



Seven Boxers of
the Golden Age
and Their Challengers

Hitters,
Dancers
and Ring
Magicians



Kelly Richard Nicholson

Foreword by Dan Cuoco

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Front cover: The amazing George “Kid” Lavigne, circa 1896

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A special shout-out
to Frank and the gang —
Jess, Taylor, Christopher, Beacher, Suzy, and Liz —
at Franky and Johnny's Island Park
on Rte. 46 in New Jersey.

Thanks for good times,
hospitality, and encouragement
in a place where good friends did meet.

Acknowledgments

This book deals with athletes who thrived in what some have called a golden age, an age when American boxing came to maturity in a setting that still had in it some grit and taste of the old frontier. It is devoted to several men—founding fathers, one might say, of a modern sporting nation—who provide flesh examples of the age and its spirit.

In completing a project of this size, one becomes indebted to a fair number of folk; the present instance is no exception. As was the case with my first boxing book *A Man Among Men*, there are several individuals who deserve special mention for their generosity. Thus again I give thanks to Tracy Callis, an eminent boxing historian and an admirer of the early fighters, who in recent years has rekindled my interest in that era. Tracy is one of the most discerning individuals on the sporting scene, not to mention a text reader and a researcher of fact whose attention to detail is unmatched. Once more, as well, I am indebted to Harry Shaffer of Antiquities of the Prize Ring for his priceless store of materials on the game at the turn of the century, and for his painstaking helpfulness on more than one occasion.

I wish to thank also Clay Moyle, owner of the greatest boxing library that I have seen, and a man helpful in the extreme when it came to obtaining rare and difficult source material. From Clay I obtained plentiful information, much of it from the marvelous *Fight Stories* magazines of the prewar era. From Monte Cox, another historian with the International Boxing Research Organization (IBRO), I obtained a number of items regarding the career and fighting merits of Joe Gans, about whom Monte has written with keen-eyed admiration. David Jack and Tom Scharf provided little-known facts respectively about Bob Fitzsimmons and Terry McGovern. Christine Lewis, in recent months, has gone the extra mile to obtain for me details regarding George LaBlanche. Finally is the contribution of Dan Cuoco, current director of the IBRO, who has penned a foreword to this book, and

who ranks as one of the game's premier sources of integrity and information.

Integrity? How often do we hear that boxing needs it? Corruption, long rife in the sport's bloodstream, abounds to this day. Yet were boxing, I submit, in the hands of men and women like these, the situation would be different. In the ranks of the IBRO are some of the best individuals whom I have met, in the sport or out of it, and whose friendship does me an honor. So, in short, I say thanks to these individuals for help, intelligence, and plain "old school" courtesy, and for insight in many cases that I would otherwise lack. Whatever merit this book has owes something to each. And whatever the problems of the sport, however much character it may lack, I declare that integrity, too, presently lives in this great and bittersweet science.

The muscles of the shoulders play the most important part in the delivery of a hard blow. Take any boxer who has finely developed back and shoulder muscles and you will find that he is a stout hitter.

Bob Fitzsimmons

... stiffen the arm and push the shoulder forward; the force of the blow should not be ended the moment it lands— keep it going.

Dick O'Farrell, *How to Box*

Ain't no secret. All I do is put my hips into them punches.

Sam Langford

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Foreword

by Dan Cuoco

In reading this manuscript, I am reminded first and foremost of one thing: that of all the pleasures given to sports fans, nothing compares with an absorbing good tale of heroes from boxing's "golden age"!

The stars of this work were men known largely for their punching power. They were men like Sam Langford, Bob Fitzsimmons, and Stanley Ketchel — two-fisted terrors who became famous for the way that they visited sudden disaster on their opponents. Were they truly the hardest punchers of their day? It is a subject laden with controversy: Any selection of a few men as being the best or the most destructive of their time will invite argument. On this point the author does not pretend to have the final word. The controversy, he realizes, will endure. But this book is not merely about punching power, nor merely about boxing talent. It is about heart and soul, and the raw stuff that makes great fighters in any era.

In *Hitters, Dancers and Ring Magicians*, which follows his biography of James J. Jeffries, Kelly Nicholson again delivers a wallop of his own, putting on display a cross-section of the best and bravest in the annals of the game. As a leadoff, he provides an historical context, succinctly tracing high points of the sport from earliest recorded times to the late 19th century. In the process, the reader gets an acquaintance with such figures as James Figg, Jack Broughton, and other pioneers who helped to take boxing from its crude beginnings to its current state. The following seven chapters, effectively mini-biographies, are devoted to fighters who exemplified the strength and spirit of the game in the era of 1890 to 1910, a time for which the author has an obvious affinity. In these chapters the reader learns of men, some of them largely forgotten, who were among the best that the sport has ever seen. Featured on center stage of this discussion, along with

stars just noted, are George “Kid” Lavigne, Barbados Joe Walcott, Joe Gans, and Terry McGovern. In all, a worthy seven they make, men in every case who bestowed value on their sport and paved the way for fighters who have climbed the steps since.

The description of their exploits is first-class. Enriching each chapter are accounts of each man’s greatest ring battles and insightful looks at some of his chief rivals. Kelly does justice to his subjects by examining what made each an immortal—a desire to succeed, an ability to dish it out, and in some cases an astounding capacity to take it in return. The result is a lean and flavorful piece of drama for which the true fight fan hungers.

Introduction

“I am sorry that prize-fighting is gone out,” remarks Dr. Samuel Johnson, late in the eighteenth century, in a conversation with his friend James Boswell. Every art, he contends, “should be preserved, and the art of self-defence is surely important.”¹ Such an art “made people accustomed not to be alarmed at seeing their own blood or feeling a little pain from a wound.”

While he preceded them by a century, Johnson would have admired the athletes who appear in the pages ahead. They were men equal to a challenge, men who were used to seeing blood, and to shedding it, in a time when spirit and muscle were forged in a hard school. There were no million-dollar paydays then, and young ring aspirants often were steered less cautiously in their ventures than they are today. The man who gave his all and came up short in a brutal fight might weep openly at its end — not from weakness, but from the sheer depth of his virile emotion. Competitors had to go it often, perhaps several times in a month, and two men who made a good show could get to know each other well in the years coming. Off nights were inevitable, and win-loss ledgers less pristine.

This is the story of heroes and wayfarers, of artists and proto-scientists, if one may stretch words like *art* and *science* to include what goes on within this arena. As its name suggests, it is about men who could punch, as well as men who excelled in creativity. The main subjects of this work do not exhaust the talent that can be mined from their era; another volume could spotlight contemporaries (some noted herein) arguably just as deserving. But the current selection constitutes a worthy sample.

By way of setting, I felt it appropriate, in the early going, to cover again some ground from *A Man Among Men*, which traced the life and career of heavyweight champion (1899–1905) Jim Jeffries. Thus certain topics noted there — boxing in ancient times, its development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the rise of the modern style — receive again their

due. But in these sections I try also to shine light from new angles, avoiding flat repetition for the sake of readers who have passed this way before.

As to the merits of old-timers versus those of fighters more recent, I offer comment toward the end as I did in the Jeffries volume.² Could these bygone heroes hold their own with the best of today? In some cases, I believe, the answer is yes. But arguments can be made on each side, and in the last tally, greatness is probably best gauged according to its era. And surely boxing greatness is found across the ages: Present-day excellence in the prize ring, as in every field, has a seminal tie to the genius that precedes it.

The structure of the present work is as follows— it begins with discussion of the game's development up to the late nineteenth century, then a chapter is devoted to each of seven fighters George "Kid" Lavigne, Bob Fitzsimmons, Joe Walcott, Joe Gans, Terry McGovern, Sam Langford, and Stanley Ketchel— during the period of about 1890 to 1910 (extending, in Langford's case, a bit further). A brief afterword follows, noting subsequent developments in the sport and the perspectives of several ring historians on the men featured herein.

* * *

"I am not a prize fighter," remarks Bob Fitzsimmons, shortly after winning the middleweight championship. "I am an athlete, and I box for prizes. I belong to the new school, and not the old, and I therefore cannot be styled a prize fighter."³ It is clear, in reading this comment, that boxing was then a sport in transition, moving from the bare-handed turf wars of the 19th century to what is seen on weekly telecasts of today. Some of these men knew what it was to fight with bare knuckles, or with gloves skin-tight; some fought in virtual marathons, wars of attrition that lasted two or three hours.

Well into the 20th century, a feature bout might be scheduled for 20 or more rounds. For this reason, men of the time were accomplished at body punching, a tactic that pays dividends in an extended battle. Less attention is given to this aspect of the game today, when fighters often spend years in the amateur ranks with a scoring system (generally, one punch, one point) that can turn a three-round bout into a fencing match. But punches downstairs, as experienced fighters will tell you, are more profoundly damaging. Get hit in the head, and you may be stunned; get hit below the heart, in that neural center known as the solar plexus, and you will think that your opponent has torn out a chunk of your soul.

The reader will notice also a sheer size difference between "big men" of that day and this. The reason for this difference is complex, but it owes

in part to the fact that athletes now come from a much wider spawning ground than they did a century ago. At the upper end, they themselves are running larger. Boxing's heavyweight contenders at this writing are apt to scale some 250 pounds, and a specimen of 210 (quite good-sized even 30 years ago) is counted as small to average. For this reason the present reader may be taken aback when hearing, say, of "Irish Giant" Peter Maher, a late 19th century slugger standing 5'11" and scaling 178. These were, in fact, respectable figures in their day, and any man above middleweight (generally meaning the low to mid-150s) was in the open weight class. Not until the early 20th century did the sport see the adoption of a 175-pound "light heavyweight" division separating average-sized men from the dreadnaughts, and not until the 1970s was a "cruiserweight" level (190 or 195, and since nudged to 200) added.

Each of my main seven subjects was known for punching. There exist longstanding questions regarding this talent and its origins. Wherein does it reside? Is it a gift from on high, or can it be taught? Punching, like much indeed of human activity, is hard to capture in precise terms. It is tinged, when all is said and done, with some element of mystery. Some fighters do damage with blows that look ordinary; others, just as big, tee off with shots that look as good, yet lack the effect. How is it that one man has "heavy hands" while another does not?

One of the few to address this question in recent times is James Carney, in "What's the Power Source for Boxing's Big Hitters?" Among the factors that seem to be relevant, notes Carney, are strength, speed, timing, concentration, body type, and perhaps others, present in various mixtures in those who merit note as punchers. While there is some positive correlation between raw strength and punching power, there is no less "a whole contingent of rather scrawny guys who [can] knock your brains out."⁴

On this point the old-timers had their ideas, as well. "It is not only the hand and arm that are used in striking," recalls Fitzsimmons during the latter part of his great career. "The legs, body, and shoulders also come into play.... A blow, to have force, must have the 'send' of the legs and the swing of the body with it."⁵ In truth, many words could be expended on the subject without saying more. Maybe there is an analogy in sports like golf and baseball. Hitting of every kind is applied force, an execution of bodily physics wherein balance, leverage, and coordination yield their product. In boxing, as elsewhere, a novice must learn something about rhythm and alignment. He may need to be guarded against a natural tendency to "kill" the target by swinging in roundhouse fashion, or drawing back to gain (so it may seem) punching momentum. A blow from the ordinary hands-up position

can pack surprising power, and its impact may be increased dramatically by slight alterations in delivery, as for example by “riding” one leg or the other, or by getting the hips into the act. (A slight clench of the hand or snap of the wrist at the moment of impact, say some, is also vital.) By the same token, punching is not altogether one thing, for *how good* a puncher you are will depend in some measure on the opponent that you are facing.

* * *

However one may assess this knack, these men certainly had it. Yet a full century now separates us from most of their exploits; how much can we know about what happened back then? Sources, in fact, are more plentiful than one might imagine. Motion picture footage, some of it remarkably clear, dates from as early as 1894. As to literature, newspapers and magazines of the day were thick with commentary on approaching bouts and blow-by-blow reports of their transaction.

In years since, there has built up an accretion also of related material, some of it supplied by eyewitness memory, some by reports secondhand. Such accounts, flavored often with the blood and sap of mad beast and crashing timber, are testament to the love that their authors bore the sport. Even so, the reader must be wary. Penned often in what has been called a “half-blinded by his own blood, he swung from his heels” style, these accounts are a joy to read, but they reflect more, at times, of the writer’s imagination than of the event itself. One source may have two men, at bout’s end, practically knee-deep in each other’s blood, while another, closer to the scene, remarks that “no great damage was done”! A man with ruptured ear tissue, by the same token, fights on with the organ “hanging by a shred.” Stricken by a right hand, he may do a mid-air flip and land (apparently doing a one-and-a-quarter turn) flat on his back. Here, as elsewhere, time breeds magnification. In some cases this enlargement owes to willful yarn-spinning by author or fighter, in some merely to that natural “morphing” of recollection, over time, to which human beings are prone. All things equal, the earlier account (usually also the more conservative) is the one toward which I lean. The inquiring reader will find numerous chapter notes to allow checking of sources firsthand.

There is also a minor issue as to how some of these men sounded when they spoke. Here, too, sources vary and writers embellish. One scribe tries hard to render the *patois* of Afro, Caribbean, or British-based speech as it struck the ear, while another ignores it. (Of course, when the fighter is writing the words, or issuing a comment for publication, no such effort is made.) Overall I follow the lead offered, maintaining a quote as it is given.

As to the books cited, the veteran reader will recognize some to which I am indebted. For information on the era's black prizefighters, there is the five-volume work *Black Dynamite* by Nat Fleischer, founder and editor of *The Ring* magazine, a periodical that began publication in 1922. (Especially of use from this source were the third and fourth volumes, titled *The Three Colored Aces* and *Fighting Furies*.) While this work contains exaggeration, and is sometimes careless in its details, it is unmatched for spirit and for sheer volume of information on its subject. (Fortunately, the reader may want to note, a new level of excellence has begun in this area during the past few years with the first volumes of a multiple work by Kevin Smith.)

Regarding Bob Fitzsimmons, the classic biography is the one by Gilbert Odd, which had its first printing in 1971 and stands to this day as a model of balance, patience, and editorial scrutiny. Fitzsimmons fans have benefited of late also from the large-format pictorial *Fitzsimmons — Boxing's First Triple World Champion* by Christopher Tobin and *Prize Fighter: The Life and Times of Bob Fitzsimmons* by Dale Webb. More recently we have the massive project of Adam J. Pollack, a multi-volume sequential work detailing the exploits of heavyweight champions from John L. Sullivan forward, the third volume of which is *In the Ring with Bob Fitzsimmons*. And recently, too, there is *Lanky Bob*, a thoroughgoing work just released as of this writing, by Keith Robinson. For summaries of Ketchel and McGovern, Fleischer is a ready source, and a veritable one-man repository of insight and anecdote. Here again, one has to maintain a critical distance, as Nat was prone to accept stories at face value, particularly where his own heroes (who were often his personal acquaintances) were concerned.⁶ Thus checking with independent sources is advised.

Other stars noted in this book, such as Lavigne, Gans, and Langford, are deserving no less of separate volumes, though few such volumes are to be found. A new book by Clay Moyle on Langford has done much to remedy the situation in regard to one of these men. A rewarding biography of Joe Gans, by Colleen Aycock and Mark Scott, has recently appeared. Most of the boxers found within these pages still await their due, and with the revived interest in boxing history among historians and scholars of all stripes, one hopes these men will soon receive the attention that they, their sport and their times rightly deserve.

I

The New Game

*They used to fight real vicious,
And went right in to maul
Outside of bites and gouging
No holds were barred at all;
Each milling cove was reckless
And often would abuse
The other fellow's feet with
The spikes upon his shoes!*

Popular refrain, celebrating the advent
of the Marquess of Queensberry rules¹

“No other thrill in the world of sports,” writes Alexander Johnston in a classic text, “can equal that which comes from watching two men engage in combat with no other weapons ... but those with which old Dame Nature has provided them.”²

It is nothing new, this combat. Primal song tells of men who compete with their fists for prizes and admiration. An episode late in Homer's *Iliad* describes two who “toe to toe, let fly at one another.” Epeios, we are told, “leapt out with a long left hook” (it is a nicely current rendition of the Greek) that dropped Euryalos flat on his back.³ Virgil's story of Aeneas, legendary founder of Rome, has in it a kindred scene, in which aging pugilist Entellus dons the gloves against a young hitter named Dares. Swinging wild at one point, the veteran misses and falls to the ground. Rising, fueled by shame and pride, he goes at Dares with both hands, his blows “thick and fast as hail ... drumming on roofs,” to win the battle.⁴ Reference is made, in this story, to a pair of massive gauntlets, seven layers of ox hide loaded with lead and iron, once worn by Dares's brother in his fatal bout with Hercules. (A horror even to Dares himself, they are stained, it is said, with blood and brains from bygone use.)