

Sammons, Jeffrey A. *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990. Pp. xvi, 318. Photographs, notes, index. \$14.95 (paper).

“Pity that ever corruption should have crept in amongst them.”

George Borrow’s comment on the decline of prizefighting from a century and a half ago could well serve as a text for this book. It is predominantly a tale of graft, sharp practice, fixed fights, crooked promoters, pliant referees, duped boxers, and defrauded spectators. It is, too, a careful account of the impact of

racism on the history of the American ring, from the white hatred of the arrogant Jack Johnson, through the acceptance of the 'Brown' Bomber, Joe Louis, to the enigmatic irritant of Muhammed Ali. Overall, the machinations of prize-fight control and management over the last hundred years are well chronicled and documented—its connections with organised crime, its interactions with local politics, and in the later stages its relationships with television.

The author promises, quite properly, not to “hang boxing on some pre-packaged modernisation concept” (where it would indeed hang most awkwardly) but to “let the sources dictate the storyline.” To urge historians “to place sport in its proper context, as a reflection of the society that formed it” should now be unnecessary, though with boxing, of all sports, this is a complex task and one of the difficulties of *Beyond the Ring* is that too often, the racist issue apart, it does not go far enough beyond it. Certainly so much of significance for the fight game takes place in the smoke filled rooms of the manipulators that it cannot be ignored, but this concentration does leave some intriguing questions unanswered. A trans-Atlantic reviewer is bound to speculate on the consequences of a federal constitution which could, for instance, allow a dubious sport to insinuate itself into legality state by state, and, more broadly, to wonder at the whole considerable involvement of government, both state and federal, in a sport which British politicians rarely take any note of. What, too, was the impact of the Great Depression on the American ring, and did any of the \$1,500 million of New Deal money spent on sports facilities by 1938 go to boxing—and if not, why not? Such questions might not be central to a history of the heavyweight championship, and a very sound one at that, but they do seem relevant in view of the wider ambitions that the author sets for himself. It is unfortunate, too, that some of the few references to the British scene are off target, particularly the description (p. 131) of the independent British Broadcasting Corporation as “government-owned and -operated” when it is always under fire from every government, right or left, for allegedly favouring the opposition.

Such criticisms though should not detract from the general worth of Sammons' book, filling as it does a gap in recent sporting history which called for attention. There are fascinating and revealing passages, such as the account of Max Schmeling's challenges for the championship and the changing attitudes towards race and nationalism as awareness grew of the Nazi zeitgeist he came to represent. The conspiracies behind the ring smack more of the grubby and the sordid, seldom reach the vivid drama of high criminality, and invite a rather flat narrative style, but the prose does light up with the appearance of Muhammed Ali, the undoubted hero of the book. Here the writing does take off, not just from Ali's own charisma but from the author's appreciation of the man who came to hold a symbolic importance for a generation of the young and discontented. More noteworthy still is the balance that Sammons still maintains in his treatment of this remarkable fighter.

Such bright beams are few. What emerges is the picture of a sport which is only superficially reconstructed from its old bareknuckle days. The organisa-

tions that control boxing often seem little more than paper screens for the real power brokers. It retains the random characteristics of a past sporting age—it has no regular fixtures and is a mish-mash of one-off encounters, often dictated more by money than talent. Without any effective professional organisation to protect them, the fighters themselves are often doomed to financial embarrassment, brain damage, or both. The final section of *Beyond the Ring* examines the financial “rewards” of the sport at all levels, and in valuable detail, surveys some of the recent medical evidence on fighters’ injuries, and concludes with a summary of the report of the State of New Jersey Commission of Investigation into boxing, published in 1984.

All in all, the book constitutes a damning indictment of professional boxing and the author’s conclusions are hardly as forceful as his evidence would suggest. There is the somewhat veiled indication that boxing is one of those diversionary concerns which keep the American mind from dwelling too much on more serious social and political issues (if so, do not baseball and football share the same guilt?) and that to abolish or even to sanitise the sport would help to focus attention on these more important questions. But surely the more persuasive conclusion is that the days of blood sports are gone, and all the more so when it is such tainted blood.

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