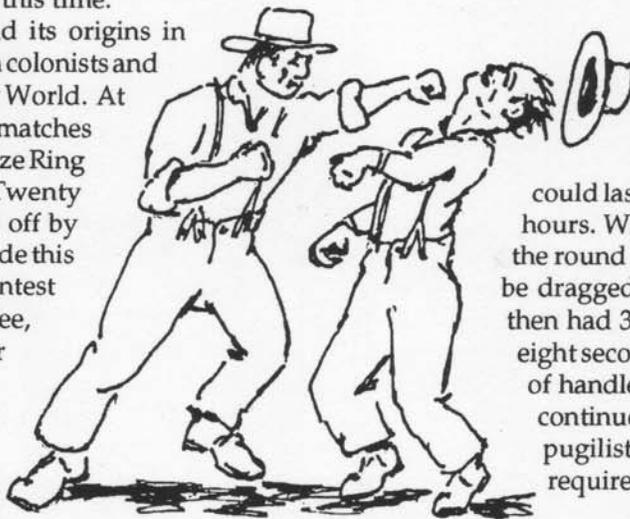


Pugilism In The Civil War

By John Dewey

Nolan's book on the Iron Brigade mentions a spontaneous boxing match that took place just before the Battle of Fredericksburg between a member of the 24th Michigan and a Confederate picket. This spirited contest ended in a draw and was probably little different from the frequent brawls in the army camps. However, more formal affairs of this sort did occur in America at this time.

Boxing, or Pugilism, had its origins in England and the English and Irish colonists and immigrants brought it to the New World. At the time of the Civil War, boxing matches were governed by the London Prize Ring Rules (introduced in 1838). Twenty square feet of turf was sectioned off by ropes. The only men allowed inside this square during the course of the contest were the two pugilists, the referee, and, unlike today, a second for each combatant. Their seconds remained in the ring to encourage and, occasionally (and illegally), get in the way of their man's opponent should their man be in trouble. This often prompted a fight between the seconds and a general melee at ringside.



At the start of a round, each combatant would advance to the center of the ring to one of two furrows, about a foot apart, that had been dug in the turf by the referee's heel. This action was known as "coming to scratch" or "toeing the mark". Upon executing this action, the contest would begin

or resume. A round was not a set period of time as in modern boxing. Under London Prize Ring Rules, a round lasted until some part of either contestant's body other than the bottom of his feet touched the turf. Thus a round

could last seconds, minutes, or, theoretically, hours. When such action occurred that caused the round to end, the battlers would return (or be dragged!) to their respective corners. They then had 30 seconds to rest and an additional eight seconds to come to scratch, with the help of handlers if necessary. The contest would continue to "a finish" when one (or both!) pugilists failed to come to scratch in the required time.

A boxer might end a round by knocking his opponent down with a blow,

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or tossing him with a hip throw, a certain amount of wrestling being allowed by the rules. A boxer might also stall for time by voluntarily dropping to one knee, though, if the rules were strictly enforced, which was very rarely the case, he risked forfeiture by doing so. The longest recorded fight under these rules was six hours, fifteen minutes and the largest number of rounds was 276!

Boxing matches at this time were conducted bare knuckle in the center of the ring (fighting off the ropes being forbidden). The fact that they were bare knuckle mandated that the competitors conduct themselves in a particular fashion. If one views a print or photograph of a pugilist in the classic fighting stance of the period, one would see a stiffly upright individual, left leg forward (southpaws, or boxers who fight with the right leg forward, were exceedingly rare), left arm out in front, elbow bent, knuckles at eye level and facing forward. The right would be slightly below that height and back a couple of inches, knuckles also facing forward. If one could go back in time and witness such a contest, one would see the pugilists moving like fencers, always keeping the right leg behind the left. There would be relatively little lateral movement. Punches were delivered straight ahead, the arm rotating as it extended.

It was the bare-knuckled left that dictated the action. This weapon was not delivered in the pitty-pat fashion of a modern jab. Undiluted by a glove, it was thrown with weight behind it, a blow meant to do damage, not as an irritant or a range finder. Only when the recipient of this blow began to show its effects would the experienced pugilist unleash his straight right. The eyes were the prime target of those punches, the deliverer hoping to cause a cut or swelling that would impair vision. Secondly, the mouth was a good target—lips, gums and tongue torn against teeth that were unprotected by a mouthguard. The nose was not as important a target because, unless the opponent was inexperienced, it was likely to have been broken and mashed against his face long before the date of the match. The blood flowed freer in those days as bone hit against bone unencumbered by leather padding.

Because the left was so damaging in bare knuckle fighting, boxers could not move in to throw hooks and uppercuts as in gloved boxing. That is also why lateral movement was less important in this time period than it is today. When boxers did move in, it was to wrestle or clinch.

The clinch is where blows to the body were delivered, the body being much softer than the head and elbows of the foe. It was also perfectly legal to capture an opponent's head in a headlock and belabor his face with the free hand. Elbows, too, were acceptable as weapons but, because of the menacing left, were infrequently thrown.

Clean knockouts were rare in bare-knuckle fighting for two reasons. Firstly, if the pugilist was knocked "queer", he did not have to rise to his feet before ten seconds as in today's boxing. Instead, he had 38 seconds to clear the cobwebs and toe the mark (and take more punishment!). Secondly, the unprotected knuckles of each protagonist would begin to hurt more and more as the bout progressed, discouraging hard-thrown punches. Boxing matches in those days were battles of attrition in which exhaustion and accumulated punishment would determine victor and vanquished.

Fatalities, although they did occur, were less frequent under London Prize Ring Rules than in gloved boxing. That is because a boxer with tightly-wrapped, glove-protected hands can really throw his body into an arcing punch with little fear of this knuckles being broken. Still, the sport was brutal enough that it was banned in all "civilized" regions of America and Great Britain as well.

In spite of the fact that prize fighting was illegal, the first World's Heavyweight Championship match was held during the Civil War. In 1863, the American Champion, John Heenan, who somehow avoided army service, went over to England to do battle with the British Champion, Tom Sayers. For two and a half hours they fought until the crowd, incensed that their man was being strangled by Heenan, cut the ropes and ended the match. It would be twenty years before another attempt to crown a World Champ would be made.

Being that prizefighting was illegal, no such event would have been tolerated in an army camp. Informal fisticuffs, when occurring, was likely to be punished by additional duty or time in the guardhouse.

In 1866, the Marquis of Queensbury introduced his rules, which are the foundation of modern boxing. In 1892, when John L. Sullivan put his world title on the line against Jim Corbett in a gloved contest, the era of bare knuckle pugilism ended.

Source: Western Boxing and World Wrestling by John F. Gilbey, 1986.