and the gladiators certainly fought nobly for the money.

At first, the fighters were either Romans or the champions of what nations they overcame in war. It can be easily imagined how joyous a sporty Roman general must have been when his adjutant came to him with a list of prisoners, and read it in this fashion: "Among the 2,000 prisoners taken at the storming of Narbis, your grace, is Jackus of Africa, the boxing champion of eleven nations." Whereat the General would slap his hands with glee, and cry: "I have heard much of this Jackus—he is a black man of tremendous power, albeit lacking somewhat in finer skill. I shall have him taught by Thord the Northman, and enter him in the next games of the Circus Maximus. By Apollo, this is a joyous day! With this fellow, my good Herbivorus, I shall win more money than I ever saw before!"

As the Empire grew more sporty, and gladiators were in more demand, the boxers were recruited from every nation. There were slaves, ex-slaves who had been set free in recognition of the money they had won for their owners, war-captives, and mercenary volunteers of every race, drawn to Rome by the allurements of gold and high living, and hoping that their thews would gain them cash unlimited. Considering, firstly, the number of the boxing events, and, secondly, the wear and tear upon the boxers, it is evident

that the professional pugilists must have been a tremendous crowd. Not only were there loads of fighters needed for the various circuses, but only half of any one batch could be used over again. The loser was a dead one, literally as well as metaphorically. Struck down with the awful cestus, he usually fell with a fractured skull, and died in the arena. If he survived he was hardly fit for further battles, and probably joined the crowds of beggars that infested every nook of ancient Rome.

The barbarians who swept Rome and Roman ways into the ashcan do not seem to have cared for the Roman ideas in athletics, although many of the ablest boxers had been members of these same tribes, and had learned their fistic science from the Roman "lanistas," or expert performers. With the fall of Rome, about A. D. 476, boxing became a lost art, and so remained for many centuries.

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The Roman boxing rules, however, did not die out, or rather, never had a chance to die out in their original home—the west of India. There, among the Rajput and Mahratta states, and particularly at Baroda, boxing flourished 4,000 years without a break. The style of boxing adopted at Baroda, antedating the fighting rules of the Greeks and Romans, was identical with cestus-milling, but much more ferocious. Like the cestus-boxing, it was a game where the loser never came back for a return match, and faking was impossible, but the Hindu cestus was ten times more terrible than that of the Roman arena. In Baroda, the boxers wear a cestus with long steel claws, like those of a tiger. The "nukki ka koosti" combats—as they call them in India—are therefore bloody beyond description. A favorite knockout blow in nukki ka koosti is a downward sweep of the steel claws, tearing out both eyes. With the cestus, and in the Roman ring, the loser was mercifully killed by the knockout that crushed his skull—in the game as played at

Baroda, the loser goes begging through the balance of his blinded days.

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In Bornu and Bagirmi, negro states of the Sudan, they have had for ages a curious style of boxing that is a cross between the fistic rules and the French savate—a game which has been practiced in that region since 1500 A. D. This game is governed by regular rules as to fouls, rounds, etc., but certain blows with the foot are permissible. The fighters box with considerable cleverness, parrying, ducking, and countering, but always waiting for the moment when the other fellow is unbalanced or careless for the fraction of a second. Then the quicker athlete swings his heel under the ear of the other fellow, a feat of high kicking and judgment of distance that would seem almost impossible. So terrific are these heel-swings that many of the beaten boxers have dropped dead with broken necks, while a clumsy blow, landing on the back of the adamantine head, means a crippled foot or broken ankle for the swinger.

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After the Barbarian conquest, boxing seems to have perished in Europe, only to gradually revive in the customs of the Anglo-Saxons. Single-stick, as a gentler form of swordplay, became popular after the Norman invasion, and from single-stick to fist fighting is an easily comprehensible gradation. The trading of buffets, already described, became a general diversion, and it was not long before Britons were fighting gamely with the clenched hands.

For several centuries, Englishmen were noted throughout Europe for the strength of their wallops and the strange fact that they settled their disputes with fists instead of swords. The upper classes, Normans by blood, retained the haughty ideals of chivalry, and went to it with sword and dagger whenever they got good and sore at each other, but the backbone of the English nation fought with the fists, though under no set rules excepting

those enforced by the attendant throng, Britons all and lovers of fair play. In the camps of the terrible English archers, the winners of Crecy and Poitiers, there was no knife thrusting, and the archers would not even fight duels with the bow and arrow, the weapons they understood so well. If Simon of Kent lost his temper at Dickon of Norwich, he hung a fine right-hand jolt on Dickon's snout, and Dickon came back with a lovely pelt to the lamp. Thus the merry Englishmen fought for ages, but never, apparently, as a public sport. There seems to have been an immense amount of wrestling at all fairs, carnivals, and public gatherings, and there were hot combats with the single-stick, but boxing, under set codes, and for prizes, does not seem to have interested the Britons or even occurred to their imaginations.

It remained, according to what little evidence is attainable, for one Figg, living near the close of the seventeenth century, to draw up rude codes of battle, and to make the position of England's best fist-fighter something to be talked about and envied. Figg seems to have been a very capable all-round athlete, and taught, in his gymnasium, not only boxing, but wrestling and the single-stick. He attracted a lot of notice; other Englishmen took up the game under the Figg rules, and Figg himself was challenged several times. Details of Figg's actual performances are sadly lacking, but the shadowy records still surviving show that he fought five or six other husky Britons, and trimmed them plenty. Pictures of Figg indicate that he was on the Tom Sharkey type physically—not very tall, but extremely muscular. Many modern critics have asserted that Figg, judging from his big muscle, must have been slow and clumsy, almost muscle-bound. Remember, though, that Figg was a fencer and a clever man with the single-stick, and you will at once realize that he must have been pretty shifty on his feet.