

A Brief History of Boxing

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

In Three Parts—PART III

By W. A. PHELON

From the Establishment of the Marquis of Queensbury Rules to the Present Time With a Brief Glance at Future Prospects

Boxing is the black sheep of the sporting world. Its friends are warm in its praises, while its enemies are seeking its destruction. To us it seems a worthy athletic sport and largely undeserving the criticism which has been heaped upon it. If our readers agree with us in this opinion they will be specially interested in the following article, the last of a series on the history of the roped arena from the time of its prehistoric origin down to the present of uncertain prospects.

THE Sayers-Heenan fight was a struggle such as few men have seen "in these degenerate days." It was a mighty battle of Homeric heroes—a deadly mill between a splendid heavyweight and a marvelous middleweight, and those who were ranged around the ring cherished the memory of that encounter to their graves. Like the battle of Waterloo, the details of the great fight are told in diametrically opposite fashion according to the prejudices of the narrator. To this very day, if you find a white-haired old fellow who was at Farnborough that great day in 1860, he will tell you one story of the fight if he is an Englishman, and an entirely different story if he is an American.

The American account maintains that Heenan was the master of the situation from the start to the finish; that he belted Sayers all around the ring; that Sayers' following kept interfering, breaking into the ring, and trying to club and kick Heenan when he came too near the ropes. They assert that as darkness came on, after forty rounds had been fought, Heenan had Sayers helpless; that the American walked across to Sayers' corner and hit him as he sat on his second's

knee; that the British mob then broke up the fight to save their champion, and that Heenan loudly proclaimed himself champion of the world.

The English stories have it that Sayers, after having his right arm so badly bruised that it was useless, peppered Heenan freely with the left, and showed such speed, such ringcraft, and such generalship that ere long he had Heenan blinded, groping round the ring, and even hitting at his own seconds. When the ring was invaded—the Britons admit that their crowd did break into the ring—they declare that Heenan ran away, and became totally blind after going a few hundred feet. They excuse the breaking up of the fight on the ground that the blinded Heenan was foully trying to choke Sayers across the ropes, and unite in swearing that Sayers would have won the fight in a few minutes more.

Could two stories be told more radically different? It only shows how differently different men see an affair, according to their friendships and prejudices. Americans and Englishmen always see the same thing in a different light, anyhow. Study the stories told of the battles fought between the two nations, ac-

ording to British and American authorities. We have long accepted it as gospel that Andrew Jackson, with 6,000 men, fought 12,000 British at New Orleans, and repulsed this overwhelming army. That's how our histories tell it. British histories claim only 6,000 British attacked 12,000 Americans behind strong forts, and had to yield to numbers. Our histories tell us that an American army of 3,000 men met 5,000 British at Lundy's Lane, and drove them from the field. British histories aver that 3,000 British met 5,000 Americans and kicked the stuffing out of them. So it was with the Heenan-Sayers fight—each side claimed a glorious victory, and the real truth, told by an unbiased man, will never be revealed—for there were no unbiased men at Farnborough that afternoon.

Sayers retired from the ring after the Farnborough battle. Heenan stayed in the game, and two years later met Tom King, who was rising as one of the best of the younger British fighters. Again history presents two strangely differing versions of the battle. English scribes insist that King, after receiving quite a trimming, rallied and finally knocked Heenan out. American authorities declare that when King was fairly knocked out he was saved by an unfair referee and allowed to get back his strength while Heenan was finally dosed with some drug and thus sent down to defeat by his treacherous English handlers.

After the Heenan period, interest in the bare-knuckle game fell off rapidly. It became a chosen sport of thugs, crooks and swindlers. Fights were bought and sold, and the few boobs who patronized the mills were robbed and slugged. From 1863 to 1882, the game was at its lowest period. In England the nobility and gentry had lost the sporting interest they once took in the fighting pastime, and the few fights that were pulled off were held against discouraging handicaps. In America, Mace, O'Baldwin, Arthur Chambers, Billy Edwards, Mike McCool, and others, really good men but unfortunate in the time when they existed, fought cheap fights before tough crowds—and half the fights, justly or unjustly, were suspected of being crooked. Thus the fistic game declined, and might have sunk into utter oblivion but for the rise

on the horizon of one man—John L. Sullivan. Roast Sully if you like. Call him a bad actor, say that he wasn't world's champion, or that he drank up all the booze on earth—anything you want—but the fact remains, John L. Sullivan was the redeemer of the boxing game, and John L. Sullivan was the grandest, most colossal figure that the boxing game has ever known.

John L. Sullivan came out in 1879, and showed such strength, such class, and such all-round magnetism that by the fall of 1881 he was recognized as the foremost figure in the ring. The titleholder among the heavies, Paddy Ryan, a fine, game fellow, was matched with John, and met him in the South, under the same old London rough-house rules. This fight was honestly conducted, squarely fought, and won by the better man.

Soon after the Ryan victory, the new champion brought the glove game back to recognition and prosperity, and really started the bare-knuckle system to its present place upon the dusty shelves. John L. toured the country, meeting them all, and caressing them upon the features with a swinging right that was like a club. Never was John a fancy boxer. His waistline began to bulge before he was 26 years old, and he couldn't do a neat back step to save his life. But he could plunge forward, and he always did. John had just one way of fighting—to charge, to bat down the other man's guard by sheer superior strength, and then to hit him. His fierce face, the ideal face of the fighting man, was enough to scare a hero, and most of John's men were through as soon as John turned his glare upon them. The "comers" whom John met were the real thing. They may have been awful boobs, and many of them surely were, but they were on the level. Nowadays, when a champion tours the country meeting "comers," the "comers" are his sparring partners, carefully planted ahead of time, and a real scrapper, no matter how poor his record, always finds the champion's evenings all "engaged" for the whole week to come.

Years of the glove game and years of high life spoiled John's fitness for bare-knuckle battle, but the old-fashioned idea

still prevailed that the championship could only be won and lost with the naked fists. So John went across the pond, fought a highly unsatisfactory draw with the fleet-footed Charlie Mitchell, an Englishman who had come up in brilliant fashion, and then came home again. There wasn't much real excitement till the summer of 1889, when John met Jake Kilrain, a persistent challenger, at Richburg, Miss., under the old rules. John fought clumsily, but Kilrain was only a middling good man, and finally sank under fire in 75 rounds. By this time, John L. was 50 years old in appearance and physique. The veteran was no longer the man of a few short years before, but he had served his purpose—he had re-established boxing as a real game and a popular diversion. The work John did needed to be done, and he did it well.

Good glove men had sprung up here and there—men who might have cut little ice under the bare-knuckle system, but were just demons with the padded hands. The foremost of them was Jim Corbett, and he came into his own at New Orleans in September, 1892, when the fat and waddling Sullivan, still brave, but having nothing but his courage, fell heavily and was counted out. Corbett defeated Mitchell, who had gone the pace almost as fast as Sullivan, and then contrived to rule the roost without much real work till 1897.

Bob Fitzsimmons, a fighter of a new and freakish type, had been coming up for years. Fitz, with enormous shoulders, smashing fists, and spidery legs, was peculiarly adapted to glove fighting. Under the old rules, he wouldn't have lasted long. His only chance would have been a knockout at the first biff—otherwise a stocky, burly man like Sharkey would have rushed in, and wrestled him down so hard he would never have got up again. Under the code that John L. had made the governing law, Fitzsimmons was invincible for years, and took the highest honors when he caught Jim Corbett on the solar plexus at Carson City.

Fitzsimmons, one of the queerest and quaintest characters the game ever saw, bossed things for a while—till Jim Jeffries loomed up in California. This Jef-

fries man was unique, a solitary specimen. He was of the build and massive strength which would have made him champion under the old rules, yet learned the skill and tricks which gave him pre-eminence under the finer laws of the glove game. He knocked out the aging Fitzsimmons and trimmed all who came against him up to the time when he quit and went to a retirement that he should never have relinquished.

Jeffries could have been champion under either code, no doubt of it. None of the great Englishmen or Americans of the London prize ring days could have withstood him. Heenan, big as he was, would have been too light for this fellow; Sayers would have been crushed in his grizzly grip. He might have met his match in Tom Hyer, but none of the other giants of the long ago could have done much against him. At the other game—the glove stuff—he was equally supreme, his massive frame enabling him to withstand the hardest wallops of smaller adversaries till he could get in his own cannon ball drives and flatten them completely.

When the monolithic Jeffries retired, various small fry contended for his title—mostly little tadpoles whom Jeff could have abolished with a poke. Tommy Burns, a small man, nothing more than a thick middleweight, finally obtained a technical hold upon the title, took it abroad, and easily thrashed the inferior heavyweights of England.

Jack Johnson, a tall and skillful negro, who had been fighting for many years with more or less success, now camped on the trail of Burns, ran him down in Australia, and easily vanquished his smaller rival. Johnson returned to America, and the negotiations which ended in the awful Jeffries fiasco at Reno were begun. The history of that sad affair is too well known—no need to tire folks therewith.

Of recent years, fakes and fixed fights have done a great deal to harm the game. Negro boxers are bought and sold, as a rule. They are not allowed to knock out white rivals, they are compelled to "lay" whenever it suits the whims—and pocketbooks—of their white masters. Various other fighters follow crooked tactics, the most general trick being that of

"saving up" an adversary for future battles. In a bout of this kind, a champion will not only refrain from stopping the other fellow, but will let him come within a shade of winning, a re-match and another fake being the natural result.

Fakes have been pulled ad libitum, and usually the fakers have escaped. Now and then, something is sprung so raw that even the veriest boob can see the trickery—as in the case of the Gans-McGovern "fight" at Chicago, a fake so bald that it killed the game in that city for years after. A union of boxing promoters has been talked of, and attempts made to form one—but of what avail would such a union be when half of the very fellows who would be its members are tarred with the faking brush already?

Of recent years, there has been a marked decadence in the bulk, strength, and class of the bigger fighters, both in America and in England, while in Ireland and Australia, homes of great sluggers a generation ago, the falling off in muscle, weight, and skill has been equally startling. In the day when John L. was king, the number of fine heavyweights in all these countries was amazing. Big men who could fight were thick as autumn leaves, and there was a small army of them who would be near champions to-day, and who would have bulked much larger in fistic fame, but for the pre-eminence of John L. Sullivan, Charley Mitchell, and Peter Jackson. For fifteen years, the big men have been steadily going back, while the smaller men have shown great class and wizard-like ability. Why this physical retrogression among the big men, and why the continuance of skill among the smaller fellows?

It is claimed that in Australia the bigger men have been invading the wild interior, mining, ranching, adventuring; that only little fellows or the weaker-spirited among the big men remain in the cities, where boxing prevails. Ireland has been almost drained of tall athletes, either by migration to America, or enlistment in the British army. England's widespread colonial wars have taken thousands of large men, while thousands of sinewy little chaps, too short in stature to be enlisted, have had to stay at home. In America, the

scarcity of good heavies is partly due to the immense gain made by baseball and football. Formerly, when a young man loomed up gigantic in stature and pugnacious of nature, his friends all urged him to take up a ring career. Nowadays, when a big youngster shows himself, he is given every inducement to play baseball, or primed for a college football team.

The glove game has superseded the rough-house fight of the London ring in every country. France, which could never see the old code at all, has taken enthusiastically to the padded gloves in recent years, is staging many bouts, and is developing an excellent set of fast and clever boxers. There has been no London rule performing among British champs since Jem Smith fought Frank Slavin, about 20 years ago, the ring being broken up by Smith's followers. Sullivan and Kilrain ended the bare knuckle stuff in America. All over the fighting map, the soft gloves rule supreme—and they would rule a lot more territory but for crooked managers, crooked pugs, and thug promoters.

I had almost forgotten one strange and interesting interlude in the history of the American ring—the era of the skin-tight glove. Just when the knuckles fell into disrepute, and before the fat glove was fully recognized, there was a long string of battles with ordinary driving gloves, with the fingers severed—just a leather bandage, you might say, around the hand. The idea was simple: to elude, the laws against bare knuckle fighting by wearing "gloves," and yet not to wear any gloves that would interfere with free action and hard punching. Under this code, some of the finest battles of ring history were fought, usually among the lighter men. Corbett and Choynski were about the heaviest men who milled with the driving gloves. The first Myers-McAuliffe fight; the Myers-Gilmore, McAuliffe-Gilmore, McAuliffe-Carney, and many other great battles were fought with the skin-tight protectors, and were great encounters of their kind. When the thicker glove became fully established as the governing weapon, the skin-tights followed the bare hands to oblivion. For a while, the California clubs tried to establish a happy

medium by the use of a two-ounce glove, but the softening influence of the age prevailed even here, and it is 20 years since men met with two-ounce mittens.

Boxing, if divided into cycles or periods, might be classed about like this:

1700-1800—The Infancy of the game.

1800-1835—The Era of Cribb and Spring. Game popular, many fine battles.

1835-1855—Era of decadence in England. Tom Hyer and Yankee Sullivan revive the game in America.

1855-1865—Era of Sayers and Heenan.

1865-1882—Era of decadence in England, and of faked fights under London rules in America.

1882-1892—The era of John L. Sullivan.

1882-1888—A sub-era of skin-tight gloves.

1892-1912—The era of the Soft Glove game; the passing of London rules, and the dying out of bush-fights.

What will be the future of the manly art? Will it ultimately perish under reform attacks and tender-hearted sentiment, or will it live, gain strength, and prosper?

There is just one answer: As long as there are countries full of men of English and of Celtic race, there will be boxing. Those races are not dying out—not so you could notice it—and the magnetism of the game has now attracted the Italian and the Hebrew races till they furnish scores of fighters, thousands of spectators. The game has had a steady tendency towards softening and gentler methods, and may become still gentler in the future. Our grandfathers never asked for padded gloves, padded rings, doctors, and other conveniences of today. The abolition of wrestling and bulldog fighting as features of the game came as the first great reform. Then came the fatter gloves and the padded rings. Some day they may even reform the sport still farther—but one thing sure, the game will never die.

LA84
Foundation