

Professors and Amateurs: Aspects of Pugilism in the Regency Period

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Professional pugilism began in England in the middle of the 18th century and flourished in the first quarter of the 19th century. Pierce Egan, an Irish Protestant and British patriot, covered most of the important fights of the era for the **London Weekly Dispatch** and later described them in great detail in **Boxiana**, a five volume work published between 1818- 1828. Egan, who referred to the bare-knuckle boxers as “professors,” (many of them opened boxing academies), and the fans as “amateurs” felt that the battle of Waterloo was won in the prize rings of England. The display of manliness and courage in the prize ring inspired English soldiers. Egan and the “amateurs” saw the opponents of pugilism, who argued that it was a brutal and barbaric sport, as advocating “dandyism” and undermining the British Empire.

The English felt that they were unique in their belief of fair play whether in the prize ring or the battle field. Pugilists observed a special code of conduct based in part on chivalry. Boxing was a fair and manly way to settle a dispute as opposed to the stiletto or the dueling pistol which was used on the continent. Egan provides many examples of gallant conduct in the ring as well as outside it. Many 19th century writers -Samuel Johnson. Tom Hughes, Anthony Trollope - shared the views of Egan.

Technically pugilism was illegal and could only take place with the compliance of magistrates though often there was a last minute search for a safe venue. Several “professors” had to serve prison terms for manslaughter, a penalty ranging from 3 to 6 months. The crowds reached 30,000 on several occasions and were at times unruly. The spectators tended to be prejudiced against non-English fighters, and on several instances interfered with matches. Scholars disagree on the composition of the crowds. In view of the expense of tickets and travel the lower classes would have been hard pressed to attend the great matches most of which took place on weekdays. Contemporary depictions of fight crowds show well dressed “amateurs.” The crowds, apparently, consisted of upper classes and well paid artisans who made about 10 times the wages of an un-skilled worker. The lower classes probably attended matches not far from their dwellings and remained on the fringes of the crowd avoiding the purchase of tickets.

The pugilistic club organized the fights and some members made money though most were involved solely for the pleasure of the sport. The pugilists were mainly artisans (about two percent were Jews and American Blacks) who usually kept their jobs while they fought in the prize ring. Some pugilists, who made large sums of money, were strictly boxers. On several occasions a “professor” made as much as 500 pounds in one fight - five times the wages of the best paid artisan or about \$100,000 in terms of 1985 purchasing power. Many pugilists earned additional money by giving boxing lessons. acting as body guards and beating up local bullies for a fee. Some pugilists became wealthy businessman - Egan lists a good number of publicans and innkeepers - and one went to parliament. A few,

however, died in poverty receiving occasional financial support from their fraternity which put on benefit matches with mufflers at Five Courts.

Pugilists with patrons conducted vigorous training programs. Running and weight lifting were important ingredients of this program, and in accordance with the principles of Dr. Sydenham the miasma of city air was avoided. The pugilists who could afford to do so trained in the country. Tom Cribb prepared for his first battle with Tom Molyneux by training on the estate of Captain Barclay in Scotland. The fighting of this era may have been less brutal than its modern counterpart. Pugilists often hurt their hands and were obliged to pull their punches and on the wooden stages or in open fields they were not able to get good traction.