Ringside

A Treasury of Boxing Reportage

Budd Schulberg

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About the Author

Budd Schulberg was born in New York City, the son of Hollywood film pioneer B.P. Schulberg, and was educated at Los Angeles High School, Deerfield Academy and Dartmouth College. After a brief stint as a screenwriter in Hollywood, he served in the United States Navy during the Second World War and was in charge of photographic evidence for the Nuremberg Trial. Mr Schulberg was *Sports Illustrated*'s first boxing editor; he has also covered title fights for *Playboy*, *Esquire*, *Newsday*, the *New York Post*, and currently the Glasgow *Sunday Herald*. He is the only nonfighter to receive the Living Legend of Boxing Award from the World Boxing Association. His writings on the fight game have also won him the Notre Dame Bengal Bouts Award and the A.J. Liebling Award from the Boxing Writers Association as well as induction into the Boxing Hall of Fame. He died in August 2009.

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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

Contents

Acknowledgements
Introduction by Hugh McIlvanney

1. Tom Cribb v. Tom Molineaux: The First International Championship Fight

2. Charles Freeman: The Primo Carnera of the Nineteenth Century v. The Tipton Slasher

3. When Boxing Was a Jewish Sport

4. Good Night, Sweet Princes

5. Confessions of an Ex-Fight Manager

6. Joe Louis and Social History

7. Archie Moore: All-Time Senior Citizen Champ

I. PAYNIGHT FOR OLD ARCHIE
II. THE CHAMPION OF COMMUNICATIONS

8. Muhammad Ali

I. KING OF THE WORLD
II. MY VERY OWN ALI MOVIE

9. Arturo Gatti: The Manly Art of No Defence

10. Oscar De La Hoya: The Two-Hundred-Million-Dollar Man

I. RETURN TO THE MECCA
II. THE GUESSING GAME: DE LA HOYA–WHITAKER
III. THE OSCAR EXPRESS ROLLS ON
IV. THE WELTERS ARE COMING! THE WELTERS ARE COMING!
V. DE LA HOYA–TRINIDAD: A TALE OF TWO CHAMPIONS
VI. MOSLEY–DE LA HOYA: MY HOME TOWN
VII. MOSLEY–DE LA HOYA, ACT II
VIII. THE REAL MAIN EVENT: ARUM V. KING

11. Lennox Lewis: The Reluctant Dragon

I. LEWIS–GOLOTA: THE BIGGER THEY ARE . . .
II. THE EMPEROR HAS NO CLOTHES
III. LENNOX LEWIS: A WANT OF PASSION

12. Roy Jones, Jr: The Pensacola Pinwheel

I. GENIUS AT WORK
II. JONES V. GRIFFIN: PRETTY BOY LOSES UGLY
III. THE MOUTHPIECE HAMLET
IV. A FOR ABILITY, B FOR BORED

V. MOVE OVER, RUBY BOB – HERE COMES ROY JONES!

13. Evander Holyfield: From the Real Deal to the Sad Deal

I. HOLYFIELD–BOWE: ACT III (THE RUBBER MATCH)
II. RE-ENTER EVANDER: A BIG NIGHT FOR HIM AND *him*
III. EVANDER THE HOLY: THE ONCE AND FUTURE UNDISPUTED KING
IV. EVANDER'S HOMECOMING AND GOING

14. Mike Tyson: From Wonderboy to Has-Been

I. THE SOFTER THEY FALL
II. TYSON REDUX: ACT I
III. REQUIEM FOR A HEAVYWEIGHT
IV. LEWIS TAKES TYSON TO FINISHING SCHOOL

15. The Little Prince: Good Hit, No Field

16. The Night of the Undisputed

17. The 'Heavyweight Championship of the World' – or, Four for the Price of One

18. Ricky Hatton and Kostya Tszyu: The British Are Coming!

19. Requiem for a Middleweight

20. Felix Trinidad

I. TRINIDAD V. MAYORGA: BRAIN V. BRAWN
II. WINKY WRIGHT V. FELIX TRINIDAD: THE KING IS DEAD! LONG LIVE THE KING!

21. No. 1 Pound-for-Pound: Pretty Boy Floyd Mayweather, Jr

22. Weightgate, and on to World War III: Diego Corrales v. Jose Luis Castillo II

23. Boxing Movies 101

24. Fighters and Writers: At the Boxing Hall of Fame

25. Machiavelli on Eighth Avenue

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Introduction

by Hugh McIlvanney

Boxing has a long tradition of attracting the attention of serious writers but, once in the vicinity of the ring, not all of them have deserved to be taken seriously. At that early stage of the Rumble in the Jungle, when Muhammad Ali had decided to adopt the perilous strategy of planting himself against the ropes in the hope of letting George Foreman 'blast his ass off', a figure prominent in the literary world turned to the famous novelist beside him in the press seats and shouted: 'The fix is in'.

To some of us for whom the tension of those minutes is an imperishable memory – who can recall as if it happened an hour ago how the raw immensity of the risk Ali was embracing put a knot in our stomachs and nearly made us want to shield our eyes from the drama – the thought that somebody could have associated the violence taking place two or three yards in front of us with a fix has a hilarious, almost a sweet absurdity. Where had that man of letters acquired his outlandish perspective on events inside the ropes? If, as must be suspected, he absorbed it from movies, they certainly weren't the kind of films identified with Budd Schulberg, who was another of the writers on hand in Kinshasa when the hours before an African dawn

were filled with perhaps the most extraordinary experience sport has produced in the past 50 years.

Schulberg's lifelong love affair with boxing has never been tainted with the romantic naivety rampant in the mind of that conspiracy theorist in Zaire. Budd's has always been a clear-eyed passion. Thanks to a father who took an admirably broad view of what constituted the essentials of a boy's education, he was around fights and fighters from an early age. Both his knowledge (historical and technical) of sport's roughest trade and his warm regard for the men who ply it are deeply rooted. Being in his company anywhere is a rich pleasure, but having him as a companion at ringside is a privilege to be cherished.

Obviously, his longevity alone makes him a living archive of the fight business, and the recollections he can summon up from as far back as the 1920s are informed by such perceptive observation that distant decades come alive as he evokes them. The same is true, naturally enough, when he talks of writers with whom he had close encounters long ago, of Ernest Hemingway or Scott Fitzgerald, William Saroyan or Nathanael West. Of course, Hemingway has always been linked with boxing, unimpressively as a participant ('not particularly evasive' was A.J. Liebling's assessment of the Nobel Prize–winner's technique) but brilliantly in print (his short story 'Fifty Grand' is as good as fiction about the ring can be). He once rashly sought to engage Budd in a rapid-fire interrogation about fighters and their deeds that was meant to be a crushing humiliation for the younger man. But it was Papa who retired on his stool after being pummelled by more vivid specifics than he could handle.

But it is not Schulberg on the past but Schulberg on the present that I appreciate most when we are together at the fights. I have come across few men with as profound an understanding of the imperatives that govern the quality of a performance in the ring. I confess to a lack of enthusiasm

for sporting chroniclers who are fine with description but feeble in judgement, who give us plenty of colour but don't know a hawk from a handsaw. It is a species exemplified by some horse-racing correspondents of my acquaintance, fellows whose words can present a picture of a thoroughbred that Stubbs might envy but whose tips would put you on welfare.

Plainly, that last point is not meant to be anything more than the facetious complaint of a frequently impoverished bettor. Anybody who claimed to be consistently accurate in forecasting the outcome of races or fights would be a bigger fraud than Nostradamus. But I do think we can ask of reporters of both kinds of contest that they should be able to comprehend and interpret the action as it is unfolding and that, once it is over, they should have a clear idea of what they have seen.

At ringside, Budd Schulberg invariably does all of that, and more. The voice that will come through the ensuing pages is not just engaging and eloquent. It is wise.

1

Tom Cribb v. Tom Molineaux: The First International Championship Fight

Prizefighting in the old bare-knuckle days was a basic, brutal business, highly unlike the stuff you see being dispensed on your television sets today. Fighters then didn't rely on the critical judgement of boxing 'experts' with intricate scorecards. They fought round after round, sometimes hour after hour, until one or the other was unable to come off his second's knee and stagger back to the line of scratch. It was not twelve three-minute rounds to a decision but as many rounds and as much time as it required for one man to knock another man completely senseless.

And yet even rules as decisive as these could lead to controversy when the stakes were high and feelings even higher. There have been disputed title fights in the US – was the Johnson–Willard fight on the level and did Dempsey really knock Tunney out in that 'long count' affair in Chicago? But a bare-knuckle fight for the heavyweight championship of the world in 1810 is probably the most controversial fight in the history of the division. It was certainly one of the most thrilling.

The rivals were Tom Cribb, the celebrated champion of England, and Tom Molineaux, an underrated ex-slave from

Virginia. Molineaux was the first of a gallant line of African American boxers to win worldwide acclaim. And his fight with Cribb was the first international match for the heavyweight championship. Today their names come alive only for historians of the old prize ring who treasure the pages of Pierce Egan's eyewitness accounts in that ebullient if sometimes inaccurate masterpiece, *Boxiana*. But in the nineteenth century, when fight fans by the thousands cheerfully waded through muddy lanes and across miles of open fields to wager and cheer on their favourite bruisers, Tom Molineaux's threat to English boxing supremacy provoked a national crisis and an international incident. The first Napoleon might have been more feared throughout England than this American challenger, but to read the sports pages of that day you would not think so. A victory for the ex-slave from Virginia over the mighty Cribb was widely considered a no less tragic prospect than a successful Napoleonic invasion.

In these days when press agents are as essential to prizefighters as to movie stars, Tom Molineaux surely would have been tagged the first 'Cinderella man'. He came from a fighting family on the Molineaux plantation in Virginia. Boxing was not yet an organised sport in America, but plantation owners used to pit their slaves against each other for side bets, and Tom's father Zachariah was a local champion. Tom grew to bull-like proportions. Although his full height was only five feet eight, he weighed two hundred pounds. He succeeded his father as the plantation's best bare-knuckle man and is said to have won his freedom as a reward for knocking out a rival plantation champion. Tom worked his way to New York, earned a living as a dock-walloper and a reputation for walloping his fellow men as well. These waterfront battles are unrecorded, but he seems to have won enough of them to style himself Champion of America, a title apparently deserved.

American pugilism was a scorned and lowly activity in 1810. But its English counterpart was at the height of its glory and popularity. An English sailor who saw Molineaux fight on the docks thought he should try his luck on the other side of the Atlantic. But not even an overenthusiastic jack-tar could have predicted that this powerful but untrained dockhand would soon be whipping to a standstill one of the great bare-knuckle champions of all time. Or that Molineaux, working his way across the Atlantic on a clipper ship, was to come within a disputed hair of snatching the championship of England from its Anglo-Saxon foundation.

Penniless and unknown, Tom landed in Liverpool and somehow found his way to the only place in London where he had some hope of finding hospitality – to the Horse and Dolphin Tavern operated by a fellow American black already celebrated in England for his fighting ability. Although only a middleweight, Bill Richmond had squared off with Tom Cribb himself, and his public house was a gathering place for the fancy and the sports. Lord Byron was one of Richmond's friends and boxing pupils. Richmond welcomed Molineaux and was soon seconding him against a promising novice from Bristol who was handled by Cribb. The burly youth beat Cribb's man so badly that he was reported as 'not having a single distinguishable feature left on his face'. Molineaux next was given a more formidable test in the person of Tom Blake, who had earned the fighting *nom de boxe* Tom Tough, as durable a trial horse as England had in those days.

The day he met Molineaux, Tom Tough arrived at the scene of the contest in a baronet's carriage, accompanied by Cribb. A large crowd was on hand, for Pierce Egan tells us, 'There was considerable curiosity among the swell division to see the new specimen in ebony, on whose merits Massa Richmond was so eloquent to all visitors to the Horse and Dolphin.' Richmond had not oversold his man. Tom Tough hardly lived up to his name and crumbled under Molineaux's vicious pummelling. Not only was Tough unable

to come to scratch within the allotted 30 seconds, but he lay unconscious for several minutes. The American was ready for Cribb.

The ease of Molineaux's victory convinced Bill Richmond that he had a coming champion on his hands. Cribb had won the title from the great Jem Belcher a year before but was in virtual retirement because his superiority had been so convincingly established that no one dared challenge him. But now a challenge was made that shook the complacency of a British sporting scene patriotically confident that its fighting men, like its fighting ships, were masters of the world. It was no accident that Molineaux's startling challenge to Cribb drove sportswriters of the day to these lines of Shakespearean defiance:

England that never did nor never shall
Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror.

In the sporting taverns of London this challenge from a lowly American, and one of African ancestry at that, was considered rank impudence, unparalleled effrontery. Gentlemen of rank who never before had concerned themselves with the crude goings-on of the pugilists admitted, in the privacy of their clubs, their anxiety lest Molineaux take the measure of England's pride. National feelings and racial presumptions brought the match to the attention of countless thousands who would have scorned the ordinary prize ring brawl.

Additional excitement came from Molineaux himself, who held forth at the Horse and Dolphin with tall prophecies about the destruction he would vent on the champion. Cribb, on the other hand, though he had seconded the fighters Molineaux had clubbed into submission, could not believe that this swarthy newcomer could stand up to him for more than a few minutes. While the betting was brisker than it had been for many years, the most popular wager

was whether or not the American challenger could absorb his punishment for more than 15 minutes.

Amply fortified with spirits to shorten the arduous journey over rocky road and muddy dale, let us climb into a coach with our loquacious guide Pierce Egan, who has given us the fullest eyewitness account of one of the memorable prize ring battles of all time:

> The day selected for this grand milling exhibition was 10 December, at Copthall Common, in the neighbourhood of East Grimstead, Sussex, within 30 miles of the Metropolis . . . The ring was formed at the foot of a hill (24 foot roped) surrounded by the numerous carriages which had conveyed the spectators thither, to ward off the chilling breezes and rain which came keenly from the eastward. Immediately . . . Molineaux came forward, bowed, threw up his hat in defiance, and retired to strip; Cribb immediately followed, and they were soon brought forward by their seconds; Gully (another former champion) and Joe Ward for the Champion, and Richmond and Jones for Molineaux.

The crowd gave a great hand to Cribb and then fell intently silent as these rugged antagonists waited for the referee to cry 'Time'. Cribb looked solid if slightly fleshy at five feet ten and a half and two hundred pounds. Molineaux's weight equalled Cribb's, though he was two inches shorter. But any height deficiency was more than overcome by his long arms and powerful muscles.

Molineaux lost no time in showing the oddsmakers that they had held him too cheap. Staggered by a hard punch over the right eye and rushed to the ropes by the confident champion in the second round, Molineaux rallied fiercely, and Cribb 'received a dreadful blow on the mouth that made his teeth chatter, and exhibited the first sign of claret'. 'First blood' was hotly wagered in those days, and the long-shot bettors had won on Molineaux.

Round after round the men fought toe to toe, Cribb with some show of science and planning, Molineaux with terrible strength, ferocity and 'gluttony', as the ability to take a

punch was described by fight reporters, vintage 1810. In the eighth, according to the round-by-round account:

> Cribb found out that his notion of beating Molineaux off-hand was truly fallacious, as he really was an ugly customer, and he also became sensible that if Molineaux could so reduce him as to make his sledgehammer hits tell, he should not willingly lay his head for the anvil. He therefore now brought forward his science, and began to adopt his usual famous retreating system. The men rallied desperately; success was alternate. At length Molineaux fell; but Cribb from his violent exertion appeared weaker than his opponent.

Somehow this scene never loses its intensity for me: the white champion and the black champion fighting each other to exhaustion while the incessant rain washed the blood from their wounded eyes and mouths and cheeks. On the soggy hillside some 5,000 panicky spectators, the high born in the outer ring, the rabble sprawled out behind them, ignored the downpour as they began to realise with mounting amazement and anxiety that their ‘unbeatable’ Cribb was losing ground to the ‘American man of colour’.

After 30 minutes of furious brawling Molineaux was not only on his feet but carrying the fight to the weary champion. The fight had gone into the nineteenth round when the first of two ‘rhubarbs’ running counter to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of fair play checked Molineaux’s effort to become the first non-British champion.

At this stage the faces of both fighters were so dreadfully battered that it was impossible to distinguish them by their features. Onlookers reported that only their difference in colour made identification possible. Cribb was on the defensive and retreating now. Molineaux pinned him against the ropes and held him so tightly that he could neither throw a punch nor go down. This provoked the first important hassle. The seconds said the men should be separated. The umpires ruled, according to eighteenth-century rules of Broughton, that the contestants could not be parted until one went down. The tension in the audience

was unbearable. Finally 200 persons rushed to the ring and attempted to loosen Molineaux's hold on the ropes. One of his fingers was broken or seriously injured in the melee. When order was restored, the enraged Molineaux chased the champion to one corner of the ring, caught Cribb's head under his left arm and clobbered him unmercifully, Cribb finally falling from the severe punishment.

Despite the injury to his hand, Molineaux pressed his advantage. His left eye was closed and he was arm-weary and close to exhaustion. But Cribb was even more battered, and it was with greater and greater difficulty that he came off his second's knee at the end of each 30-second rest period. Odds rose as high as 4 to 1 on Molineaux. The twenty-eighth round ended with Cribb 'receiving a leveller'. At the end of the rest period he lay back in his second's arms, unable to rise. According to Fred Henning's *Fight for the Championship*:

> Tom Cribb could not come to time, and Sir Thomas Apreeee [an umpire] allowed the half-minute to elapse and summoned the men three times. Still Cribb could not come and the Black awaited the award of victory, his just due, in the centre of the ring. But during the excitement Joe Ward pushed across the ring to Bill Richmond, and accused him of having placed two bullets in the Black's fists. This was, of course, indignantly denied, and Molineaux was requested to open his hands, proving that nothing was there.

This has been a favourite ruse of cagey managers from Cribb's day to our own. While Molineaux was on his feet, involved in the dispute, the fallen champion was gaining an invaluable three- or four-minute rest. When 'Time!' was called again, Cribb was able to come up to the mark.

Molineaux rushed in to stop his man in the 29th but the undeserved rest seemed to have restored Cribb's spirit and confidence. A desperate blow on Molineaux's right eye closed that 'peeper' – as these early day boxing writers put it – and brought the gallant Negro down. He was up again for the 30th, nearly sightless.

But the desperate trick in the 28th and the closing of Molineaux's one good eye in the 29th were the turning points. In the 31st he was levelled again by a hard blow in the throat. In the 32nd 'they were staggering against each other like inebriated men'. Somehow they went on this way until the 39th round when Molineaux at last had to acknowledge, 'I can fight no more.' Cribb himself was near collapse, and Richmond persuaded his deadbeat protégé to try one more round in the hope that Cribb could not come to scratch. But Cribb made it, if barely, and poor Molineaux fell in a heap. After 55 minutes of vicious, bloody and somewhat senseless battling, the 'most ferocious and sanguinary' battle in the history of the English prize ring came to an end. Tom Cribb was acclaimed the victor. He had 'protected the honour of his country and the reputation of English Boxing', Pierce Egan assures us. But even Egan, an Irish Anglophile, putting the best possible face on it, had to admit that in the disputed and crucial 28th round, '[Cribb's] seconds, by a little manoeuvring, occupied the attention of the Black's seconds, and so managed to prolong the period sufficiently to enable the champion to recover a little, and thus assist him to pull through.'

Molineaux's questionable loss brought him overnight fame. And his threat to British boxing supremacy was reemphasised just three days later when the following notice in the London papers rocked the English sporting world anew:

> To Mr Thomas Cribb, St Martin's Street,
> Leicester Square:
>
> Sir, – My friends think that had the weather on last Tuesday, the day on which I contended with you, not been so unfavourable, I should have won the battle; I therefore challenge you to a second meeting, at any time within two months, for such sum as those gentlemen who place confidence in me may be pleased to arrange.
>
> As it is possible this letter may meet the public eye, I cannot omit the opportunity of expressing a confident hope, that the circumstance of my

> being of a different colour to that of a people amongst whom I have sought protection, will not in any way operate to my prejudice.
> I am, sir,
> Your most obedient humble servant,
> T. MOLINEAUX

Cribb promptly accepted the challenge, for his sense of honour had been offended. Molineaux had alluded to the ‘unfavourable weather’, but the champion and his friends, their consciences not entirely clear, knew the dangerous foreigner was not referring to the elements alone. Molineaux had to wait longer than two months for his rematch with Cribb, for a young heavyweight named Rimmer decided to make it a three-way rivalry by challenging the challenger. Rimmer was a protégé of an ex-fighter, Bob Gregson, boniface of Castle Tavern, the pugilistic headquarters of the day. He was close to Cribb, and Richmond saw the challenge as a means of giving the champion more time to prepare for his rematch with this overpowering challenger. Rimmer’s friends had been calling him a second Jem Belcher, but he proved no match for Molineaux, who beat him into insensibility in 15 rounds. Oddly enough, the Rimmer fight was the only Molineaux bout ever to be reported in an American paper. The *Savannah Republican* of 23 July 1811, had this to say:

> Civilisation! – A boxing match took place at Mously Hart, in the neighbourhood of London, on 21 May, for one hundred guineas. The champions were Molineaux (the famous black man from New York) and a young Englishman named Rimmer. In the course of fifteen rounds, the black pounded his antagonist most tremendously; when lords, nobles, sweeps, ploughmen, fighting men and assistants, from pique or sympathy, crowded into the ring and fought promiscuously about twenty minutes. There were at this brutal exhibition about fifteen thousand spectators of all ranks.

Englishmen, it would seem, despite their traditions, had difficulty accepting the sight of one of their countrymen stretched out at the feet of this dark intruder. The dreadful possibility that this might happen to their idol, Tom Cribb,

made the second Cribb–Molineaux battle the most widely discussed in British ring history, even more eagerly awaited than the bitter Richard Humphries–Mendoza 'The Jew' title bouts a generation earlier. The issue was nothing less than 'Whether Old England should still retain her proud characteristic of conquering; or that an American, and, a man of colour, should win the honour, wear it, and carry it away from the shores of Britain.'

Conscious of his patriotic responsibilities, Cribb went into training three months before the fight. He seems to have been the first pugilist to attempt anything like a modern training programme. His training camp was on the estate of Captain Barclay, an aristocratic health enthusiast and champion walker who had astonished his countrymen with a series of 100-mile strolls. Cribb came to Barclay badly out of shape. A life of ease in London had blown him up to 16 stone (224 pounds). In Barclay's own words, 'He had become corpulent, big-bellied, full of gross humours and short breathed; it was with difficulty he could walk 10 miles.' Barclay soon had him doing 20 miles a day, and then 30, including a half-mile run each day at top speed. His diet was rigorous, he sparred with amateurs to improve his timing, was put through a severe course of calisthenics, and in 11 weeks he weighed in at 192, which Barclay had established as his ideal fighting weight.

Molineaux, on the other hand, lacking a patron, had to pick up his eating money where he could find it. There was plenty to be found, for his near-victory over Cribb made him an object of great curiosity wherever he went. But the money he earned from exhibitions around the country was squandered in self-indulgence. Richmond and Tom Belcher were accused of using Molineaux as a meal ticket instead of seriously preparing him for this crucial fight, and of keeping him 'pliable to their wishes by allowing him to drink stout and ale by gallons'. Molineaux was open-handed and easygoing. Self-control was not one of his virtues. His

contemporaries describe him as ‘amorous in the extreme’. If he was not already sufficiently intoxicated, this sudden fame for an illiterate ex-slave was heady brew. In addition he seems to have had a childish faith in his physical prowess. Tom Molineaux would not believe that any excess could tap his native strength. On the morning of the fight his breakfast consisted of a whole boiled fowl, an apple pie and a tankard of ale.

There were no million-dollar gates in those days, but all the other familiar trappings of a ‘Battle of the Century’ make that 28 September 1811 sound like a big-time TV pay-for-view at one of the Vegas casino palaces. On the eve of the fight there wasn’t a bed to be found for 20 miles in all directions. Twenty thousand fans were on hand at Wymondham, an incredible number considering the total population and the means of transportation of those days. Although the fight was scheduled for noon, hundreds of spectators were on the grounds as early as six in the morning, hoping to get a better view of the battle. Peers were there in their four-in-hands, and watermen, butchers, cobblers, ‘rustics in their clouted shoes’. Among the ‘Corinthian of the highest rank’ were lords, knights and generals, including the Marquis of Queensberry. Had there been a Don King in those days, the fight would have grossed a $100 million and made wealthy men of both contestants. As it was, both were to die in poverty, the traditional fate of great fighters over the centuries. Not only was there no Don King to maximise the price of the seats, there were no seats. The innovation of seats for spectators at prizefights was nearly a century away. Instead the first row stretched out on the turf, the second row kneeled, and the rest stood behind them. And behind *them* were the horsemen, ‘some seated, while others more eager stood, circus-like, upon their saddle: these were intermixed with every description of carriage, gig, barouche, buggy, cart and waggon.’

For the first five rounds Cribb took another painful drubbing. He was bleeding profusely from the mouth, his right eye was an ugly slit, and his left eye was closing rapidly. But Molineaux could not draw on the superhuman endurance that had carried him so far nine months earlier. Too much ale and too much chicken, winged and otherwise, had him ‘heaving fearfully’ as early as the fourth round.

The sixth round was the convincer. Here it is, blow by blow, as recorded in *Pugilistica*:

> Molineaux, distressed for wind and exhausted, lunged right and left. Cribb avoided his blows, and then put in a good hit with his right which Molineaux stopped exceedingly well. Cribb now got in a destructive blow at his ‘mark’, which doubled up Molineaux. He appeared almost frantic, and no dancing master could have performed a pirouette more gratifying to Cribb’s friends. Molineaux hit short and capered about. Cribb followed him round the ring, and after some astonishing execution, floored him by a tremendous hit at full arm’s length.

Molineaux was out of gas. But for a few more rounds he kept charging in, borne on a momentum of terrible courage and futile rage. In the ninth round his jaw was broken, and he fell like a slaughtered steer. While the fallen challenger lay senseless, the crowd screamed its pleasure and Cribb danced a crazy hornpipe around the ring. At the end of the allotted half-minute, Molineaux was still out, but Cribb was not satisfied. He waived the time limit so that Molineaux could come again. In a brutal tableau of superiority, a kind of human bullfight with the total destruction of Molineaux the only possible finale, Cribb knocked Molineaux down again, and then again. In a gallant, foolhardy stupor, Molineaux managed to get off his second’s knee once more, and again he was levelled. Still not satisfied, Cribb waived the time limit so as to have one more crack at the tottering Molineaux. Molineaux pitched to the stage floor and lay still. Cribb and former champion Gully danced a Scottish reel around the ring. And 20,000 triumphant sons of Britain went wild with joy.

The fight had lasted only twenty minutes, just a third as long as the first great contest. When Molineaux was carried unconscious from the ring it was learned that not only his jaw but two of his ribs had been broken. Cribb’s earnings (on a winner-take-all basis) were £400. As a tribute to his gameness, a collection of £50 was raised for Molineaux. Impressive sums had changed hands on the outcome. Captain Barclay was said to have won a fortune of £10,000. A baker who had gambled his house, his shop and all his personal property was £1,700 ahead. For several days following the fight there were public demonstrations celebrating the British victory. When the champion called on Molineaux to inquire as to his condition, he sported a barouche and four, the horses decorated with blue ribbons signifiying Cribb’s colours. When he reached London the public ovation was so great that the streets he approached were impassable. Crowds gathered to applaud him wherever he appeared.

In the tradition of fistic heroes over the centuries, Cribb settled down as a host to the sporting fraternity, and for many years his tavern prospered and legends of generosity and gallantry gathered around him. But true to the same tradition, his luck finally ran out: a few years before he died he was hauled into the courts on a charge of bad debts. In his home town of Woolwich a monument was erected in his honour shortly after his death in 1848.

After the second meeting with Cribb, Tom Molineaux toured and fought on for five more years with declining success. In the extravagant language of his day we learn that he worshipped more ardently in the temples of Bacchus and Venus than in that of Mars. In 1818 we find him in Northern Ireland, teaching the stick-fighting natives how to fight with their fists, a course of instruction that appears to have left its mark. Fast living had made a gaunt ruin of his powerful physique. His fortunes had sunk so low that he was living on the handouts of two fellow blacks serving in an

Irish regiment. Unable to afford the cheapest lodging, and rapidly wasting away from disease and neglect, he muttered his final ‘I can fight no more’ in the regimental bandroom at Galway on 4 August 1818, at the age of 33.

He had come a long way up and a long way down, and a long, long way from the slave quarters of Virginia. But for one glorious hour he had given blow for blow with a great champion of England, he had proved that manly skills and fighting hearts were not exclusive qualities of the English, nor of any race, and for sixty trembling seconds while English sportsmanship wavered and bowed to national expediency, he was indeed champion of England, supreme among men as tough and prideful and resolute as ever assembled, the bare-knuckle fighters-to-a-finish of centuries past.

[1953]

2

Charles Freeman: The Primo Carnera of the Nineteenth Century v. The Tipton Slasher

There seems to be in all of us the urge to create and glorify giants, heroically enlarged extensions of ourselves, who can go forth single-handed to perform the deeds of strength and annihilation of which we ourselves, mere normals, are incapable.

Greek heroes invariably ran to size. The ancient Jews, when they sought a champion to settle affairs with the rival Philistines, pinned their hopes on Samson. From that day to this, the oversized, jumbo heavyweight has never failed to excite our curiosity, admiration and awe, even though this excitement may be a two-sided sensation that anticipates the giant's invincibility and at the same time prepares to enjoy his defeat by a smaller adversary.

Giants getting their lumps from little guys have come to be a common occurrence. But, despite the proof presented by a sad string of fallen giants, the crowds seem to be drawn irresistibly toward any new superman who tosses his hat in the ring.

Of course, the classic example of the last century was the hapless Primo Carnera, all six feet six, two hundred and

fifty-six pounds of him, who couldn't beat a third-rater without considerable help from his owners. With fights 'arranged' all the way to the title, he was finally led to slaughter by Joe Louis and Max Baer.

It may be that every century must have its Carnera. For in the previous century an American giant who outweighed Carnera by 50 pounds and topped him by a half-foot was causing the same kind of furor, some of it just as manufactured, as Carnera did on his introduction to the American sports world in the early 1930s.

His name was Charles Freeman. Performing as a strong man in a circus, like Carnera, he caught the eye of the champion of England, Ben Caunt, who was making an American tour, appearing in *Life in London* at the Bowery Theater, and giving exhibitions of his stiff-stance, slow-moving, bear-hugging style.

In a letter to the leading London sports journal of the day, Caunt wrote:

> An unexpected circumstance has brought me back to New York . . . a challenge in the papers from the Michigan Giant. I am quite prepared to fight him. This giant is seven feet three inches high, proportionately stout, and very active; he can turn twenty-five somersets in succession, can hold a large man out at arm's length, weighs 333 pounds and has nothing but muscle on his bones . . .

By the time Freeman came to the attention of the New York journals, he had shrunk a trifle and either cast off his Midwestern background or been appropriated by Manhattan. He is described by a reporter as:

> standing seven feet in his stocking feet and weighing three hundred and fifteen pounds, the tallest specimen of our city that ever came under the notice of Tall Son of York. He has arms and legs strong enough for the working beam or piston rod of a Mississippi steamboat. At Halifax recently, someone sent him a challenge, which was accepted. But upon seeing the New York Baby, the challenger waived the honor of meeting him, except with the muffles on.

The champion, Caunt, apparently saw more advantage in adding Freeman to his road company than in squaring off with him in earnest, for the article concludes with the intelligence that ‘our specimen youth shall accompany the English champion back to the Old World, where, we’ll lay a pile, they’ll be graveled to match him’.

Billed as the American Atlas and appearing in sparring exhibitions with Caunt, Freeman drew sell-out crowds at his first appearance in the Queen’s Theatre, Liverpool, and continued to turn them away everywhere he went. While the editor of *Sportsman’s Magazine* dismissed him with ‘Freeman has as little pretensions or inclinations to boxing as any noncombative member of the Peace Society’, Caunt’s press agents were flooding the papers with eloquent accounts of Freeman’s prowess, even asserting that no British boxer had courage enough to meet him.

Before he had engaged in a single contest, the New World Goliath, as he was sometimes billed, had become the nemesis of every British heavyweight. Numerous challenges were passed back and forth, all of which Caunt, on Freeman’s behalf, chose to ignore. It was not until Freeman’s publicity boys began referring to their client as ‘the champion of the world’ (with an impressive list of American triumphs scored exclusively over non-existent opponents) that the British boxing circle decided it was time to call this colossal bluff.

A council of war was held in what can probably be best described as the Gallagher’s of the day, ex-fighter Johnny Broome’s Rising Sun. After egging themselves to fighting pitch by reading aloud some of the more extravagant publicity, the fight crowd agreed that £100 should be posted as a challenge to the American giant to meet any suitable opponent Broome should select.

Much to the surprise of the doubting Toms, the challenge was accepted, with no less a personage than Tom Spring, England’s beloved, undefeated ex-champion appearing at

the Rising Sun on behalf of Caunt and Freeman. For Freeman's opponent, Broome nominated the Tipton Slasher, an up-and-coming pugilist later to lay a disputed claim to the championship, though never considered much more than a willing second-rater.

As was the custom of the day, the articles of agreement for their match were drawn up at Spring's Castle Tavern, another famous sports hangout, on the understanding that £10 would be deposited each week, alternately at the tavern of Spring and Broome, until the full side bet had been posted.

The fame of the untried Freeman and the international aspect of the match, the first since the memorable battles between Tom Cribb and Tom Molineaux half a century earlier, caught the public's imagination. Enthusiastic Americans were going around town offering 2 to 1 on their countryman, though the odds eventually levelled off at 6 to 4. After a final round of exhibitions, benefits and personal appearances, Freeman finally went into serious training near a country village whose local reporter has left us this happy account of his activities:

> Freeman has been assiduously attended by his friend, Ben Caunt, and has been ranging up hill and down dale like the celebrated giant Gog in his 'seven-league boots' with staff in hand and followed by 'a tail', which, from the length of his fork, generally manages to keep a respectful distance in the rear.
>
> Although his nob has been roofed with a shallow tile to diminish the appearance of his steeple-like proportions, he still has the appearance of a walking monument, to the no-small alarm of the squirrels in Squire Byng's Park, into whose dormitories he occasionally casts a squint of recognition.
>
> By his good humour and playfulness of disposition he has won all hearts and has been a welcome guest on whatever premises he has cast anchor in his walks, which have seldom been less than twenty or thirty miles a day.
>
> He has been extremely attentive to his training, and has been much reduced in flesh, while his muscular developments stand forth with additional symmetry. On his arrival, he carried some twenty-three stone

[322 pounds] ‘good meat’ but we doubt whether on Tuesday he will much exceed eighteen stone [252 pounds].

The Slasher was also described as in the pink, down to his fighting weight of one hundred and eight-nine, ‘six feet high, a well proportioned, muscular fellow (always deducting the “baker-knee” which destroys the perpendicular of his pedestal)’.

In our own days of televisionary sloth, when fight fans have been heard to complain that it is too much trouble flying all the way out to Las Vegas, one can only wonder at the sacrifices of personal comfort and even safety these early devotees of the ring were willing to make. Despite the widespread publicity the Freeman–Slasher bout had received and the enthusiastic backing of the Prince of Wales and many other of The Fancy, prizefighting was still on the books as a crime. So the site of the bout, in open country some 20 miles outside of London, was to be kept a secret from all except the initiated. But with the entire London sporting world in on the plans, it hardly took Scotland Yard to pick up the scent.

With carriages already on the road toward the appointed site the night before, the law had only to tail them to be on hand for the arrival of the contestants at the rural station the following morning. So the party had to move four miles on into the next county, along muddy back roads which a majority of the would-be spectators had to travel on foot.

Most of these were London dandies, unprepared for such coarse pedestrianism, but even when these stubborn ancestors of present-day ringsiders saw their route lead them directly into a swamp, they pushed on in determination to get their guinea’s worth.

These weary, mud-bespattered diehards finally arrived at the ring site with barely time to catch their breath when, as a witness reported, ‘the Sawbridgeworth police superintendent and Mr Phillips, the magistrate, once more