

THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF PRIZEFIGHTING: PITTSBURGH AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

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IN the last twenty-five years the decline of boxing as a popular sport has been remarkable. During a time when commercialized sport has expanded at an unprecedented pace, the fortunes of the prize ring have shrunk dramatically. Championship matches, especially in the heavyweight class, still generate some public interest, but this has been due more to the personality of former champion Muhammed Ali than to a general growth of public interest in the sport. In comparison with the activities of professional and college football and basketball, and in competition with professional baseball for the entertainment dollar, the prize ring is now the poor relation of the commercial sports family.

This situation has not always been the case. At one time interest in the prize ring dominated the American sports scene. Legendary figures, such as heavyweights Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, and Rocky Marciano, middleweights Sugar Ray Robinson, Rocky Graziano, and Tony Zale, and featherweights Sandy Sadler and Willie Pep, were men who earned thousands of dollars and widespread fame for their exploits inside and outside the twenty-four-foot-square ring.

Boxers were frequently identified with their regions and cities. Dempsey was the "Manassa Mauler," Marciano the "Brockton Bomber," and the Graziano-Zale matches were classics in the history of the American prize ring — the tough Italian ex-convict from New York's Lower East Side brawling with the hard-fisted Polish kid from the steel mills of Gary, Indiana. The decline in such local identification and in the popularity of boxing seemed to coincide. In its heyday, boxing provided the spectator a chance to claim for his state, city, town, and even neighborhood the distinction of being the home of a champion. At no time was this truer than when America entered the twentieth century.

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Yet, despite this popularity, prizefighting remained a not-altogether respectable sport. Well into this century, most states prohibited boxing both legally and socially. Also, prizefighting seemed to be the exclusive province of the immigrant and working class both as to audience and participants. Unlike baseball or football, which are adaptations of games imported from England in the nineteenth century, or basketball, which Dr. James Naismith created in a Springfield, Massachusetts, YMCA, boxing's rules were established first by Jack Broughton in London in the mid-1700s and later revised by Britain's Marquess of Queensberry in 1866. The un-American character of the sport represented in the formulation of its governing rules was heightened by the fact that the best fighters came from the immigrant working classes who swept into this country in the nineteenth century. Coupled with this dual affront to the sensibilities of native Americans was the inherent brutality of the sport.

According to Broughton's London Prize Ring rules, a man could not gouge, butt with the head, knee, or hit a downed opponent. Despite such niceties, knockdowns still determined rounds, seconds assisted a fighter to and from "scratch" (a line drawn in the center of the ring), and a man had thirty seconds to come to scratch after each knockdown. All fights were "finish fights"; that is, the bout continued until one of the fighters could not "come to scratch." The matches were bareknuckle and allowed a combination of wrestling and boxing with the winner receiving two-thirds of the specified purse or prize while the loser accepted, if he could, the remaining third.¹ Such "finish fights" shocked many people and left the impression that the sport appealed only to the rowdy elements in society, particularly the professional sporting men, the gamblers, or "the fancy" as they were known.

Still the prize ring had its defenders. In an era dominated by the rugged competition of politics and business, when such slogans as "the struggle to survive" and "the survival of the fittest" were becoming an American creed, the prize ring appeared to an early sports writer as "the physical expression of the fighting spirit of man expressed by other Americans in business."²

The emergence of John L. Sullivan in the late 1870s gave supporters of the prize ring the larger-than-life figure needed to defend the sport. Sullivan's brag, "I can whip [or something more colorful]

1 Frank C. Merke, *Encyclopedia of Sport*, 4th ed. (New York, 1969), 239; John V. Grombach, *The Saga of Sock* (New York, 1949), 339.

2 Robert Edgren, "Fighters by Nature," *Outing* 43 (Dec. 1903): 343.

any man in the house," on which he made good on numerous occasions, restored a sense of individualism to a society enmeshed in the growing industrialization and urbanization of the late nineteenth century. The extent of this public interest can be judged by the newspaper coverage devoted to Sullivan's brawl with Jake Kilrain for the heavyweight championship of the world in 1889. Though prizefighting was illegal in every one of the country's thirty-eight states, the nation's dailies carried detailed news of the forthcoming battle. All the elements which made the prize ring "an immoral, vicious and brutal sport" were found in this match. Here were lower-class Irish-Americans brutally beating each other according to London Prize Ring rules, while the sporting fraternity wagered thousands of dollars on the outcome. Yet even the *New York Times*, which had long opposed all prize ring activity, acknowledged the tremendous interest in the match: "never, during even a presidential election, has there been so much excitement as there is now . . . even when the brutal exhibition is over and it is known that Sullivan was successful and that 75 rounds were necessary to knockout Kilrain."³

The Pittsburgh newspapers reported the exploits of Sullivan and Kilrain as dutifully as did their counterparts in New York, Chicago, or St. Louis. Matches had long been held in river towns. With the advent of the railroads, rail centers also became the sites for an increasing number of matches with the railroad companies combining in one fare the price of a train ticket and the admission to the proposed bout. Pittsburgh qualified as both a rail center and a river town and so it witnessed a corresponding increase in prize ring activity.

There is no question that prizefighting was illegal in Pittsburgh. The Pennsylvania legislature in March 1867 specifically outlawed prizefighting, stating:

that from and after the passage of this act, whomsoever shall engage, or participate in any prize-fight, within this commonwealth, or any fight or pugilistic contest, on the results of which any money or valuable thing is bet or wagered, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and on conviction thereof shall be fined in a sum not exceeding \$1000 and imprisoned in the penitentiary or the jail of the proper county for a period not exceeding two years.

The legislature meant to strike not only the actions of the fighters but onlookers when it added that, "anyone being present at such a fight, or laying any bet or wager on the result thereof whether present or not, shall be considered a participant therein."⁴ This statute re-

³ *New York Times*, July 9, 1889.

⁴ *Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (Mar. 22, 1867), No. 22: 39.

mained in effect throughout Pennsylvania until the passage of the McBride Act of 1923, which legalized "boxing, sparring and wrestling matches or exhibitions for purses" and established an athletic commission to regulate the sport.

A way around the 1867 law emerged in the 1880s. In 1883, Pennsylvania courts upheld the city solicitor of Philadelphia by indicating that "sparring exhibitions were not forbidden nor were they unlawful. . . . and whether they were likely to be conducted as to cause a breach of the peace, was a matter for the mayor [of a given locality] to decide."⁵ Thus, if a promoter of a "sparring exhibition" could win approval of a mayor the fight was on.

Combined with this interpretation of the existing law was the change taking place in the rules governing the prize ring itself. In 1866, the Marquess of Queensberry, a prominent figure in British sporting circles, drew up a set of regulations designed to remove some of the brutality from the old London Prize Ring rules. These outlawed wrestling or hitting an opponent while being held, provided for a fixed time limit for each round — three minutes, and introduced the practice of padded gloves for the fighters. More important, the rules eliminated the "coming to scratch" after a round by requiring a fight to be resumed within ten seconds of a knockdown or the downed fighter would be declared the loser on a knockout.⁶ These new rules appealed to the sporting fraternity because they led more frequently to a clear winner. At the same time, for those who hoped to gain public support for the prize ring the rules appeared to prevent the grueling finish fights which had characterized the bareknuckle era.

Pittsburgh witnessed an increase in ring activity during the last decade of the nineteenth century, but the sport still remained circumscribed both legally and socially in the city. The matches that took place generally were fought in outlying mill towns such as Homestead, Millvale, Aliquippa, Allegheny, or on barges in the Ohio River where they were technically outside the jurisdiction of local authorities. The matches were gloved bouts, for the Queensberry rules had gained general acceptance by the 1890s. The reporting of these bouts became an important part of the Pittsburgh newspaper scene. Colorful by-lines taken from the jargon of the ring were introduced in the sports sections of the major dailies. Names like "Jimmy Jab," "Jabs and Jolts," and "Solar Plexus" offered the public news of the local and national prize ring activity as well as commentary and opinion

5 *Purdum's Pennsylvania Statutes Annotated*, No. 3: 373.

6 John Durant, *The Heavyweight Championship* (New York, 1952), 20.

regarding the quality and quantity of the bouts taking place.

The Pittsburgh newspapers offered the prize ring an invaluable service in the promotion of prizefighting. Since no commission existed to promote and regulate the matches in the city or state during this period, the responsibility for arranging matches locally fell to the newspapers. If Richard Kyle Fox had determined to make the *National Police Gazette* "the arbiter of the masses in sports and the gay life" nationally, the local newspapers accepted the same role for the Pittsburgh area. Chief among the local papers to provide this promotional service were the *Pittsburgh Post*, the *Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch*, the *Pittsburgh Press*, the *Pittsburgh Chronicle*, and after its establishment in 1906 the *Pittsburgh Sun*. The technique for this practice remained remarkably simple. The prizefighter, or in many cases his manager, would issue a challenge to a specific individual boxer or to any fighter at a given weight through the auspices of the newspapers. A money deposit then would be left with the newspaper by the challenging party. In April 1899, for example, James ("Red") Mason deposited \$50 with the *Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch* for Jack Bennett of McKeesport to fight Ed Kennedy of Allegheny for \$250 a side. In the same year, "Lowden Campbell, a local merchant, claimed the lightweight championship of the tri-state area and offered to meet all comers for the title" through the pages of the *Pittsburgh Post*. Even though this practice was more common around 1900, as late as 1906 the *Pittsburgh Sun*, as part of its challenge to the other dailies in the city, arranged fights and served as the depository for challenge money.⁷ The fact that this practice was popular in Pittsburgh can further be demonstrated by the publication in the *National Police Gazette* of a challenge by Billy Corcoran, manager of a prominent Pittsburgh featherweight, Jack McClelland, "to any fighter at 126 pounds on behalf of his fighter for a purse of \$500 or \$1000 a side, excepting the current champion, Terry McGovern of New York."⁸

The development of the athletic clubs as sponsors for ring activity brought on the decline of this role for the newspapers. Athletic and social clubs offered the prize ring the opportunity for stability and standardization of regulation in the promotion of matches. The clubs presented the prize ring with an avenue to respectability because they took promotion out of the hands of gamblers who, the *Pittsburgh Sun* editorialized, were "putting the sport down and out in every city and

⁷ *Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch*, Apr. 1, 1899; *Pittsburgh Post*, Jan. 1, 1899; *Pittsburgh Sun*, Mar. 12, 1906.

⁸ *National Police Gazette*, July 27, 1901.

town of any importance.”⁹ A bout sponsored by the Emerald Athletic Club typifies the character of early club fights. The match took place on March 7, 1899, in a circus tent just outside the Pittsburgh city line on South Thirty-fifth Street and drew a crowd of 3,000 people. The fighters were local men, Jack Bennett of McKeesport and George Plante of Pittsburgh’s South Side. Interest in the match had been stirred through promotional work by the city’s newspapers which billed it as “the most important boxing contest ever held in Pittsburgh and probably ever held between New York and Chicago.”¹⁰ While this type of journalistic hyperbole is suspect, nonetheless it ignited public interest. The *Daily Dispatch* remarked that “a large number of the most prominent businessmen of the two cities [Pittsburgh and Allegheny] will be present.” As the admission price for the match was \$1.00 for general admission and \$2.00 and \$3.00 for reserved seats, “most of the mill men of the Southside were at the contest to see Plante perform, and as a result the mills were idle last night.”¹¹ The South Siders were not disappointed. Plante knocked out Bennett in ten rounds.

The athletic clubs’ effect on the quality of matches is demonstrated in the action of the National Athletic Club in 1909. Sponsoring a boxing card for Pittsburgh in August of that year, the National Athletic Club refused to pay fighters who appeared to feign efforts in the ring. This decision was upheld by the superintendent of police, Thomas McQuaide, as a protection of the interest of the public from fraud. Realizing that the public interest in the prize ring depended on the guarantee of quality matches for their admission fees, the National Athletic Club authorized the referee to disqualify any fighter on the spot and to appoint a substitute for the match if the first fighter gave a feigned performance. The club also required a physical examination by the club’s physician to prevent an injured fighter from entering a club-sponsored match.¹²

The athletic clubs did not single-handedly change the public image of the prize ring in Pittsburgh. However, their growth as fight promoters corresponded very closely to the growth of prizefighting in the city. The two championship fights held in Pittsburgh during the first decade of the twentieth century were both held under the auspices of the National Athletic Club. In May 1909, Stanley Ketchell successfully defended his middleweight crown at the Duquesne Gardens. And

⁹ *Pittsburgh Sun*, Mar. 17, 1906.

¹⁰ *Pittsburgh Post*, Mar. 5, 1899.

¹¹ *Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch*, Mar. 7, 1899.

¹² *Pittsburgh Sun*, Aug. 27, 1909.

in July 1909, the heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson, fought a six-round no-decision bout with Tony Ross of New Castle, Pennsylvania, at the same venue. Both these bouts drew large enthusiastic crowds, but the 8,000 fans at the Johnson-Ross fight exceeded all previous attendance records. Barrett O'Hare, the boxing writer for the *Daily Dispatch*, cited these two bouts (along with the Jim Jeffries exhibition in June) as proof of the improved status of the sport in Pittsburgh.¹³

The only recorded death in the Pittsburgh ring came in a bout sponsored by the Greater Pittsburgh Athletic Club. In 1899, a black heavyweight from Chester, Pennsylvania, named Tucker Townsend, fighting under the ring name Kid Lavelle, died as a result of a beating administered by John Cavanaugh of Pittsburgh. This promotion was one of the first ventures in the prize ring for the athletic club, and while Lavelle's death temporarily halted all ring activity in Pittsburgh, ten years later the same organization was, with the National Athletic Club, the leading promoter of matches in the area.

The reforms introduced by the local athletic clubs made it possible for the respectable citizens of Pittsburgh to support a sport still technically illegal. The *National Police Gazette* described the fight fan as a "gallus gent who dresses loud, always has a bet down and is the hardest kind of rooter, . . . a man who takes in all the shows and pays his way . . . who wears a suit of the best pattern, a cigar much elevated in his mouth and a fedora hat of the latest block."¹⁴ The local press of this era does not give the same picture of the Pittsburgh fan. From the "large number of the most prominent businessmen" and "the mill men of the Southside" who flocked to the Bennett-Plante bout in a circus tent in 1899 to the crowd composed of "every degree of citizenship in the city" who jammed the Duquesne Gardens for the Johnson-Ross bout in 1909, the public support of the prize ring in Pittsburgh bridged the social and economic divisions of society.

The fighters themselves, however, were not drawn from "every degree of citizenship in the city." In every category the boxing headliners were, with few exceptions, either immigrants from Ireland or native sons of Irish parents who had settled in the United States. The identification of the Irish with the prize ring in the nineteenth century is reflected in the practice adopted by many fighters of changing their names to more Irish-sounding aliases. For example, Tony Ross was the ring alias for Antonio Rossilano.

¹³ *Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch*, July 1, 1909.

¹⁴ *National Police Gazette*, Sept. 7, 1901.

After 1900, other ethnic groups came to dominate the sport in Pittsburgh. The *Pittsburgh Post* in 1899 had published a list of the eleven leading area fighters who offered some promise of gaining national recognition. All but two were Irish-Americans. To dramatize the change which took place in the Pittsburgh prize ring in only a decade, none of the three leading fighters in Pittsburgh in 1910 was Irish. Frank Klaus and George Chipulonis (who fought under the name George Chip) were outstanding middleweights and both future champions in that weight class. The Italian Tony Ross never achieved championship status but he was the best heavyweight produced in the Pittsburgh area since the time of John Finnegan and John Cavanaugh at the turn of the century. Chip and Ross, by adopting Irish-sounding ring names, demonstrate the still popular identification of the prize ring with Irishmen. Yet the prominence of these three non-Irishmen, along with the presence on the horizon of Pittsburgh's greatest fighter, Harry Greb, a young man of German descent, indicates the broader ethnic base boxing had achieved in the Steel City by 1910.

The great majority of local boxers, whether Irish, German, or "other," fought in the middleweight, lightweight, and featherweight divisions. These bouts were exceedingly popular, which may, to some extent, explain why the extensive ring activity in Pittsburgh went undisturbed by law. The *Police Gazette* in 1901 commented on the phenomenon that "middleweight, lightweight and featherweight bouts go relatively unmolested whereas the heavyweight matches are frequently outlawed."¹⁵ The bouts held in Pittsburgh at the Grand Opera House, the old City Hall on Market Street, the Duquesne Gardens, the old Exposition Hall, and the Bijou Theatre on Sixth Street, as well as those in tents and barges on the Ohio River were so frequent, so well reported, and so well attended that the lack of nationally-known heavyweights did not diminish Pittsburgh's reputation as a fight center.

The first championship bout in Pittsburgh involved the middleweight crown. Stanley Ketchell, the reigning champion, defeated Kid Hubert in May 1909 at the Duquesne Gardens. The newspaper promotion and reporting of this match, held under the auspices of the National Athletic Club, emphasized the public interest in ring activity by calling it "Pittsburgh's greatest fistic event in years." Ketchell, though not a native, was extremely popular in the Steel City. Indeed, one newspaper commented bluntly that "Pittsburgh is a Ketchell town."

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Mar. 16, 1901.

At the same time, a young Pittsburgh middleweight named Frank Klaus was making a name for himself locally and nationally. In November 1909, Klaus fought a draw with Ketchell's number-one rival, Billy Papke, a man who had beaten Ketchell in 1908. Though Ketchell had redeemed this defeat with two victories over Papke, Klaus's good showing earned him a shot at Ketchell's crown. Frank Klaus's battle with Ketchell in March 1910 at the Duquesne Gardens marked the second middleweight championship bout held in Pittsburgh within a year. The ability of Klaus to hold the champion to a draw opened the way for the Pittsburgh fighter to become the city's first titleholder three years later. Klaus was the last middleweight to go unbeaten against Ketchell before the champion's untimely death in October 1910.

Pittsburgh fighters were contenders in the lighter weight divisions as well. Jack McClelland, the clever featherweight, had knocked out Abe Attell at the World's Fair in St. Louis in 1904. Though Attell held no championship at the time, he refused to meet McClelland again after Attell won the title in 1908. Tommy Sullivan, from whom Attell won the title, and Young Corbett, who preceded Sullivan as champion, had also refused to meet McClelland, most likely depriving him and Pittsburgh of an earlier championship.

There is no question that the twin motives of financial reward and improved social standing motivated the men who fought. The imagination of many a sturdy man working in a Pittsburgh mill for fourteen dollars a week top salary had to be stirred when the *Pittsburgh Post* reported that a better-than-average middleweight, Kid Broad, earned \$1,300 in one month of ring activity, and that an average heavyweight named Kid McCoy earned over \$11,000 in two weeks from two matches.

The fighters themselves made it clear why they fought. The *Pittsburgh Chronicle* quoted a prominent California heavyweight, Joe Choynski, on his reasons for being a prizefighter: "I can't see any glory in this business. . . . I am in it for my bread and butter," even to the point of throwing a match "if there was enough inducement."¹⁶ And in a long article on one of Pittsburgh's leading boxers of the era, Jack McClelland, the columnist "Solar Plexus" characterized McClelland as "a professional ringman who fought regularly and well for the income he received from the ring."¹⁷ A half-century later, Jack McClelland himself in an interview with Harry Keck of the *Sun-*

¹⁶ *Pittsburgh Chronicle*, Apr. 14, 1899.

¹⁷ "Solar Plexus," *Pittsburgh Post*, Apr. 16, 1899.

Telegraph recalled that dreams of wealth pushed him into the prize ring. McClelland even remarked that he had little interest in prize-fighting himself either at the time he was active or following his retirement.

Fighting for money, however, was not seen as degrading by the public, but rather big money made fighting a "profession." One commentator wrote that "the bare-knuckle Irish toughs who combined prize-fighting with their roles as bodyguards and bully-boys for political organizations such as Tammany Hall" were replaced by a new type of man "indistinguishable from successful people in other fields of endeavor."¹⁸ The *Pittsburgh Post* described the popular feather-weight champion, Terry McGovern, as "a puritan, who does not smoke, drink or swear, who is religious and devoted to his family." Even the clergy sometimes saw virtue in the fight game. One Sunday in 1910, the Reverend O. M. Houghton delivered a sermon at Kittanning, Pennsylvania, on hard work and its rewards. Perhaps the preacher was a fight fan, but in any case he offered the example of former champion Jim Jeffries who "threw away what was earned by hard work so that now a Black man claims the title of World Champion."¹⁹ The inherent racism of this sermon aside, the acknowledgment by a minister that prize ring activity was acceptable hard work demonstrates the degree of social approval won by professional ringmen.

While the McClellands, the Klauses, the Chips, the Finnegans, and the Rosses of turn of the century Pittsburgh were not members of the Duquesne Club or guests at the homes of the Mellons, the Carnegies, or the Fricks, they nevertheless enjoyed a popular respect far exceeding that given to ringmen a half-century before. Pittsburghers continued avidly to follow their own fighters — the Zivics, the Conns, the Burleys — until professional fighting itself fell on the hardest of times in the 1960s. Now an appeal to local pride is not often heard in the gale of national huckstering, be it for beer or boxing.

Turn of the century America sought justification for the natural spirit of individualism and competition. Professional boxing for all its social and legal prohibition provided the public with an image in step with the changing American scene. The ideal of advancement based on merit and hard work rather than birth or position prompted the emigration of millions to these shores in the decades before and after 1900.

¹⁸ Robert Edgren, "The Modern Gladiators: Why America Succeeds," *Outing* 41 (Mar. 1903): 736.

¹⁹ *Pittsburgh Post*, Jan. 24, 1910.

The prize ring reflected that ideal more than any other sporting activity. As one commentator wrote, "the social stratification in England which was reflected in their prize-ring where boxers were little more than body-guards and bully-boys for the aristocracy, was not to be found in America. The social mobility of the American society, so idealized by the proponents of industrial America, was nowhere better demonstrated than in the American prize-ring."²⁰ Pittsburgh was the archetype of industrial America. The decline of boxing's popularity may well reflect the decline of the popularity of this earlier ideal.

²⁰ Alfred Austin, "Old and New Pugilism," *Outing* 37 (Mar. 1901): 682-83.

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