

# The Kings of the Roped Arena

## The Greatest Boxing Champions of All Time

In Three Parts. Part I

Who Was the Foremost Heavyweight in the History of  
the Ring?

Famous Title Holders of Former Days—How They Would Compare  
With More Recent Champions—Changing Laws in the Boxing  
World—The Greatest of Them All

By WILLIAM A. PHELON

The following article is by our eminent contributor from Cincinnati, Mr. William A. Phelon. Mr. Phelon is known to literally millions of fans as one of the greatest baseball experts of the country. His writing has attained a prominence such as few other scribes of the game can equal, but probably not many of his host of readers know that Mr. Phelon is, if anything, more of an authority on boxing than he is on baseball. His connection with this much-maligned sport extends through a period of more than twenty years. His extensive knowledge of the subject secured for him, sometime since, the appointment as head of the boxing commission at Cincinnati. In the following article Mr. Phelon deals with that most interesting of all boxing problems, who was the greatest heavyweight champion in the history of the game.

IT is a strenuous proposition to compare the great fighters who have had their brief careers, who have strutted their little hour before the admiring multitude and then lowered their flags to the men who have, in turn, smiled, bowed, and passed away. Every generation, yes, even each decade, has its hero to remember, its one great champion to boast about, and each of these bygone warriors was, in the eyes of those who loved him, a fighter such as no other epoch ever showed. Comparison of the battlers is a weighty task for many cogent reasons. You must consider times, places, fighting rules and the quality of adversaries. Even the measure of actual battle cannot be accepted, nor can you take the mere fact that one champion whipped another as final proof of the winner's superiority. Seldom indeed has it happened in the annals of the ring that two great fighters met under circumstances that gave each an equal opportunity. When a title-holder has been overthrown, it has generally been a case of

an old and wornout scrapper being mowed down by youth and vigor, and no man can say what the outcome might have been had they met three years before.

It is as difficult to compare the warriors of the past with those of the modern school as to draw parallels between famous generals of earlier times and those of recent wars. Many military critics of the present hour believe that Napoleon, had he been on earth during recent events, would have been easily beaten by modern guns and modern tactics. The Corsican won battles by charges of his mail-clad cuirassiers and by hurling masses of his Old Guard upon the foe. Modern guns would plow holes through the close-ranked guard and the cuirassiers would never live to close upon their adversaries. All this might be absolutely true—yet how do we know what Napoleon's genius might have accomplished under such changed circumstances? It is stated in history that he was the best artillery handler of the time

—that he used cannon as an ordinary man uses a pistol. What, then, would be more likely than that Napoleon would take advantage of the improved guns, and, instead of being crushed by them, utilize them to his own benefit, gaining even greater victories than before?

How, then, can we adequately compare the fighters of a past generation with those of to-day? Admirers of the modern school claim that the present class of fighters are more skilled in both attack and defense—that an oldtime fighter, pitted against one of the latest style, would be bewildered, overwhelmed, cut to pieces before he could accomplish anything. Possibly so—but some of the most brilliant champions of recent times were men who laid science aside and went in with the swing of our daddies. Worshippers of the old heroes allege that they were iron men when compared to the more delicate boxers of to-day—that they were superior in strength, endurance, gameness and fighting qualities. Perhaps they were—but could one of them have caught, worn down and beaten a Corbett, boxing at his best?

The difference between London prize-ring rules and those governing the modern battles must be given due consideration. Many of the old champions won their fights upon the turf as much by wrestling as by hitting, and such fighters would be all at sea in a Queensberry ring. Per contra, many of our finest champions of recent days would not get very far if a powerful antagonist could grip and twist their slender frames. Can you imagine the spider-legged Fitzsimmons, if his terrific punch should miss on the first attempt, and a human bear grappled him for a fall?

Far back in the forties there lived an American heavyweight named Tom Hyer, who was considered not only the greatest of his day, but, by those who saw his battles, the greatest that ever stepped inside a ring. All who used to cheer Tom Hyer are long since in their graves, but some of those old sportsmen survived to the day of John L. Sullivan, whom they declared was much after Hyer's type, but nowhere near his equal in size, sheer strength or ferocity. The descriptions of Hyer's battles show that he was a man much like Jim Jeffries in stature and muscular power; that he

either had no science or never needed to use it, and that he beat down his victims by Sullivan rushes, winding up with a bear-hug and a whirl that ended with the other man smashing down upon the sod. It is impossible, after carefully studying the stories of Hyer's strength and fighting talents, to deny him a high rank among the great heavyweights of history. Even under the modern boxing rules he would probably have gained an eminence like that of Jeffries. It is evident that no ordinary blow could stop Hyer's attack, and the "straight rules" now adopted in many cities would have left him ample leeway for destructive infighting along the ropes.

A freak heavyweight who might, if rightly managed, have gained much greater fame than he ever enjoyed was Charles Freeman, "the American Giant." Freeman, somewhere around 1850, was showing in circuses, when a fight promoter discovered him. This fellow, unlike most giants, had strength in proportion to his size. A beautifully modeled figure of a man, between seven and eight feet in height, and scaling some 280 pounds, Freeman had tremendous sinews, the quickness of a great cat and a better thinking gear than most sideshow wonders. He was taken to England, given some boxing education and then turned loose upon the British heavies. Only three or four of them had the nerve to face the mammoth. Freeman, crude and raw at the game, was nevertheless their master with little difficulty, and beat their heads off in a playful way. Ere long he was quietly but effectively ostracized; no English boxer would encounter him, and, for lack of matches, he gave up the ring, returning to the tents and dying, as he had lived, a freak in a sideshow.

Freeman, properly advertised, would have cut an awful swath in these press-agent times, and, judging by what he did in the few chances offered him, would have created a large quantity of trouble among the burlies.

Tom Cribb, whose name is still spoken with reverence in England, seems to have been an iron man for endurance, a Caesar for warlike craft and a lion for courage. Cribb, as shown in his pictures, was broad-shouldered and massy, with huge muscles—a general type of English fighter in the earlier days. He

was fairly speedy on his pins, could hit snappily and with stunning force, and had wonderful capacity for rallying under heavy punishment. Cribb, living today, could not be knocked cold by any fighter of less hitting power than Bob Fitzsimmons, while his incessant yet well-aimed attack would get the goat of almost anyone who might have to face him in a long battle.

Cribb's pupil, Tom Spring, is considered by many British critics as the ideal fighter. While a marvel at the London rules, he showed beautiful skill in friendly glove affairs; he could hit heavily, could take the gaff with great gameness, and is believed to have had more actual cleverness both in evading a rush and in placing punches than any fighter before his period. Spring was also a taller and better built fighter than the general run of the stocky British boxers, and was a positive genius when it came to using his natural advantages. There seems little doubt that Spring was the Corbett of his time, with more than Corbett's hitting power, and, as he was admittedly chain-lightning with the gloves, he would surely have achieved high rank among the twentieth century performers. He might not have had enough weight to withstand the terrible Jeffries when Jeff was right; he might not have had cleverness enough to cope with Johnson—but, on the face of the returns, it looks as though Tom Spring could go through the white hope crop like a knife through cheese.

John C. Heenan, the Benicia Boy, and one of the most unfortunate fighters in the history of the game, was a big, fine-looking athlete, about the size of Jim Corbett, but with stronger muscles. Heenan was a classy fighter for those days, but lacking in either speed of blows or in quick thinking. In his great fight with Sayers, a much smaller man, the Briton time and again slipped neatly under his guard, and showed so much superiority of brain-power that Heenan's physical advantages were discounted. The Benicia Boy appears to have been a fine, manly fellow, and a good fighter, but far from the topmost rank as the great fighters go.

John Morrissey, who defeated Heenan and afterwards became a Congressman, was a corking good man, but seems to

have been some points shy of the stuff to make an invincible champion. He had gameness, some science and a punch, but his whole fighting repertoire would hardly class him with Hyer or Tom Spring.

Tom Sayers, who drew with Heenan and whipped most of England's heavies, was only a middleweight, never fighting over 163 pounds or thereabouts. On the record made by Sayers, he must be classed as one of the very best men of his weight in all the annals of the game—but his weight wasn't sufficient to have carried him to a world's championship. Fitzsimmons weighed no more, but Fitz was a physical freak with the reach of a giant, while Sayers was small in every way.

Jem Mace, who lasted a long, long time in the game, was a wizard of skill, one of the best-sciented men ever engaged in pugilism. Many Britons will always insist that Mace was a peerless champion, and that his superior has never been seen on either side of the Atlantic, but this seems hardly true. It is highly doubtful if Mace, even at his best, could have outgeneraled Tom Spring or outgamed Tom Cribb.

History may not rank John L. Sullivan as the greatest of all fighters, but no other boxer has ever gained his renown, his universal popularity or a respect and admiration that has remained unbroken through twenty years of retirement from the ring. Many capable judges unite in declaring that Sullivan was the king of all the fighters, the peerless monarch of the game. Others assert that John was over-rated; that he happened along at a lucky time, when there were no real fighters to give him a hard trial, and that he blew up as soon as he faced a live one. Much can be said in support of both theories. Many of the men John conquered didn't amount to anything, it is true—but they were the best that could be set before him. They were pretty husky athletes, too, and gave plenty of trouble to others whom they encountered. Be it remembered, also, that Sullivan didn't do as too many modern boxers do—he didn't frame or fix things ahead of time. Nowadays a star won't box, most of the time, unless he can select his opponent beforehand. I have in my possession a sheaf of letters which, if ever exposed to the public view, would kill

the reputation of half our star pugilists deader than the late C. Nero. They positively refuse to meet this, that or the other tough proposition; they suggest that the clubs "match" them with this, that or the other sparring partner from their own stables, and they endeavor, in every yellow, devious way, to evade the faintest chance of having to fight hard and squarely for the public's money. John L. never quibbled, evaded or suggested bringing on a mark. Tell him that there would be a chance to fight a certain man at a certain place, and John would simply growl, "All right—I'll be there — have another bottle?" John didn't fake, frame or dodge; he fought when matched, and he fought for all he had in him—wherefore the people loved him, and they love him still!

Sullivan had tremendous strength and vast hitting power. He was far more scienced, as he showed in friendly exhibitions, than most of the critics thought, but in battle he didn't use, or really require, any science—he simply went in, beat down his victim's guard and stretched him on the floor. His tactics may have been coarse and primitive, but they won him victories, and they carried him on his triumphant way for many seasons.

Jim Corbett, conqueror and successor of John L., was perhaps the fastest heavyweight that ever lived. Fleet as a featherweight, with wizardlike command of legs and arms, he also had a matchless eye for distances, making him dangerous in attack, uncatchable in retreat. He was all over Sullivan like a cooper going round a barrel—but was it justice to compare that fight with what Corbett might have got from the lithe and agile Sullivan of ten years before? Great was Jim Corbett, marvelous in all the fine points of the game, but with one vital flaw in his armor: the inability to deliver a straight, crashing, knockout blow.

When Corbett fought Sullivan, Jim danced round John till nature gave way and the old warrior, breathless, exhausted, crashed heavily to the floor. When Corbett fought Bob Fitzsimmons, he danced round the Australian in the selfsame way—but this time the endurance was there and the power of iron resistance. Grimly, doggedly, Fitzsimmons took all that Corbett could hand

him; Fitz's legs and lungs refused to surrender to the storm, and finally the hard hitter cornered the fancy boxer. One fearful dig to the wind and the game was over. The artist of the ring was down and out, and the hard hitter was again the emperor.

Robert Fitzsimmons, middleweight in poundage, heavyweight in height and reach, had the fearful punching power of Sullivan and more skill in delivering it. He had outlasted the light attack of Corbett, had sent him down and out, and, for a time, reigned supreme on his shattering punches. Then came the youthful Jeffries, and another champion was made.

Fitzsimmons had endurance enough to withstand the comparatively weak blows of Corbett, but when he faced Jeffries he had to meet a man still bigger than Corbett, with more bodily endurance and fortified with the terrible punch so lacking in the Corbett make-up. Poor Fitz, in his turn, was worn down and finally flattened, and Jim Jeffries was the monarch of the game.

On "form," the passing of the champions might look like a regular upward climb, with a better man securing the honors each time—but circumstances must be considered, and these circumstances again make the task of comparing the champions an almost impossible one. Corbett beat Sullivan—but Sullivan was a slowed-up, portly, middle-aged man. Fitzsimmons trimmed Corbett—but Corbett had been treading the primrose path for many a day. Jeffries beat Fitzsimmons—but Fitz had grown old in the interim. No fair comparison can be made, nor can the negro Johnson be considered as the logical capsheaf of this strange procession because he defeated Jeffries. The Jeffries who fell before Jack Johnson was a shell of the former Jeffries, and only a ghost of the man who downed Fitzsimmons.

Jack Johnson, the great black heavyweight, is a man of ample bulk and strength to be a champion. He is as tall as Corbett, weighs little less than Jeffries when in fighting trim, and can hit harder than Corbett, though not as hard as Fitzsimmons. A great man—let justice be done him, even though he has become unpopular and everybody's target—and one of the best of historic heavies. The greatest that ever lived?

Well, hardly. He ranks well up, but, when all the finer qualities of a champion are considered, some distance south of several men mentioned in this article.

Peter Jackson, who flourished about 1890, was probably a shade better pugilist than Johnson—in all probability the best fighter of the negro race. He had fully as good a defense as Johnson, and rather neater footwork; he had a better left hand, and a right that was as effective either for long-range boxing or for infighting; his generalship was quite equal to that of Johnson, and his game-ness was heroic. Men who saw Jackson work, and also saw the other great heavies of the time, believe that he was the best on earth at that period, excepting John L. Sullivan, and that it would have been a toss-up had these two ever battled. It would have been John's desperate rushes and flail-like fists against the cold science and whiplike shots of the great negro, and who can tell which way the tide of victory might have flowed?

They all lacked something. Sullivan lacked science and precision. Corbett lacked the K. O. punch. Fitzsimmons lacked the weight to brace him against the bulk of Jeffries. Jeffries lacked the furious fire of Sullivan. Johnson lacks the finished skill of Peter Jackson and the energy of Sullivan. The perfect champion does not exist, and has never happened. It's the fault of nature, for the men themselves have ever done the best they could.

Of the old champions I believe Hyer and Spring were the best. But whatever the old-timers may have been able to accomplish matched with more modern boxers and more up-to-date methods, they, and the deeds which made them famous, have fallen too far into the discard to rouse much enthusiasm now. Conditions are so essentially different that anything like a fair, sane comparison is practically out of the question. To all intents and purposes therefore the question resolves itself to a study of those boxers who have held the heavyweight championship since the day when John L. Sullivan emerged from the shadows which lay heavily upon the squared arena, and by the might of his personality raised the entire game he represented so far in the estimation of the general

public that it has remained ever since, one of the vital sports of the nation. Sullivan, Corbett, Fitzsimmons, Jeffries and Johnson, and because he never had a chance to compete for the supreme title of his profession, while all recognized his innate merit, Peter Jackson what a distinguished assemblage of athletic perfection and still with what obvious defects?

Sullivan, though he set a record for heavy drinking which won for him a world's championship as much as did ever his mighty fists, raised the standard of boxing from a sport of the shadows skulking in saloons and the most disreputable of surroundings to a sport of national recognition if not commendation. He found it an outcast and made it a recognized member of the sport family. For this he deserves a world of credit. If Sullivan did more than any other individual to create boxing he shared more than any other individual in its success. In his day of small gate money he nevertheless accumulated or rather allowed to pass through his fingers a fortune such as no other boxer has ever touched. And if he wasted this easily won wealth in a lavish expenditure which knew no bounds, it was only the outpouring of his own large nature, whole-souled in whatever he did; expansive, unmindful of consequences to himself or others. Although Sullivan fought under London rules, although he was governed by laws so essentially different from those of the present as to make comparison difficult and almost impossible he is still probably the greatest favorite of the fighting constituency for the title of chief boxer of all times. With him fighting was a passion, an intense joy, the chief aim in being. He flung discretion to the winds. He cared naught for boxing science. His was the skill of iron muscles, of boundless courage, of undaunted will. He was a terrible man to meet. He fought with a rush which bore his opponent literally off his feet. His fighting face alight with its savage ferocity was alone sufficient to strike a fear to the heart of an opponent. Grim, relentless, ferocious he was the incarnation of the fighter and in ten long years his match was never seen.

Many people are prone to ask themselves the question, Who did John L.

ever lick? Very well, who did he? And while we are on the subject, who did Corbett lick? who did Fitzsimmons, or Jeffries, or Johnson? Corbett fought Charlie Mitchell, an old man and a middleweight to boot, and such glory as redounds to his credit for this exploit no one can deny. He lost his title to Fitzsimmons, another middleweight, and though he put up a magnificent fight on that occasion and had all the better of the argument save for the one unlocked for contingency of a knockout blow, still who did he fight? And Fitz, he held the hard-won championship for about two years and lost it in the first real fight he staged, to an unknown dub named Jeffries. And Jim, sure he met and vanquished the best, but who were the best? Two has-been champions: one Corbett, already defeated and getting old, who at that came within an ace of wringing Jeff's title from him, and Fitz, who broke his nose, and left his burly antagonist scarred for life, both much smaller men than he, much older, weakened by years in the ring. And as for Johnson; but why go on? It is true that John L. in his palmy days did meet an awful lot of boobs, but he met everybody there was to meet, didn't he. And he held the championship for over ten years in spite of a lack of training which mounted heavenward, a glorified, protracted infringement on all physical culture laws and tenets. The peerless John, with a constitution of iron and a soul of granite, defied the assaults of foes and dissipation and advancing age, and it took the three of them combined a weary while to wrench from him his hard-won and jealously-guarded title. In all respects save one, a champion of champions, a man without a peer. And that one respect? Lack of fighting science. He did not need it in his encounters with those he met in his prime; he may not have needed it in a contest with those who came after, could he have met them all on an equality of age and training. But that was his sole defect. He had all the others in abundance. Build, weight, strength, fighting spirit, quickness, all that a fighter needs.

Corbett did still more to elevate the game, although his work is small in comparison with that of Sullivan's in the aggregate. Corbett was known as "Gen-

tleman Jim." No one would have thought, to gaze upon his pale, esthetic face, that within lurked the soul of a prize-fighter. He would have been picked as a broker, a professional man, even a clergyman, anything rather than his own calling. And was he so far wrong? May not a man use the talents with which he is endowed, be they strength of intellect or strength of muscle, coupled with the will to dare and the perseverance to succeed? Corbett, while he was little that Sullivan was, was nearly everything that Sullivan was not. No lightweight had ever more sinuous grace in the ring than "Gentleman Jim"; he lunged and parried with all the innate skill of a fencer. He was as elusive as a shadow. No marks of his many battles scar Jim's scholarly face nowadays. No marks of battle ever marred that face when he was champion of the world. Corbett was the cleverest heavyweight that ever entered a ring. His matchless skill, his exquisite science was a thing to be marveled at in his prime—to be marveled at now. Between science and brute force there is always a gulf fixed. Each has its tried retainers, and rightly so. The advocates of science exult in the fact that science won over brute force when Corbett robbed Sullivan of the title. But would he have robbed him had he met the grim old warrior some seven or eight years earlier? I think not, though of course that question will never be definitely settled. Corbett was great in science, he excelled all before his time or since; but he was a shade light for the heavyweight title, and he lacked a punch. Furthermore he could not take much punishment, though this bothered him little in his prime, for no man ever had less to take than he.

Fitzsimmons was the most marvelous fighter of his weight of any time, but that is just the point. He did not weigh enough to successfully hold down the title. He carried a herculean wallop. He lost to Jeffries, but he gave the champion one of the most tremendous maulings any fighter ever had to endure. He was tricky, cagy, scientific in an illusive, awkward-appearing way, a fighter who prolonged his career far past the twilight of the boxer's allotted time, who took part in 370 battles and won the heavyweight championship of

the world when he weighed below the middleweight limit and was thirty-five years old, far past the sphere of usefulness of the average boxer. Surely this is honor enough to Fitz, to say that he was the greatest fighting machine of his weight this little old world has ever seen. But that he was a match for the best of the heavyweight world at their prime; well hardly. He might have licked them. One of his killing punches, rightly delivered, would have done it, but it would have been an accident and not a thing that can be banked upon. Fitz had but one defect, his weight, but that was enough to bar him from the highest honor of his profession.

Jeffries, with the most perfect build a fighter ever had, a power to endure punishment which was never paralleled, a tremendous punch — surely those are enough to entitle a man to some respect. But Jeffries, too, had his failing. It was not so much in lack of science. That militated against him at the start of his career when he was mercilessly mauled by Fitzsimmons and Corbett, but he gradually learned, and in his later fights displayed a knowledge of the finer points of the game that would do credit to a lightweight. With all his massive bulk he was light on his feet and as active as a child. No, it was not science that he lacked, it was the fighting spirit, that fierce love of encounter for its own sake which so fired the indomitable strength of Sullivan and made him the very incarnation of physical force. All the endowment of matchless physique, of limitless endurance, of slowly acquired, but none the less sure mastery of form, were Jeffries', but not that spark without which the most superb machine is dead indeed. And although he yielded in weight, it is an even question if sturdy old John L. in his prime, urged on by that restless force which surged within him, would not have battered down the more perfect natural endowments of his antagonist. Jeff fought for money, there was no mistake about his motive. He disliked the ring and all connected with it. He knew that he was physically endowed with powers which were unrivalled and he proceeded to cash in. It was merely turning a well-trained biceps into a certified check, the transformation of a swollen face into crisp bank notes. This

is nothing against him, for in all ages a laborer has been accounted worthy of his hire, but it was none the less a defect in Jeffries' make-up that he lacked the prime incentive to the ideal fighter, "love of the game."

Johnson has been an enigma from the first. Marvelously clever, not on the flashy type of Corbett, that active, nervous animation which won for the latter the title of "the dancing master of the ring," but rather a canny watchfulness, a marvelous alertness which left no loophole of approach and which placed the black man's giant shoulders and huge arm, always in the best possible position for use. Johnson has never been a fighter. He has never had to fight. In all his combats where there was much at stake he has always so far overshadowed his opponent that he has never had to extend himself. This does not mean that he could not have extended himself had the occasion arisen, but at the best, this talent, if he does possess it, has never been shown. And the American public proverbially has to be shown.

The black champion would have proved more than a match for Corbett. He was nearly the latter's equal in cleverness and far more than a match for him in hitting power. He would have been more than a match for Fitzsimmons, for while the latter's punch could have knocked him out, the Cornishman could not have endured Johnson's punches in the interim as he endured Corbett's. But against Jeffries in his prime, or Sullivan, that is a different question. Would not the massive frame of Jeffries have been more than a match for the black man's cleverness, and would Johnson's caution have availed him against the bull strength and ferocious plunges of Sullivan? More than an even question. In my own opinion Johnson is hardly the equal of that other black wizard, Peter Jackson.

The palm then seems to rest between Sullivan and Jeffries. With all his admirable talents I doubt if Sullivan in his prime could have defeated the man who knocked out Munroe in less than two rounds. Not that Munroe was any wonder, but the Jeffries who faced him then was a wizard in speed, a giant in strength, of limitless endurance, almost as brilliant

as Corbett, and at least once in his life actuated by a spirit of animosity that fired his sluggish soul. I am afraid, had the doughty old champion of the early eighties been matched against the terrible Californian in that encounter, he would have found more of a contract than he could manage.

But what avails the opinion of one man? The old champions have passed from the stage and their brilliant deeds are buried in moldy records. Still, defenders arise to back the cause of each, and this always will be so as long as men are men, whatever boxing laws may go into effect.

*(The next article in this series will deal with the greatest middleweight of all time.)*

