

A Brief History of Boxing

The Principal Events in the Roped Arena from the Days of the Olympic Games to the Present Time

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IN THREE PARTS—PART II.

From the Days of the Early English Champions to the Establishment of the Marquis of Queensbury Rules

Now that Jack Johnson seems fairly certain to emerge from his long period of inaction to again contend for the championship of the world, a new outpouring of popular interest is directed toward the boxing game. The following installment of an extremely readable and instructive history of boxing is the second in the series and deals with the development of this justly popular sport from the classic days of the ancient Greeks and Romans down to the beginning of the so-called modern era.

BOXING was brought into active, flourishing condition, according to the best accounts, by the husky Figg, an all-round athlete who was skilled in single-stick, fencing, and broadsword exercises. Mr. Figg fought any one who dared to face him at any of his specialties, and seems to have tanned them all. He also gave lessons, and the boxing tuition must have been some strenuous, to say the least. Padded gloves had not yet been devised, and Figg's lessons were taught with the nude hands. Letters from young sports of the time are still extant, mentioning Figg and his instructions. One brave young Briton wrote thusly to a friend: "Went upon Monday to take my lesson in fist-fighting from the great Figg. He beat and bruised me somewhat, but by good fortune I 'scaped from serious injuries." A boxing lesson from Champton Figg must indeed have been an exciting event, and not to be repeated more than once a week at the outside.

The fighting game, placed under regu-

lar, codified rules by early champions and sportsmen at perhaps the year 1730, continued to hold full sway in England for about 150 years, during which period the "London prize ring rules" governed the sport, and hundreds of terrific battles were contested. Over in Ireland, the naturally pugilistic Celts took kindly to the game, and soon had their own fights and their own champions, with occasional visitors from England. In Scotland, there was very little of the sport—the stern Scots, brave enough, but preferring to show their bravery with the broadsword and the bayonet, never took to boxing, and to this day there are few boxing bouts beyond the Tweed.

The American colonists do not seem to have cared for boxing. There are very few records of prizefights in this country previous to 1820. Our daddies had all the fighting they wanted with the Indians, the French, and finally the British, and could not waste energy in slugging one another. But over in England, meanwhile, the game throve might-

ily. It was carried on, under rules that were changed but little, for a century and a half—rules which made the sport a mixture of boxing and Græco-Roman wrestling.

The salient principles of London rule fighting were these: Bare knuckles. No limitations as to number of rounds—all fights to a finish. No set duration for the length of rounds, each round lasting till one of the combatants was knocked or wrestled down. Wrestling permissible, but practically under the Græco-Roman rules: all holds to be taken above the waist. Tripping and back-heeling were permissible. Time of rest between rounds, thirty seconds. No kicking, butting, gouging, hair-pulling, or hitting below the belt allowed.

Under these simple rules, only a shade more refined than those of the rough-house or barroom fight, thousands of battles were manfully contested between 1730 and 1880, when the London code began to fall into disuse. The last great battle under the London rules was between Frank Slavin and Jem Smith, about 1891 or 1892—the last of the bare knuckle, London rule fights in this country was that between John L. Sullivan and Jake Kilrain, at Richburg, Miss., in 1889. At a very early period—probably 1760—the fight game fell into disrepute in England, and nearly all mills thereafter were pulled off in spite of strenuous opposition by the authorities. Seldom was a great battle staged without exhilarating chases by the police and rural constabulary, and the vitality of boxing is eloquently attested by the fact that it survived this hostility.

The breed of fighters developed by the London rules was little short of heroic, in a warlike and athletic sense. They were English, Irish, or gypsies, with a few English Hebrews, while an occasional American or West Indian black made a corking reputation on the British shores. Old pictures show that these men were mostly short of stature and tremendously developed as to arm, shoulder, and leg muscles. Tom Sharkey is about the only type, among the modern fighters, corresponding to those of old England. Even John L. Sullivan and Jim Jeffries look far more symmetrical and graceful than the English champions.

These men may have been ideal wrestlers, and, possibly, heavy hitters, although thick, bulgy muscles are usually too much tied up to deal a smashing blow. Few of them could have possessed any great amount of speed or footwork—they moved around the ring with monolithic immovability, rushed in, hit, grabbed, and went tumbling to the ground, repeating this process till one or the other could go no farther.

Strange as it may seem, these bruisers, these bareknuckle battlers under savage rules, appear to have been kindly and good-hearted fellows in the main, while the fairness with which they fought should be emulated by many of their modern successors. Few fights were lost on fouls. The striking of a foul blow seldom happened; even in the midst of furious grapples, weaving round and round the ring, when accidental fouls might seem excusable, these fighters almost never transgressed the rules. They were fair, square, honest fighters, game and manly men.

The London ring events were supposed to take place "on the turf," and the rings were pitched on sand or grass, with crude stakes for corners. There was no provision for the protection of the men against accidental injury—the thick-padded posts and cloth-wound ropes of today were not dreamed of by these hardy fellows. Many an old-time fighter came to grief through striking his hand against the stakes, but the fracturing of skulls by falls against hard planks was a contingency that worried no one—the sod as a better safeguard than all the felt mattings of modern rings.

Round the ropes crowded the spectators. They were usually arranged in three ranks, the first rank lying flat, the second row sitting, and the third rank standing up. These crowds, decorous and well-behaved in the early days of the game, grew more and more unmanageable in later years, and finally broke up many of the big fights by their behavior. Thieves and thugs rioted through these crowds; bookmakers and shady gentry of every kind began to become the financial promoters, and, as was inevitable, the sport became mottled with fakes and dubious contests.

Nevertheless, great champions, men

whose names are still heroes of English song and story, fought their way to the front, reigned awhile as champions, and, in many cases, lived to an honored old age, the idols of the loyal Britishers. One of the best and gamest of them all was Tom Cribb, who defeated the best men that England could produce, and might, perhaps, be termed the first real champion of the world. Cribb, who flourished just about 100 years ago, was at the height of his fame when some sportsmen imported an American negro named Molineux—a stocky black, who seems to have been much on the general pattern of Sam Langford, but a little bigger and heavier. This negro showed his quality by trimming two or three of the lesser English lights, and then was matched with Cribb.

Matchmaking in those days was handled with a directness and common sense that would serve as a model to modern promoters—but circumstances, of course, were different then. There was no haggling about the percentage to winner and loser—the loser simply got nothing except an elegant beating. There were no bonuses for the signature of the champion, and there was no scrapping about the picture privileges. They simply met and agreed to fight at a certain time and place for so much a side, shook hands, had a drink of ale, and went into training.

Cribb and Molineux had two terrific fights, in both of which the negro's hard hitting seemed to prevail for many rounds. The Englishman's endurance, however, was his best asset, and he outlasted the black man, who fell helpless after some great and furious slugging. Cribb thus became the first real world's champion, and gained a place in the affections of his countrymen such as few other pugilists have ever held.

At this time—largely through the fine personality of Cribb and the glory of his victories—boxing enjoyed an unexampled run of prosperity. Everybody who had any pretensions to physical strength was a boxer. Noblemen and merchants took lessons from the professionals; amateur contests were incessant; difficulties between Englishmen were settled with the fists, and the fighters, between their battles of the regular

ring, traveled all over England with "boxing booths," meeting the ambitious youths of every village.

Glove contests and modern ring rules had their inception here, years before the Marquis of Queensberry codified the statutes into the laws that were destined to cut so large a figure in the sport. It was obviously impossible for the amateurs to maul each other with the bare fists, and it was equally impossible for the traveling champions to slug the ambitious youngsters bare-handed for what paltry revenue might be taken at the doors. Hence the glove-contests in place of the knuckles, and hence, too, the idea of simply boxing a few minutes and then resting, rather than to go on for an indefinite period. The traveling champions and their boxing booths, therefore, were the real originators of the latter-day system.

So hardy were the English professionals, so contemptuous of pain or damage, that they thought no more of a hard setto with the gloves than of exercising with the dumb-bells. Champions, traveling together, often walloped each other mightily with the gloves, and I once had the word of Jem Mace himself that a knockout with the gloves was regarded as nothing out of the ordinary, and, most of all, as nothing that should be inserted in the printed record of a pugilist. Imagine a fighter of today, touring the country, meeting maybe 290 aspiring youths, and knocking out some other great fighter in the course of an exhibition setto! Just imagine the record that fellow would have printed and circulated all over the boxing world!

A splendid figure soon after Cribb's time was his protege and pupil, Tom Spring, who seems to have been wonderfully fast and agile for a London ring fighter, and a marvel of generalship and ring-craft. Other fighters of class and quality followed, among whom William Thompson—the famous Bendigo—appears to have been the most scienced and skilful, while Ben Caunt, a gigantic slugger, was on the John L. Sullivan order. The Tipton Slasher, a sturdy warrior of sixty years ago, was another English idol, and carried himself superbly in many a victorious field till his star paled before the radiance of the man whose

name is, most imperishably of all, associated with the glories of the British ring—Tom Sayers.

Ireland, meanwhile, had its champions and its battles. One of these fights has become an epic in Irish annals—the fight upon the Curragh of Kildare between Dan Donnelly, Ireland's pride, and Jack Cooper, an English gypsy. To this day, in old, cobwebby saloons run by ancient Irishmen, you can find rude copies of a painting representing Donnelly and Cooper in their battle. It is a most distressful picture, both champions covered with blood and scratches, and the Englishman especially so. Both as a work of art and as a nightmare, that picture is some horror, but if its owner is a real old-line Irishman he will break your face if you laugh at that picture or offer to buy it from him. To this day, the footprints of the champions are preserved on the Curragh of Kildare, for successive generations of loving Turks have kept them there by setting their own feet in the marks the heroes left so long ago.

The United States did not fully wake up to the beauties of the fighting game till the British had been slipped the boots and the Indians caressed with bullets. It might be said, in fact, that the Americans were too busy fighting to fight. The negro Molineux came forth from Virginia, and his prowess shows that there must have been a little boxing, though not much, but we have few records of American milling till Tom Hyer, a star of seventy years ago, burst upon the scene. Hyer, a New Yorker of about John L. Sullivan's fighting size, seems to have had wonderful strength and a fearful punch, while his soul was full of ferocity and love of battle. Hyer had only a few fights, but won them so decisively that his class was easily made apparent, and he retired while still young, unable to get any adversaries. So beloved was Hyer in New York that the market-men, according to old tradition, let him help himself each morning to whatever provisions he needed for his family, and allowed him to keep this practice up until he died.

Between 1845 and 1859, there appears to have been a great deal of fighting in the United States, Tom Hyer's glory seeming to have started a boxing wave. Out of the herd there rose conspicuous two mighty men of Irish blood, John C. Heenan and John Morrissey. These two loomed up as far superior to all others, and, as was only right and natural, were finally brought together. In a fearful fight, Heenan, who at first seemed a sure victor, lost his chances by swinging his hand against one of the stakes of the ring, and, disabled, fought on till nature gave out and Morrissey was victor. Morrissey refused to again meet Heenan, went into politics, and became a Congressman.

Tom Sayers, by an extraordinary series of victories, had, as already remarked, come to the front in England. Jem Mace, fighting at the same time, might have beaten Sayers. He was certainly Sayers' superior in speed and ring generalship, but, somehow or other, the gypsy never went after Sayers, and Tom seized the laurels of the English championship without opposition from the only Englishman who might have thrashed him. Sayers was a great man, beyond a doubt, and one of the most remarkable fighters that ever donned the gloves. For all his wonderful record, he was nothing but a middleweight. He usually fought round 156 pounds, and seldom over 162, and was only 5 feet 8½ inches tall—in other words, about the size of Tommy Ryan.

Yet Sayers never hesitated to take on the six footers and the 200 pounders. He had no fear of any fighter, irrespective of size and weight, and, as "England's eleven stone champion," carved a niche in fistic fame that can never be forgotten.

Negotiations were opened for a battle between Sayers and Heenan, who claimed the American championship by default when Morrissey refused again to meet him. The preliminaries were soon settled, and all plans were laid for an international battle that after the lapse of fifty years is still a mooted issue and a subject of rancorous discussion.

(To be continued.)

