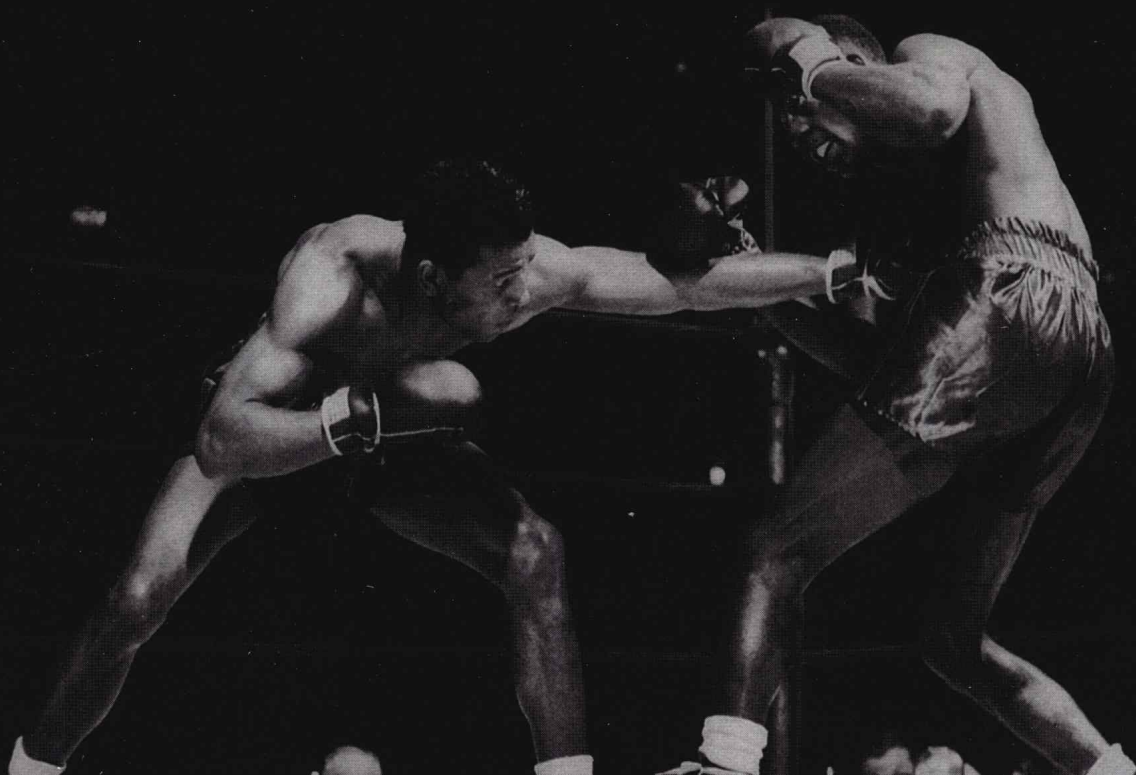


# MIKE SILVER

# THE ARC OF BOXING

The RISE and DECLINE  
of the SWEET SCIENCE

*Foreword by* BUDD SCHULBERG



# The Arc of Boxing

## *The Rise and Decline of the Sweet Science*

MIKE SILVER

*with a foreword by Budd Schulberg*



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For my mother and father  
of blessed memory

# *Acknowledgments*

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I had wanted to interview international ballet star Edward Villella ever since I read that he was a former amateur boxing champion. Writing this book gave me that opportunity. He could not have been more helpful or down to earth, a genuine class act.

Many thanks to the late Al Thomas, professor of English literature, boxing maven and noted weight lifting and body building authority, for introducing me to Terry Todd, and to Sherm Drexler for introducing me to Al. Would that it had happened years earlier.

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era lightweight contender, was a friend for many years who added to my knowledge of the “sweet science.” Boxers will always remain my favorite athletes.

During the entire lengthy process of writing this book my devoted brother Bennett has been a bedrock of support and a brilliant creative resource. He was there for me at the very beginning of my obsession. He was only ten years old when he borrowed a book from the library that he thought his big brother might like because of his newfound interest in boxing. That book — Nat Fleischer’s *50 Years at Ringside*— along with Stanley Weston’s *Boxing Illustrated/Wrestling News* magazine, started the ball rolling. I was hooked.

As anyone who has tried it knows, writing a book is a difficult and lonely endeavor. Words of encouragement and support are always welcome, especially when the work seems overwhelming. Thanks to the following people for their heartfelt expressions of support: Don Harwood, Elizabeth Weiner, Herb Ross, Barbara Covell, Robert Mladinich, Sallie Kraus, Stephanie Arcel, Pete Spanakos, and Toby Weston Cone.

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I extend my gratitude to Paul Muchinsky, Dave Cohen, Scott Silver and Greg Zola, who critiqued drafts of the manuscript. Thanks also to Joel at Kinko’s.

I don’t believe this book would ever have been written had I not taken boxing lessons during my teenage years from an old school trainer named Willie Grunes. I was a 14-year-old amateur boxer being tutored in “the manly art of self defense” by an individual who understood boxing as an art and science. He instilled within me an appreciation of balance, leverage, footwork, combination punching and strategy. He taught me moves that, years later, on film, I saw great fighters such as Barney Ross, Tony Canzoneri, and Joe Louis perform. Willie was a perfectionist. I was admonished for a slight bend of the wrist. Standing up too straight, exposing my chin or dropping my guard was cause for a drill sergeant-like rebuke. It wasn’t pleasant, but it made an impression. Willie is long gone. I like to think he would have approved of this book.

“There is much about jazz that relates to boxing. The improvisation, the flow, the beauty of the notes, the tempo.” *Archie Moore, Light Heavyweight Champion 1952–1961.*

“The brilliant boxer is an artist, albeit in an art not readily comprehensible, or palatable, to most observers” *Joyce Carol Oates*

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# *Foreword*

by BUDD SCHULBERG

Alas, the Manly Art of Self Defense, as the sport of boxing or fisticuffs is so grandly called, is today more honored in the breach than in the execution thereof. That is the theme of noted boxing historian Mike Silver's savvy conclusion as he compares the current boxing scene to what he justly calls the Golden Age, meaning the 1920s to the 1950s, the glory years of Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson, Willie Pep, and a host of other ring immortals.

This writer can bear witness to Mr. Silver's credentials as someone truly to be trusted as an insightful student of the contrasting fistic eras. As a boxing writer, I find myself constantly referring to Mike to get a knowledgeable estimate as to the attributes of current boxers. When a boxer like our current No. 1 pound-for-pounder, the gifted egomaniac Floyd Mayweather, lets his enlarged ego proclaim himself not just the best current fighter but the greatest of all time (a pocket-sized Muhammad Ali), thank goodness we have the seasoned professional critic, Mr. Silver, to put him in his place. When I was getting carried away in my enthusiasm for Mayweather's shut-out of our latest Cinderella Man, the Argentine upstart Carlos Baldomir, my better judgment led me to check out my superlatives with someone with a more balanced view of the subject than I have, the aforementioned Mr. Silver. He is my reality check. While I tend to get carried away with the accomplishments of today's reigning fighters, be they Shane Mosley, Winky Wright or De La Hoya, there is always the cautioning voice of Mike Silver, ready to put those fistic plusses in historical context.

To reach the level of appraisal from which Mr. Silver makes his judgments, one would have had to study the films of all the great fighters from today's to the dawn of the 20th century, as has he. Whether I ask him to compare the respective merits of Harry Greb, Tiger Flowers, or Pete Latzo, Mr. Silver's answer is never based on an educated guess. He has seen the film, rerun it and studied it and can figuratively play it back for you. So when he makes his judgment call that despite today's Mayweathers, De La Hoyas, and Pacquiao's, our current champions come up empty against the legends of the Golden Age, we must reluctantly go along with his appraisal.

He has not only seen and studied the evidence on film, he has weighed the factual evidence. In boxing's heyday, a boxer with twenty fights was just getting ready to graduate from six-round fights to eight. A fighter with thirty fights was graduating to semi-windup at Madison Square Garden. Today, a kid wins eighteen in a row and he's talking



title fight. And not just talking, but winning. Vide Jermaine Taylor. At this stage in his career, some fifty years ago he'd only be moving up to his first ten-rounders.

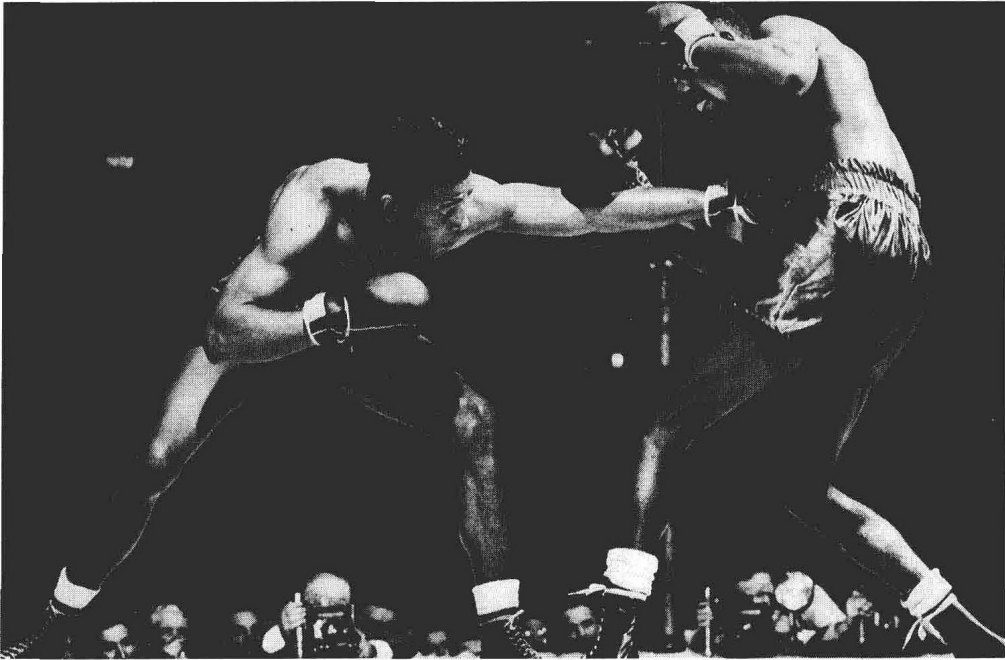
Mike Silver's logic is irrefutable. The greatest of all teachers is experience. In the first half of the century, fighters were engaged in as many as twenty fights a year, and sometimes more. They were exposing themselves to so many different types: slick boxers, sluggers, southpaws, each with his own individual style. They were learning on the

job how to cope with the multi-faceted aggressions they were facing. How can a boxer get these necessary lessons if he's only fighting twice and sometimes even once a year? So a boxer with natural talent may go through an entire career without ever having the opportunity to master his craft. It's like an actor going from a beginner's class to starring and all without ever having had the chance to develop his technique.

We see this lapse on television, month after month, a young fighter with some early promise rushed to the top before he's anywhere near ready. Fighters who wouldn't have qualified for a semi-windup in the old Garden are up there getting title shots worth millions of dollars. Too often their careers are over before in the olden days they had barely begun. Good lord, Sugar Ray Robinson, our nonpareil, had seventy-eight fights before finally winning a fight from Tough



Sugar Ray Robinson, boxing's ultimate pugilist. He possessed the greatest combination of speed, power and elegance the sport has ever seen (Sports Legends Photos).



**Artist at work.** Sugar Ray Robinson (left) jabs Tommy Bell in their 1946 welterweight title fight (International Hall of Champions).

Tommy Bell for the vacant World Welterweight Championship. I saw that fight in the Garden in 1946 and remember Ray getting knocked down but getting up and outpointing Bell to win a rouser of a fight. Along with his natural ability he had learned his craft in so many challenging tests with the likes of Fritzie Zivic, Jake LaMotta, Henry Armstrong, and Sammy Angott, the class of those gifted years. He learned how to cope with all the different fistic problems those excellent practitioners represented. By the time he was ready for Bell he had boxed for seven years; he had gone from a sterling amateur champion with eighty-five fights to seventy-six victories and a single defeat to the uncrowned middleweight champion Jake LaMotta, whom he licked in the rematch. He had gone from fistic kindergarten to graduate school. By the time he fought Tough Tommy, who had earned that sobriquet the hard way, he had learned how to cope with every conceivable type of opposition. In all probability there will never be a boxer touched with the genius of a Sugar Ray, but if there were, in these days when a boxer is considered busy if he has two fights a year, he would never have the opportunity to develop to his full potential.

That's why, even with our Mayweathers, Winky Wrights and Manny Pacquiao, there is no depth in the weight classifications. In earlier days, there were a dozen worthies in every weight class. It was no disgrace to have losses on your record because the competition was so intense. A McLarnin could beat a Barney Ross. But a Barney Ross could come back and win the rematch. Only a Sugar Ray went undefeated, and when he finally blew one to Randy Turpin, it was really Kid Dissipation and not the Brit Kid who did him in. Facing all comers, Sugar Ray was an encyclopedia on opponents' skills.

With today's fights few and far between, there is simply no opportunity for the kind of bout-to-bout education that empowered the early greats.

So Mike Silver provides chapter and verse for his contention that boxing is a lost art. For those of us who still follow the sport with an enthusiasm clouded by the negatives that continue to hound the poorly supervised activity, it's not an easy pill to swallow. When a Mayweather meets a De La Hoya we'll be on our way to Vegas with high hopes for a classic. Still, we're ever mindful of knowledgeable Mike Silver's reluctant conclusion that we're witnesses to a lost art that once gave us the immortals. If Mr. Silver is right, and his judgment leaves little doubt, the days of Benny Leonard and Barney Ross, Henry Armstrong and Willie Pep, Louis and Ali, are all behind us, and we die-hards are worshipping a god who's failed. All of which makes for entertaining reading, if somber reflection.

Budd Schulberg is a renowned boxing journalist as well as a critically acclaimed novelist whose work includes *What Makes Sammy Run*, *The Disenchanted* and *The Harder They Fall*. He won an Academy Award for his screenplay of *On the Waterfront*.

## *Preface*

Who are the greatest boxers of all time? Why — and how — did they become great? Are contemporary superstars such as Roy Jones, Jr., Bernard Hopkins, Oscar De La Hoya, Floyd Mayweather, Jr., Mike Tyson and Lennox Lewis better, or worse, than their counterparts of decades past? Why have certain eras produced an abundance of outstanding talent while others have not? This book answers these questions.

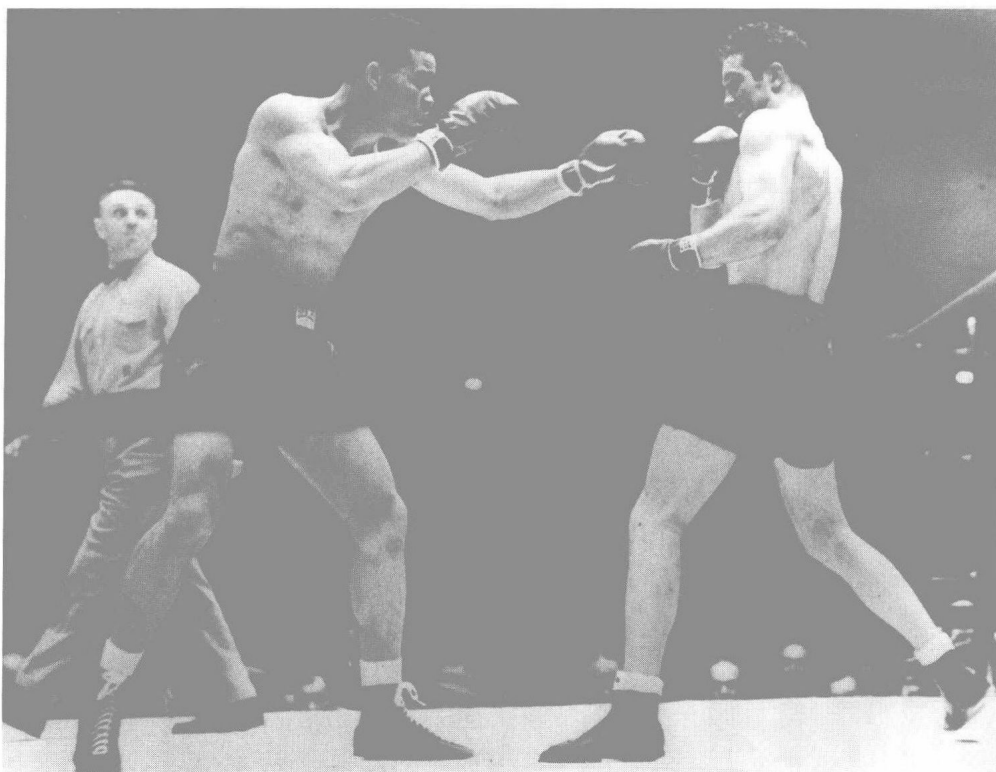
Anyone who has ever debated the merits of boxers from different eras knows there is a significant segment of the sports community who believes such comparisons are unfair. After all, aren't the athletes of today bigger, stronger and faster than ever? Does it not make sense to believe that boxers are also bigger, stronger and faster than ever?

On a superficial level the “newer is always better” attitude towards athletic excellence appears to be valid, except for one important caveat; a boxer's performance, unlike that of a swimmer, track and field athlete, or weightlifter, cannot be defined in terms of finite measurement. Boxing's interaction of athleticism, experience, technique and psychology is a far more complex activity than just running, jumping, lifting or throwing.

To blithely state that today's top professional boxers are better than their predecessors simply because measurable athletic performance has improved in other sports — whose winners are determined by a stopwatch, ruler or scale — is analogous to suggesting a singer is great only because he is capable of reaching a higher note than anyone else. Of course no reasonable person would agree with this statement because it totally ignores the complex nuances of the singer's craft, such as timbre, inflection, vocal range and phrasing. Yet many people, without even realizing it, apply this same logic to boxing, oblivious as they are to the complex nuances of the boxer's craft.

Even though today's professional athletes are, on average, bigger than ever, it is illogical to relate this fact to boxers because they compete in separate weight divisions appropriate to their size. Except for heavyweights, the weight differential between opposing boxers rarely exceeds ten pounds. As for heavyweights, why should the “bigger than ever” label automatically stamp today's giants as better fighters just because of their superior bulk? I challenge anyone with a modicum of interest in this sport to take a look at the four current heavyweight champions (whoever they are at the moment) and explain to me how they are better than the “small” heavyweights of 30 or 40 years ago, when fighters named Ali, Liston, Frazier, Holmes, Norton, Foreman and Quarry were contending for that once precious title.

Are today's fighters stronger than ever? To properly answer this question one must



**“He can run, but he can’t hide”** was heavyweight champion Joe Louis’s response when asked about Billy Conn’s superior speed. Trailing on points, Louis (left) knocked Conn out in the 13th round of their 1941 title fight.

first determine how strength manifests itself in a boxing match. In competitive weightlifting, the definition of effective strength is obvious; whoever can lift the most poundage always wins. On the other hand, a golfer’s strength is not measured by how much he can lift, but by how far he can hit the ball, and a tennis player’s superior strength is useful only if it translates into a powerful serve or return. If the stronger player is slower, less skillful, or lacks experience, strength becomes less of a factor in determining the outcome of a match.

Strength is certainly useful to a boxer trying to control an opponent during infighting, or in a clinch. But it should be understood that strength and power are not synonymous. A fighter may be very strong but have only average hitting power, or he can be of average strength and possess a powerful knockout punch. Punching power is more important to a fighter than strength. Nevertheless, many fighters have achieved greatness despite having only average strength and hitting power. An example of this type of fighter was Depression-era champion Barney Ross. Many of his opponents were physically stronger and more powerful, but very few could match his consummate boxing skills, physical toughness and fighting spirit.

Notwithstanding his ability to stand up to the type of severe punishment that often took down much “stronger” men, Ross used strategies inherent within the art of

boxing to counteract an opponent's superior strength or punching power. He faced the best fighters of his time and won titles in three weight divisions while losing only four of eighty-one professional bouts. He was never stopped. How does one measure that type of strength?

The effective application of the art of boxing to defeat an opponent possessing superior strength and power was apparent as far back as 1892, at the very dawn of the modern boxing epoch, when James J. Corbett ("Gentleman" Jim) knocked out the legendary John L. Sullivan ("The Boston Strongboy") in the 21st round to win the heavyweight championship of the world. This scenario would repeat itself countless times over the next century, as it did 72 years after Corbett-Sullivan when a fighter then known as Cassius Clay used a similar hit and move strategy to upset the brutish heavyweight champion Sonny Liston.

Although Corbett and Clay (soon to be renamed Muhammad Ali) were younger, faster and better conditioned than Sullivan and Liston, their intelligent use of speed enabled them to frustrate and eventually break down two of the most powerful fighters to ever hold the heavyweight championship.

Speed is a valuable asset for any athlete. Yet, as important as speed is to a boxer, it cannot determine the outcome of every match. A competent professional boxer can utilize a variety of tactics to offset an opponent's superior speed. And — lest we forget — all the speed in the world will come to naught if a punch lands with enough force to stop a fast stepping opponent in his tracks. As Joe Louis so aptly put it before his heavyweight title fight with the lightning quick, but nevertheless doomed, Billy Conn: "He can run but he can't hide."

Today's world class athletes routinely run a mile in less than four minutes and the hundred-yard dash in almost nine seconds flat, and can lift the equivalent of a small automobile off the ground — all of which is irrelevant to the sport of boxing. When technique, experience, strategy and psychology are thrown into the mix, an opponent's superior speed, strength or power are situations that a competent boxer must deal with and attempt to overcome.

Another dimension that cannot be measured with a stopwatch, ruler or scale involves the character of the athlete. Character, or as it is known in the boxing vernacular, "heart" (and during the English bare-knuckle period, "bottom"), is important to any athlete aspiring to greatness. But the word takes on added meaning when it is applied to professional boxing. "We are not speaking here of simple courage. Any man who ties on the gloves and walks into the ring has a degree of courage," wrote Pete Hamill on the subject of heart. "To say that a man had heart was a more complicated matter. The fighter with heart was willing to endure pain in order to inflict it. The fighter with heart accepted the cruel rules of the sport. He must not — could not — quit. He might be outclassed and outgunned but he never looked for an exit."<sup>1</sup>

Few heavyweights of any era could match Mike Tyson's tremendous punching power. Athletically, he was blessed with all the tools for boxing greatness. If his talent was for basketball or football his character flaws would not have affected his performance nearly as much, and he would have maintained his lofty status. But professional boxing is different; it asks questions of its athletes that other sports do not.



Legendary Depression era boxing rivals Barney Ross (left) and Tony Canzoneri square off in 1933 (courtesy Stephanie Arcel; from the Archives of Ray Arcel).

When confronted with an opponent he could not overpower, Tyson became frustrated and his fragile confidence wavered. His vaunted “killer instinct” appeared to fade in the later rounds. Too often he welcomed the respite of a clinch. In extreme situations he either stopped fighting or sought the nearest exit by fouling out. Although Mike Tyson possessed the physical attributes of a great athlete, he did not possess the psy-

che of a great fighter. Evander Holyfield defeated Tyson as much with his character as with his fists. Whoever said “character is destiny” must have had the unforgiving sport of boxing in mind.

These are just a few of the topics to be discussed on the path to boxing enlightenment it is my sincere wish this book will provide.

A final note: When a lawyer attempts to make the strongest argument possible on behalf of his client, he requires the testimony of credible witnesses to bolster his case. To enhance this book’s validity I have included the testimony of three of the world’s most renowned teacher-trainers: Teddy Atlas, Emanuel Steward and Freddie Roach. Over a dozen other experts—among the sharpest minds in boxing—have also contributed their insights and opinions. Some of these experts are old enough to have personally witnessed the best fighters of the past 70 years. This may be the last opportunity to delve into the wealth of information and knowledge they have to offer concerning the “Old School” vs. “New School” boxing debate.

All of the interviews were conducted independently—one on one. The reader will undoubtedly note a similarity in many of the views expressed. A conscious decision was made not to edit out the overlap, for it is the very consistency of these independent opinions that lends strength to their truth.

I have spent over 40 years seeking out and meeting with top boxing experts, documenting conversations, and gaining insights. The information contained in these pages challenges many preconceived notions about the nature of boxing as it exists today. Whether you agree or disagree with the book’s conclusions, of one thing I am certain—no one who reads it will ever look at a boxing match in the same way again.



