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BODNER, ALLEN. *When Boxing Was a Jewish Sport*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997. Pp. xv, 256. Notes, illustrations, index. \$24.95 cb.

I enjoyed reading this book because it shed some light on the history of boxing, a sport whose social significance has hardly been studied. It is remarkable that boxing has not attracted more attention from sports historians because if we want to know a sport and its effects on society in the period of the great immigration (roughly from 1880 to 1920), an in-depth look at boxing is needed, since boxing was the sport “par excellence” of the immigrants. Boxing, either for spectators or participants, played a substantial role in the acculturation of the newly arrived. The spectators, and certainly the actors, were introduced, in a most real and brutal way, to what America was all about. The message conveyed by boxing was loud and clear. It stated that if you wanted to survive in this brave new world, you had better sharpen all your tools. There was light at the end of the tunnel, though. Money and success, whatever they may have meant, were there for the taking. It was up to you. You made the difference.

Allen Bodner, in a very unpretentious way, brings us to the teeming tenements of the Lower East Side in New York City during the time of the great immigration. The newly arrived Jews, living in poverty but rich in tradition and culture, were well aware of what was right and what was wrong. Boxing was not at the top of their scale of values. We are touched by the horror felt by the mother of the great Benny Leonard when she learned her son was a boxer. But for some of the second-

generation Jewish young men, boxing offered a way out of the ghetto. Money could be made in boxing, and this fact was a powerful attraction. By the hundreds, Jewish boys flocked to boxing gyms and to the professional ranks to the point that they outnumbered participants from other ethnic groups who shared life in the tenements. This is not a well-known fact because the Jewish community did not look at boxing success with pride. This attitude is reflected in the journalistic Jewish literature of the time, which hardly mentioned the subject. Bodner well depicts this love-hate feeling about boxing in the Jewish community. On one hand, there were the mothers who did not like their boys' involvement with boxing because it was not a respected profession and because of the risk involved for the participants. On the other hand, a sort of compromise was reached between mothers and sons because the money earned from boxing became extremely handy in those lean times.

Bodner argues that, overall, the Jewish boxers were the classical example of the "good boy." They lived at home; shared their take with their parents, most cases; married Jewish girls; and stayed married to the same girl for life. The Jewish boxers also shared the values of the community from which they had sprung. Most of them sent their sons and daughters to college.

But the work of Bodner is more than a sociological study. When he looks at the boxers up close during his interviews with them, we learn that these young men were proud. They felt good about themselves; they felt as good as anybody else and wanted to test their mettle. Boxing was the appropriate medium. There is nothing meek about these Jewish boxers. They were tough boys who took on the best of what the world of boxing could throw at them. Many were so good at it that they won world titles.

There is an interesting point noted by the author that I also found to be true when interviewing Italian boxers of the same period who lived in the same poor conditions. That is, none of these young men became boxers to show that Jewish people were different than other races or that the ethnic group to which they belonged was as aggressive or competitive or physical or superior as any other. Jewish boxers were not there to break a lance for the cause of Jewry; they were in boxing for themselves and to make much-needed money. But when they were faced with anti-Semitism, they responded in kind. In other words, when they were verbally or physically attacked simply because they belonged to a minority group, they put their boxing skills to work. Many of the old-world Jewish boxers, in their interviews with Bodner, related that, on those occasions, it felt good to be a Jew and be able to do something for the Jewish cause.

Overall, the work of Bodner is not only a most useful sociological analysis but also a sentimental journey into a particular period of American history—the time of the great immigration, a time characterized by those ethnic islands that coexisted in the great American cities. These ghettos were fertile grounds for boxing because it was easy to find human material and easy for the promoters to pick one group versus the other, and thus create enthusiasm and large attendance. This period, characterized by ethnic enclaves, came to an abrupt end with the conclusion of World War II, as many of the returning soldiers were able to take

advantage of the G.I. Bill and, consequently, move into professions and out of the ghetto. In a way, Jewish boxing took it on the chin because, with better opportunities, young Jewish men almost totally disappeared from boxing. Yet the Jewish boxing legacy should be known, and I believe Allen Bodner has done justice to the subject. There are no more Benny Leonards or Barney Rosses, but they live in history and in Bodner's work

The book is well worth reading for the general public and, in particular, for sport historians interested in new areas for research.

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