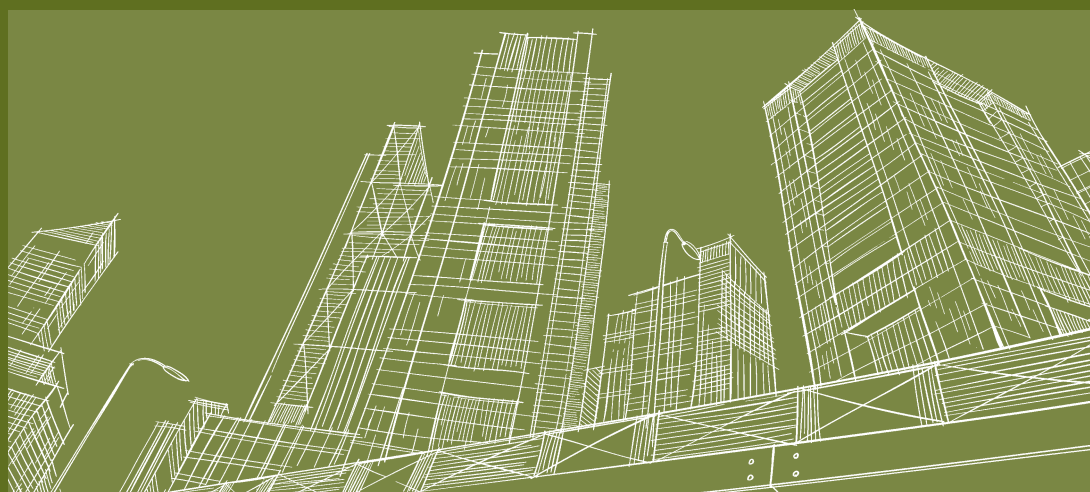




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# A Social History of Sheffield Boxing, Volume I

Rings of Steel, 1720–1970



Matthew Bell · Gary Armstrong

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## Palgrave Studies in Urban Anthropology

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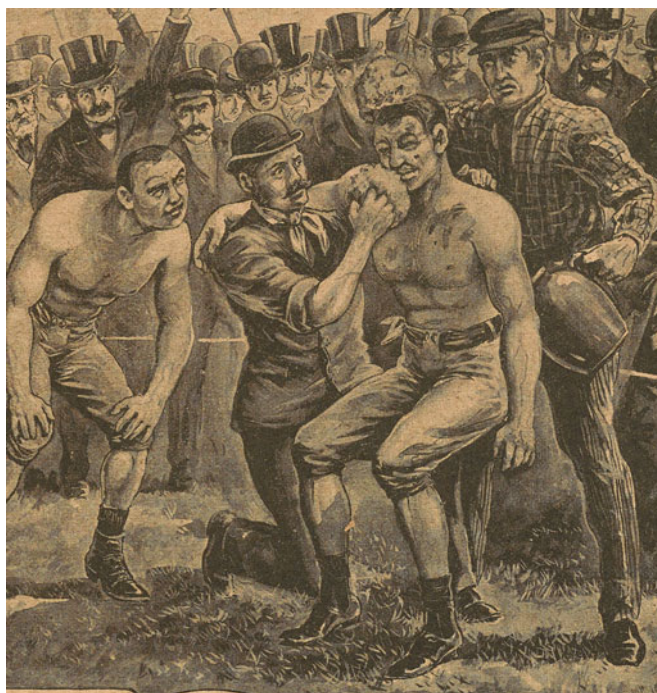
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*Box. n.s. [bock, a cheek, Welch.] A blow on the head given with the hand.*

—Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755

We have many people to thank for the stories that follow. We could give several hundred words by way of appreciation but we sense few readers would care for such detail. We must then—reluctantly—be brief in our appreciation, which we will categorise to the best of our abilities.

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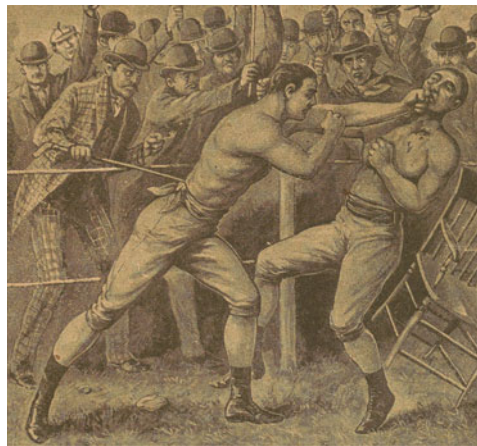
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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction: Rings of Steel



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Sheffield is one of the dirtiest and most smokey towns I ever saw ... one cannot be long in the town without experiencing the necessary inhalation

of soot, which accumulates on the lungs. There are however numbers of persons in Sheffield who think the smoke healthy.—J. C. Symons, 1842

There cannot be greater proof of the depravity of the age than that which the brutal custom of boxing exhibits – and that such a low and barbarous exercise should become fashionable reflects the greatest disgrace on those who encourage it.—*The Times*, 1788

However, we might want to refer to it—‘prize-fighting’, ‘the fight game’, ‘the sweet science’, ‘the cruel profession’, ‘violent ballet’, ‘the noble art of self-defence’, ‘showbusiness with blood’, ‘the poor boys’ game’—the shadow of death or injury ever hangs over boxing. Furthermore, we need to accept that boxing is a strange practice. It is a sporting event of considerable skill and courage that requires two individuals whose encounters have been hitherto cursory to dance around and punch each other in front of a goading and cheering public. It asks them to brutalise (or face being brutalised) for the entertainment of paying onlookers in a contest that—as British sportswriter Kevin Mitchell stated—can come across as ‘once-removed violence’ and ‘comic books come to life’ (Mitchell, 2011, p. 61). It is a celebration of one of humanity’s greatest fears, *i.e.* brutal assault by someone fitter and stronger. This is what makes boxing box office; the event uses the term ‘show’ without embarrassment.

As both a sport and a spectacle boxing fascinates. It carries a costume of danger and virility that appeals to the human psyche. The fight provides morality tales and parables, exemplifying the best and worst in the human race. The common perception of boxers, as sociologist Loïc Wacquant suggests, is of rugged, near-illiterate men from broken backgrounds seeking to elevate themselves from the gutter to fame (Wacquant, 1995b). Boxing does have such people and stories, but there is far more to it than that.

The fight the public seeks is the culmination of a body-obsessed regime requiring constant denial by the two protagonists. In this results-based business, the ultimate vindication of a boxing life well-lived is victory. The other outcome is often worthless; in defeat the boxer loses the future he aspired to and learns the lesson that a fighter is not allowed an off day. The best exponents are elevated amongst the world’s richest sports stars. The loser receives some financial recompense for his bravery, ideally lives to enjoy such income but is not always afforded an appreciation. In creating champions and losers, boxing therefore makes and breaks reputations,

sometimes in seconds. With its promise of riches and admiration, boxing has always attracted dreamers and—inevitably—people ill equipped to live out that dream.

The sufferance all boxers face upon entering a ring is beyond income. The contest permits men who might hitherto have lived as nobodies to become, as the American novelist Irvin S. Cobb so evocatively explained, ‘anonymous youths who in the overtures are achieving a still greater namelessness by being violently put to sleep’ (Cobb, 2011, p. 13). The loser’s efforts too often afford him—in the USA—the dismissive labels of ‘tomato can’ and ‘taxi driver’. The British critic might dismiss the same man with the derisory ‘journeyman’ moniker, *i.e.* someone travelling without ability and destination who is remembered—if at all—as a mere ‘stepping stone’ for the more able-bodied. We might ask: Who has a penchant for featuring in such public suffering in the name of entertainment? We might also question any dismissive attitude towards the gallant loser. Those too frequently derided in the term ‘journeyman’ are in fact essential to the fight game. Their longevity is often testament to their boxing ability.

## THE END OF CONVERSATION

The public face of boxing—the bout—is the culmination of years of private devotion. The elite boxer requires supreme fitness, guile, intelligence, adaptability and the ability to defend as well as attack. Champions also have an abundance of will as much as the obvious requisite physical attributes. Factored into this is the unquantifiable prospect of pain, the extent of which is not written in training manuals nor discussed at length amongst the fighter’s entourage. However, the bell that announces the fight as ‘on’ is the preliminary to possible imminent changes in consciousness and personality, courtesy of the opponent’s punching prowess.

Does this brutal practice deserve to be called ‘sport’? Where else in contemporary non-criminal life can the ability to utilise physical violence be equated with being a success, concomitantly bringing wealth, fame and an assumed sense of personal eminence? The American, British and Australian Medical Associations have long called for boxing to be banned (Australian Medical Association, 2015; British Medical Association, 2007; Forman, 1996). Dr George Lundberg, then editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, called the sport an ‘obscenity’ that ‘should



not be sanctioned in any civilised society' (Lundberg, 1983). Others recognise boxing's absurdity. Former *New York Daily News* sports writer Paul Gallico argued that 'the human head was never intended by nature to be punched' and reasoned that 'from the manner of its construction out of hundreds of tiny, delicately articulated bones, the closed fist was never meant to be one of man's most effective weapons' (Gallico, 2013). When a forceful punch connects with a skull, haemorrhage occurs in the brain. Over time such blows induce what is called 'posterior cortical atrophy'.<sup>1</sup> The slurred speech and stumbling movement of some who fought for too long suggest that the arguments of certain medical experts have resonance.

The correlates and connectivities of the fighter's body and mind are intriguing. Beyond the pursuit of cash, the boxer might state his motivation is to 'prove a point'. Some might wonder who these men are who believe that punching someone repeatedly is the best route for such an ambition. Gallico's explanation was that they are—usually—average men the onlookers would like to be: gentlemanly but potentially terrible. The fighter is too often pathologised and the boxing contest reduced to two troubled individuals acting out some form of public release, a survival strategy in a harsh world where physicality and violence are valid currency. As American boxing writer David Remnick noted, championship contests see the 'hungry classes ... risking their brains for the titillation of the overfed' (Remnick, 1998, p. 264). Former world light-heavyweight champion José Torres<sup>2</sup> argued that the public like their boxers to be regarded as 'rather heroical but silly fellows, or as clowns with a penchant for offbeat or gnomic remarks' because, he reasoned, 'it's bad enough ... that these boxers could take [the observer] out in a street fight, without having to swallow the added gall that the boxer might be smarter as well' (Torres, 1972, p. ix). Boxing provokes searching questions; notably, what might such permissible violence tell us about cultures and peoples?<sup>3</sup>

## THE CODE OF THE WARRIOR

Peoples, tribes and cultures have historically admired and revered individuals who manifest strength, endurance and mental toughness that set them apart from the norm. Such people are often considered 'warriors', and throughout history arenas have been created for them. In

Ancient Greece, the sport of *Pankration* or *Pancratium*<sup>4</sup> was a combination of grappling and striking. Men exchanging punches in a prescribed contest was an Olympic event as far back as 760 BC. One of the earliest named champions was Varasdates, an Armenian who prevailed at the 291st Olympiad in 385 BC. However, Olympic boxing in this epoch bore little resemblance to the modern version.<sup>5</sup> Ancient boxers bound their hands with leather thongs, leaving fingers uncovered. Nails, metal balls and knots of hardened leather contained within the bindings added to the viciousness of the blows. It was a brutal fight to exhaustion—sometimes death—in which admission of weakness was anathema; Eurydamas of Cyrene swallowed his broken teeth so as to not encourage his rival by spitting them out. Another story tells of Stratophon, who after four hours of boxing was so disfigured that he was informed ‘neither dogs, nor any person in the town could possibly recognise thee’. According to a contemporary poem, a boxer named Olympicos ‘once had a nose, a beard, eyebrows, ears and eyelids’ but ‘he had lost them all’ because of boxing (Lambros *et al.*, 1896).

Reliefs, depictions and figurines from ancient Mediterranean and Levantine cultures representing men in boxing pose proliferate in modern museums. Temple images drawn some 5,000 years ago illustrate Sumerians fighting with leather-strapped hands. Fourth-millennium BC Mesopotamian stone reliefs depicting men with fists raised suggest that such contests had procedures and protocols. Similar representations have been found from third-millennium BC Egypt and across much of the Mediterranean region from the late Bronze Age.<sup>6</sup> Homer’s *Iliad*, written around 750 BC, includes one of the first literary references to men (Epeius and Euryalus) fighting for prizes. A famous fourth-century BC bronze statue is known as *The Pugilist at Rest*.<sup>7,8</sup> Boxing was practised in Ancient Roman amphitheatres. The first Roman Emperor Augustus, who ruled from 27 BC to 14 AD, was a fight fan, as explained by Roman historian Suetonius: ‘He took particular pleasure in witnessing pugilistic contests, those of the Latins, not only between combatants who had been trained scientifically, whom he used often to match with the Greek champions; but even between mobs of the lower classes fighting in the streets, and tilting at random, without any knowledge of the art’ (Suetonius Tranquillus, 1855, p. 108). The West African martial art *Dambe*, still practised today by the Hausa people of northern Nigeria, resembles illustrations of Ancient Greek and Egyptian combatants, some of which depict a fighter

with one hand wrapped and the other bare, which is a characteristic of *Dambe*.

The celebration of the warrior encompasses Babylon and Sumer, African peoples, the nomads of the Eurasian steppes, Celtic tribes and indigenous Americans. The warrior can also be Biblical; heroic narratives are evident in the ‘David and Goliath’ story. Judeo-Christian accounts celebrated how the former displayed courage, manhood and wit to defeat the giant Philistine and thus revealed his suitability to become King of Israel.<sup>9</sup> Skilled fighters were revered, but they also had value; slaves in Roman times—and in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century USA—were pitched against each other to fight for the honour and monetary gain of their owners, and sometimes for the attainment of their own freedom.

### ACTIONS AND WORDS

So what actions define a warrior? We can consider what Greek philosopher Heraclitus stated in around 500 BC:

Out of every one hundred men, ten shouldn’t even be there, eighty are just targets, nine are the real fighters, and we are lucky to have them, for they make the battle. Ah, but the one, one is a warrior, and he will bring the others back.

The warrior is thus few in number and different from mere mortals. Classical Athenian philosopher Plato suggested that the ideal society would be formed of a guardian class and craftsmen (*i.e.* labourers). The former would be sub-categorised into rulers (*i.e.* policymakers) and the auxiliary (*i.e.* the military), which was in essence a distinct warrior class that would enforce the will and decisions of the rulers and defend their society with force (Plato, 2008). This calls to mind the Ancient Greeks’ fabled Hoplite and Spartan fighting corps. These warrior classes were assumed to produce ‘leaders’ and were summed up by the Greek word *arete* (ἀρετή), meaning ‘excellence’ or ‘moral virtue’ (Jaeger, 1939; Poliakoff, 1987).

The idea of *arete* also included excellence in mind and speech. This explains how intellectuals might simultaneously be warriors: Gabriele D’Annunzio (1863–1938) was a poet, artist and musician in *fin de siècle* Italy who earned himself the sobriquet ‘The Warrior Poet’ for his heroic exploits during the First World War with the elite *Arditi* troops.<sup>10</sup> The term ‘spiritual warrior’ in Buddhism denotes one who combats the

universal enemy of ignorance. Intellectualism as part of the warrior's complexity pervades the work of Renaissance authors such as Castiglione and Machiavelli. In Castiglione's *The Courtier*, the 'Renaissance Man' has a cool mind, is capable of articulating elegant and brave words and possesses a bearing that marks him out<sup>11</sup> (Castiglione, 1901). In Britain fighters—let us assume they are warriors—were historically 'sponsored' by the highest figures in the land, sometimes surreptitiously, sometimes openly. British Kings have enjoyed the company of such fighters. The 1821 Coronation of George IV at Westminster Abbey saw pugilists James Belcher and 'Gentleman' John Jackson (and 16 other well-known fighting men) acting as ushers in what was a subtle—but Regal—legitimation of their practice. Fighting men also stimulated leaders of another kind. Adolf Hitler recognised the benefits of martial sports, writing in *Mein Kampf*: 'Boxing and jiu-jitsu have always seemed to me more important than any inferior ... training in marksmanship' (Hitler, 1925, Ch. 9).

In being physically and mentally superior to others in the society they serve, warriors are often assumed to carry a higher moral purpose, which explains their abiding appeal. American boxing writer Thomas Hauser offered some perspective, reasoning: 'Man's first weapons were his fists. Self-preservation is nature's first law. From these axioms boxing has evolved' (Hauser, 1987, p. 4). As Hauser argued, boxing is the most violent activity condoned by modern society outside of the contexts of war and law enforcement. The belief that in the warrior's code there is no room for surrender encapsulates the ethos of many combat-related sporting activities. Thus, a boxer's body ideally conveys invincibility and does not reveal his fears. In the modern world, the 'warrior' boxing hero might be preserved for life in bronze or stone, especially if he is dead. Such effigies often betray vulnerability but always hide any sense of fear.

## STATUESQUE

The website [http://www.offbeat.group.shef.ac.uk/statues/database\\_uk.htm](http://www.offbeat.group.shef.ac.uk/statues/database_uk.htm) lists 15 statues of boxers located in public places throughout the UK. Three of these are memorials to fighters who died from injuries sustained in the ring (Bradley Stone, James Murray, Johnny Owen), whilst 11 of the 15 are in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. These metrics suggest a number of things. One is that they are remarkably few in number when we consider that there are over 100 statues related to football and around 25 to cricket; perhaps the paucity is explained by the ambiguous

perception of those who fight for a living. The second is that the Celtic regions appear to revere their fighting men more than do the English—the Northern Irish city of Belfast and the Welsh valleys town of Merthyr Tydfil each host three of the 15. Equally, there may be in this an element of a parochial willingness to raise funds to commemorate a local hero that is for some reason stronger where there is a greater sense of both neighbourhood pride and national identity.<sup>12</sup>

In Sheffield public memorials to its sporting sons and daughters are scarce. Of the 300 or so pieces of public art listed on the website <https://public-art.shu.ac.uk/sheffield/index.html>, few are ‘traditional’ statues and just two—both at the Attercliffe sports venue *iceSheffield*—are sport related.<sup>13</sup> One is a likeness of 1976 Olympic figure skating champion John Curry (born in Birmingham), the second a stylised ‘Blade’ sculpture, which, according to its creator Mike Johnson, represents both ice skating and Sheffield-manufactured knives. In the city centre there exists the *Sheffield Legends* ‘Walk of Fame’ outside the Town Hall, in which several sportspeople are honoured by plaques inlaid in the pavement (including boxing’s Brendan Ingle and Clinton Woods)<sup>14</sup> and the gold-painted post box on the corner of Barker’s Pool and Holly Street, which commemorates Jessica Ennis-Hill’s heptathlon gold medal at the 2012 London Olympic Games. Those who determine such things prefer Sheffield’s stone or bronze honourees to depict war heroes, Royalty or social reformers; exceptional people no doubt.

## THE POWER AND THE GLORY

Elite level boxers are exceptional; they earn a living by avoiding punches thrown at them and landing punches in return, and are therefore not normal. They go public with such an ability to make big money from the audiences that pay to watch this spectacle. The boxers endlessly seek the best way to deliver the blow that—ideally temporarily—disables an opponent. Other sports are played; boxing is not. It is a real fight that carries potentially serious consequences. Hand wraps and padded gloves do not really protect; in offering a respite from the pain that would occur if fists were not covered, padded gloves allow for more punching and implicitly more pain to be inflicted on the opponent.

Malevolent accuracy defines the training regime. The favoured impact point of a punch is the opponent’s jaw. A blow that lands here impacts on brain capacity because it imparts the greatest torque<sup>15</sup> of any head

punch. The sight of an opponent's blood is welcomed by his adversary. Occasionally metrics go awry; a boxer dies in the ring or soon afterwards. Death effects the reputation of both the spectacle and the sport. For some boxing is an art, for others it is an exhibition of malignant aggression. Possibly it is both. Simultaneously a weapon and a target, the fighter requires vast amounts of self-discipline. Training demands an immersion in a world few can enter. The routine that elite level boxing asks for is a daily tolerance of pain and an hourly rejection of exhaustion. Submission to such physical demands becomes a labour of love. The internal issues the protagonists have to deal with are encompassed within the somewhat ephemeral notions of 'Character' and 'Will'.

Training hones subconscious movements and anticipation—how otherwise could a man avoid a punch given a millisecond of warning? The body that develops as a consequence becomes not only a source of self-appreciation but also an aesthetic admired by onlookers. The boxer lives for the cheers of an appreciative audience. For many, such a world is the ultimate manifestation of sporting endeavour, hence the fascination with the figure of the boxer. But as sports journalist Kevin Mitchell observed, some of the most fearsome and athletic of human beings are also contrarily some of the most mentally fragile (Mitchell, 2011, p. 110). In this fiercely individualistic pursuit, the fighter's ultimate opponent is often himself. The list of boxers who have suffered depression or other mental illness during or after their careers is extensive. Many disguise such frailties from the gaze of family and colleagues, often to the extent that world titles can be won at the same time that feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt pervade the mind.<sup>16</sup>

The danger and brutality inherent in boxing attract both *aficionados* and the curious. Why this is so intrigued American writer Joyce Carol Oates, who considered boxing an art form with no natural analogue in the arts. She was also to recognise how the audience affiliated to the figure of the boxer, whom she considered as 'a conduit through which the inchoate aggressions of the crowd are consummated' (Oates, 1997, p. 82). Overloaded with masculinity, boxing might best be considered as a microcosm of the soul of war. Oates saw in pugilism issues of unreconstructed gender, reasoning: 'Boxing is for men and is about men, and *is* men. A celebration of the lost religion of masculinity all the more trenchant for its being lost' (Oates, 1997, p. 72). Some readers will challenge the gender bias, but the fascination in the boxer for Oates lies in part in the inner turmoil the boxer must carry: 'He must learn to exert his

“will” over his merely human and animal impulses, not only to flee pain but to flee the unknown’ (Oates, 1997, p. 15). He must also flee—or accommodate—the sharks and vultures outside the ring.

### THE SPECTACLE OF THE PLAY-FIGHT

Championship boxing contests today are highly organised sporting rituals that can claim centuries of tradition and patronage. Epochs of nefarious bouts and decisions have attracted endlessly curious narratives about where the fight game’s monies come from. The boxing world has ever been associated with the underworld and questionable people and practices. As US writer Joe Flaherty brutally stated in his obituary of former world heavyweight champion Sonny Liston, ‘Transgressions are always forgiven in boxing if the sinner prostrates himself in front of his better sinners – namely promoters, managers and boxing commissioners’<sup>17</sup> (Flaherty, 1971). Boxing has historically contributed to various economies that bring the sport an image problem. It is a game open to manipulation by people who take advantage of the fact that many boxers do not prepare for a life after boxing. However, this might be less true today than in past decades: many modern boxers employ agents, lawyers and accountants to look after their finances and futures, and can change promoter or manager at the expiry of a contract. The more enterprising and intelligent manage themselves, enabling them to negotiate the best possible deal whilst cutting out the middlemen.

One reason for this development is that the morals of the men in the ring are often significantly higher than those who manage and promote them. Legion are the stories of boxers who earned fortunes but retired penniless, whilst tales of lives tainted by post-boxing crime, alcohol or drugs are also common. Former world middleweight champion Randolph Turpin worked in a scrapyard, a café and fairground boxing booths after he left regulated boxing, later turning to wrestling to supplement his income. With a large unpaid tax bill, he committed suicide in 1966, aged 37. Another example is former world heavyweight champion Riddick Bowe, who filed for bankruptcy in 2005 despite earning some \$15 million from boxing. Former world featherweight champion Howard Winstone worked as a hospital porter and watchman to make ends meet. Jem Mace, one of the pioneers of glove boxing in the nineteenth century, became a street busker and died in poverty. The catalogue of similar life-stories is

deep. According to author Nick Parkinson in his 2016 book *A Champion's Last Fight*, 25 of 53 British world champion boxers between 1945 and 2012 'are known to have experienced problems with money, drink, drugs, depression or crime after their boxing careers'.

It could be argued that amateur boxing has a completely different set of ethics, wherein the triumph lies more in the contest than the victory. This certainly applied to public school, university and armed forces boxing established over a century ago. Winning an Olympic or ABA title is the goal of such amateurs, both then and now; the methods employed to do so even today carry the amateur 'ethos'. And herein lies the popularity of the fight game, practised as it is in both post-industrial wastelands and the gymnasiums and cloisters of Oxbridge. Boxing is a 'cross-class' sport like no other, a realisation perhaps best summed up by the inscription on the plaque below the statue in Warwick of Randolph Turpin. Referring to his 1951 world title victory over the great Sugar Ray Robinson, the inscription reads: 'In palace, pub and parlour, the whole of Britain held its breath'.

## FAIR MEANS OR FOUL

Boxing's credibility is on the line in every fight. Modern professional boxing's origins lie in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prize-fights and the attendant unlawful wagers. Brokers of varying moralities were always around and remain integral to boxing. Its modern history in the USA is synonymous with gambling centres such as Las Vegas and Atlantic City, where huge monies are expended by audiences on its outcomes. As Kevin Mitchell stated, the best business is often done at the scenes of the worst damage (Mitchell, 2011, p. XVI). From the 1940s to the 1960s, the fight game was subject to the whims of the 'Mob', *i.e.* the gambling incomes of American crime syndicates. The criminal mystique only added to the sport's glamour; fixers were as much spoken of as fighters. The hurting business has ways of doing things, not always apparent to the casual observer.

To aid its objective of trustworthiness, boxing has long sought internal regulation. The pursuit of a 'fair fight' informs all boxing bouts; people want to believe both fighters have a chance of winning. To this end, boxing has for over 150 years sought to moderate itself via rules of engagement, with specificities around duration and weight. Today the



duration is measured at title level in 12 three-minute rounds. Weight categories are necessary to—ideally—prevent mis-matches of body size. In the early 1900s, there were eight weight divisions, which over the following decades expanded to 17. The oft-quoted reason for this is boxer safety, but some might argue that commercial concerns were the prime motive. The outcome of the contest is decided in part by three judges sitting ring-side who note every punch, hopefully impartially. The one man in the ring without weight issues is the referee, who is the sole adjudicator in some contests but in championship fights merely ensures there is no foul play.

Boxing careers begin for most fighters with four-round contests, then progress to six and eight rounds. For some 50 years, world championship contests were held over 15 rounds but many were reduced to 12 in 1982 after the death of a South Korean boxer.<sup>18</sup> In most professional bouts, the winner of a round receives a score of ten, based on the criteria reduced to blows, control, defence, damage inflicted and the concept of ‘ring management’. The loser of a round gets nine points, decreased by one point for a knock-down. If a judge regards a round as evenly contested, both boxers score ten. The referee can instruct the judges to deduct a point for various underhand practices such as hitting below the belt, hitting a man when down, butting, use of an elbow or throwing or holding an opponent. Following serious incidents in the early 1990s (for instance, the serious brain injury suffered by Michael Watson and the death of Bradley Stone),<sup>19</sup> a physician is required by law to be ring-side. At top-level events, an anaesthetist is present and two ambulances are stationed by emergency exits. Nevertheless, casualties still occur, thankfully very rarely.

The indefensible thus has both protocols and defenders. The latter argue it pays well and makes millionaires out of poor boys. It is also an equal opportunities employer, one of the best in sport, but those fighting for no money still get caught up in controversies. Even when cameras cover every punch and the world is watching, arguments occur. The 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games saw several boxing judges and referees sent home by the *Association Internationale de Boxe Amateur* (AIBA)<sup>20</sup> governing body because, according to that organisation, ‘decisions were not at the level expected’. To be fair to all involved, scoring a three-round fight is not always easy when there is no knock-out, and indeed in the same contexts the scoring criteria can change. The 2012 London Olympics scored the boxing contests on punches landed. This

proved controversial; did the system give primacy to the jab over the power punch? Later the scoring system was changed to that used in the professional game, giving priority to the ‘quality’ of punches rather than their number. Whilst scorecards are made public and inquiries sometimes held following an appeal by the loser, the judges’ decision is nearly always final. Controversies are thus integral to boxing. This might make us ask about the disposition of society to make space for such practices.

## WIDER CONTESTS AND MARGINALISED BODIES

The logic of sport is connected to the social contexts in which it is played out. In boxing, the female body and the black male body have historically not always been part of the same inquiry afforded to the white male body. The former in the eyes of many did not fit the image of the protagonist; many assumed women did not possess the physicality to box. Some still argue this. The female form around boxing contests has traditionally been the *accoutrement* to male participation, seen most obviously in the figure of the ‘ring girls’ who appear between rounds informing the audience of the number of the next round. Invariably young, lithe and scantily dressed they offer themselves as the antidote to the muscular and brutalised men with whom they compete for the crowd’s attention.<sup>21</sup>

Sociological research offers a different perspective on female pugilists. The works of sports sociologist Jennifer Hargreaves inform us that women have boxed in Britain since the eighteenth century. Indeed, London witnessed female bare-knuckle contests reported as ‘vicious’ and ‘prolonged’. In 1722, one woman used a printed advertisement to challenge another. It read:

CHALLENGE. – I, ELIZABETH WILKINSON, of Clerkenwell, having had some words with HANNAH HYFIELD, and requiring satisfaction, do invite her to meet me on the stage, and box me for three guineas,<sup>22</sup> each woman holding half-a-crown<sup>23</sup> in each hand, and the first woman that drops the money to lose the battle.

A reply duly came:

ANSWER. – I, HANNAH HYFIELD, of Newgate-market, hearing of the resoluteness of Elizabeth Wilkinson, will not fail, God willing, to give her

more blows than words – desiring home blows, and from her no favour;  
she may expect a good thumping.

Elizabeth Wilkinson married James Stokes, who owned an ‘amphitheatre’ in which fights with fists and weapons took place. She became known as the ‘championess’ of England, unbeaten in at least 45 fights in the 1720s and took part in both individual and mixed pairs contests, the latter with her husband. Part of the attraction for male spectators was the female form. In an age when women’s legs were rarely seen in public, the advertisements stated: ‘NB They Fight in close Jackets, short Petticoats, coming just below the knee, Holland Drawers, white Stockings, and Pumps’.

Female fighting abilities were marketable; bouts featuring women—in later years those held in the boxing booths of travelling fairs—were available for paying customers. In these same places, women even fought men for the entertainment of those who placed wagers on the outcome. An emerging form of championship fighting for women appeared in the late nineteenth century; in 1888, Hattie Leslie was declared the unofficial female world boxing champion but in general women’s bodies were not considered the appropriate place for punches to land. However, descriptions in the mid-1940s of fights involving teenage girls were reported in the *Sunday Dispatch*.<sup>24</sup> The genre produced a champion a decade later when Yorkshire-born Barbara Buttrick was in the 1950s declared the flyweight and bantamweight world champion, having previously fought over 1,000 fairground boxing booth bouts.

## FEMININE FIGHTERS

Elsewhere the women’s game was trivialised. In the 1970s and 1980s, women boxed in unregulated nightclub shows. Such events were often voyeuristic and sexualised by male onlookers encouraging the removal of upper-body clothing. Bikini-clad and sporting oversized foam-filled gloves, the protagonists of what was called ‘Foxy Boxing’ were playing out their bouts for leering men rather than boxing purists. This version of the sport was popular in the 1980s and 1990s amongst American military personnel and European holidaymakers in South-East Asia. Things began to change with the rise of ‘third-wave’ feminism. The visibility of serious women boxers from the mid-1970s was part of a wider socio-political movement. As Hargreaves’ research explains, women boxers of

this era were educated and self-sufficient. Inspired by the feminist movement, they proved willing to enter and appropriate the traditional male arenas of physical capital (Hargreaves, 1994).

In October 1993, USA Boxing (the governing body of amateur boxing in the USA) introduced regulations that allowed for women's amateur boxing, a change adopted only after a legal challenge by a 16-year-old girl from Washington State named Dallas Malloy. Soon after the court ruling Malloy out-pointed Heather Poyner in Lynnwood, Washington. A year later women's boxing was recognised by the AIBA. Some respectability was added to the rise of women in the ring when notorious promoter Don King signed his first female professional in Christy Martin (see below) in 1994. The first fully sanctioned women's world championship was staged the following year. In 1996, the Amateur Boxing Association of England (ABA) lifted a century-old ban on women's participation. The first US boxing championship for women began in 1997. Then, following an International Olympic Committee decision in 2009, women's boxing made its Olympic debut in 2012, with three weight divisions contested. Today women box under the aegis of various governing bodies, including the Women's International Boxing Federation (WIBF), the Women's International Boxing Association (WIBA) and the International Women's Boxing Federation (IWBF).

Women's boxing has taken off since the 1990s, but female boxing administrators and officials remain rare. The first recognised female referee was Belle Martell, who in 1940 obtained a licence to officiate in California. There were other positions to which women sought entry. For some 40 years from the 1940s, the Canadian-born Aileen Eaton (nicknamed 'The Dragon Lady') and her husband Cal jointly promoted some of the USA's biggest fights. In Britain in the 1970s, the glamorous Beryl Cameron-Gibbons, proprietor of London's famous Thomas A Beckett gym (above the eponymous pub), became Britain's first female boxing promoter. Cameron-Gibbons was followed soon afterwards by the more reserved Alma Ingle, more of whom in Volume Two. In the 2010s, Olivia Goodwin, daughter of promoter Steve Goodwin, began staging her own shows at the York Hall, Bethnal Green, but she is a member of a very small group. In 2018, the website [www.boxrec.com](http://www.boxrec.com) listed 335 UK-based active boxing promoters; just two were women.

Those whose skill and judgement can affect the outcome of a bout are similarly scarce. There are few qualified female boxing referees in Britain;

one is Anne Elliott, a lecturer in sports science at Middlesex University. Fitness instructor Hilary Lissenden from south London took up boxing training to lose weight before qualifying as a referee for amateur contests. In 2016, she was appointed to the board of England Boxing,<sup>25</sup> the first woman to hold such a role. The seats reserved for ring-side judges are seldom occupied by women. One of their number, Nevada-based Adalaide Byrd, caused global consternation in September 2017 with her scoring of the world middleweight title unification bout between Gennady Golovkin and Saúl ‘Canelo’ Álvarez. One judge scored it a draw, one gave it narrowly to Golovkin, whereas Byrd awarded it by a wide margin to Álvarez. A draw was thus the unsatisfactory outcome. Byrd temporarily stood down from officiating but returned to ring-side a month later. In December 2017, she was a judge for two world title fights in Japan and in total has judged some 500 career contests. In her defence, countless male judges over the decades have come up with equally mystifying scores. Another role in the staging of a boxing event that adds to the spectacle is that of the Master of Ceremonies, or MC. The most famous of this genre is Michael Buffer, who made the introductory phrase ‘Let’s get ready to rumble!’ familiar to all in the fight game. In Britain at least he has just one female counterpart; in 2018, Verity Painter, from north London, became the UK’s first licensed female MC, regularly warming up the boxing audiences at the York Hall.

## OUT AND KNOCK-OUTS

That the fight game was not the sole preserve of heterosexual males was challenged as early as the 1960s. Former three-weight world champion Emile Griffith was openly bisexual, which was a brave thing to be in early-1960s America, especially for a black man in this most macho of sports. At the weigh-in for a 1962 title fight his opponent, the US-based Cuban Benny Paret, touched Griffith’s buttocks and made homophobic remarks. Griffith won the contest by a brutal knock-out; Paret never regained consciousness and died ten days later. This outcome provoked Griffith into saying: ‘I kill a man and most forgive me. I love a man and many say this makes me an evil person’ (McRae, 2015). After a 100-plus fight career, Griffith trained several world champions, including Wilfred Benítez and Juan Laporte. Griffith’s final fight—his 111th—was a points defeat to British future middleweight world champion Alan Minter.

Whilst Griffith remains the best-known boxer to publicly declare his gay status, the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* in 2018 listed in the category ‘Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay and Transgender Sports-people’ seven male and female boxers—professional and amateur—who declared they were gay or bisexual, plus one transgender boxer. As well as Griffith, they included: Christy Martin, who in 2009 won the world light-middleweight championship; the Puerto Rican world featherweight championship contender Orlando Cruz; the Leeds-born double Olympic champion Nicola Adams; and Canada’s 1992 Olympic silver medallist Mark Leduc. Their presence in the ring questions in some ways historical perceptions around both boxing and sexuality.

Boxing could also challenge belief systems. In both the USA and Britain from the late nineteenth century men born into the Jewish faith played a huge role in boxing, be it as champions, promoters or managers; such influence continues to this day. The International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame<sup>26</sup> celebrates 46 people with boxing connections, either as fighters or as managers/promoters. Some, such as Max Baer, Jack ‘Kid’ Berg, Joe Choynski, Benny Leonard, Ted ‘Kid’ Lewis and Daniel Mendoza, are giants of world boxing history. There were in fact no fewer than 26 Jewish world champions between 1910 and 1940. The Jewish brothers Abe and Monte Montell were the first siblings to simultaneously hold world titles, whilst Mendoza is believed to be the first person of the Jewish faith in history invited to meet British Royalty. Meanwhile, the Jewish promoters Jack Solomons, Mickey Duff, Bob Arum and Mike Jacobs are or were amongst the best known in the business (Bodner, 1997).

## RACE RELATIONS

Boxing also offers narratives and morality tales around ethnicity. A racial undertone has been evident in many fights in history; to a critic the fight game has often been one wherein blacks fight and whites collect. The first black world heavyweight champion was Jack Johnson, the son of Texan slaves, who took the title by defeating Tommy Burns in Sydney in 1908. The enduring need in some to find a white challenger and indeed victor was often undignified. The search for the ‘Great White Hope’<sup>27</sup> was in part promoted by writer Jack London,<sup>28</sup> who when reporting on the Johnson/Burns fight for the *New York Herald* wrote: