

Dennis Brailsford, *Bareknuckles: A Social History of Prize-Fighting* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1988). Appendices, bibliog. illus., index. pp. xiv + 176. £14.95 net.

Elliott J Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986). Illus., index, notes. pp. 316 . \$US24.95 cloth.

Sports historians have until now largely ignored many of the 'fighting sports' which flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because as Brailsford puts it they represented a 'cultural dead end' and a 'fading pathway leading to nowhere'. (p. xii) They also included some of the 'darker sporting pleasures' which even in their own era were regarded by many as callous and degrading. This sport, as Gorn put it, was part of a rough masculine culture and prominent boxers had links with urban gangs, the criminal underworld and political machines.

These two fine studies, which cover a century-and-a-half of prize-fighting in Britain, and a century in America, rectify this gap. But they do far more than fill in some missing pages in sports history: the development of a major sport in the eighteenth century and its awkward transition into the nineteenth century. The history of bareknuckle boxing illuminates many wider issues.

Bareknuckles was the most complex sport of eighteenth century. There was a 'time in Britain when it could have been developed, alongside the theatre, as legitimate public entertainment

but mostly it was an illegal and fringe sport with organisers dodging the law in setting up clandestine meetings at shifting venues. Because of its illegal status pugilism was denied the opportunity in Britain of developing 'any formal organisation or openly avowed headquarters'. (Brailsford, p. 19) Despite these handicaps pugilism, according to Brailsford, was the first world sport by the 1860s when the prize-ring developed an international dimension when many British boxers migrated to the United States. Prior to this in the eighteenth century, a number of American blacks, such as Bill Richmond, had been prominent in British boxing circles.

Pugilism was also the first sport to match contestants of different religious and racial backgrounds. Ethnic identification was an important element in Britain from the eighteenth century and it became the driving force which saw prize-fighting as the pre-eminent American sport by the 1860s. Perhaps the most useful contribution of both books is that they throw much light on the complex historical forces which spawned organised sport from the 1850s. Because the transition from bareknuckle to glove boxing under the Queensbury rules was awkward, uncertain and even indirect, there are many fresh insights into the rise of organised sport.

An outstanding feature of Dennis Brailsford's study is that he captures the atmosphere of the ring which was full of characters, colour and controversy: butchers who boxed, aristocrats, publicans, money-lenders, and bookmakers who organised and patronised contests. Boxing also had links with some of the other fighting sports. The bar of former boxer, Tom Cribb, was adorned with the stuffed form of the dog Billy, whose reputed speciality was to kill fifty rats (probably doped) in less than a minute. There are many accounts of violent encounters: one boxer who participated in matches in a field near Birmingham died at the end of the fight, while another expired the next day.

There are many rich details of the boxing legends such as the well-groomed American black, Bill Richmond, who benefited from the patronage of General Percy, became a noted boxer, and later had a successful career as a publican and boxing promoter. The sport also attracted the eccentric and raffish Barrymore brothers who were known as ‘Helgate’, ‘Cripplegate’ and ‘Newgate’ respectively.

While there is much to admire about this view of boxing from the inside, *Bareknuckles* is enhanced by fine social and economic analysis. There are details about the changing character of contracts with short-term contracts becoming prevalent by the late eighteenth century. The social background of boxers is examined: they were mainly urban with butchery the predominating trade. Minority groups including the Jews and the Irish were involved in the sport also. Brailsford presents figures to suggest that the stake money put up was rather less than that of other sports. Bareknuckles had its influential aristocratic backers, from the Prince of Wales down, but, for a time, boxing did gain some middle-class support. There is also much detail about the shifting character of patronage.

Brailsford also has done a fine job unravelling the checkered career of prize-fighting which enjoyed eras of respectability, such as when it operated from a London amphitheatre, to other times when it moved to the fringe of the metropolis to escape the law or when bouts were staged in public houses or at racecourses. Chapter 5, ‘The Sport and the Law’ deals with some of the cat-and-mouse games with local authorities by a sport which lacked fixed and readily controllable venues.

Brailsford’s chapter on ‘The Last Bareknuckle Days’ analyses the various reasons why the sport did not survive although it did spawn glove boxing. Organisational chaos, which had always been a major problem, and corruption were important factors. But the lack of support from the emerging sporting press was also a crucial factor as

bareknuckles lost all its claims to acceptability. Part of the reason was that the organisers of prize-fighting were unable to come to terms with the new sporting values and practices. The organisers of bareknuckle boxing, for instance, stubbornly stuck to the habit of weekday matches. Elliott Gorn's book, published before Brailsford, complements Brailsford's book as there were many links between British the and North American boxing scenes.

Gorn's book also contains rich detail of the colourful subculture of boxing. There are some fine descriptions of classic bouts such as the 'battle of Hastings' in 1842 between Christopher Lilly and Thomas McCoy, which lasted 118 rounds over two hours and 41 minutes. Although McCoy was knocked down 80 times and was choking on his own blood, his seconds refused to throw in the towel and the fight ended only when McCoy collapsed and died.

Gorn, like Brailsford, has a deft touch in his social analysis of bareknuckle boxing. Prize fighting depended on an underclass of unattached men who had little to lose by pursuing a career in boxing. The breakdown of the household economy along with the existence of a 'bachelor subculture' in the cities of the mid-century - when 40 percent of men between 25 and 35 were single - encouraged the development of gender-segregated realms and culture. Men gathered together more frequently in saloons, lodges, firehouses and political clubs as well as at sporting venues.

Bareknuckle boxing in America, as in Britain, always had ambiguous status and ambivalent reception. Some of the sporting press were savage in their criticism of the sport yet also carried illustrations depicting the action in major fights. American prize-fighting was initially local and ethnic and thrived in those cities, like New York, which had the largest ethnic communities. Appeals to ethnic loyalties and hatreds were easy to trigger in an era of great economic change and social dislocation. The two most celebrated

boxers of the 1850s, Morrissey and Heenan, were both born of Irish immigrant parents and were leaders in the rough masculine subcultures of San Francisco and New York respectively.

Gorn has an excellent chapter on ‘The Meanings of Prize Fighting’ and explores bareknuckles in terms of gender history. There were some in the eighteenth century who praised ‘the masculine values of prowess, valour, and physical courage’ (p. 26) as a counter to effeminacy. The American working-class also gloried in man as an aggressive and physical being. This ethic of masculine honour was essentially a backward-looking one which had roots in the Old World.

Prize fighting enjoyed a boom in America in the 1850s and 1860s but lost ground to the new team sports emerging from that time. Because of its outlaw status bareknuckles lacked a single overarching authority and it also made it possible for unscrupulous characters to infiltrate a sport which already had links with underworld corruption. Despite the awkwardness with which prize-fighting dealt with the modernising tendencies which were affecting all sports, it did produce the most famous and charismatic American sports figure of the nineteenth century, John L. Sullivan. He participated in the last bareknuckle bout in 1889 and represented a transitional figure from bareknuckle to the more respectable glove boxing.

Taken together these works represent two of the best books that I have read on sports history for some time. Both authors demonstrate that it is possible to combine sound historical scholarship, integrating sports history into social history, with writing which is lively and conveys a sense of the colourful and rich tapestry of this sport.

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