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Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting

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ELLIOTT J. GORN

The Bare-Knuckle Era

Origins of the Ring

Fistic combat goes back at least as far as ancient Greece and Rome. Pindar, in 474 BC, celebrated Diagoras' victory in the Greek Olympiad: "But do thou, O father Zeus, that rulest over the height of Atabyrium, grant honour to the hymn ordained in praise of an Olympian victor, and to the hero who hath found fame for his prowess as a boxer; and do though give him grace and reverence in the eyes of citizens and of strangers too. For he goeth in a straight course along a path that hateth insolence." Worthy of Zeus' blessing, the successful boxer was a man of moral as well as physical excellence. Successful fighters were exalted heroes, showered with prizes. They, like other athletes, exemplified discipline, as well as ideals of grace and beauty. Boxing was good preparation for warfare, and the successful boxer upheld honor, demonstrated virility, paid homage to the dead. Great boxers embodied the goal of unified mental, physical, and spiritual cultivation.¹

The Greeks passed the idea of fistic combat onto the Romans, who gave us the Latin word *pugilism*. Boxing, however, became ever more brutal under the Roman Empire, part of the fascination with bloody gladiatorial games. Fighters wore the caestus – a thong wound round the hand, protecting it and making it a much more dangerous weapon. Virgil wrote in *The Aeneid*:

From somewhere he produced the gloves of Eryx
And tossed them into the ring, all stiff and heavy,
Seven layers of hide and in-sewn lead and iron ...
You can still see the blood and a splash of brains
That stained them long ago ...

Virgil described an epic match between the old champion Entellus and a young challenger, young Dares, who left the ring vanquished, spitting blood and teeth.²

Perhaps boxing was introduced to England during the Roman occupation, but if that was the case, the sport disappeared shortly after the Christian

era and did not return until the seventeenth century. Probably Englishmen revived the ring when they rediscovered the classics, through Virgil and Homer, for example. The Restoration of the mid-1600s witnessed generally a loosening of mores from the more stringent Puritan ways. Drinking and gambling accompanied an efflorescence of rowdy sports like cockfighting and bullbaiting. Especially in the cities, boxing was part of a raucous early-modern culture.³

James Fig was considered the father of the English ring. He opened Fig's Amphitheater in London, and there he taught boxing, as well as swordsmanship and cudgeling. He also fought early prizefights, boxing matches fought for a purse. Jack Broughton was the next great teacher of the sport in his London Academy. Broughton received the patronage of the Duke of Cumberland, and by promulgating the famous "Broughton's Rules," he brought a more refined tone to the prize ring beginning in 1743. Broughton's Rules banned strangling an opponent, hitting him below the belt, or striking him when he was down. Matches were held outdoors on turf in a roped-off square. The rules specified that a round ended when either man was punched or thrown down, that a new round began thirty seconds later with both men toeing a mark called "the scratch" in the middle of the ring. Each boxer appointed seconds to assist between rounds, umpires to settle disputes, and the umpires in turn appointed a referee whose decisions were final.⁴

With some minor modifications, Broughton's Rules governed the English Prize Ring for a century, and the American Ring for nearly 150 years. By the late eighteenth century, boxing was considered the "National Sport of England." There were several reasons for its ascendancy. The ring was part of a larger commercialized leisure culture that included sports like cricket and horse racing, which had their own formal rules, sophisticated betting, and powerful clubs comprising wealthy patrons. Moreover, several charismatic champions emerged in this era, such as Daniel Mendoza, the first Jewish champion; Bill Richmond, an African American who pioneered counterpunching; and Gentleman John Jackson, who taught the manly art to a generation of English aristocrats.⁵

Two of the most spectacular fights of this era took place in 1810 and 1811, as the English champion Tom Crib fought an African American challenger, Tom Molineaux. Crib won their first battle, but just barely, so when they came together again at a place called Thistleton Gap outside London, upwards of 20,000 Englishmen followed them – lords and knights and military officers and gamblers and publicans and pickpockets and young dandies and weavers and butchers. Crib won the second match too, and together they were interpreted as a great triumph for the English nation and English manhood; the issue of race was not nearly so important at this

particular historical moment, whereas later in the century white champions like John L. Sullivan refused to fight black boxers.⁶

Above all, the ring in this era was part of a culture that embraced writers like Pierce Egan and William Hazlitt, artists such as Robert Isaac Cruikshank, young aristocrats at Eton and Harrow, even the Prince Regent of England. Prizefighters were mostly working-class men, but some among the rich, powerful and educated gave them protection as well as cultural cache. And boxing was just one popular recreation in an era that saw alliances of the rich and poor.

But English society was changing, and rapidly. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, a new bourgeois class was on the rise, rich with profits from new industries like spinning and weaving, deeply earnest in its allegiance to productivity and sober self-control, and often affiliated with powerful new evangelical organizations. This new nexus of power and culture was impatient of the sloppy ways of the old aristocracy and gentry. Improving each bright and shining hour was the way forward, not the bloody popular recreations of old, with their attendant drinking, gambling, and carousing. Just when industry called for increasingly self-controlled behavior, old sports and recreations threatened to undermine working-class discipline. In this atmosphere, prizefights were not only illegal but local magistrates and constables enforced the laws, arrested the fighters and their backers. Boxing went into a steep decline.⁷

The First American Fights

Britain continued to produce some great champions, and occasionally the fancy, as boxing aficionados were called, pulled off a big bout. But in coming decades, English and Irish fighters increasingly ventured across the Atlantic to the United States. When Bill Richmond and Tom Molineaux, both African Americans, headed to England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there was no extensive culture of the ring in America. Molineaux, it was said, was a slave whose master freed him after he'd won a big bout. This might or might not be true, but there is very little solid evidence that boxing matches between slaves were common. Boxing just was not well known in North America before the mid-nineteenth century, less so in the south than the north, less still in rural areas than in cities. Richmond and Molineaux went to England – to London – precisely because opportunities were so meager here.⁸

There was one odd exception to this rule, a detour in this story really. The word “boxing” came to be used for violent fights in the southern backcountry from the late eighteenth through the early nineteenth century. As in the

London Prize Ring, two men squared off and spectators gathered. But there the similarity ended. Most commonly called gouging matches or rough-and-tumbles, the goal was to disfigure an opponent, bite off his nose or ears, and if at all possible, gouge out his eyes. Great battles were celebrated in legend, and champion eye-gougers were mostly men on the fringes of “civilization,” hunters and trappers, riverboat handlers, roustabouts, the sorts of men who lived largely apart from families, churches, cities. But these were not fights for a purse, as in the prize ring. Rather, they were affairs of honor – one man refused to drink with another, or belittled his fighting prowess or called him a name. Male honor was a cornerstone of white Southern culture, and eye gouging can be thought of as a backwoods version of dueling.⁹

Rough-and-tumbling aside, by the 1820s stray newspaper stories indicate that boxing matches with some of the trappings of the English ring came off sporadically in American cities. The earliest full report came from the *New York Evening Post*:

On Tuesday the 8th July, at half past 6 P.M. being near the Ferry at Grand Street, I observed a large number of men, women and children collecting, and like others, I followed to Gardner’s wharf, at the upper end of Cherry Street, where I saw a large ring forming, and on enquiry found a lad about 18 years old, a butcher, and a man whom they called the champion of Hickory Street, both stripped, and each had a second. After the proper arrangements, the seconds drew back a little, and the word was given for battle.

A round-by-round description of the forty-minute battle followed, including praise for the young butcher who possessed “the boldness and courage of a bulldog.” This report established a literary convention: because boxing was illegal and considered to be immoral by the middle class, the writer, as others would in coming decades, said that he just happened upon the battle.¹⁰

Through the 1830s and 1840s, the ring continued to develop in America. Because of its declining fortunes in England, several notable fighters came to the United States. Men like Ned Hammond, originally from Dublin, and George Kensett of Liverpool staged bouts with increasing attention to the ring’s conventions; Champion James “Deaf” Burke came to the United States after an opponent in England died in the ring, and emigration seemed like his best option; and English immigrant William Fuller founded the tradition of giving sparring lessons to well-off young men. The few regular bouts of this era took place mostly in and around New York City, and the ring began to receive consistent coverage from the gentlemanly *Spirit of the Times*, and also from the *New York Herald*, a workingman’s penny-daily. As boxing grew, so did its opposition. Thomas Jefferson scorned it, along with horse racing, as an English aristocratic dissipation that had no place in democratic

America. Others condemned boxing as violent, crass, corrupting of youth. In an age that increasingly prized bourgeois values like sober self-control, the ring encouraged dissipations like gambling, swearing, and drinking. Reformers, clergymen, and journalists condemned the corruptions of the ring, yet many working-class men came to see boxing as emblematic of their way of life. “Burke presented an iron frame, in which all superfluous flesh seemed excluded,” and the writer went on to describe in detail “The Deaf ‘Un’s” body. Here were the beginnings of a male aesthetic that appealed deeply to working-class men.¹¹

Beginning in the late 1840s and lasting until the Civil War, boxing experienced a golden age in American cities. Part of the reason was the growth of a substantial working class, based on the rise of new manufacturing businesses. Simply put, there was now a critical mass of men with enough income, a little spare time, and a desire to find “manly” sports. And one other thing: there was a growing immigrant presence on urban streets. For English and Irish men, boxing was an ancestral sport; by the mid nineteenth century, it had long been associated with national pride and personal virility. The immigrant presence fed rivalries, English versus Irish, Irish versus native born, native born versus English, and these were played out in the ring, and generated unprecedented spectator interest.¹²

But before this golden age could flourish, one bout nearly killed the ring. On September 13, 1842, Chris Lilly and Tom McCoy met in Hastings, just above New York City. In this era before weight classes, both were mid-sized men, a little under 140 pounds, but 2,000 spectators jammed a dozen boats for the trip up the Hudson. Of course the bout, like all prizefights, was illegal, so the boxers, their seconds, and even the fans might be arrested, should constables choose to challenge such a tough crowd. The new 1838 rules of the London Prize Ring were in force – they would continue in the United States for another fifty years – and they explicitly outlawed the hair-pulling, head-butting, eye-gouging, gut-kneeing, and neck-throttling so often on display under Broughton’s Rules. As always, a round ended when a man was punched, tripped, or thrown down, and a new round began thirty seconds later. Journalists gave the fight considerable ink, and boxing’s homoeroticism, the emphasis on masculine beauty, emerged in descriptions of boxers’ bodies: “[McCoy’s] swelling breast curved out like a cuirass: his shoulders were deep, with a bold curved blade, and the muscular development of the arm large and finely brought out.”¹³

The fight lasted over two and a half hours, 119 rounds. McCoy refused to concede the match, even though he was defenseless for the last fifty. The battle ended with his death; the coroner said he drowned in his own blood.

This was the first fatality in the American prize ring, and it prompted an outburst of rage. The grand jury sitting in Westchester County indicted eighteen men on charges ranging from riot to manslaughter. Boxers George Kensett, John McClester, and Yankee Sullivan stood trial, and all were convicted. In his charge to the jury, the judge described the ringside crowd: “the gamblers, and the bullies, and the swearers, and the blacklegs, and the pickpockets and the thieves, and the burglars ... the idle, disorderly, vicious, dissolute people – people who live by violence – people who live by crime.” The judges words expressed the fear that cities had become dens of vice, that youth there hardened into idle, drunken, bloodthirsty ruffians, that a corrupt, aggressive, alien underclass now prevailed and threatened the wellsprings of American virtue.¹⁴

Boxing all but disappeared for five years after the Lilly–McCoy match, but the conditions that fed the ring actually improved. Cities continued to grow rapidly, fed by a growing number of immigrant men. Most of them labored at working-class jobs, so they were eager for rough amusements. And too, ethnic conflict deepened between Englishmen and Irishmen, Americans and immigrants. Maybe most important, prizefighting rode into mid-century on the backs of several charismatic fighters.¹⁵

Political influence got Yankee Sullivan out of legal difficulties after the Lilly–McCoy fight, and he lay low for a few years, tending bar at his saloon in lower Manhattan. But he longed to fight, and, in 1847, he began publicly sparring at “Sportsman’s Hall” and other venues where the fancy gathered. Sparring exhibitions were restrained boxing; fighters wore gloves, fought indoors for a limited number of rounds, refrained from punching too hard. It was all mostly legal, as men demonstrated the manly art but without the violence and passion of the prize ring. But Sullivan itched for a real fight and apparently so did his fans. As had become the custom before the Lilly–McCoy fight, Robert Caunt, brother of the former English champion Benjamin Caunt, published a letter in the *Spirit of the Times*: “I have received numerous challenges from Yankee Sullivan, but have never been able to bring him up to the chalk ... If he means business, I am already to fight him for one thousand dollars, and if he will not accept this challenge, I hope he will not annoy me anymore with his bounces.” Their seconds arranged the match, and they fought at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, before 700 members of the fancy on May 11, 1847. Sullivan easily defeated Caunt in twelve minutes, but the fight did its work; it not only reintroduced the ring to an American audience after the Lilly–McCoy debacle, it brought back ethnic conflict, larger-than-life fighters, and high stakes (\$1,000 was roughly three years of a working-class man’s salary).¹⁶

The Golden Age

“We do not remember,” the *New York Herald* declared a year and a half after the Sullivan–Caunt fight, “ever to have seen so great an excitement among certain classes of society, as has been developed during the last few days in relation to the approaching prizefight between Yankee Sullivan and Tom Hyer. It is similar in some respects to the agitation produced in the public mind by the first accounts of the Mexican War.” Each side wagered \$5,000, with total betting estimated at upwards of \$300,000. A man could scarcely enter a saloon six months before the bout without giving his opinion of Sullivan and Hyer.¹⁷

And those opinions were marked by the abilities of the two fighters, but just as much by their ethnic backgrounds. The 1840s was a decade of unprecedented immigration to the United States and especially to the eastern cities. For the first time, in 1845, over 100,000 immigrants entered the country; in 1847, 200,000; in 1850, 300,000. The Irish were overrepresented because of the potato blight, or more precisely, because when the crops died beginning in 1845, England’s policies failed to meet the emergency. During the 1830s, 200,000 Irish came to America; four times that number arrived in the 1840s. The English and Irish had their own long-simmering enmities; native-born Americans and the English were not fond of each other; American Protestants accused Catholics of idolatry and subservience to the pope; American workers often blamed the Irish for taking their jobs, while the Irish looked on Americans as cold-hearted, selfish, and arrogant. The prize ring, of course, was always a stage for playing out such conflicts.¹⁸

Tom Hyer made his reputation as a street brawler. He was a butcher, a trade long dominated by American-born workers. Hyer demanded a stake of \$5,000, an amount Sullivan’s backers struggled to raise. Daily fights broke out between their friends, and one night, Hyer and Sullivan chanced on each other in a downtown oyster bar, and almost instantly the former had the latter in a headlock and punched away at his leisure. Police broke up the fight, but tensions ran high in the streets for weeks, until Sullivan formally challenged Hyer, as had become customary, with an advertisement in the *New York Herald*. Sullivan claimed Hyer assaulted him without cause, accused him of cowardice, and declared, “I can ‘flax him out’ without any exertion.” Hyer responded with an equally inflammatory card of his own. They signed “Articles of Agreement” on August 7, 1848.¹⁹

The Hyer–Sullivan fight marked the full maturity of the American ring. All of the rituals were in place, the challenges, the legalistic Articles of Agreement – “the said James Sullivan agrees to fight the said Thomas Hyer a fair stand up fight, half minute time, in a twenty-four feet roped ring,

according to the new rules as laid down in the *Fistiana* for 1848” – the very dimensions of the ring and the tying of each man’s colors to the ropes. During the six months between signing articles and the battle itself, fights constantly threatened to break out on the streets and in the saloons. Opponents of the ring argued that boxing encouraged violence, while proponents claimed that the ring allowed men to set aside pistols and knives for civilized combat, an argument that would go on for decades without resolution. The boxers’ preparation, however, was surprisingly disciplined. Two months before the battle, both men went into intense training, including running, punching the heavy bag, workouts with light dumbbells, a rigid diet consisting mostly of meat; and sex was absolutely forbidden. Hyer, one account concluded, led “a perfectly chaste and abstemious life”; he was a model “to many who claim to lead up middle aisles, and to sound the key note in sacred psalmistry.” One of the great paradoxes of boxing is how men in training embraced rigid self-discipline in the name of violence. Indeed, the attraction of the sport, its very aesthetic, depended on the balance between bloody passion and refined technique.²⁰

Of course prizefighting itself was illegal, and as thousands prepared to disembark from Baltimore for a secret location, local magistrates decided to break up the fight. They descended on Poole’s Island in Chesapeake Bay, where Hyer and Sullivan were ready for battle. However, the boxers’ friends arrived before the law, rescued the two heroes, and in a final humiliation, the boat carrying the constables ran aground. So two vessels with about 100 passengers each headed for Still Pond Heights, Kent County, Maryland, where a ring was quickly raised. The sun was going down and light snow covered the ground, but at ten minutes after four, Yankee Sullivan threw his hat in the ring, followed moments later by Hyer’s. Both men had their hair cropped close to avoid having it pulled, and each tied his colors to the ropes, the stars and stripes for Hyer, emerald green with white spots for Sullivan. Sullivan won the coin toss and he chose to have his back to the sun, Hyer looking straight into the light. In an age before weight classifications, the disparity in their size was striking, Sullivan giving away four inches and thirty pounds. But both were impressive, and one newspaper declared, “They were as finely developed in every muscle as their physical capacity could reach, and the bounding confidence which sparkled fiercely in their eyes, showed that their spirits and courage were at their highest mark.”²¹

Size and youth won. Sullivan depended on his wrestling craft to weaken the larger man, but he simply was not able to handle Hyer. The fight lasted a little over seventeen minutes, just ten of it actual fighting, with both men well bloodied, Sullivan’s face “clotted with gore,” Hyer’s chest covered with his own blood from having the skin under his right eye lanced by his

cornermen to prevent it from closing. In the end, “Hyer let fly both right and left in Sullivan’s face, who, though he could not return it, took it without wincing in the least. Hyer then rushed him to the ropes again, and after a short struggle there, threw him and fell heavily upon him ... When he was taken off, Sullivan was found to be entirely exhausted.” “The Great \$10,000 Match” was over, but the celebrations and news coverage lasted for days, and was unlike anything seen before. Above all, boxing had come of age, and a series of great matches would follow. Still, prizefighting remained almost entirely a sport for working-class men, roundly condemned by respectable bourgeois Victorians.²²

For the next decade, the ring thrived in big American cities. A series of notable champions and exciting matches kept boxing in the news. In an era of heavy immigration, especially in the wake of the Irish Famine, the fights were often billed as having ethnic enmities at their core. But equally important, a group of great fighters emerged. Yankee Sullivan and Tom Hyer – the acknowledged “Champion of America” – continued to command attention, and new men like John Morrissey from Troy, New York, and John C. Heenan, the “Benicia Boy,” fought spectacular matches. And too, the border between street fighting and the ring remained vague, as toughs like “Butcher” Bill Poole, whose reputation was earned entirely in brawls, challenged regular ring fighters like Morrissey to street battles. Poole was a notorious nativist, and when he was murdered on the streets of New York, it was easy for partisans to portray it as an assassination of a patriot by Irish zealots, led by Morrissey. “Good-bye, boys, I die a true American,” Poole allegedly gasped, then died. His life and violent end were both emblematic of the turbulent male subculture of the urban streets that nurtured the ring.²³

The culture of boxing continued to expand, with saloons opening where the fancy could gather in East Coast and Great Lakes cities, and all the way to San Francisco. More and more newspapers gave the ring ink, and a new compendium of ring history, *The American Fistiana* saw the light of day. And new professors of pugilism gave lessons and presented sparring exhibitions, introducing young fans to the “manly art.” But to thrive, boxing needed real prize ring bouts, championship matches, and a newcomer, John Morrissey, was eager to oblige. The son of Irish immigrants, raised in Troy, New York, a veteran of brutal street fights, he became a logical opponent for Tom Hyer. But Hyer wanted a match for far more money than Morrissey’s backers could raise, so the next logical opponent was Yankee Sullivan. Sullivan was old enough to be Morrissey’s father, and he also gave away twenty-five pounds to the young man. They met on September 1, 1853, in the tiny town of Boston Corners, where New York, Massachusetts, and Connecticut all bordered each other, ideal because legal jurisdiction was easily muddled.²⁴

Roughly 6,000 fans made their way to the secret venue. From the outset, Yankee Sullivan pummeled Morrissey, leaving him a bloody mess, but Old Smoke was renowned for his “bottom,” his sheer ability to take punishment and keep going. In round forty-two, long into their second hour of fighting, chaos broke loose. Some say it began with Morrissey choking Sullivan on the ropes; others claimed that Old Smoke’s seconds broke the ring to create a diversion and save their man. In any event, Sullivan found himself fighting Orville “Awful” Gardiner, and thus too busy to come up to scratch at the call of time. Morrissey was awarded the fight by default. The *New York Times* thundered,

With the benefits of a diffused education; with a press strong in upholding the moral amenities of life; with a clergy devout, sincere and energetic in the discharge of their duties, and a public sentiment opposed to animal brutality in any shape; with these and similar influences at work, it is inexplicable, deplorable, humiliating that an exhibition such as the contest between Morrissey and Sullivan could have occurred ...

Sullivan spent a week in the Lennox, Massachusetts, jail; Morrissey paid a \$1,200 fine to stay out of prison.²⁵

Several big matches followed the Morrissey–Sullivan battle, but it was Old Smoke the fancy wanted to see, since his victory over Yankee Sullivan (and Hyer’s refusal to fight) made him champion. A young challenger emerged in California, John C. Heenan, originally from Morrissey’s hometown of Troy, New York, but long since employed by the Pacific Steamship Company in Benicia, California. In recent non-championship fights, Buffalo, New York, had become a favorite staging ground. Fans came by rail, and from there took steamers to secret locations in Canada. Morrissey and Heenan signed articles of agreement, did their training, and finally, thousands of fans purchased tickets marked “excursion” or “picnic.” On October 20, 1858, they made the journey to Long Point, Canada West. Morrissey was the heavy favorite, not only because Heenan was younger and less experienced, but also because Heenan had developed an ugly abscess on his leg. The fight in some ways resembled Sullivan and Morrissey. For ten rounds, Heenan punched and threw Morrissey, making an ugly red mask of the older man’s face. But finally, in his weakened condition, Heenan ran out of steam, and Morrissey, despite the beating he took, had enough left to finish off the challenger. “Probably no human eye will ever look upon so much rowdyism, villainy, scoundrelism and boiled-down viciousness, concentrated upon so small a space,” thundered the *New York Herald Tribune*. Yet that city gave Heenan and Morrissey an unmatched reception.²⁶

The international acme of bare knuckle fighting came in 1861, with the “Great Contest for the Championship of the World.” Benecia Boy Heenan signed articles to fight the Champion of England, Tom Sayers, near London. When Tom Molineaux fought Tom Crib, the American reaction was all but nonexistent. But now there was an explosion of excitement. That Heenan was white and of Irish parentage mattered. But that wasn’t all. Many Americans were now familiar with the ring. The sport no longer seemed outlandish, foreign; it had been domesticated, though stigmatized as a lower-class dissipation. Besides, this was a great match. Tom Sayers, small at five foot eight, about 155 pounds, had beaten every conceivable challenger. Heenan was the perfect foil, young, aggressive, and big, 200 pounds on a six foot two inch frame. They fought forty-two rounds, over two hours; one of Sayer’s arms was broken, and Heenan was nearly blind from blows around his eyes. It was not really possible to say that either fighter was ahead, but it was a moot point anyway. A contingent of Hampshire constables marched in to break up the fight, and the battle ended in chaos, the referee declaring it a draw. With time Americans came to believe that Heenan was robbed, but in the immediate aftermath, the fight was a touchstone of American nationalism at the very moment the American nation fell apart with secession and civil war.²⁷

The dozen years between the Sullivan–Hyer fight in 1849 and Heenan–Sayers in 1861 was the golden age of American bare-knuckle fighting. The ring became an emblem of working-class masculinity. Far from the steady habits and sober self-control of the Victorian middle class, the prize ring with its attendant culture of gambling, drinking, and carousing represented an anti-Victorian world. The great boxers were avatars of masculine toughness, their pictures hung in countless saloons in Northern cities. The ring was part of a web of male institutions, including volunteer fire companies, ethnic gangs, urban political wards, unions, fraternal organizations, brothels, saloons, and gambling dens. Boxing, with its emphasis on violence, toughness, physical skill, and bloody competition, was at the heart of this male subculture.²⁸

The fate of three of the great champions of the era gives a sense of the possibilities and dangers of this world. After losing to John Morrissey, Yankee Sullivan left New York for San Francisco. There he again practiced his skills at electoral abuse – intimidating voters, ballot box stuffing with fake returns. But Sullivan was unlucky. A group of businessmen organized a vigilance committee. They deported several political opponents (including a few other pugilists who had moved out from New York), hanged others, and arrested Yankee Sullivan. A few days later, he was found dead in his cell; his life bled out from a gash on his arm. Tom Hyer stayed in New York,

engaged in various nativist causes, got into some street battles, and generally played the role of a great man in local saloons. But soon his health broke down; in his mid-forties, he died of heart failure. John Morrissey, on the other hand, became involved in politics and forged connections with Tammany Hall. Always interested in gambling, Morrissey opened one then another Faro parlor. Before long, he organized several very wealthy businessmen in turning Saratoga, New York, into a gambling mecca, including opening Saratoga racetrack. Late in life, Morrissey became a United States congressman. Never quite regarded as a “gentleman,” he was nonetheless a successful man.²⁹

Decline and Rebirth

The years following the Sayers–Heenan battle were mixed ones for the prize ring. On the positive side, the Civil War turned out to be a crucible of American sports. Bringing hundreds of thousands of men together in camp and field allowed sporting ideals to spread. Officers often encouraged men to keep in shape with competitive games, so baseball, cricket, and “football” grew enormously in popularity. Boxing too gained converts, and stories were told of violent conflicts between men settled amicably with the gloves. In the aftermath of war, new fans deepened boxing’s appeal.³⁰

But much as in England forty years earlier, the ring’s problems multiplied. The old Victorian suspicion of men apart from families, drinking, gambling, and carousing did not go away. And increasing disorder inside and outside the ropes gave boxing’s enemies new opportunities to police the ring. Fixed fights became common in the 1860s and 1870s. The violence that the ring supposedly tamed and contained often broke loose, as factionalism led to increasing numbers of battles ending in free-for-alls. “The referee failed to be killed” was a euphemism for the rare battle that came off without extramural bloodletting. Many fights ended with the principals and even fans in jail. Then, too, boxing always depended on great champions, charismatic, larger-than-life figures, and for whatever reason, few seemed to be around in the 1860s and 1870s.³¹

Tom Sayers was one of the last English bare-knucklers. In 1867, the Marquess of Queensberry Rules were published in London, and soon ran the English ring. The Queensberry Rules forbade wrestling and mandated three-minute rounds with one minute of rest between them, a ten-second knock-down rule, and gloved fists. Claims of order and safety notwithstanding, the new rules arguably made the sport more dangerous, since gloves protected the hands against broken bones, allowing far more punches to the head. Twenty more years would pass in America before the Queensberry

Rules became the norm for championship fights. But the new rules were prizefighting's route to semi-respectability. While matches increasingly came under suspicion for being fixed – that is, if they weren't stopped by the police before they even got going – the Queensberry Rules offered a way forward, first in “exhibitions” on indoor stages, then finally for championship bouts. The key figure in the transformation would emerge in the late 1870s, a charismatic young Bostonian of Irish parentage. John L. Sullivan possessed enormous strength, stamina, and athletic talent. He also had a knack for self-promotion. Before he was done, he was arguably America's first modern athlete, earning over a million dollars along the way and becoming one of the most famous men in America.³²

Sullivan originally hoped to be a professional baseball player, but while still in his teens his fistic talents emerged along with his temper. Soon he was challenging local heroes in glove affairs on Boston stages and winning. He went on tour, offering to pay any man \$50, then \$100, who could stay in the ring with him for three rounds. Sullivan also fought a couple of battles under bare-knuckle rules, but his first big fight came in 1882. Champion Paddy Ryan, having first admonished the youth to “go and get a reputation,” now took on Sullivan. They fought in Mississippi City on the Gulf Coast, thousands of men finding their way to the hastily built risers surrounding the ring. The “Boston Strong Boy” surprised everyone. “When Sullivan struck me,” Ryan said after the fight, “I thought that a telegraph pole had been shoved against me endways.” The fight lasted about ten minutes in nine rounds. Sullivan pressed Ryan relentlessly, and knocked him around the ring. For the next ten years the Strong Boy was the toast of the ring. More, he transformed the sport.³³

With his fame as champion secure, Sullivan realized that there was far more money to be made fighting with gloves than in bare-knuckle battles. In fact, he challenged all comers after defeating Ryan, but he insisted he would wear gloves so as to not be arrested. More important, Sullivan began touring the country in traveling shows and circuses. Night after night, he came on stage, challenged anyone in the house to fight him for three or four or six rounds under the Queensberry Rules, and of course he never met anything like his match. He made thousands of dollars a week, and before his career ended, he was the first American athlete to earn one million dollars.³⁴

Local police rarely broke up Queensberry fights. Part of the reason was that for the first time, prominent American men had begun advocating rough sports. Games like college football where boys died with alarming frequency, for example, became metaphors for the stern self-testing needed in an era that extolled social Darwinism. Men of means like young Theodore Roosevelt and the psychologist G. Stanley Hall spoke openly of their fascination

with the ring. Even some men of faith joined the chorus for “Muscular Christianity.” In other words, Sullivan entered the pugilistic world when many of the old Victorian strictures against the ring were loosening, even as the means to stage and promote his “Knocking-Out-Tours” – railroads, telegraphs, and cheap newspaper coverage – proliferated. And he understood that glove fights could attract a richer, more prestigious clientele – “gentlemen,” as he put it – rather than the old fancy crowd.³⁵

There was one more reason beyond Sullivan’s charismatic personality and athletic ability that he was so successful. He was assisted by his arch-enemy, Richard Kyle Fox. In truth, it is unclear if the two really disliked each other, but they clearly understood that their enmity was profitable. Richard Kyle Fox was a Scotch immigrant, a journalist, who, after knocking around New York’s newspaper world for a while, purchased the old *National Police Gazette*. The *Gazette* had been around since the 1850s and mostly covered news of crime and police work. When Fox purchased it at the end of the 1870s, he saw an opportunity to market something new – a weekly journal printed on shocking pink paper and aimed at working-class men, filled with outrageous stories and sketches. Fox invented crazy competitions like hair-cutting and water-drinking contests; he covered the scandals of the theater world (the stage of course was still considered disreputable); he reprinted lurid pictures and descriptions of lynchings from the South and Midwest, gory murders filled the *Gazette*’s pages, sexual improprieties with pictures of scantily clad women, and all sorts of images and stories tilting toward sexual sadism and masochism appeared, and sports, too, especially rough sports like boxing. The *Police Gazette* became known as “the barber’s bible” because places where men gathered – pool halls, saloons, barbershops – went out of their way to subscribe and to keep back copies on file. Past the turn of the century, the *Gazette* was the source for all that was tawdry and scandalous, and newspaper moguls like William Randolph Hurst and Joseph Pulitzer learned much about shaping and marketing news from Richard Kyle Fox.³⁶

So of course the *Gazette* became the leading organ for stories about the ring. But far more than just disseminate fight results and ring gossip, Fox effectively was now America’s boxing promoter. Because boxing remained illegal until the 1890s, there was no easy way to rationalize the sport. But the *Gazette* became the ring’s trusted authority above all others, so that Fox could simply declare particular fighters to be champions then arrange new matches and publicize them. More, he created six weight classifications. These did not exist in the earlier bare-knuckle era, as witnessed by Yankee Sullivan and Tom Sayers fighting men who outweighed them by thirty or forty pounds. But beginning about 1890, as the bare-knuckle era ended and

the Queensberry Rules took hold, boxing men recognized the categories of flyweight, bantamweight, lightweight, welterweight, middleweight, and heavyweight, mainly because the *Gazette* legitimated them. More, Fox used his money to promote the ring, offering up stakes money for particular boxers, conferring championship belts, turning the *Gazette* offices into the central location where fights were arranged, drumming up interest in matches.³⁷

Early in John L. Sullivan's career, as the story goes, Fox was at an elegant saloon and he called the Strong Boy over to his table. "Let Fox come to me" was Sullivan's reply. Years later, in the last great bare-knuckle battle, the 1889 fight between Sullivan and Jake Kilrain, their public antagonism boiled over. Fox designed a new heavyweight championship belt in 1887, with diamonds and gold and 200 ounces of silver. He would award it to the next title holder, but he insisted that the *Gazette* offices arrange all fights for the belt, that he, Fox, be stakeholder, and that the *Gazette* have a reporter at ringside. Meanwhile, Kilrain, whose career had risen swiftly, published a challenge to Sullivan for \$5,000 a side. Sullivan was still healing from a broken arm, so he rejected the challenge. With that Fox declared Kilrain the new champion, and on June 4 awarded him the belt in a public ceremony. Sullivan said that when he won it from Kilrain, he would offer it as a trophy to the bootblacks of New York. Then several of Sullivan's friends and backers had an even larger and more elegant belt made, and they presented it to him in Boston.³⁸

The End of the Bare-Knuckle Era

Sullivan saw little reason to fight another bare-knuckle match. No one believed, at least not yet, that Kilrain was his match, and the Boston Strong Boy continued to make a fortune fighting brief glove fights against local chumps. He went out on another "knocking-out tour," but within a few months, England's Charley Mitchell humiliated him in a glove fight. Worse, Sullivan's drinking and lack of training made it obvious that he was overweight and out of shape. Derided by critics for his long absence from the prize ring, Sullivan and Kilrain finally agreed to a bare-knuckle match on July 8, 1889, in Richburg, Mississippi. After months of ballyhoo in the press, they met on a sweltering day. The sun blistered their backs as they fought for three hours. Sullivan had trained hard and worked himself back into shape; reporters said he looked like the champion of old. Midway through, drinking a concoction of tea and whiskey between rounds, Sullivan began to vomit. Word around the ring was that his stomach retained the whiskey but rejected the tea. He won in seventy-five rounds, handily. His

return north was a triumph as he stopped in town after town to receive the plaudits of fans.³⁹

No one knew for sure at the time, but the bare-knuckle era had just ended. Sullivan would not fight a championship battle again for three years, and when he finally published a challenge to all comers, he insisted on the Queensberry Rules. So confident was he that such a fight would be legal that he openly named the venue – New Orleans, at the new Olympic Club. Wealthy men in tuxedos sat at ringside on September 24, 1892. Sullivan lost his title to James J. Corbett from San Francisco that night, part of a festival of championships of various weight classes, all fought under the new rules. The glove era had begun – no more running from the law, or at least not as much. Boxing certainly never lost the taint of corruption, but finally the prize ring had emerged from the underworld into semi-respectability.⁴⁰

NOTES

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- 2 *The Aeneid of Virgil*, translated by Rolfe Humphries (New York: Scribner, 1951), pp. 125–29.
- 3 Dennis Brailsford, *Sport and Society, Elizabeth to Anne* (Toronto: Routledge & K. Paul, 1969), pp. 198–216; Robert W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), chapter 1.
- 4 Pierce Egan, *Boxiana, Or Sketches of Ancient and Modern Pugilism* (London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1829), pp. 8–23; John Ford, *Prize Fighting, The Age of Regency Boximania* (South Brunswick, NJ: Great Albion Books, 1971), chapter 6.
- 5 Malcolmson, pp. 42–43, 145–46; Ford, pp. 131–36.
- 6 Egan, pp. 360–71, 386–420.
- 7 Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 24–33.
- 8 Gorn, pp. 34–36.
- 9 Elliott J. Gorn, “‘Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch’: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry,” *American Historical Review* 90(1) (Feb. 1985), pp. 18–43.
- 10 *New York Evening Post*, July 10, 1923; Gorn, *Manly Art*, pp. 36–40.
- 11 Gorn, *Manly Art*, pp. 40–47; *American Fistiana* (New York, 1860), pp. 6–9; Anon, *The Life and Battles of Yankee Sullivan* (New York, 1854), pp. 88–89.
- 12 *American Fistiana*, pp. 8–11; *Life and Battles of Yankee Sullivan*, pp. 16–24; Gorn *Manly Art*, pp. 69–73.
- 13 Gorn, *Manly Art*, pp. 73–81; Thomas McDade, “Death in the Afternoon,” *Westchester Historian*, 46 (Winter 1970), pp. 1–6.
- 14 Gorn, *Manly Art*, pp. 76–79; *New York Herald*, extra edition, November 28, 1842.
- 15 Gorn, *Manly Art*, pp. 76–80.

- 16 *Life and Battles of Yankee Sullivan*, pp. 29–33; *American Fistianiana*, pp. 16–17.
- 17 *New York Herald*, February 6, 1849.
- 18 Gorn, *Manly Art*, pp. 83–85, 136–38. Also see Gorn, “Good-Bye Boys, I Die a True American”: Homicide, Nativism, and Working-Class Culture in Antebellum New York City,” *Journal of American History*, 74(2) (Sept. 1987), pp. 388–410.
- 19 *American Fistianiana* (1849 edition), pp. 2–4; Ed James, *The Life and Battles of Yankee Sullivan* (New York, n.d.), pp. 33–36, 63–64; Ed James, *The Life of Tom Hyer* (New York, 1849), p. 1.
- 20 Gorn, *Manly Art*, pp. 86–91.
- 21 *American Fistianiana* (1849), pp. 22–28; *Life and Battles of Yankee Sullivan*, pp. 50–60; Gorn, *Manly Art*, pp. 90–92.
- 22 Gorn, *Manly Art*, pp. 92–97.
- 23 Gorn, *The Manly Art*, chapter 3; Gorn, “Good-Bye Boys.”
- 24 Ed James, *The Life and Battles of John Morrissey* (New York, 1879), pp. 3–10.
- 25 *Life and Battles of Yankee Sullivan*, pp. 64–71; James, *Life of Morrissey*, pp. 6–12; *American Fistianiana* (1860), pp. 20–22.
- 26 *American Fistianiana*, pp. 58–61; James, *Life of Morrissey*, pp. 13–19; Anon, *The Lives and Battles of Tom Sayers and John C. Heenan*, “The Benicia Boy,” (New York, 1860), pp. 63–67.
- 27 *Lives of Sayers and Heenan*, pp. 69–71, 77–86, 91–94; Ed James, *The Life and Battles of John C. Heenan: The Hero of Farnborough* (New York, 1879), pp. 6–18.
- 28 Gorn, *Manly Art*, chapter 4.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 159–64.
- 31 *Ibid.*, pp. 164–78.
- 32 Duffield Osborn, “A Defense of Pugilism,” *North American Review*, v46, April 1888, pp. 434–35; John Boyle O’Reilly, *Ethics of Boxing and Manly Sports* (Boston, MA: Ticknor, 1888).
- 33 On the Ryan fight, see Michael T. Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 102–13; for Sullivan’s life and times, see his autobiography, *John L. Sullivan, The Life and Reminiscences of a 19th Century Gladiator* (Boston, 1892).
- 34 Isenberg, chapters 5–7.
- 35 Gorn, *Manly Art*, chapter 6; Elliott Gorn and Warren Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sports* (New York: University of Illinois Press, 1993), chapter 3.
- 36 Elliott Gorn, “The Wicked World: The *National Police Gazette* and Gilded Age America,” *Media Studies Journal*, v 6, Winter 1992, pp. 1–15.
- 37 Gorn, *Manly Art*, pp. 207–29.
- 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 230–32.
- 39 William Edgar Harding, *Life and Battles of Jake Kilrain* (New York: R.K. Fox, 1888), pp. 5–29; Sullivan, *Life and Reminiscences*, chapters 9, 10; Isenberg, pp. 257–80; Gorn, *Manly Art*, pp. 207–37.
- 40 Gorn, *Manly Art*, pp. 237–54; Isenberg, chapters 11, 12.

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