

Notes, Documents, and Queries

The Molineaux-Cribb Fight, 1810: Wuz Tom Molineaux Robbed?

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On December 18, 1810 near East Grinstead, Sussex, the black American challenger Tom Molineaux fought the British (and world) boxing champion Tom Cribb in a spectacular contest. The hard fought battle left both boxers badly mauled and virtually out on their feet, but it was Molineaux who at last said he could not continue. Boxing literature presents two contrasting judgments of the fight. With the exceptions of one book in support of each judgment and each citing one piece of contemporary evidence, neither judgment is shown to rest upon first hand evidence; both consist merely of unsubstantiated assertions sometimes referring to other secondary works. One judgment holds that during the fight nothing untoward occurred of sufficient impact upon the outcome to deny Cribb the victory. The other holds that certain occurrences unfairly deprived Molineaux of a victory properly belonging to him. This article will examine the evidence of neglected primary sources in order to determine whether it verifies the fairness of Cribb's victory or sustains the allegations of unfair treatment of the challenger Molineaux.

During the past sixty years the literature on the subject reveals a growing tendency toward judgment in favor of Molineaux. Dissents from the official verdict of 1810 have been expressed with varying degrees of intemperance.¹ Goodman accumulates all the examples of alleged unfairness toward Molineaux and asserts with unprecedented vehemence that Molineaux was cheated of a victory that would have made him the first American and black world champion boxer. The other writers mentioned in note one who think Molineaux deserved to win point to one incident only, the same one, excepting Wignall who also mentions a second. Among them only Knebworth adduces anything that can be considered evidence; although contemporary, it was once removed because his source John Wilson (1785-1854) did not see the fight but judged from hearsay. A gratuitous shift in judgment appears in *The American*

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Negro Reference Book.² The 1966 edition, citing the *London Times* of December 19, 1810 on the fairness of the fight says that there is “no evidence” of unfair treatment of Molineaux and the black was not a victim of “skuldugery” though color prejudice “hovered over” the fight. The 1976 edition, with a new editor, says that “had it not been for the trickery of the Cribb seconds” Molineaux would have been the winner. The 1976 edition cites no evidence to justify the assertion.

Writers of the past sixty years who accept the older tradition of a fair Cribb victory are almost nonexistent. Besides Davis, there is the well-informed historian of boxing, Nat Fleischer. He says he spent “months of arduous labor” in research on Molineaux’ career but he cites no sources.³ In both of his books which notice the first Molineaux-Cribb fight, he simply says that Cribb won and does not hint of any doubts. Davis, in effect, says the burden of proof lies upon the dissenting writers. Though they are in the majority, numbers mean nothing. In the end, neither group of writers makes a case. The challenges to the traditional view, if they fail to present evidentiary arguments, do require return to the primary sources if we are to know what really happened on December 18, 1810.

Three incidents, the champions of Molineaux allege, constituted the unfair treatment that cheated him of victory. One occurred in the 19th round when Molineaux tangled Cribb in the ropes, and using both hands, held him there so that neither boxer could strike a blow. Because Cribb had not fallen, the umpire (as he was called), Sir Thomas Apreece, did not intervene. The crowd grew impatient and then angry. Two hundred persons rushed the ring to separate the boxers and in the melee one of Molineaux’ fingers was broken. The second incident occurred at the end of the 27th round. By the then prevailing rules the round ended because Molineaux had floored Cribb. As the thirty second interval between rounds expired with Cribb unable to get to scratch, his second, Joe Ward, demanded an inquiry to ascertain whether Molineaux had concealed lead weights in each closed fist. By the time the black was cleared of suspicion at least two minutes elapsed; the delay enabled Cribb to resume the fight. He went on from there to win, in thirty-three rounds say some accounts, thirty-nine, forty, or forty-four say others. Another incident is sometimes mentioned in secondary accounts. Molineaux allegedly lost his balance, collided with a ring post, and so the 31st round ended. Accounts differ as to the seriousness of the collision; the most extreme say that Molineaux suffered a concussion and hurt his chances in the remaining rounds.

All of these incidents, if they occurred as certain secondary accounts describe them, were so spectacular that a spectator could not but notice them and remember. Common sense says that any reporter writing an account of the fight, for a newspaper for example, would tell of them, whatever the outcome of the fight.

For a boxing match, the best evidence is that of eye-witnesses, knowledgeable about boxing and the rules of boxing, who recorded their observations immediately after the event. With respect to the Cribb-Molineaux fight, five unsigned eyewitness accounts are here adduced. They appeared in print within a few days after the fight. The one in the *London Times* appeared the day after the fight; the other four did not have to be written in such haste to meet publication deadlines. Three of them appeared in publications that specialized in sporting news, and another, in the *London Times*, may be presumed, like these three, to have been written by a person knowledgeable about boxing. The fifth, appearing in the *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, was the least likely on the face of it to have been written by a boxing expert. With a sixth that will be discussed after the first five, they constitute the most substantial basis for judgment that any writer on the fight has used.

The five eyewitness accounts follow:

1. *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, Monday, December 24, 1810.

This was a popular weekly London newspaper. It gave generous treatment to sports.

The account summarizes each round through the ninth. Then it summarizes the remainder of the fight. After fifty-five minutes and forty-four rounds, Molineaux "gave in rather from weakness than want of courage." There is no mention of the tangle in the ropes, the long pause after the twenty-seventh round, or Molineaux' collision with a post.

2. *The Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, Monday, December 24, 1810.

This was a country weekly published within easy distance from East Grinstead, Sussex.

It printed a general account, a column long. From the twelfth to the twenty-sixth round, the fight went in Molineaux' favor. In the twenty-sixth round Molineaux became weak, seized the rope for support, and held Cribb there. From then on Cribb fought defensively, "milling" in retreat which was his speciality, "and thus gained the victory." The fight lasted fifty-five minutes and forty-four rounds.

Like all other accounts, this one said that both fighters were badly mauled and both were exhausted when Molineaux said he could fight no more. That is, the victor was almost as badly damaged as the loser. The account says nothing of the long pause or the collision with a post. Though it notices the entanglement in the ropes, it makes nothing of the incident.

3. *The London Times*, Wednesday, December 19, 1810.

This account summarizes each of the first twelve rounds in order. It describes

the remainder of the fight, which went forty-four rounds, in general terms, except for the entanglement in the ropes. In round twenty, Molineaux, feeling weak, seized the ropes and held Cribb in them. "The outer ring for a short time was broken" and then the fight resumed.

That is all. Nothing is made of the rope incident, and the long pause and Molineaux' supposed collision with a post are not mentioned.

4. *The Sporting Magazine*, Volume 37 (December, 1810).

Begun in 1792, this was the first periodical devoted exclusively to sports. It covered all sports and gave much attention to pugilism. It appeared monthly. This issue, apparently because of the importance of the fight, contained two accounts of it.

a. *Account 1* (pp. 97-102). This account proceeds round by round through the first nine; ten through sixteen are discussed together; so are seventeen through twenty and twenty-three through twenty-eight; the next three are discussed in order, and the thirty-third was the last round because Molineaux said he could fight no more.

This account does not mention the long pause or the rope incident, and in noticing the incident in which Molineaux struck his head, it does not refer to a ring post. In the thirty-first round, in throwing Cribb, Molineaux himself fell and "he pitched upon his head." The fall made him giddy. What is strange is that the fight was on the ground, soggy from the hard rain. It is not clear why the fall should have hurt Molineaux enough to make him giddy.

On the whole, "the strictest fair play was shown to both parties throughout."

b. *Account 2* in the *Sporting Magazine* (pp. 120-122). The first twelve rounds are presented in order. Then the account becomes general. Parts of the fight received special attention.

In the twentieth round, Molineaux became weak. "He seized the ropes of the ring for support, and held Crib (sic) there. The outer ring for a short time was broken, but the fight was resumed." This last sentence is the same, word for word, as the one quoted from the *Times*.

In the thirtieth round the betting was 2-1 on Molineaux and the crowd was subdued. "Crib (sic) was hit down in one round during this silence, [from the twenty-seventh to the thirtieth rounds] and the best judges did not suppose he would appear again in time, but as stated by James Belcher, in the ring, Crib (sic) 'would beat a good man after a momentary recovery.' "

The writer mentioned the unusual rope incident but did not think it significantly affected the outcome of the fight. The account, like the preceding four, contains no insinuations, let alone allegations, that Molineaux received unfair treatment, much less was cheated of victory. While all of the accounts notice the crowd's partisanship for Cribb over Molineaux, a present day phrase explains this as something every team or individual has to contend with, unavoidably. The home team has an advantage, and in this instance it was Cribb. To use an English soccer term, Cribb was at home and Molineaux away.

Three days after the fight, Molineaux sent to Cribb a letter challenging the champion to a return bout.⁴ The letter did not allege or even insinuate that Molineaux had received unfair treatment. It spoke of the miserable weather the day of the fight, torrential, cold rain which Molineaux thought handicapped him more than it did a native born Englishman. He also hoped that the next time the crowd would not let the difference in "color . . . operate to my prejudice." A close reading of this passage persuades me that the reference was not to unfair officiating but to crowd preference for Cribb. The crowd was partisan because of xenophobia and racial prejudice. If this letter truly and fully expresses Molineaux' judgment of the fight, then allegations of cheating by the officials or by Cribb's seconds would in his opinion be unfounded. It was a well-phrased letter that someone wrote for the illiterate Molineaux, and altogether a dignified and gentlemanly one. The references to the weather and Cribb's home court advantage were expressed so nicely that they do not strike the reader as alibis. And there was nothing Cribb, his seconds, or the officials could do about that situation.

There seems to be no evidence for thinking that Molineaux stimulated or encouraged loose talk about the fight that seems to have helped build the story of Cribb winning unfairly. If anything, the letter of challenge should have discouraged it. Nevertheless talk went on. As September 28, 1811, the date of the second Cribb-Molineaux fight approached, excitement mounted. Even more decidedly than before, the honor of England and retention of the world championship by a Briton and a white seemed to be in jeopardy, for Molineaux had proved himself a redoubtable challenger. Whether Molineaux had indeed been cheated of a victory, Cribb's championship was in great danger. No one understood that better than Cribb. That is why he trained so hard for his second bout with Molineaux. His training regimen under the direction of the noted pedestrian Robert Barclay Allardice, better known as Captain Barclay, should interest physical educationists.

On the eve of the fight, the Stamford News said, tantalizingly, "The odds are still in favor of Cribb, . . ."⁵ But the Black and his friends nod their heads and look knowingly when this is mentioned. There were more than whispers abroad after the last battle, that the American did not receive all that fair play which Englishmen are noted for, and which surely a foreigner has a great

claim on as a native. The ring, it is said, was broken in a most outrageous manner, and undue favor shown to *Cribb* by allowing him more than his time, while a failure in this respect on the part of his antagonist was instantly taken advantage of. [If this refers to Molineaux' surrender to end the fight, the insinuation is unfounded.] We hope there will be no recurrence of such unhand-some behavior."

This story, ten months after the first fight occurred, derives from the "whis-pers" that had been "abroad." Unlike the five preceding eyewitness ac-counts, it (or the "whispers"—"it is said") tends toward a judgment that Molineaux had not received fair play, but whether fair play from the crowd or from the umpire is not clear. The gossip went farther than Molineaux went himself toward imputing unfair treatment. If it went that far in less than a year, it went much farther during the next one hundred seventy years and cannot go any farther than Goodman who in 1980 said, "Had traditional Brit-ish sportsmanship and fair play prevailed America would have had her first world heavyweight champion. . . ."6

The Cribb-Molineaux bout of September 28, 1811 was a smashing victory, in eleven rounds, for the English (and world) champion. No controversy or dis-pute tainted the decisiveness of Cribb's triumph. British boxing supremacy, and shall one also say, white supremacy were confirmed. The fight also marked the end of Molineaux' career as a serious contender. For him thereaf-ter it was all downhill, barnstorming, giving boxing exhibitions, dissipating and womanizing until his death on August 4, 1818 in Galway, Ireland while on a barnstorming tour.

Mention by the Stamford News of gossip about the first Cribb-Molineaux bout indicated that suggestions of unfairness must have been in mind when men wrote or told about the second one and made a point of saying there could not this time be talk of unfairness. The London *Times* of October 7, 1811 summed it up: "no one could say Molineaux did not have fair play. Every one agreed on that." The *Sporting Magazine* reported that "The assemblage gave mutual applause to the combatants during the fight. . . ." When Molineaux entered the ring he was greeted with "cheering" that showed "he had many friends, for love or *money*, among those present."⁷ On the main questions, "no one can say, that in this battle Molineaux had not fair play shown him:—we would, however, suggest that the cries of exultation, which proceeded from the champion's numerous friends, when the advantage seemed on his side, must have had the effect of *cowing* the Baltimore man:—we think, in decency and generosity, they ought to have been omitted." But—this was boxing, not cricket. The home court advantage and home crowd support are simply facts of sporting life, and if the home team supporters are more numerous and cheer louder, so be it.

Another contemporary account of the first Cribb-Molineaux fight provides a

retrospective view. Written certainly by an eyewitness though published a few years after the fight, it is a bit more reflective than a newspaper or periodical account. In contrast to a newspaper story, written under pressure of time, it could be influenced by conversations subsequent to the fight. It was the most complete contemporary account and therefore must have been written from notes rather than memory. It summarized the fight round by round through the 34th after which there was no serious fighting. The account appeared in Pierce Egan's classic of pugilism, *Boxiana*.⁸ Egan, perhaps the first sports writer by profession, specialized in pugilism. He was at the height of his career when Cribb was champion. His *Boxiana* is a history of boxing up to Egan's own time, and for his own time Egan compiled chapters on individual boxers and their careers. Thus, it is history in biographical form. The book is generally regarded as accurate and authoritative. It is distinguished by the author's ample personal knowledge of the men he wrote about and of the art and science of pugilism. Egan does not say he witnessed the first Cribb-Molineaux fight, but it is impossible for me to believe that he did not.

Egan's account of the fight could not supply later writers with a foundation for a legend. He is explicit about only one of the three incidents mentioned earlier. This was the rope incident in round nineteen, noticed briefly in the *Times* and in the second account of the *Sporting Magazine*. Somehow—and no writer seemed to be sure how it happened—Molineaux, leaning against the ropes out of weariness, managed to entangle Cribb in them so that he could neither stand nor fall, and neither boxer could strike a blow. The fight was stalled on dead center, yet the referee would not intervene because neither boxer had fallen. The crowd became impatient and then angry. About 200 persons rushed the ring and tried to disentangle the immobilized combatants. Says Egan of the scuffle, "it is asserted, that if one of the Moor's fingers was not broken, it was much injured." This is a cautious sentence. Egan is not sure that what is asserted is true or comes from good authority. He virtually acknowledges that he did not have first hand knowledge of the kind or severity of the damage to Molineaux' finger. He makes no attempt to judge the effect of the injury upon the outcome of the fight as a modern writer trying to be sensational might do.

After the boxers were disentangled, says Egan, Molineaux locked Cribb's head under his arm, and with his free hand fibbed Cribb until he fell to the ground, ending round nineteen. In the twenty-ninth round Cribb finally succeeded in closing Molineaux' right eye, and "The fate of the battle might be said to be decided by this round." The thirty-fourth round was the last in which any real fighting occurred, and after the thirty-ninth round, Molineaux fell "from weakness." This account does not mention a collision with a post, a fall which knocked Molineaux giddy, or a long pause between rounds.

What all this means is that the eyewitness accounts of the first Cribb-Moli-

neaux fight contradict the pro-Molineaux accounts in some reference books and many secondary histories of boxing and sports. Because when they include citations at all, none of these pro-Molineaux accounts cite first hand evidence but only one another, they suggest a tendency to follow the bandwagon. Molineaux was a black and a stranger in a foreign country; his lonesome situation evokes sympathy for the underdog. With the fight so close and emotions so deeply involved, later judges seize upon assertions congenial to predispositions and repeat them, regardless of the absence of evidence, as though reiteration establishes a case.

The summaries of the eyewitness accounts on the other hand indicate that while they disagreed with one another in some details, they do not support an allegation that Molineaux was cheated of victory. So far as we know from contemporary accounts he never asserted that he was cheated. If crowd preference is unfairness then both xenophobia and color preference operated in favor of Cribb. Molineaux and Cribb fought under the handicap of bad weather. Perhaps Cribb was a better mudder, as some horses are, but that was not unfairness imposed by human beings. Rather, nature was unkind to Molineaux. If Cribb had the advantages of patronage that his opponent had not yet won for himself, then that was unfortunate for Molineaux but can hardly be called unfair treatment. Molineaux had been in England only a year, fought only twice previously, and was not yet in a situation to attract patrons. Read in the light of subsequent loose talk about the fight, the eyewitness accounts can be strained to suggest the occurrence of unusual incidents. Unless exaggerated in the telling, none were of such significance that ringside reporters thought they affected the outcome of the fight or cheated Molineaux of victory. My judgment is that Molineaux fought under unavoidable disadvantages but he “wuz not robbed” and by a narrow margin Cribb properly retained his championship.

Notes

1. In chronological order, the main ones are: Trevor C. Wignall, *The Story of Boxing* (New York: Brentano's, 1924), pp. 85-87; Edward Anthony, James Lytton, and Viscount Knebworth, *Boxing: A Guide to Modern Methods* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1931), pp. 30-31; Edwin Bancroft Henderson, *The Negro in Sports* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers Inc., rev. ed. 1949), p. 17; John Durant and Otto Bettmann, *Pictorial History of American Sports* (New York: A. S. Barnes & Company, 1952), pp. 18-19; Louis Golding, *The Bare-Knuckle Breed* (London: Hutchinson, 1952), pp. 121-148; Dennis Prestidge, *Tom Cribb at Thistleton Gap* (Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire: Brewhouse Publications, 1971), pp. 22-23; Ocania Chalk, *Pioneers of Black Sport* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975), p. 124; Michael Harris Goodman, “The Moor vs. Black Diamond,” *Virginia Cavalcade*, XXIX: 4 (Spring, 1980), pp. 167-172.
2. John P. Davis, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 778 and the 1976 edition, p. 946 edited by Mabel M. Smythe.
3. *Black Dynamite* (New York: The Ring Athletic Library, 1938), Book No. 14, pp. 33, 39-40. See also Nat Fleischer and Sam Andre, *A Pictorial History of Boxing* (New York: Citadel Press, 1959), p. 27.
4. *The Sporting Magazine*, Vol. 37 (December, 1810), p. 122.
5. Stamford was in Lincolnshire, only a few miles from the projected site of the match. This piece was republished in *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, September 29, 1811, by which time the fight was over.

6. *Virginia Cavalcade*, (Spring, 1980), p. 164.
7. Vol. 39 (October, 1811), pp. 16-24.
8. (London: G . Virtue, 1828-1829, 5 volumes). This account of the fight is in I, pp. 405-408 . Volumes I and II were published in 1818 and reprinted as I and II, with the same pagination, in the five volume set.