

GERALD EARLY

Introduction: The Last Sport Standing

The most lasting impression of all, however, was the fight itself. On the evening of June 30, 1927 I grasped for the first time how much concentration, mercilessness, and toughness American boxers brought to their profession. The way Walker hammered down his challenger, the ditchdigger Milligan, remained an unforgettable lesson for me. Here it was demonstrated to me for the first time *how unconditionally the boxer puts his existence on the line.*

– German boxer Max Schmeling (1905–2005), on watching the championship fight between Tommy Milligan and Mickey (the Toy Bulldog) Walker in London¹

Was it worth all the blood and the sweat and the heartaches?

Absolutely! Besides, what else could I have become? With education and the right breaks, anyone can aspire to become a doctor or a lawyer – but you have to know real poverty to want to earn your living as a fighter. During much of my career, poverty was a constant companion ...

To me, boxing has always represented the purest and truest form of athletic competition. It's much more natural to fight than it is to play football or hockey. A caveman or an alien from another planet would understand boxing, but he sure as hell wouldn't understand golf or tennis.

– Heavyweight boxer George Chuvalo²

Boxers are highly trained athletes, tuned up to a degree not known in other sports. They ply their trade alone, and there is nowhere to hide. It is a marriage of top physical conditioning with unrelenting bravery. *In my years in the fight game I have found that the professional boxers who successfully carve out a name for themselves are highly sensitive and complicated people.* It is no wonder that boxing champions react in so many different ways to the pressures that fame and wealth bring. If you take the endurance of a tennis player, the courage of a racing driver, the sensibility of an actor, the continued discipline of a long distance

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runner, and mix those ingredients, you are on the way to knowing what it takes to be a professional boxer.

– Angelo Dundee, trainer of Muhammad Ali and
Sugar Ray Leonard, among others³

The Boxer as Hipster

In order to understand boxing, and the chapters that comprise this book, it is important to consider its complexity and sociology as a performance art. Yes, it is an art! And a long-standing theatrical tradition. Nothing illustrates this better than the career of the great German fighter of the 1920s and 1930s, Max Schmeling, who managed to be a star in two distinctly different phases of German political and social history.

Max Schmeling's autobiography reminds the reader how much boxing was in vogue among German artists and intellectuals during the Weimar Republic of Schmeling's youth and young manhood. He became a professional fighter in 1924. Part of the mystique of the boxer was the pull of the primitive: the sport was obvious in its intentions and goals, in the nature of its performance and spectacle, administering and enduring physical punishment of the plainest kind, conquering the will of one's opponent, disconnecting one's opponent from reality by knocking him out cold. The German Smart Set appreciated the backwards purity of the sport, its anti-bourgeois essence, if you will, something modern society produced that was meant to celebrate something that transcended or preceded the modern, adored how it symbolized and re-enacted the Darwinian or Spencerian morality of survival as endless struggle. As Schmeling quotes Austrian actor and director Fritz Kortner, to whom he gives boxing lessons, "What happens in the ring is a reflection of life. Merciless, raging – the way you go after each other – it's the way we all fight for our existence."⁴ As Canadian fighter George Chuvalo avers, boxing is natural, natural to the point of seeming transparent and depthless. But even as the German artistic community took up Schmeling as a sort of exotic, a representation of a myth, some of them appreciated the technical aspects of the sport, the enormous sacrifice that was required to learn to throw punches properly while minimizing damage to one's hands and wrists; to duck, block, and slip punches by turning one's head, hunching the shoulders, using one's forearms and elbows; to move in the ring in the best way to give one's punches the greatest leverage and to take advantage of one's height, arm reach, and leg strength. Modern prizefighting was not just fighting in any ordinary, street corner sense, but a highly refined, restricted (no kicking, knee strikes, elbow strikes, or wrestling), and disciplined use of the body as a particularly stylized

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striking and blocking weapon. The enormous training that professional boxing demanded made the boxer in some ways something like an artist in devotion to craft but in some ways better, as the boxer seemed the perfect marriage of the scripted and the spontaneous. Also, the truly knowing fan could possess a form of secret knowledge in understanding the technique of a boxing match, knowing that what was going on in the ring was not a brawl but an extraordinary combination of something artful and something mechanical, something memorized and something innovated in the moment. Combining this complexity of technical accomplishment, the necessity to master a prescribed but endlessly variable choreography, with the myth of Darwinian survival and the palpable social realism of poverty as a motivator that drives someone to perform in this strange theater of personal but highly regulated violence would make the boxer something special perhaps in relation to other athletes. Thus, the boxer, in Schmeling's glamor world of the creative elite, was a kind of hipster.

There are three points of clarification to be made here: first, when Schmeling began to be criticized for the company he was keeping, being called "arrogant" and "a social climber," it brought to his mind American heavyweight champion Gene Tunney, who "had been criticized because he read the classics, corresponded with George Bernard Shaw, and modeled for the Swiss sculptor Hermann Haller."⁵ But Schmeling was different from Tunney in that Schmeling did not really cultivate the Smart Set so that he could become a part of it as Tunney did, but rather he allowed himself to be taken up by them. Schmeling was not interested in affecting being a man of letters, someone who could lecture about Shakespeare in a college class, as Tunney once did. Tunney wanted to be a squire. He was not a hipster figure in the way that Schmeling was among the German bohemian crowd. (In this book, Carlo Rotella provides a detailed look at the glamor world that emerged around professional boxing in 1920s America by examining Tunney, Jack Dempsey, and the lesser known tough middleweight Harry Greb and the cultural implications of their fights for the era.)

Second, Schmeling's association with the German Smart Set was not quite the same as black American heavyweight champion Jack Johnson's (championship reign 1908–15) association with the black sporting life of the turn of the twentieth century. Johnson hung around songwriter/novelist/poet James Weldon Johnson (who knew the fighter very well),⁶ poet/novelist Paul Laurence Dunbar, comedians George Walker and Bert Williams, Ernest Hogan, Sissieretta Jones, and other black entertainers and artists of the day, as well as the leading black athletes of the day, such as cyclist Major Taylor and jockey Isaac Burns Murphy. The intense racial segregation in America made this association possible, necessary, and even desirable in

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some respects, but it was not an arrangement in which Johnson was being cultivated or taken up with salons and the like by intellectual and artistic types who were fascinated by the fact he was a boxer. Johnson hung around with other black entertainers and artists because they ran in the same social circles.

Third, Schmeling took on another kind of symbolic role as a successful German fighter when the Nazi regime took over. If Schmeling was a hipster type to the bohemian and artistic set of the liberal regime, for Hitler he was an example of Aryan superiority (the fact that Schmeling resembled American heavyweight champion of the 1920s Jack Dempsey added to his star quality). At least, he represented Aryan superiority until he ignominiously lost his rematch to Joe Louis in 1938 (he beat Louis all around the ring in their first encounter in 1936, which in fact built up his Aryan “super fighter” image). The American public saw the 1938 rematch, one of the biggest fights of the twentieth century, as democracy versus fascism, but Germans saw it as a racial inferior versus a racial superior. By 1936, Schmeling, who had been world heavyweight champion from 1930 to 1932, was the most famous German athlete plying his trade in America, and was the benign face of Nazi Germany in its quest to host the Summer Olympics that year. In a sense, once Schmeling’s identity as star athlete was coopted by the Nazi state, Schmeling became a complex mixture of being both the insider and the outsider: the Aryan boxer with the Jewish American manager and Jewish friends; the voice guaranteeing the safety of black and Jewish athletes in Berlin before the International Olympic Committee.⁷ He became, however reluctantly, a member of an ideological elite with the Nazis rather than a creative one when he was a hipster among the artists and intellectuals.

It must be remembered that champion boxers are more than survivors; (in the profession, mediocre fighters are called survivors); champions are more than resilient. They are, to borrow Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s term, “antifragile,” something that gains strength and thrives from the adversity and resistance it encounters. Sylvester Stallone’s “Rocky” films are, by and large, mythical examples of this: Rocky grows stronger from the beatings he takes as a challenger and champion. Fight manager Irving Cohen once laughingly put it, “The best tip who to bet on in a movie fight is the guy who loses the first fourteen rounds.”⁸

In his book, *Antifragile*, Taleb lists “street fights” as antifragile.⁹ If I understand his classifications and their justifications correctly, Taleb might list modern boxing merely as “robust” and possible even “fragile” compared with, say, its ancestor, bare-knuckle fighting, or to today’s ultimate fighting or mixed martial arts, because the latter forms are much closer to street

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fighting in the theatricality and intensity of the risks and the range and unpredictability of the variables they offer. All high-performance athletes are asked to withstand and overcome pain and resistance; only a few, like fighters, are expected to show they thrive on the risk of pain, brain damage, and sudden death.

It is this sense of the antifragile that makes the champion boxer a unique brand of hipster particularly, but bestows this aura, for many (especially intellectuals), even on the average boxer. What sort of personality lives so casually on the edge of this strange way of measuring success by taking and giving physical punishment? This might explain why certain ethnic boxers captured the public imagination in ways that made them larger than life, that made their fights national, even international, epics – heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson and his struggle against the racism and imperialism of the early twentieth century; Joe Louis and his rise as an American patriotic hero; Rocky Graziano as an influence for 1950s hipster actors like Marlon Brando, James Dean, Steve McQueen, and Paul Newman;¹⁰ Muhammad Ali and his rise as the American dissident hero; and Robert Duran as the ferocious Central American war machine.

Tales Told at Ringside

Boxing is a sport, but not a game. A physical contest of wills based on the most primitive expression of violence, boxing is mythical and absurd, anarchic and designed, heroic and depraved, uplifting and decadent. The weight of its contradictions – being inhumane yet profoundly human in the various needs it satisfies – is what gives boxing its enduring power, its cultural relevance despite its persistent marginality. And make no mistake, even during its halcyon days when certain championship fights were front-page news, when the glory or despair of a nation seemed to hinge on a fight's outcome, when certain boxers were iconic heroes or villains (or, in the case of Muhammad Ali, both), boxing was always a sport on the margins of respectability, of legitimacy, of authenticity, even of morality. For a good portion of its history it was illegal, and even today there are many who advocate that it be banned.

Boxing was a sport that was invented in eighteenth-century England by the urge to bet, has always had connections to the criminal underworld and what is called “the sporting life,” and has frequently been accused and sometimes guilty of fraud in its performance or in its refereeing and judging. It is the world of boxing that popularized the expression “the set-up.” Boxing has had its moments of intense bourgeois interest, especially amateur boxing, which has had both collegiate and aristocratic connections, and certain

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professional boxing champions who were especially charismatic or larger than life, but it has largely been a sport, especially professional boxing, that has generated mixed feelings at best in the bourgeoisie and high society that have attended big-time championship fights with fascination but also been repulsed by the sport. For the bourgeoisie, boxing was always a form of slumming. (Recently, boxing training methods have become a form of fitness, and suburban gyms have opened for the middle-class hipster; jazz trumpeter Miles Davis is among the most famous devotees of boxing as a regimen of virtue, fitness, and hipness.¹¹) For the slum-dwellers and the working class, boxing was always the alloy of honor and hustling, where the moguls of this “show business with blood” tried to fleece all varieties of suckers, including the boxers themselves, who on more than one occasion have been referred to as little better than “two-dollar whores.”¹²

Boxing has been a sport in constant flux, at times almost resembling disarray. In the eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth century, boxers fought without gloves, wrestling as much as they punched; in many instances, gouging, butting, and biting were permitted, although the London Prize Ring Rules, established in 1838 but based on Jack Broughton’s Rules that were established in 1743, eliminated much of the most gruesome aspects of the sport. Bouts were fought to the finish – that is, until one of the combatants quit or was unable to continue. Rounds were untimed and lasted until one of the opponents went down. A round could be as short as ten seconds or as long as ten minutes. Each man then had thirty seconds to get back to the scratch mark in the middle of the ring to continue the bout. Gloves were introduced in the latter part of the nineteenth century in regular bouts (gloves of a sort had been used in sparring and training during the bare-knuckle era) to protect the hands and enable the combatants to throw more punches. As more fighters wore gloves, and as the gloves began to resemble mittens, reducing one’s ability to use one’s hands for anything but striking, wrestling and holds were eventually banned from the sport. Under the Marquess of Queensberry Rules, published in 1867, rounds were timed, three minutes in duration. Breaks between rounds were expanded to one minute. The length of a fight became fixed, under ten rounds for fighters with less experience, ten rounds for a normal fight, fifteen or twenty rounds for a championship fight. However, at the turn of the twentieth century, fights could last forty or more rounds. (Today, championship fights are twelve rounds. Non-championship fights are ten. Less experienced or novice professional boxers have bouts of four, six, or eight rounds, depending on their experience.) Judges became more important in the gloved era, with a fixed number of rounds, as there was no guarantee that a fighter would be knocked out or would quit before the end of the fight.

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As the epicenter of boxing shifted from England to the United States by the early twentieth century, more states legalized the sport (which had always been condemned by reformers as being brutal and inhumane, utterly shameful); for instance, New York finally legalized boxing in 1920 with the Walker Law, and established a boxing commission to regulate bouts in the state. Boxing is a state-controlled enterprise, which has made it difficult to regulate. Boxers were and still are required to be licensed, in part for their own welfare, although this does not prevent fixed fights or mismatches and the manufacture of dubious credentials on the part of promoters and managers. Nor does the existence of boxing commissions prevent fighters from being cheated by managers or promoters, but the commissions have generally been an aid to the sport. But the wild capitalistic spirit of professional boxing (its heyday in England was the early days of capitalism as a new system of relations between people and markets) is why it emphasizes individualism, is constantly at war with itself over how to regulate itself, constantly seeks new markets and opportunities (despite the rampant and strenuous racism looming large over the considerable period of its development, boxing was always a racially integrated sport – at least in a limited way early on – and also, because of its weight divisions, a sport that did not discriminate on the basis of size. Today, for instance, boxing, professional and amateur, has ceased to discriminate against women, who seriously contest in the sport. On this last head, Cathy van Ingen offers for this book an overview of women in the sport in her essay, “Women’s Boxing: Bout Time.”) Its origins and its tendency to generate competitive governing private regimes like the World Boxing Council, the World Boxing Association, the International Boxing Federation, and the World Boxing Organization, none of which try to regulate anything in boxing but championship fights, in addition to the half-hearted, barely enforced intervention of the federal government, the inability of boxers to form a union as a counterweight to the power of promoters, managers, and boxing commissions, and the abiding interest of organized crime, have made professional boxing nearly impossible to govern rationally. Today, the sport is balkanized not only by too many weight divisions, somewhere between sixteen and eighteen, but also by a number of “sanctioning” bodies, starting with the World Boxing Council and the World Boxing Association, which have their origins in the legalization of boxing in New York, that recognize their own champion and their own ranking of contenders. Any given weight division may have four or five “official” champions, each representing a different sanctioning authority. This proliferation began to mar the sport’s coherence in the 1970s and 1980s but continued to grow steadily worse. Clearly, promoters and television executives may have thought that more champions would mean

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more championship fights and a greater number of viewers and revenue, but boxing has lost the casual sports fan in recent years, has lost its space in many of newspapers' sports sections, in part because the sport seems too confusing and disordered.

Another reason many Americans may have lost interest is that so many competitive boxers fighting in the United States these days are foreigners from Latin America, Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. Professional boxing has always been global, but during its glory days in the United States, it was largely dominated by American boxers. This is no longer the case. If it were not for the large immigrant populations in America, boxing would be an even more marginal sport than it is. Finally, boxing has taken a back seat as a combat sport to mixed martial arts and ultimate fighting where the contestants combine wrestling, boxing, judo, and karate, completely weaponizing the entire body and thus permitting bouts with fewer restrictions about where to strike or how to fight. Professional boxing, to many younger sports fans, may seem almost, for lack of a better term, Victorian.

“Watching a fight on television has always seemed to me a poor substitute for being there,” writes boxing essayist A. J. Liebling.¹³ Nonetheless, television transformed boxing in the 1950s when it was, in the medium's early days, the most popular sports programming by far, reducing the number of local gyms and fight clubs. According to old timers, television developed boxers too quickly, pushing them prematurely up the ladder of competition. As Liebling put it, “The clients of the television companies, by putting on a free boxing show almost every night of the week, have knocked out of business the hundreds of small-city and neighborhood boxing clubs where youngsters had a chance to learn their trade and journeymen to mature their skills ... [N]either advertising agencies nor brewers, and least of all the networks, give a hoot if they push the Sweet Science back into a period of genre painting.” Liebling's *The Sweet Science*, the famous collection of his *New Yorker* essays, is the classic account of boxing during the early television age, 1951–55, “the last heroic cycle” in boxing, before television's dominance completely wrecked the sport.¹⁴ Television certainly radically changed boxing culture and how the public perceived boxing. To be sure, it gave the public more boxing than the public needed or ultimately wanted. Boxers wound up playing for the television cameras in a way that was distinctly different from when fight footage could only be seen in movie theaters. If there was pressure for boxers to slug and knock out opponents before television in order to enhance the entertainment factor of the sport, this pressure increased after television became the main medium through which the public interacted with the sport. Television nearly destroyed boxing in the 1950s by overexposing it because it was so easy and cheap to program,

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airing too many questionable fights, and particularly airing deadly fights such as the 1962 welterweight championship fight between Emile Griffith and Benny “Kid” Paret that resulted in Paret’s death.¹⁵ (In this book, Troy Rondinone’s chapter “Prime (and Crime) Time: Boxing in the 1950s” gives an overview of the era, including an account of the impact of television; Mark Scott has a chapter on welterweight and middleweight fighter Emile Griffith, who has become a subject of interest in recent years because of the controversy surrounding his sexuality and his bout with Paret; and finally Rosalind Early’s chapter on an opera about Griffith shows how much he has become a figure of the moment in our culture.)

But television also revolutionized the sport, especially in presenting new types of black male personalities like heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson, who represented a Medium Cool, television-friendly, black boxer in the early days of integration, a cross-over figure for the age of the Negro as striver and mainstream liberal. Sonny Liston, in image, was almost the polar opposite of Patterson. As African American playwright and poet LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) described him: “Sonny Liston is the big black Negro in every white man’s hallway, waiting to do him in, deal him under for all the hurts white men, through their arbitrary order, have been able to inflict on the world ... Sonny Liston is ‘the huge Negro,’ the ‘bad nigger,’ a heavy-faced replica of every whipped up woogie in the world.” Liston was a convicted felon, a bruiser with mob connections, with poor southern roots, a menacing look and a big punch, who was, more or less, a test for the liberal belief of the day that environment, not genes, made the man in the ongoing discussion about whether he deserved a crack at Patterson’s title. His life was the stuff of sociological theory in a sociological age. He, too, was a product of television and despite Jones’s feverish political interpretation was a man who wound up more sinned against than sinning, used and misused by the whites who controlled him, he hardly was able, as Jones asserts, “to collect his pound of flesh” in retribution.¹⁶ Liston was the fighter extracting his pound of flesh from other black men as a form of employment. In fact, Liston’s testimony during the Senate Antitrust and Monopoly Subcommittee hearings in 1960 revealed an illiterate man who knew no math (he could count) and who knew little about the machinations going on around him as a rising professional fighter except that he knew he was being used. The police leaned on him because he was a black ex-convict who was associated with white gangsters, not necessarily because it was possible that he might commit a crime. By 1960, he was the best heavyweight in the world, even though he did not have the title. His goals were modest: “As long as I’m fighting and making money and driving a good car and eating regular, nothing much is bothering me,” he once said.¹⁷ But Patterson and

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Liston did, in a crude way, represent the good black man and bad black man, the worthy black man and the man of questionable worth. They were the Negro Morality Play of the age of television.

But it was Muhammad Ali who transformed the sport and television in the 1960s with his style as a boxer, his demeanor, his personality, and his political religion that challenged the government:¹⁸ he was a new type to form a sort of racial typological triad with Patterson and Liston: the Negro as dissenting rebel and as the child of the “permissive society.” Ali was a revolution and revelation for television sports, but television also made Ali possible. His combination of humor, exaggeration, political commentary, anger, petulance, and charm was unique for a black public personality and was best suited to television that could exploit his good looks and his gregariousness almost as if he were the lead in a television sitcom. Ali would attract blacks because they so admired him, but he would also attract whites because, whether they liked or despised him, they were fascinated by him. Moreover, Ali had the glories, the energy, the pure charisma of youth in an age that was dedicated to the baby boomers and in a medium that ever increasingly wanted to both serve and reflect that generation.

Congress has investigated boxing for its ties to organized crime.¹⁹ The sport has been called a menace to public health because of the brain trauma, deaths, and mental deterioration that it frequently causes. (Wilfred Benitez, Meldrick Taylor, the late Jerry Quarry, Gerald McClellan, the late Greg Page, the late Matthew Saad Muhammad, the late Floyd Patterson, and Freddie Roach are just a few of the noted brain-damage cases, although the most shocking, distressing, and guilt-inducing for the public was Muhammad Ali, who had been severely impaired by Parkinson’s, which many believed had been caused by boxing.) Boxing stands unique in the sports world as the only sport in which the object is to physically harm your opponent. (Mixed martial arts, ultimate fighting, and other combat sport – also unregulated by the federal government – simply mimic, intensify, and broaden this aspect of boxing.)

Television brought all of this about the sport to the public as well in a startling way. Television, first network then cable, in essence glamorized, romanticized, and mythologized boxing as it also aired its dirty laundry and denigrated its corruption, sleaze, and grotesqueness. Television wound up being boxing’s enabler, even its main financial support, as it also wanted to be some sort of muckraking exhibitor serving the public good. Boxing defined television’s contradictions.

There are two major cultural subtexts to professional boxing: race and individualism. Boxing has always been a story about race, has long been seen as a contest between the races, which race was stronger, more fit to