



Boxing History

Introduction

Fighting with the fists for sport and spectacle is probably as old as sport itself. Boxing contests are found throughout antiquity. Greek boxers would wear boxing gloves (not padded) and wrappings on their arms below the elbows, but were otherwise naked when competing.

The word "boxing" first came into use in England in the 18th century to distinguish between fighting to settle disputes, and fighting under agreed rules for sport. It is now used to describe a sport in which two contestants (boxers) wearing padded gloves face each other in a "ring" and fight an agreed number of "rounds" under recognized rules.

Although men have always been the most numerous participants, there are some references to fights between women during the 18th century, and women's boxing was organized again at the end of the 20th century.

Throughout the latter part of the 19th century and the whole of the 20th century, amateur and professional boxing operated in parallel. In the final quarter of the 20th century, however, amateur boxing lost much of its popular support.

Traditional concerns about bruises and black eyes gave way to more serious concerns about long-term eye and brain damage, and medical checks on boxers, and medical supervision of their fights, became an increasingly important feature of both amateur and professional boxing.

The First Boxers

It was not until the early part of the eighteenth century that boxing became popular as a sport in the British Isles. Though the start of fist fighting in England coincided with the arrival of the Romans, boxing as we know it really got tinder way with the acknowledgement of James Figg as first British heavyweight king in 1719. Through the pages of ring history, the story of the heavyweights is the story of boxing itself.

When James Figg announced the opening of his Amphitheatre, his name became the first on the long roll of British prize ring champions, and because he was the first to advertise openly the teaching of boxing and exhibitions of skill, he has become known as the Father of Boxing. He was more expert as a cudgeller than as a pugilist. A master with the sword and an expert fencer, he attracted the patronage of the English "bloods," the sports element of the country.

It was Figg who popularized sparring exhibitions, and his initiative was responsible for the opening of many other amphitheatres. In these, wooden rails instead of ropes formed the ring enclosure, which was elevated upon a stage, the referee officiating outside the ring.

Figg died in 1740 and George Taylor, one of his pupils, succeeded to the championship.

Taylor was followed by the father of boxing rules, Jack Broughton, who in 1734 formulated the first code and invented the boxing glove, which at the time was used only in sparring exhibitions.

Broughton studied defense and attack and depended on the use of this style. Previously boxing was a toe-to-toe match, but Broughton introduced into the sport stopping and blocking, hitting and retreating. He was six feet tall, weighed 196 pounds and was quite intelligent.

The Duke of Cumberland took a deep interest in him, and obtained for Broughton a position with the Yeomen of the Guard which he held until his death at the age of eighty-five. Broughton's Rules governed boxing from August 18, 1743, until 1838, when a new code, "The London Prize Ring Rules," was adopted.

From Figg to Muhammad Ali is a long stretch-over 250 years-and in that period many famous heavyweights came to the fore. There were big men, small men, fat and lean ones; men of the rough-and-tumble school and men of science; fighters who were sluggers and those who were cool-headed boxers; men of culture, some of only an ordinary education, and others with none at all. But each was a champion - a heavyweight who had gained the top rung of the pugilistic ladder.

Eliminating the bare-knuckle and skin-tight gloves era, which covered a century and three-quarters of boxing, and coming down to the period governed by the Marquis of Queensberry Rules that called for glove contests, we find twenty-five heavyweights as kings of the division and one claimant, Marvin Hart.

Many thrilling battles were fought in the reign of these Kings of Pugilism.

Early Corruption

When Broughton passed out of the picture, boxing suffered because it had lost the man who was recognized as the "Father of the English School of Boxing." His rules formed the groundwork of fair-play and his introduction of gloves, or "mufflers," added to the sport's popularity. His honesty made him beloved by his patrons. They expected emulation of his conduct by those who followed him.

But they were in for a shock. Shortly after Broughton's retirement, crookedness crept into the sport. It made its appearance during the reign of Broughton's successor, Jack Slack, the Norwich Butcher, the first "Knight of the Cleaver" to win an English title. Slack not only "tossed" fights but assisted in the arrangement of other "cross affairs of the knuckles."

Slack's early triumphs were gained more through fearlessness than ability. He introduced the "chopper," which was the equivalent of the modern rabbit punch.

Slack's reign extended from 1750 to 1760, and during that decade British boxing was almost at a standstill. The public lost interest and faith in it because of charges of crookedness made against outstanding fighters.

The Duke of Cumberland became Slack's backer in the fight for the crown with Bill Stevens, "The Nailer"; the Duke of York was the challenger's patron. That contest took place on June 17, 1760, and another surprise was furnished the Corinthians when "The Nailer" won the title. The victor was a notorious character whose double-crosses had brought pugilism to a low level.

After Slack had been shorn of his championship, he became the backer of George Meggs and arranged a battle for the crown with Stevens, whom Slack had bought off. The champion, for a financial consideration, agreed to permit Meggs to win, and for arranging the "cross," Slack received fifty guineas from Meggs.

From 1761 to 1783, a period of twenty-two years, the championship was in an unsettled state. It was knocked about from one head to another.

Meggs, who bought the title from "The Nailer," soon saw it wrested from him by Baker Milsom, and the Baker in turn soon was dethroned by Tom Juchau. Then followed Bill Darts, who won the crown from Juchau. Darts held the title for nearly five years before losing it to "Waterman" Lyons in a desperate struggle.

Lyons thought so little of his exploit, or the fame thereby attained, that at the expiration of two weeks he retired and returned to the peaceful pursuit of ferrying passengers across the Thames. Darts regained the crown, only to lose it in

the shortest bout for a heavyweight title in fistic annals to Peter Corcoran of Ireland, the first of his race to win a British championship. The contest lasted less than one minute.

Corcoran's first important fight took place near Hyde Park on September 4, 1769, with Bill Turner, who previously had defeated Bill Stevens, a former champion of England. Corcoran gave Turner an unmerciful beating.

While in London, Corcoran was introduced to Colonel O'Kelly, a conspicuous character on the turf. He was the owner of Eclipse, the famous race horse, and became Corcoran's sponsor. Colonel O'Kelly arranged a bout for Corcoran for Derby Day, May 18, 1771, against Bill Darts, the English title holder, and the Colonel backed his countryman heavily and collected a handsome sum when Corcoran knocked out Darts in less than one minute of the opening round. The Colonel was accused of bribing Darts to "lay down" in order to make the wagering a "sure thing."

As Corcoran had whipped Bob Smiler, the brickmaker, Tom Dalton, and Joe Davis, and had challenged Lyons, who a few months before had won the title from Darts, Corcoran claimed the championship and was duly recognized.

In 1774 Corcoran fought Sam Peters at Birmingham, the battle taking place near Waltham Abbey. In that contest also there was considerable dissatisfaction, the spectators calling the affair a fake.

Then came the set-to with Harry Sellers, the West of England fighter who hailed from Jack Slack's Bristol School. They clashed at the Crown Inn, Staines, on October 10, 1776, and on this occasion, the flag of the Irishman was lowered, Sellers winning.

The English reported this fight as one sold by Corcoran and the report proved a sad blow to the former champion. Though he prospered out of the proceeds of the fight, he lost the friendship of his admirers and when he died he had to be buried by subscription.

Thus ended the career of the first Irishman to be crowned champion of England. Sellers, who took the crown from Corcoran, held it for four years and was deposed by another Irishman, Duggan Fearn's by name. Fearn's victory, like that of Corcoran over Darts, was gained in quick time. The fight lasted only a minute and a half, Sellers falling after the first punch and declining to continue. Fearn's was an Irish boatswain.

Following Sellers' dethronement, the championship of England fell into the hands of Tom Johnson, who put in his claim for the title and supported it with dignity and courage. Through him boxing regained public confidence. Johnson, christened Thomas Jackling, ruled from 1783 to 1791.

From the time he assumed the crown until 1789, Johnson waded through his opponents as if they were so many novices. A search was made at Bristol, the hotbed of pugilism, and there an opponent was found in Bill Warr, but he was polished off as easily as were others. Then came a battle with Isaac Perrins at Banbury, Oxfordshire, on November 22, 1789, and this likewise resulted in victory for Johnson.

In 1791, however, the Duke of Hamilton came forth with a challenge for Benjamin Brain (Big Ben), and in this fight Johnson was struck heavily on the nose in the second round. Bothered considerably by this damage and the breaking of the metacarpal bone of the middle finger of his right hand by striking it on a spike, he lost the crown. Thus was the renowned Tom Johnson deprived of the title he had so long held with honor.

With the victory of Big Ben and the defeat of Johnson ends the first period of heavyweight boxing. The second starts with the rise of the great Daniel Mendoza and ends with the reign of John Belcher.