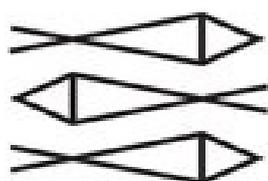


# THE SWEET SCIENCE

A. J. LIEBLING



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**THE SWEET SCIENCE**

**Foreword by Robert Anasi**

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# Foreword

by Robert Anasi

No one wrote about boxing better than A. J. Liebling. This is saying something, as the competition is pretty fierce, running as it does through Norman Mailer all the way back to *The Aeneid*. Liebling's first boxing essays appeared in the 1930s, but his great run didn't start until 1951. Between that year and 1963, he churned out thirty-four pugilistic masterpieces for *The New Yorker*, a publication that cared little for the "sweet science of bruising" but appreciated Joe Liebling.<sup>1</sup> Liebling wasn't a boxer, a writer per se; a man of commodious inclination, he wrote with equal facility about the racetrack, World War II, France, the press, politicians (and other con-men), the low-life, and food. Yet boxing held a particular allure for him. He had boxed enough to enjoy the niceties of the sport, and the characters of the prize ring provided abundant material for his writing. I like to think that Liebling was foreordained to write about boxing: the first newspaper article he remembered reading, at age seven, was about an Oklahoma fighter. Tellingly, boxing analogies and anecdotes permeate his non-boxing books such as *Between Meals* and *The Telephone Booth Indian*.

On boxing Liebling is a joy to read. It would be redundant to list the many virtues of his prose—like handing out an instruction manual for a sunset. More useful, perhaps, is to mention what he *doesn't* do. These essays avoid the dazzled mystification of much "literary" boxing prose and the hard-boiled sentimentality of the sports journalism of Liebling's day. From time to time Liebling's erudition will send you running for the dictionary—choice mots include *pyknic* and *succedaneum*, and there are oddball references to Greek tragedy and an Arab philosopher named Ibn Khaldun. The interest, however, is not to overawe but to entertain (he calls one Southern politician "a peckerwood Caligula").

Although Liebling's observations are suffused with humor, generally at the expense of his principal subjects—fighters and trainers, managers and fans—his drollery is never malicious. As often as he satirizes fight people, he credits them with shrewdness and insight, though often it may filter through a guttural idiom. Liebling writes with bemused tolerance, the hallmark of an artist whose work took him through every stratum of urban life to Indian reservations and the D-Day beaches of Normandy. One thing Liebling certainly is not is a racist, although no less an authority than Joyce Carol Oates makes the claim to the contrary. Liebling does refer to African-Americans as "colored" or "Negro," but that is simply the diction of his period. What Oates fails to realize is that Liebling had more empathy for fighters than he did for anyone else. Compared to how Liebling treats southern politicians and prudent boxers get off easy.

Liebling's voice is urbane, his tastes cosmopolitan. He appreciates the crowd and is attuned to the minute interactions and exchanges of city life. Like a man out for a weekend stroll, Liebling takes his time; the typical essay meanders from gym to training camp and through the city, making stops in various centuries and continents. Liebling is the educated stand-in for the man on the street, delighted to take the time to look at what's happening around him—though he is also entirely capable of taut dramatic writing (best demonstrated in "Charles I," the book's shortest essay).

Liebling's good fortune, and ours, rests in the fact that *The New Yorker* of his day trusted its top writers to expound upon whatever inspired them. While *The Sweet Science* focuses mostly on title fights, the outcome is less important than the route Liebling takes to get there. So he toddles over to Ireland for a modest bout simply because it's being held in the town that gave its name to every all-out brawl—Donnybrook. Such whimsy is rarely visible in today's celebrity and scandal-driven

market, where every article must reduce to a one sentence “idea,” and fact is king. The rare opportunities writers have to treat their subjects goes a long way toward explaining their compressed, overheated prose—they know they aren’t likely to get the chance again, and only have a few thousand words to fit everything in. By contrast, the Liebling pace is leisurely. What he can’t treat in one essay can be easily taken up in the next; themes evolve and intertwine throughout the eighteen pieces. Celebrities are disdained, scandals absent. By the time Sonny Liston became heavyweight champion in 1962, he had attracted notoriety equal to that of Mike Tyson today, yet Liebling barely refers to Liston’s criminal past. The rough champion is humanized through his exchanges with a sympathetic Liebling. The obvious goes unmentioned.

To most contemporary Americans the customs and traditions of fighters appear as bizarre and savage as those of Kandangai headhunters. In the 1950s, however, boxing was much closer to the general public. This familiarity, and Liebling’s own boxing experience, allowed him to represent the sport *as sport*. His stance toward its sometimes disturbing violence might seem blase to us—as when he describes Ezra Charles’s disfigurement at the hands of Rocky Marciano—but Liebling saw boxing as the pros do: a job, more difficult than most but also more rewarding. He doesn’t make the ring over into the setting for a morality play or an alternate site for Armageddon (he had witnessed the real thing on the battlefields of Europe).

This is not to say that Liebling didn’t take boxing seriously. As far as he was concerned, boxing deserved to be called “science.” He understood the intellectual and physical effort necessary to master the craft. Although he recognized the brute force of a Marciano, he preferred technicians to sluggers—a suitable predilection for one of the great stylists of his generation. Hence his disapproval of Ingemar Johansson’s lax training methods and his appreciation of the shrewd old artist Archie Moore, whom he called “a boxer’s boxer, as Stendhal was for a long time a writer’s writer.” Liebling rarely covered unproven fighters, but his eye for talent was acute enough to recognize, in late 1961, the aura around a brash young heavyweight named Cassius Clay (he also enjoyed Clay’s verbal prowess).

Liebling knew he was covering a sport in decline. He had watched boxing descend from a pinnacle in the 1920s, when it rivaled baseball as a national pastime and Jack Dempsey garnered more headlines than Babe Ruth. Even during the Depression-era doldrums of 1938, New York City counted more than a thousand registered professional boxers who performed weekly at seven city clubs, while amateurs fought as often as every other day for prizes that could easily be pawned (a useful quality in the twentieth century’s worst economic crisis). When Liebling returned to the beat fourteen years later, New York had only 241 pros; all but one of the clubs had shut down, and the old Madison Square Garden, world capital of boxing, was a ghost kingdom with spectral tiers of empty seats.

Liebling’s prose is shaded by the recognition that his time is passing. Time hangs over all of us, but it strikes no one more swiftly than boxers, who can become old men in three minutes. Even the great champions, men who have defeated every other opponent, are helpless against this threat. *The Sweet Science* opens with the last stand of Joe Louis, hero of Liebling’s young manhood, and closes with a thirty-nine-year-old (at least) Archie Moore succumbing to Marciano. The succession of title-holders is the central story of prizefighting, and no reign ends without bloodshed. Liebling’s sympathies rest with the old men in their futile struggle (his terse sentences on Louis’s downfall are the most affecting in the book). With a self-proclaimed “insatiable nostalgia for the past,” Liebling is perfectly suited to the task of eulogizing the fighters of his youth.

His nostalgia, however, encompasses more than a fading generation of fighters. A much larger world was disappearing, that blue-collar, urban America Liebling covered in the 1930s and left for the Second World War. Boxing was that era’s canary in the coal mine. Like Kerouac with his railroad hobos and skid-row mantras, Liebling laments the vanishing underworld of the Depression, although in rather a different context. Liebling blamed boxing’s suffocation on an invention he had little use

for: “a ridiculous gadget called television ... utilized in selling beer and razor blades.” (Liebling had commensurate disdain for baseball and Chicago, Illinois, which he famously dubbed “the Second City”). Television, for Liebling, had strangled boxing by taking audiences from the boxing clubs and paydays from club fighters. As he put it: “Television gives so plausible an adumbration of a fight, for nothing, that you feel it would be extravagant to pay your way in ... Men are becoming slaves of the shadows.”

In postwar America, boxing was losing its audience for the very same reasons cities were losing their inhabitants. The new Levittown culture was killing the community that sustained Liebling. For Liebling the city was the center of American life, and New York was America’s central city. Yet the New York he walked through was at the grim commencement of a forty-year decline. Postwar America was trending away from the city of pedestrians toward the isolation of the suburbs, where TV screens and passenger automobiles filtered reality. (One woman who spent the fifteen years after the war abroad told me, “When I came back, all everyone talked about was their lawn and their car.”) The exodus transformed cities from communities to wastelands, and new suburbanites looked at those left behind not as fellow citizens but as criminals and murderers. Boxing has always been a primarily urban pastime (whereas the defining suburban sport is auto-racing, in which the machine and its anonymous mechanics hold far greater importance than the driver). When white Americans left the cities, they left boxing as well.

One of my great literary regrets is that Liebling didn’t live to cover Cassius Clay’s triumph over Liston and Clay’s subsequent transfiguration into Muhammad Ali—Liebling died a few months before their first bout. The world Ali ushered in was a new one, its Day-Glo struggles more in tune with Tom Wolfe’s hyperkinetic prose. Yet, like all true artists, Liebling looked forward as well as back, and would surely have kept his equipoise through the turmoil of the ’60s. Literary journalism is as old as newspapers, but what Wolfe dubbed “New Journalism” can be directly traced through Liebling and his brittle colleague Joseph Mitchell. Moving beyond the clever parochialism of *The New Yorker* and the false objectivity of traditional news writing, Liebling helped to legitimize a narrator whose subjective stylings enrich reality. Early Tom Wolfe reads a lot like Liebling on speed.

I can only surmise about what Liebling would make of today’s pugilistic dark ages. In his era fighters fought rematches of close fights, even title fights, almost automatically. Ray Robinson and Jake LaMotta met six times, inconceivable for champions today. In the 1950s a quality pro thought himself underemployed if he had only eight or ten bouts a year, and the amateur scene was thriving. Nowadays pros who make a living from boxing are about as common as Yetis, and amateurs can’t get enough fights to learn the rudiments of the craft. It has been several generations since the tinsmith meccas of Las Vegas and Atlantic City displaced the Garden as showcases of the sweet science. My own experiences as an amateur boxer looking for fights, and as a writer writing about them, took me back and forth across the five boroughs on an often-futile quest. Today’s boxer is an endangered species; at times I felt like a zoologist searching for a rare snail in the Amazon basin.

Over a century intervened between Liebling’s efforts and those of his beloved Pierce Egan. Evidently, great boxing and great journalism come together only at rare intervals. Yet although the sport has become a part-time avocation for most, there is no danger that boxing will go extinct, or that writers will lose their fascination with it. Liebling took the long view: “... the desire to punch other boys in the nose will survive in our culture ... [Boxing] is an art of the people, like making love.”

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# Introduction

“Sweet Science of Bruising!”

—*Boxiana*, 1824

“I had heard that Ketchel’s dynamic onslaught was such it could not readily be withstood, but I figured I could jab his puss off ... . I should have put the bum away early, but my timing was a fraction of an iota off.”

—Philadelphia Jack O’Brien, talking, in 1938, about something that had happened long ago

It is through Jack O’Brien, the *Arbiter Elegantiarum Philadelpiae*, that I trace my rapport with the historic past through the laying-on of hands. He hit me, for pedagogical example, and he had been hit by the great Bob Fitzsimmons, from whom he won the light-heavyweight title in 1906. Jack had a score to show for it. Fitzsimmons had been hit by Corbett, Corbett by John L. Sullivan, he by Paddy Ryan with the bare knuckles, and Ryan by Joe Goss, his predecessor, who as a young man had felt the fist of the great Jem Mace. It is a great thrill to feel that all that separates you from the early Victorians is a series of punches on the nose. I wonder if Professor Toynbee is as intimately attuned to his source. The Sweet Science is joined onto the past like a man’s arm to his shoulder.

I find it impossible to think that such a continuum can perish, but I will concede that we are entering a period of minor talents. The Sweet Science has suffered such doldrums before, like the long stretch noted by Pierce Egan, the great historian of *Boxiana*, between the defeat of John Broughton in 1757 and the rise of Daniel Mendoza in 1789, or the more recent Dark Age between the retirement of Tunney in 1928 and the ascension of Joe Louis in the middle thirties. In both periods champions of little worth succeeded each other with the rapidity of the emperors who followed Nero, leaving the public scarce time to learn their names. When Louis came along he knocked out *five* of these worthless champions—Schmeling, Sharkey, Camera, Baer, and Braddock, the last of whom happened to be holding the title when Louis hit him. A decade later he knocked out Jersey Joe Walcott, who nevertheless won the title four years afterward. His light extended in both directions historically, exposing the insignificance of what preceded and followed.

It is true there exist certain generalized conditions today, like full employment and a late school leaving age, that militate against the development of first-rate professional boxers. (They militate also against the development of first-rate acrobats, fiddlers, and *chefs de cuisine*.) “Drummers and boxers to acquire excellence, must begin young,” the great Egan wrote in 1820. “There is a peculiar *nimbleness* of the *wrist* and exercise of the shoulder required, that is only obtained from growth and practice.” Protracted exposure to education conflicts with this acquisition, but if a boy has a true vocation he can do much in his spare time. Tony Canzoneri, a very fine featherweight and lightweight of the thirties, told me once, for example, that he never had on a boxing glove until he was eight years old. “But of course I had done some street fighting,” he said to explain how he had overcome his late start. Besides, there are a lot of unblighted areas like Cuba and North Africa and Siam that are beginning to turn out a lot of fighters now.

The immediate crisis in the United States, forestalling the one high living standards might bring on, has been caused by the popularization of a ridiculous gadget called television. This is utilized in the

sale of beer and razor blades. The clients of the television companies, by putting on a free boxing show almost every night of the week, have knocked out of business the hundreds of small-city and neighborhood boxing clubs where youngsters had a chance to learn their trade and journeymen to mature their skills. Consequently the number of good new prospects diminishes with every year, and the peddlers' public is already being asked to believe that a boy with perhaps ten or fifteen fights behind him is a topnotch performer. Neither advertising agencies nor brewers, and least of all the networks, give a hoot if they push the Sweet Science back into a period of genre painting. When it is in a coma they will find some other way to peddle their peanuts.

In truth the kind of people who run advertising agencies and razor-blade mills have little affinity with the Heroes of *Boxiana*. A boxer, like a writer, must stand alone. If he loses he cannot call an executive conference and throw off on a vice president or the assistant sales manager. He is consequently resented by fractional characters who cannot live outside an organization. A fighter's hostilities are not turned inward, like a Sunday tennis player's or a lady M.P.'s. They come out naturally with his sweat, and when his job is done he feels good because he has expressed himself. Chain-of-command types, to whom this is intolerable, try to rationalize their envy by proclaiming solicitude for the fighter's health. If a boxer, for example, ever went as batty as Nijinsky, all the howlers in the world would be screaming "Punch-drunk." Well, who hit Nijinsky? And why isn't there a campaign against ballet? It gives girls thick legs. If a novelist who lived exclusively on applecores won the Nobel Prize, vegetarians would chorus that the repulsive nutriment had invigorated his brain. But when the prize goes to Ernest Hemingway, who has been a not particularly evasive boxer for years, no one rises to point out that the percussion has apparently stimulated his intellection. Albert Camus, the French probable for the Nobel, is an ex-boxer, too.

I was in the Neutral Corner saloon in New York a year or so ago when a resonant old gentleman, wiry, straight, and white-haired, walked in and invited the proprietors to his ninetieth birthday party in another saloon. The shortly-to-be nonagenarian wore no glasses, his hands were shapely, his forearms hard, and every hair looked as if, in the old water-front phrase, it had been drove in with a nail. On the card of invitation he laid on the bar was printed:

Billy Ray  
Last surviving Bare Knuckle Fighter

The last bare-knuckle fight in which the world heavyweight championship changed hands was in 1888. Mr. Ray would not let anybody else in the Neutral buy a drink.

As I shared his bounty I thought of all his contemporary lawn-tennis players, laid away with the thromboses, and the golfers hoisted out of sand pits after suffering coronary occlusions. If they had turned in time to a more wholesome sport, I reflected, they might still be hanging on as board chairmen and senior editors instead of having their names on memorial pews. I asked Mr. Ray how many fights he had had and he said, "A hundred forty. The last one was with gloves. I thought the game was getting soft, so I retired."

When I was last in Hanover, New Hampshire, faculty members were dropping on the tennis courts so fast that people making up a doubles party always brought along a spare assistant professor.

This discussion of the relative salubrity of the Sweet Science and its milksop succedanea is what my friend Colonel John R. Stingo would call a labyrinthian digression.

It is because of the anticipated lean aesthetic period induced by television that I have decided

publish this volume now. The transactions narrated in it happen to comprise what may be the last heroic cycle for a long time. The Second World War, which began to affect American boxing when the draft came along in 1940, stopped the development of new talent. This permitted aging prewar boxers like Joe Louis and Joe Walcott to maintain their dominance longer than was to be expected under normal conditions. By the late forties, when the first few postwar fighters were beginning to shine, television got its thumb on the Old Sweetie's windpipe, and now there are no clubs to fight in. But between these catastrophes Rocky Marciano appeared out of the shoe-manufacturing town of Brockton, Massachusetts, and Sandy Saddler, the pikelike featherweight, out of Harlem. Randy Turpin looked, briefly, like the first Heroic British fighter since Jimmy Wilde. Marcel Cerdan made an unforgettable impression before his premature death in an airplane accident. (He is not in this book because he died too soon.) Archie Moore, a late-maturing artist, like Laurence Sterne and Stendhal, illuminated the skies with the light of his descending sun, and Sugar Ray Robinson proved as long-lasting as he had been precocious—a tribute to burning the candle at both ends.

It was in June of 1951 that it occurred to me to resume writing boxing pieces, and that was only five months before Marciano, then an impecunious, or “broken,” fighter, arrived, as narrated early in this volume. There was no particular reason that I came back to boxing—“Suddenly it came to me,” like the idea to the man in the song who was drinking gin-and-water. It was the way you take a notion that you would like to see an old sweetheart, which is not always the kind of notion to act on.

I had written a number of long boxing pieces for *The New Yorker* before 1939, but I dropped them then, along with the rest of what Harold Ross used to call “low-life,” in order to become a war correspondent. Low-life was Ross's word for the kind of subject I did best.

When I came back from the war in 1945 I wasn't ready to write about the Sweet Science, although I continued to see fights and to talk with friends in Scientific circles. I became a critic of the American press, and had quite a lot of fun out of it, but it is a pastime less intellectually rewarding than the study of “milling,” because the press is less competitive than the ring. Faced with a rival, an American newspaper will usually offer to buy it. This is sometimes done in Scientific circles, but is not considered ethical. Besides, the longer I criticized the press, the more it disimproved, as Arthur MacWeeney of the *Irish Independent* would put it.

My personal interest in La Dolce Scienza began when I was initiated into it by a then bachelor uncle who came east from California when I was thirteen years old, which was in 1917. He was a sour teacher and a good storyteller, so I got the rudiments and the legend at the same time. California, in the nineties and the early 1900s, had been headquarters: Corbett, Choynski, Jeffries, Tom Sharkey, Abe Attell, and Jimmy Britt were Californians all, and San Francisco had been the port of entry from Australia, which exported the Fitzsimmonses and Griffos. Uncle Mike could talk about them all. After my indoctrination I boxed for fun whenever I had a chance until I was twenty-six and earning sixty-three dollars a week as a reporter on the *Providence Journal and Evening Bulletin*. I continued to box occasionally for many years more, generally just enough to show I knew what was all about it, as the boys say. I went shorter rounds every time. The last was in about 1946, and the fellow I was working with said he could not knock me out unless I consented to rounds longer than nine seconds.

When I returned to the realms of higher intellection in 1951 Joe Louis was entering his eighteenth year as the most conspicuous ornament of the “fancy”—the highest feather in its hat. Within a few months Marciano appeared. This began a new cycle: Marciano and the Old Men, like Louis and the Old Men in 1934–38. During the immediately subsequent episodica, to borrow a word from Colonel Stingo, Marciano knocked out three world's heavyweight champions, Louis, Walcott, and Ezzard Charles, and wound up beating Moore, the heavyweight-light-heavyweight, who challenged for the title at thirty-nine. Marciano was then himself thirty-one, which was a fairly advanced age for a boxer, but all his big fights have been against men still older, because nobody was coming up behind him.

With the Moore fight on September 16, 1955, the cycle was complete. It is certain that neither Hero will ever be better than on that night, and highly improbable that either will be again that good.

All the Heroic transactions recorded within this book thus occurred within the four-and-a-fraction years, June, 1951— September, 1955, and they have a kind of porous unity, like the bound volumes of *Boxiana* Egan used to get out whenever he figured he had enough magazine pieces about the ring for his day to fill a book. There is as main theme the rise of Marciano, and the falls of everybody who fought him, and there are subplots, like the comeback of Sugar Ray after his downfall before Turpin and his re-downfall before Maxim, but not his current re-comeback. There is some discussion of the television matter, and there are exploits of minor Heroes like Sandy Saddler, the featherweight champion, and a lot of boys you never heard of. The characters who hold the book, and the who fabric of the Sweet Science together, are the trainer-seconds, as in Egan's day.

Egan, to whom I refer so often in this volume, was the greatest writer about the ring who ever lived. Hazlitt was a dilettante who wrote one fight story. Egan was born probably in 1772, and died certainly, in 1849. He belonged to London, and no man has ever presented a more enthusiastic picture of all aspects of its life except the genteel. He was a hack journalist, a song writer, a conductor of puff-sheets and, I am inclined to suspect, a shakedown man. His work affords internal evidence that he was self-educated; if he wasn't he had certainly found a funny schoolmaster. In 1812 he got out the first paperbound installment of *Boxiana; or Sketches of Ancient and Modern Pugilism; from the days of Broughton and Slack to the Heroes of the Present Milling Aera*. For years before that he had been writing about boxing for a sporting magazine called the *Weekly Despatch*. The unparalleled interest in the Sweet Science aroused by the two fights between Tom Cribb, the Champion, and Tom Molineaux, an American Negro, in 1811, inspired Egan to launch a monthly publication confined to milling.

He covered the historical portion of his self-assigned program in his first few numbers, and after that *Boxiana* became a running chronicle of the Contemporary Milling Aera. As the man with the laurel concession, he became a great figure in the making of matches, the holding of stakes, the decision of disputes, the promotion of banquets, and all the other perquisites of eminence.

"In his particular line, he was the greatest man in England," a memorialist wrote of him long after his death. "In the event of opposition to his views and opinions, he and those who looked up to him had a mode of enforcing authority which had the efficacy without the tediousness of discussion, and 'though,' says one who knew him, 'in personal strength far from a match for any sturdy opponent, he had a courage and vivacity in action which were very highly estimated both by his friends and foes ..."

"His peculiar phraseology, and his superior knowledge of the business, soon rendered him eminent beyond all rivalry and competition. He was flattered and petted by pugilists and peers: his patronage and countenance were sought for by all who considered the road to a prizefight the road to reputation and honor. Sixty years ago [that would have been 1809}, his presence was understood to convey respectability on any meeting convened for the furtherance of bull-baiting, cock-fighting, cudgelling, wrestling, boxing, and all that comes within the category of 'manly sports.' If he 'took the chair' success was held as certain in the object in question. On the occasions of his presence he was accompanied by a 'tail,' if not as numerous, perhaps as respectable as that by which another great man was attended, and certainly, in its way, quite as influential."

Egan brought out his first bound volume, comprising sixteen numbers, in 1813, although the title page reads 1812. (It had gone to the subscribers with the first installment.) He did not put out another bound volume until 1818. There was a third in 1821, a fourth in 1824, and a fifth in 1828. By that time the Sweet Science was entering one of its periodic declines. Too many X (Egan's way of writing crooked) fights had disgusted backers and bettors, and there was a lack of exciting new talent. The Sweet Science was not to reach another peak until the rise of Tom Sayers, in the late 1850s, which would

culminate in Tom's great fight with the American, John C. Heenan, in 1860. Egan abandoned *Boxiana* after the 1828 volume.

A great charm of *Boxiana* is that it is no mere compilation of synopses of fights. Egan's round-by-round stories, with ringside sidelights and betting fluctuations, are masterpieces of technical reportage, but he also saw the ring as a juicy chunk of English life, in no way separable from the rest. His accounts of the extra-annular lives of the Heroes, coal-heavers, watermen, and butchers' boys, are a panorama of low, dirty, happy, brutal, sentimental Regency England that you'll never get from Jane Austen. The fighter's relations with their patrons, the Swells, present that curious pattern of good fellowship and snobbery, not mutually exclusive, that has always existed between Gentleman and Player in England, and that Australians, Americans, and Frenchmen equally find hard to credit. Egan is full of anecdotes like the one about the Swell and his pet Hero, who were walking arm-in-arm in Covent Garden late one night, when they saw six Dandies insulting a woman. Dandies were neither Gentleman nor Players, and Egan had no use for them. The Swell remonstrated with the Dandies and one of them hit him. The Swell then cried, "Jack Martin, give it them," and the Hero, who was what we today would call a light-heavyweight, knocked down the six Dandies. From Egan's narrative it is impossible to tell which performance he considered more dashing, the Swell's or the Hero's.

That particular Hero, by the way, was known as the Master of the Rolls, because he was by trade a baker. "Martin is very respectably connected," Egan wrote, "and, when he first commenced prize pugilist, he had an excellent business as a baker; but which concern he ultimately disposed (or got rid) of, in order, it seems, to give a greater scope to his inclinations." Egan's cockney characters, and his direct quotes of how they talked, were a gift to Dickens, who, like every boy in England, read the author of *Boxiana*. In the New York Public Library catalogue there is listed a German monograph, circa 1900, on Egan's influence on Dickens, but I know of no similar attempt at justice in the English language.

Egan's pageant scenes of trulls and luses, toffs and toddlers, all setting off for some great public illegal prize-fight, are written Rowlandson, just as Rowlandson's print of the great second fight between Cribb and Molineaux is graphic Egan. In the foreground of the picture there is a whore sitting on her gentleman's shoulders the better to see the fight, while a pickpocket lifts the gentleman's watch (reader). Cribb has just hit Molineaux the floorer, and Molineaux is falling, as he has continued to do for a hundred and forty-five years since. He hasn't hit the floor yet, but every time I look at the picture I expect to see him land. On the horizon are the delicate green hills and the pale blue English sky, hand-tinted by old drunks recruited in kip-shops (flophouses). The prints cost a shilling colored. When I look at my copy I can smell the crowd and the wildflowers.

Egan could be stately when he wanted, as you can see from the following sample taken from the dedication of the first volume of *Boxiana*:

To those, Sir, who prefer *effeminacy* to hardihood—assumed *refinement* to rough *Nature*—and whom a *shower of rain* can terrify, under the alarm of their *polite* frames, suffering from the unruly elements—or would not mind Pugilism, if BOXING was not so shockingly vulgar—the following work can create no interest whatever; but to those persons who feel that Englishmen are not automatons ... *Boxiana* will convey amusement, if not information.

I can think of nothing more to say in favor of the Present Extension of the GREAT HISTORIAN'S



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# The Big Fellows

## Boxing with the Naked Eye

Watching a fight on television has always seemed to me a poor substitute for being there. For one thing, you can't tell the fighters what to do. When I watch a fight, I like to study one boxer's problem, solve it, and then communicate my solution vocally. On occasion my advice is disregarded, as when I tell a man to stay away from the other fellow's left and he doesn't, but in such cases I assume that he hasn't heard my counsel, or that his opponent has, and has acted on it. Some fighters hear better and are more suggestible than others—for example, the pre-television Joe Louis. "Let him have it, Joe!" I would yell whenever I saw him fight, and sooner or later he would let the other fellow have it. Another fighter like that was the late Marcel Cerdan, whom I would coach in his own language, to prevent opposition seconds from picking up our signals. "*Vas-y, Marcel!*" I used to shout, and Marcel always *y allait*. I get a feeling of participation that way that I don't in front of a television screen. I could yell of course, but I would know that if my suggestion was adopted, it would be by the merest coincidence.

Besides, when you go to a fight, the boxers aren't the only ones you want to be heard by. You are surrounded by people whose ignorance of the ring is exceeded only by their unwillingness to face facts—the sharpness of your boxer's punching, for instance. Such people may take it upon themselves to disparage the principal you are advising. This disparagement is less generally addressed to the man himself (as "Gavilan, you're a bum!") than to his opponent, whom they have wrong-headedly picked to win. ("He's a cream puff, Miceli!" they may typically cry. "He can't hurt you. He can't hurt anybody. Look—slaps! Ha, ha!") They thus get at your man—and, by indirection, at you. To put them in their place, you address neither them nor their man but your man. ("Get the other eye, Gavilan," you cry.) This throws them off balance, because they haven't noticed anything the matter with either eye. Then, before they can think of anything to say, you thunder, "Look at that eye!" It doesn't much matter whether or not the man has been hit in the eye; he will be. Addressing yourself to the fighter when you want somebody else to hear you is a parliamentary device, like "Mr. Chairman ..." Before television, a prize-fight was to a New Yorker the nearest equivalent to the New England town meeting. It taught a man to think on his seat.

Less malignant than rooters for the wrong man, but almost as disquieting, are those who are on the right side but tactically unsound. At a moment when you have steered your boxer to a safe lead of ten points but can see the other fellow is still dangerous, one of these maniacs will encourage reckless behavior. "Finish the jerk, Harry!" he will sing out. "Stop holding him up! Don't lose him!" But you, knowing the enemy is a puncher, protect your client's interests. "Move to your left, Harry!" you call. "Keep moving! Keep moving! Don't let him set!" I sometimes finish a fight like that in a cold sweat.

If you go to a fight with a friend, you can keep up unilateral conversations on two vocal levels—once at the top of your voice, directed at your fighter, and the other a running *expertise* nominally aimed at your companion but loud enough to reach a modest fifteen feet in each direction. "Reminds me of Panama Al Brown," you may say as a new fighter enters the ring. "He was five feet eleven and weighed a hundred and eighteen pounds. This fellow may be about forty pounds heavier and a couple of inches shorter, but he's got the same kind of neck. I saw Brown box a fellow named Mascart in Paris in 1927. Guy stood up in the top gallery and threw an apple and hit Brown right on the top of the head. The whole house started yelling, 'Finish him, Mascart! He's groggy!'" Then, as the bout begins, "Boxes like Al, too, except this fellow's a southpaw." If he wins, you say, "I told you he reminded me

of Al Brown,” and if he loses, “Well, well, I guess he’s no Al Brown. They don’t make fighters like Al any more.” This identifies you as a man who (a) has been in Paris, (b) has been going to fights for a long time, and (c) therefore enjoys what the fellows who write for quarterlies call a frame reference.

It may be argued that this doesn’t get you anywhere, but it at least constitutes what a man I once met named Thomas S. Matthews called communication. Mr. Matthews, who was the editor of *Time*, said that the most important thing in journalism is not reporting but communication. “What are you going to communicate?” I asked him. “The most important thing,” he said, “is the man on one end of the circuit saying ‘My God, I’m alive! You’re alive!’ and the fellow on the other end, receiving the message, saying ‘My God, you’re right! We’re both alive!’” I still think it is a hell of a way to run a news magazine, but it is a good reason for going to fights in person. Television, if unchecked, may carry us back to a pre-tribal state of social development, when the family was the largest conversational unit.

Fights are also a great place for adding to your repertory of witty sayings. I shall not forget my adolescent delight when I first heard a fight fan yell, “I hope youse bot’ gets knocked out!” I thought he had made it up, although I found out later it was a cliché. It is a formula adaptable to an endless variety of situations outside the ring. The only trouble with it is it never works out. The place where I first heard the line was Bill Brown’s, a fight club in a big shed behind a trolley station in Far Rockaway.

On another night there, the time for the main bout arrived and one of the principals hadn’t. The other fighter sat in the ring, a bantamweight with a face like a well-worn coin, and the fans stamped and whistled and yelled for their money back. It was thirty years before television, but there were only a couple of hundred men on hand. The preliminary fights had been terrible. The little fighter kept looking at his hands, which were resting on his knees in cracked boxing gloves, and every now and then he would spit on the mat and rub the spittle into the canvas with one of his scuffed ring shoes. The longer he waited, the more frequently he spat, and I presumed he was worrying about the money he was supposed to get; it wouldn’t be more than fifty dollars with a house that size, even if the other man turned up. He had come there from some remote place like West or East New York, and he may have been thinking about the last train home on the Long Island Railroad, too. Finally, the other bantamweight got there, looking out of breath and flustered. He had lost his way on the railroad—changed to the wrong train at Jamaica and had to go back there and start over. The crowd booed so loud that he looked embarrassed. When the fight began, the fellow who had been waiting walked right into the new boy and knocked him down. He acted impatient. The tardy fellow got up and fought back gamely, but the one who had been waiting nailed him again, and the latecomer just about pulled up on one knee at the count of seven. He had been hit pretty hard, and you could see from his face that he was wondering whether to chuck it. Somebody in the crowd yelled out, “Hey, Hickey! You kept us waiting! Why don’t you stay around awhile?” So the fellow got up and caught for ten rounds and probably made the one who had come early miss his train. It’s another formula with multiple applications, and I think the man who said it that night in Far Rockaway did make it up.

Because of the way I feel about watching fights on television, I was highly pleased when I read, back in June, 1951, that the fifteen-round match between Joe Louis and Lee Savold, scheduled for June thirteenth at the Polo Grounds, was to be neither televised, except to eight theater audiences in places like Pittsburgh and Albany, nor broadcast over the radio. I hadn’t seen Louis with the naked eye since we shook hands in a pub in London in 1944. He had fought often since then, and I had seen his two bouts with Jersey Joe Walcott on television, but there hadn’t been any fun in it. Those had been held

public places, naturally, and I could have gone, but television gives you so plausible an adumbration of a fight, for nothing, that you feel it would be extravagant to pay your way in. It is like the potato which is only a succedaneum for something decent to eat but which, once introduced into Ireland, proved so cheap that the peasants gave up their grain-and-meat diet in favor of it. After that, the landlords let them keep just enough money to buy potatoes. William Cobbett, a great Englishman, said that he would sack any workmen of his he caught eating one of the cursed things, because as soon as potatoes appeared anywhere they brought down the standard of eating. I sometimes think of Cobbett on my way home from the races, looking at the television aerials on all the little houses between here and Belmont Park. As soon as I heard that the fight wouldn't be on the air, I determined to buy a ticket.

On the night of the thirteenth, a Wednesday, it rained, and on the next night it rained again, so on the evening of June fifteenth the promoters, the International Boxing Club, confronted by a night game at the Polo Grounds, transferred the fight to Madison Square Garden. The postponements upset a plan I had had to go to the fight with a friend, who had another date for the third night. But alone is a good way to go to a fight or the races, because you have more time to look around you, and you always get all the conversation you can use anyway. I went to the Garden box office early Friday afternoon and bought a ten-dollar seat in the side arena—the first tiers rising in back of the boxes, midway between Eighth and Ninth Avenues on the 49th Street side of the house. There was only a scattering of ticket buyers in the lobby, and the man at the ticket window was polite—a bad omen for the gate. After buying the ticket, I got into a cab in front of the Garden, and the driver naturally asked me if I was going to see the fight. I said I was, and he said, “He's all through.”

I knew he meant Louis, and I said, “I know, and that's why it may be a good fight. If he weren't all through, he might kill this guy.”

The driver said, “Savold is a hooker. He breaks noses.”

I said, “He couldn't break his own nose, even,” and then began to wonder how a man would go about trying to do that. “It's a shame he's so hard up he had to fight at all at his age,” I said, knowing the driver would understand I meant Louis. I was surprised that the driver was against Louis, and I was appealing to his better feelings.

“He must have plenty socked away,” said the driver. “Playing golf for a hundred dollars a hole.”

“Maybe that helped him go broke,” I said. “And anyway, what does that prove? There's many a man with a small salary who bets more than he can afford.” I had seen a scratch sheet on the seat next to the hackie. I was glad I was riding only as far as Brentano's with him.

The driver I had on the long ride home was a better type. As soon as I told him I was going to the fight, which was at about the same time that he dropped the flag, he said, “I guess the old guy can stand a sock.”

I said, “I saw him murder Max Baer sixteen years ago. He was a sweet fighter then.”

The driver said, “Sixteen years is a long time for a fighter. I don't remember anybody lasted sixteen years in the big money. Still, Savold is almost as old as he is. When you're a bum, nobody notices how old you get.”

We had a pleasant time on the West Side Highway, talking about how Harry Greb had gone on fighting when he was blind in one eye, only nobody knew it but his manager, and how Pete Herman had been the best infighter in the world, because he had been practically blind in both eyes, so he couldn't afford to fool around outside. “What Herman did, you couldn't learn a boy now,” the driver said. “They got no patience.”

The fellow who drove me from my house to the Garden after dinner was also a man of good will, b

rather different. He knew I was going to the fight as soon as I told him my destination, and once we had got under way, he said, “It is a pity that a man like Louis should be exploited to such a degree that he has to fight again.” It was only nine-fifteen, and he agreed with me that I had plenty of time to get to the Garden for the main bout, which was scheduled to begin at ten, but when we got caught in unexpectedly heavy traffic on Eleventh Avenue he grew impatient. “Come on, Jersey!” he said, giving a station wagon in front of us the horn. “In the last analysis, we have got to get to the Garden sometime.” But it didn’t help much, because most of the other cars were heading for the Garden, too. The traffic was so slow going toward Eighth Avenue on Fiftieth Street that I asked him to let me off near the Garden corner, and joined the people hurrying from the Independent Subway exit toward the Garden marquee. A high percentage of them were from Harlem, and they were dressed as if for a levee, the men in shimmering gabardines and felt hats the color of freshly unwrapped chewing gum, the women in spring suits and fur pieces—it was a cool night—and what seemed to me the prettiest hats of the season. They seemed to me the prettiest lot of women I had seen in a long time, too, and I reflected that if the fight had been televised, I would have missed them. “Step out,” I heard one bear say as his group swept past me, “or we won’t maybe get in. It’s just like I told you—he’s still one hell of a draw.” As I made my way through the now crowded lobby, I could hear the special cop next to the ticket window chanting, “Six-, eight-, ten-, and fifteen-dollar tickets only,” which meant that the two-and-a-half-dollar general-admission and the twenty-dollar ringside seats were sold out. It made me feel good, because it showed there were still some gregarious people left in the world.

Inside the Garden there was the same old happy drone of voices as when Jimmy McLarnin was fighting and Jimmy Walker was at the ringside. There was only one small patch of bare seats, in a particularly bad part of the ringside section. I wondered what sort of occupant I would find in my seat. I knew from experience that there would be somebody in it. It turned out to be a small, frail colored man in wine-red livery. He sat up straight and pressed his shoulder blades against the back of the chair, so I couldn’t see the number. When I showed him my ticket, he said, “I don’t know nothing about that. You better see the usher.” He was offering this token resistance, I knew, only to protect his self-esteem—to maintain the shadowy fiction that he was in the seat by error. When an usher wandered within hailing distance of us, I called him, and the little man left, to drift to some other part of the Garden, where he had no reputation as a ten-dollar-seat holder to lose, and there to squat contentedly on a step.

My seat was midway between the east and west ends of the ring, and about fifteen feet above it. Two not very skillful colored boys were finishing a four-rounder that the man in the next seat told me was an emergency bout, put on because there had been several knockouts in the earlier preliminaries. I gave me a chance to settle down and look around. It was ten o’clock by the time the colored boys finished and the man with the microphone announced the decision, but there was no sign of Louis Savold. The fight wasn’t on the air, so there was no need of the punctuality required by the radio business. (Later I read in the newspapers that the bout had been delayed in deference to the hundreds of people who were still in line to buy tickets and who wanted to be sure of seeing the whole fight.) Nobody made any spiel about beer, as on the home screen, although a good volume of it was being drunk all around. Miss Gladys Gooding, an organist, played the national anthem and a tenor sang it, and we all applauded. After that, the announcer introduced a number of less than illustrious prizefighters from the ring, but nobody whistled or acted restless. It was a good-natured crowd.

Then Louis and his seconds—what the author of *Boxiana* would have called his faction—appeared from a runway under the north stands and headed toward the ring. The first thing I noticed, from where I sat, was that the top of Louis’s head was bald. He looked taller than I had remembered him

although surely he couldn't have grown after the age of thirty, and his face was puffy and impassive. has always been so. In the days of his greatness, the press read menace in it. He walked stiff-legged, was natural for a heavy man of thirty-seven, but when his seconds pulled off his dressing robe, his body looked all right. He had never been a lean man; his muscles had always been well buried beneath his smooth beige skin. I recalled the first time I had seen him fight—against Baer. That was at the Yankee Stadium, in September, 1935, and not only the great ball park but the roofs of all the apartment houses around were crowded with spectators, and hundreds of people were getting out of trains at the elevated I.R.T. station, which overlooks the field, and trying to loiter long enough to catch a few moments of action. Louis had come East that summer, after a single year as a professional, and had knocked out Primo Camera in a few rounds. Camera had been the heavyweight champion of the world in 1934, when Baer knocked him out. Baer, when he fought Louis, was the most powerful and gifted heavyweight of the day, although he had already fumbled away his title. But this mature Baer, who had fought everybody, was frightened stiff by the twenty-one-year-old mulatto boy. Louis outclassed him. The whole thing went only four rounds. There hadn't been anybody remotely like Louis since Dempsey in the early twenties.

The week of the Louis—Baer fight, a man I know wrote in a magazine: "With half an eye, one can observe that the town is more full of stir than it has been in many moons. It is hard to find a place in the park, hard to get a table in a restaurant, hard to answer all the phone calls . . . . Economic seers can explain it, if you care to listen. We prefer to remember that a sudden inflation of the town's spirit can be just as much psychological or accidental as economic." I figured it was Louis.

Savold had now come up into the other corner, a jutting-jawed man with a fair skin but a red back, probably sunburned at his training camp. He was twenty pounds lighter than Louis, but that isn't considered a crushing handicap among heavyweights; Ezzard Charles, who beat Louis the previous year, was ten pounds lighter than Savold. Savold was thirty-five, and there didn't seem to be much bounce in him. I had seen him fight twice in the winter of 1946, and I knew he wasn't much. Both bouts had been against a young Negro heavyweight named Al Hoosman, a tall, skinny fellow just out of the Army. Hoosman had started well the first time, but Savold had hurt him with body punches and won the decision. The second time, Hoosman had stayed away and jabbed him silly. An old third-rater like Savold, I knew, doesn't improve with five more years on him. But an old third-rater doesn't rattle easily, either, and I was sure he'd do his best. It made me more apprehensive, in one way, than if he'd been any good. I wouldn't have liked to see Louis beaten by a good young fighter, but it would be awful to see him beaten by a clown. Not that I have anything against Savold; I just think it's immoral for a fellow without talent to get too far. A lot of others in the crowd must have felt the same way because the house was quiet when the fight started—as if the Louis rooters didn't want to ask too much of Joe. There weren't any audible rooters for Savold, though, of course, there would have been if he had landed one good punch.

I remembered reading in a newspaper that Savold had said he would walk right out and bang Louis in the temple with a right, which would scramble his thinking. But all he did was come forward as he had against Hoosman, with his left low. A fellow like that never changes. Louis walked out straight and stiff-legged, and jabbed his left into Savold's face. He did it again and again, and Savold didn't seem to know what to do about it. And Louis jabs a lot harder than a fellow like Hoosman. Louis didn't have to chase Savold, and he had no reason to run away from him, either, so the stiff legs were all right. When the two men came close together, Louis jarred Savold with short punches, and Savold couldn't push him around, so that was all right, too. After the first round, the crowd knew Louis would win if his legs would hold him.

In the second round Louis began hitting Savold with combinations—quick sequences of punches like a right under the heart and a left hook to the right side of the head. A sports writer I know had to

me that Louis hadn't been putting combinations together for several fights back. Combinations demand a superior kind of coordination, but a fighter who has once had that can partly regain it by hard work. A couple of times it looked as if Louis was trying for a knockout, but when Savold didn't come apart, Louis returned to jabbing. A man somewhere behind me kept saying to a companion, "I read Savold was a tricky fighter. He's got to do something!" But Savold didn't, until late in the fifth round, by which time his head must have felt like a sick music box. Then he threw a right to Louis's head and it landed. I thought I could see Louis shrink, as if he feared trouble. His response ten years ago would have been to tear right back into the man. Savold threw another right, exactly the same kind, and that hit Louis, too. No good fighter should have been hit twice in succession with that kind of foolish punch. But the punches weren't hard enough to slow Louis down, and that was the end of that. In the third minute of the sixth round, he hit Savold with a couple of combinations no harder than those that had gone before, but Savold was weak now. His legs were going limp, and Louis was pursuing him as he backed toward my side of the ring. Then Louis swung like an axman with his right (he wasn't snapping it as he used to), and his left dropped over Savold's guard and against his jaw, and the fellow was rolling over and over on the mat, rolling the way football players do when they fall on a fumbled ball. The referee was counting and Savold was rolling, and he got up on either nine or ten, I couldn't tell which (later, I read that it was ten, so he was out officially), but you could see he was knocked silly, and the referee had his arms around him, and it was over.

The newspapermen, acres of them near the ring, were banging out the leads for the running stories they had already telegraphed, and I felt sorry for them, because they never have time to enjoy boxing matches. Since the fight was not broadcast, there was no oily-voiced chap to drag Louis over to a microphone and ask him stupid questions. He shook hands with Savold twice, once right after the knockout and again a few minutes later, when Savold was ready to leave the ring, as if he feared Savold wouldn't remember the first handshake.

I drifted toward the lobby with the crowd. The chic Harlem people were saying to one another, "It was terrific, darling! It was terrific!" I could see that an element of continuity had been restored to their world. But there wasn't any of the wild exultation that had followed those first Louis victories in 1935. These people had celebrated so many times—except, of course, the younger ones, who were small children when Louis knocked out Baer. I recognized one of the Garden promoters, usually a sort of fellow, looking happy. The bout had brought in receipts of \$94,684, including my ten dollars, but what was more important to the Garden, Louis was sure to draw a lot more the next time, and at a higher scale of prices.

I walked downtown on Eighth Avenue to a point where the crowd began to thin out, and climbed into a taxi that had been stopped by the light on a cross street. This one had a Negro driver.

"The old fellow looked pretty good tonight," I said. "Had those combinations going."

"Fight over?" the driver asked. If there had been television, or even radio, he would have known about everything, and I wouldn't have had the fun of telling him.

"Sure," I said. "He knocked the guy out in the sixth."

"I was afraid he wouldn't," said the driver. "You know, it's a funny thing," he said, after we had gone on a way, "but I been twenty-five years in New York now and never seen Joe Louis in the flesh."

"You've seen him on television, haven't you?"

"Yeah," he said. "But that don't count." After a while he said, "I remember when he fought Cameron. The celebration in Harlem. They poisoned his mind before that fight, his managers and Jack Blackburn did. They told him Camera was Mussolini's man and Mussolini started the Ethiopian War. He cut that man down like he was a tree."

## Broken Fighter Arrives

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When Louis knocked Savold out, I came away singularly revived—as if I, rather than Louis, had demonstrated resistance to the erosion of time. As long as Joe could get by, I felt, I had a link with an era when we were both a lot younger. Only the great champions give their fellow citizens time to feel that way about them, because only the great ones win the title young and hold on to it. There have been three like that among the heavyweights in this century—Jim Jeffries, Jack Dempsey, and Louis. Jeffries won the championship in 1899, when my father was a footloose young sport, and was beaten after a period of retirement, by Jack Johnson in 1910, when Father was a solemn burgher with a wife and two children, and three twelve-story loft buildings with second mortgages on them. Dempsey beat Joe Willard in 1919, when I was in short pants. He lost the second decision to Gene Tunney in 1927 (I had believed that the first was an accident, and so I had continued to think of him as champion), and by that time I had written half a novel, spent a year at the Sorbonne, and worked on two newspapers.

Louis was the champion, in the public mind, from 1935, when he slaughtered Primo Camera and Max Baer, until 1951. Technically, his span was slightly shorter, because he didn't beat Jim Braddock for the title until 1937, but everybody knew from 1935 on that he would beat Braddock whenever he got the match. And he lost the championship by a decision to Ezzard Charles in 1950, but Charles was subsequently knocked out by old Jersey Joe Walcott, whom Louis had flattened a while back. When the three were introduced from the ring before the bout between Sugar Ray Robinson and Rance Turpin in September, 1951, the crowd left no doubt that it still considered Louis the leading heavyweight.

At about that same time, I learned that Louis, who was thirty-seven, had been “made” with a new heavyweight, Rocky Marciano, who was twenty-seven and a puncher. I didn't think much about it then, but as October twenty-sixth, the date set for the fight, approached, I began to feel uneasy. Marciano, to be sure, had never had a professional fight until shortly after Louis first announced his retirement, in 1948. (Joe had subsequently, of course, recanted.) In addition, Marciano had beaten only two opponents of any note, both young heavyweights like himself, who were rated as no better than promising. He was not big for a heavyweight, and was supposed to be rather crude. What bothered me, though, about the impending affair was that Marciano was, as he still is, steered by a man I know named Al Weill, who is one of the most realistic fellows in a milieu where illusions are few. Marciano was already a good drawing card and would continue to be as long as he was unbeaten, and Weill, I was sure, would never risk the depreciation of an asset unless he felt he had a good bet.

Weill is at present the matchmaker of the I.B.C., which controls boxing here in New York and in a dozen other large cities, and his son, Marty Weill, is Marciano's manager “of record,” which means he signs the contracts. The younger Weill has a job-lot commission business in Dayton, Ohio, and isn't properly a boxing man at all. When the elder Weill became matchmaker, he “gave” his son the fight as much as a lawyer, upon becoming a public official, turns over his private practice to a partner. Marciano is, in effect, a kind of family enterprise, like Rockefeller Center. As the fight date drew near, I decided to go around to the headquarters of the International, above the Iceland Skating Rink in the Madison Square Garden building, and ask the elder Weill what was doing. I could have accomplished this less formally by giving him what he calls a bang on the telephone, but I wished to compare his facial expressions with his asseverations.

The matchmaker is of the build referred to in ready-made-clothing stores as a portly, which means not quite a stout. There is an implication of at least one kind of recklessness about a fat man; he lets himself go when he eats. A portly man, on the other hand, is a man who would like to be fat but restrains himself—a calculator. Weill has a Roman nose of the short, or budgereegah, variety, and a general over-all grayish coloration that is complemented by the suits he generally wears and the cigar ashes he

frequently spills on them. On his home block—86th Street between West End Avenue and Riverside Drive—he blends perfectly with the tired 1910 grandeur of the apartment houses; he looks like one more garment manufacturer worried by a swollen inventory. This does not stop him from knowing more about the fight business than any of the flashier types who wear long beige jackets and stroll downtown after dark.

Weill is a frugal man, and he likes frugal fighters. Every kind of serious trouble a fighter can get into, he says, has its origin in the disbursement of currency—rich food, liquor, women, horse-race betting, and fast automobiles. Once a fighter starts gambling, Weill doesn't want him. "A gambler thinks he can get money without working for it," he says. Weill had a big string of fighters before the war, and used to quarter them all in a lodging house near Central Park West, where the housemaster would issue to each boy a weekly meal ticket with a face value of five dollars and fifty cents, redeemable in trade at a coffeepot on Columbus Avenue. The tickets cost Weill five dollars each in cash. A fighter could get a second ticket before the week was out, but only if he showed that the first one had been punched out to the last nickel. None of those fighters ever suffered a defeat that could be attributed to high living. Mere frugality, however, may prove a boomerang, for the fighter sometimes gets to like it. There was once an old colored heavyweight named Bob Armstrong, who, when asked of his utmost ambition, said, "To wake up every morning and find a dollar under my pillow." Naturally, he never got to be champion. Weill wouldn't want a fighter like that. What he really loves is an avaricious fighter.

When I asked Weill about Marciano he looked happy. "He is a nice boy," he said. "The dollar is his God. That is to say, he is a poor Italian boy from a large, poor family, and he appreciates the buck more than almost anybody else. Them type guys is hard to get outa there. You want to look out for them young broken fighters." By "broken fighter," Weill, who is a purist, meant a fighter who has broken. "He only got two halfway decent purses—with LaStarza and Layne—and it was like a tiger tasting blood," Weill went on. "So you know how confident he is when he will take a fight like this for fifteen per cent of the gate. Louis gets forty-five. Why, Marciano will bring more money into the Garden than Louis. Connecticut, Rhode Island, and half of Massachusetts will be empty that night. Marciano hails from Brockton, Massachusetts.

Having considered the morale factor, which with him always comes first, Weill passed to the tactical level. He said Marciano would never be a clever boxer; he wasn't made for it, anyway, being short for a heavyweight, and wide, with short, thick arms. "But he knows what he has to do," Weill said. "Get in close enough to hit and then keep on hitting. And he don't come walking in straight, like Savold. Anybody would look good punching a punching bag that comes straight to you. This kid will fight out of a crouch. How I got him"—he changed the subject abruptly—"is three years ago a fellow I know used to promote around Boston wrote me there was a hell of an amateur he would like me to take. So I sent up the carfare for them to come down. They come, and we took Rocky to the C.Y.O. gym and put him in with a young heavyweight from Staten Island, a big blond guy belonged to a friend of mine. We had to stop him or he'd killed that Staten Island guy. I seen right then Rocky had the beginning of it. So I sent him up to Manny Almeida, a friend of mine promotes in Providence which is near where he is out of Brockton, but Brockton is too small to have fights. And I asked Manny to put him in with the same kind he was, but no setups.

Because you got a guy knocking over setups, you don't know what you got. He come along good. When I come over here, I give him to Marty. Who should I give him to if not my own flesh and blood?"

A day or two after my talk with Weill, I went out to Louis's training quarters at Pompton Lakes, New

Jersey, and it was like going back to the first administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt. There was about all Louis's habits a majestic continuity, as there was about his style in the ring, which is basically classical. His style has diminished in speed of execution but has never varied in concept. Pompton was his lucky camp; he trained there for his first New York fight, against Camera, in 1935, when he was twenty-one, and he trained there for all his succeeding fights but four—"way more than twenty," he told me when I talked with him later that day. I hadn't been out there since the summer of 1938, when Louis was preparing for his return fight with Max Schmeling, the only man who had up to that time knocked him out. (That return fight was his happiest victory; he destroyed the German in less than a round.) Incidentally, Louis has knocked out six men who at one time or another held the heavyweight championship—Schmeling, Jack Sharkey, Camera, Baer, Braddock, and Walcott—a record possible because the championship changed hands so often in the short period between 1930 and 1937, leaving so many mediocre ex-champions simultaneously extant.

The camp, like Louis himself, was essentially the same but much older-looking. Part of the difference, I suppose, was due to the fact that the Schmeling fight had been in the summer, and now the leaves were turning on the sides of the Ramapos, and the air was chill. But that wasn't all of it. Before the war, the camp was operated by a bright and energetic couple named Dr. and Mrs. Bier, who had ambitions about turning it into a health farm for millionaires. On days when Louis was to spar, the grounds were always packed with charabancs from Harlem bringing people to see him work. The money pouring in at the gate, at a dollar a head, made training actually a profitable activity, and the hot-dog concession alone—there was also a bar—brought in enough to pay the sparring partners. The place has since been bought by a man by the name of Baumgartner, and there is no longer a bar, or even a hot dog, on the premises, although I heard that Coca-Cola can be bought on Sundays. The day was there, there were perhaps a dozen automobiles on the grounds when sparring was scheduled to begin, and no more than twenty-five paying customers, at sixty cents a head, despite the fact that the fight was only a week off. And, except for me, the press was represented only by Colonel John L. Stingo, who writes a column called "Yea Verily" for the New York *Enquirer*, a newspaper always dated Monday but published only on Sunday afternoon. Colonel Stingo is a small, agile man who helped cover the Corbett-Sullivan fight for the New Orleans *Item* in 1892. A Boston newspaperman named Gilhooley had ridden out with us from New York in a car hired by the I.B.C., but had gone on to Marciano's training camp at Greenwood Lake, New York, seventeen miles farther along. The car was to wait there for him, and then pick us up after the workouts were over.

One of the first things I saw on getting out of the car was a familiar sweated figure sprawled in a lawn chair in front of the red frame building that in livelier days housed the bar. It was Mannie Seamon, Louis's trainer, a white man who stepped into the job after the death of Jack Blackburn, the old colored fighter who formed Louis's style. Seamon is more of a conditioner than a boxing coach—a jovial, rosy-cheeked man who sometimes discourses learnedly on "bone juice" and keeping the air out of his charges' bones. He hadn't changed at all in the intervening years, I noted enviously, but I winced when I thought of how many thousand medicine balls he must have thrown at Louis's and other fighters' stomachs since 1938. All the sparring partners of thirteen years ago were gone—working on the docks, most of them, Seamon said—and so were Louis's managers then, John Roxborough and Julian Black, the two colored sporting men who brought Joe out of the Middle West, and Mike Jacobs, the quondam ticket scalper who once controlled boxing through his control of the great new favorite, Louis.

"Joe's looking the best he has in four years," Mannie said. (It was in 1947, in his first match against Walcott, that Louis first showed he was slipping badly.) We talked a while about fellows we had known in the thirties, and I asked Mannie if the terrible monotony of training wasn't beginning to tell on Louis. Joe made his pro debut in 1934, and he had boxed amateur before that, and the Army meant

no letup, for his duty there consisted of boxing exhibitions for other soldiers. So he had been at it for nearly twenty years—light bag, heavy bag, pushups, belly bends, roadwork, and shadowboxing. It was hard to stay interested in your own shadow for twenty years. Even an old race horse gets so he won't extend himself in works.

"We keep his mind off it as much as we can," Seamon said. "We got a rule here, we never talk fighting. Anything but that. We listen to phonograph records, or we play cards, or handicap horses. I tell him funny stories, and the best is different people come in and talk to him."

Seamon walked over to the gymnasium to get the fighter ready for his sparring exhibition, and after a while Colonel Stingo and I followed him. When we got to the dressing room, Louis was sitting at the rubbing table while Seamon prepared his hands—bandages, gauze, and flat sponge-rubber pads over the knuckles, and then adhesive tape to hold the structure in place. Seamon said, "Joe, this is Colonel Stingo. He is seventy-eight years old and he wants to work a couple of rounds with you." Louis looked down at the Colonel and couldn't at the moment think of anything to say except "Glad to meet you." I reminded Louis that he and I had last met in Frisco's, a drinking club on Sackville Street in London, during the war, and he said, "That man once charged me sixteen dollars for a pint of gin and tonics." With us in the dressing room was a slender colored man named Reed, a friend of Louis's who had evidently been a patron of Frisco's at the same time, and he joined in the conversation to say he had once paid a cabby three pounds and six shillings to drive him to Frisco's from a few streets away. "'Three-and-six,' the man said," Reed recalled. "So I gave him three pounds and six shillings, and then I reached in my pocket and all I had left was a ten-shilling note, so I gave it to him for a tip. I didn't know if it was enough. That was my first time on leave in London." Louis began to laugh. "That was a pretty good tip," he said. "Two dollars for a seventy-cent ride that you already paid him nearly fifteen bucks for."

Louis, Reed, and I began telling stories about prices we had paid in London, straining the elastic credulity with each tale—a kind of auction. Louis stuck closest to plausibility; Reed and I were just trying to be funny. Fruit had been fantastically dear in London by American standards, and Louis said he had once paid thirty shillings for a pound of hothouse grapes, as a present for an English family he knew. "Then I saw just a small apple there for six shillings," he said. "So I bought that, and bit into it outside the store. Man, it was sour! I give the rest of it to an old dog that come along, and he took one bite and took off." Louis also told about going up on a roof to watch an air raid his first night in London. "The tracers was the most beautiful thing I ever saw," he said.

By the time Seamon had finished with his hands, Louis was in high good humor. "I'm sorry we got no boxing shoes to fit you, Colonel," he said to Stingo just before he went into the gymnasium. "So I guess I won't be able to work with you today. You worked with me wearing those shoes, you might as well step all over my feet and disable me."

There was nothing showy about the workout. Two of Louis's three partners were light heavyweights, much smaller than the old champion, and they worked fast, to speed up his reflexes. He didn't punch hard at either, since the idea wasn't to discourage them. One of them, a brown boy from Bermuda, hit Louis pretty freely, but it was reasonable to suppose the Bermudian was a lot faster than Marciano could possibly be. That's the point of working with a light, fast man. The only partner on hand of the big, rough type that used to staff Louis's camps was a heavyweight named Elkins Brothers, whom Louis had seen fight in the semifinal on the Robinson-Turpin card. Brothers, a squat, powerful fellow, played the part of Marciano when he sparred with Louis. He came in crouching, and threw overhand rights at Louis's jaw. The overhand right, thrown in a rising arc like an artillery shell, was supposed to be Marciano's best punch. Louis kept jabbing at Brothers' head, trying to hit him just as the right started coming and keep him off balance. When he succeeded, he stepped in with a right uppercut. It was a pattern of battle, but neither man pressed it to its ultimate implication. They were methodical

rather than fierce. Louis's body looked good—leaner, if anything, than it had in 1938—and the jaw was as sweet as ever.

Stingo and I were sitting out on the lawn after the workout, waiting for the car from Greenwood Lake to pick us up, when Louis came along, on his way from the gym to his living quarters. He looked younger with his snap-brim hat on. It hid the bald spot. And in street clothes, after all, a superbly conditioned man of thirty-seven is still young. It's when he gets into a ring that age comes on him. Louis hovered over us for a while, but none of us could think of much to say. It was no use asking him how he felt, or whether he thought he could win this one, because clearly he was as good as anybody could get him now, and he had never had a match in his life that he didn't think he was going to win, and sixty-nine times out of seventy-one he had been right. So why would he change his mind this time?

Louis gave a small shiver and said, "Well, I guess I better go in, or I might get a chill." We shook hands all around, and he went along to play cards with the sparring partners who belonged to the younger generation.

The camp at Greenwood Lake, which I visited three days before the fight, was more lively. Marciano looked like the understander in the nine-man pyramid of a troupe of Arab acrobats. He was built like a bulldog, necked and wide-shouldered, and even when he was merely walking around in the ring, he kept rippling the muscles of his arms and back, as if afraid that if he let them set they would tie up. He looks as if he should be muscle-bound, but he isn't. He worked with a big, rangy young heavyweight named Jimmy DeLange, who had the Louis role, and they fought as if they wanted to transcend the limitations of the leather head guards and the huge sparring gloves and knock each other out. Marciano moved around briskly on his stubby legs and threw punches well, especially to the body, but DeLange had no trouble reaching his head with left jabs, and the spar-mate's right uppercuts to the body came off well in close. Marciano was working in a head guard that was a cross between a gladiatorial helmet and racehorse blinkers, with long leather wings at the sides of his eyes. He wouldn't have that, at any rate, when he fought Louis, I told myself. He finished the third, and last round with a big burst of punching.

During the workout, I sat alongside the ancient featherweight champion Abe Attell, and after it was over and the trainers had pulled Marciano's gloves off, Abe called up to the fighter, "Take it easy, Rocky! He's only a sparring partner!" The fighter held up three fingers and called back apologetically, "Only tree days!"—signifying that, with but three days to go, he was in too good shape to restrain himself.

"I had five hundred on him," Attell said to me. "And after what I seen today I'm making it a thousand." Attell, who was himself one of the greatest of boxers, is a knowing man about fights, but he is famous for having an intricate mind. I consoled myself with the thought that he might, in fact, be betting on Louis and speaking favorably of Marciano only to get the odds up.

"Louis is all through," Attell went on, with what I considered a deplorable lack of sentiment in an old champion who had himself felt the sharp tooth of time. But Attell, who looks at you with cold eyes around his huge beak that is like a toucan's with a twisted septum, is not a sentimental man. "If they get a referee who don't let Louis hang on, the kid will knock him out," he said. He then put a handful of BB shot in his mouth and started to pick his teeth. He uses bamboo toothpicks, which he had tailored for him at a novelty shop on Broadway. From time to time, by means of his toothpick, he propels the pellets, one by one, through gaps between his teeth, hitting with perfect accuracy any object up to ten feet away. A nightclub hostess with a plunging neckline is his favorite target, but a busy bartender in a dimly lighted joint will keep him almost equally happy. *En villégiature*, he will

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