

When he sat down with Mike Tyson last month after the Washington press conference announcing his June 11 fight against Kevin McBride, ESPN's Jeremy Schaap mentioned that he'd just returned from Reykjavik, Iceland, where he'd interviewed "another former world champion from Brooklyn."

Tyson wracked his brain, but couldn't imagine who Schaap could be talking about.

"Bobby Fischer," the reporter finally told him.

"**Bobby Fischer?**" A look of apparent horror spread over Iron Mike's tattooed face. "Man, that guy is crazy!"

A globe-trotting anchor and correspondent for the all-sports network, Jeremy Schaap is the son of Emmy Award-winning broadcaster Dick Schaap. One of the most revered figures of our time, Dick Schaap was a renaissance man, a nationally-renowned sportswriter who also wrote film and theatre criticism, and authored over 30 books before he passed away at 67 four years ago. Following in yet another of his father's many-faceted footsteps, Schaap *files* is celebrating the publication of his first book, "

Cinderella Man

: James J. Braddock, Max Baer, and the Greatest Upset in Boxing History" (Houghton Mifflin; 324 pp.; \$24) this week.

Jeremy Schaap's conscious decision to write his first book clearly didn't come because he had too much time on his hands, but having reached his thirties, he wanted to explore that side of his creative nature. He and his agent Scott Waxman (a college classmate from Cornell who had also worked along Schaap when both were copy boys at the *Times*) then set about finding a likely subject.

That it would be a boxing-based book came naturally: The subject was as near and dear to Jeremy's heart as it had been to his father's. He had done several boxing features for ESPN (and currently serves as a host for the network's nascent pay-per-view telecasts).

"Boxing people are among the most colorful in sports," said Schaap. "They're usually the best quotes, just because they haven't been coached to withhold themselves the way athletes in team sports have."

That there was a high-profile movie in the works, starring Russell Crowe as Braddock, didn't hurt, either.

"We knew the film would spark a natural resurgence of interest in Braddock," said Schaap. "But the more I looked into it, the more I realized that not only might this be the greatest sports story of all time, but that hardly anything had been written about it: Apart from a casual treatment as

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Written by George Kimball
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part of boxing histories, nothing had been written about Braddock since Lud Shabazian's 1936 biography ('Relief to Royalty'). And, amazingly, considering what an intriguing figure he was, very little had been written about Baer since Nat Fleischer's brief biography 'Max Baer: The Glamour Boy of the Ring.'"

Simply put, by the early 1930s Braddock was a has-been. He had been a promising light-heavyweight contender in the 1920s, but lost his only title shot, a decision to Tommy Loughran, in 1929. This precipitated a skid in which Braddock lost five times in six fights, but he had earned a fair share of purses, and had invested for his future.

Like those of many of his countrymen, Braddock's nest egg was wiped out by the Wall Street crash of 1929. He continued to box, but a series of hand injuries hampered his effectiveness in the ring.

"He couldn't beat *anybody*," said Schaap.

He was reduced to fighting for peanuts in backwater venues, and by the time Braddock hung up his gloves and retired from the sport in despair he had won just four of his last eleven fights.

He managed to get longshoreman's papers and went to work on the Jersey docks, but even there jobs were scarce. More often than not, he would arise early and trudge to the docks, only to return empty-handed. With a wife and three children to feed, he increasingly despaired for his family. Late in 1933 he put his pride aside and applied for a place on the county welfare rolls. At one point he and his wife Mae even had to farm their children out to their grandparents because he could no longer care for them.

During this dark period at least two remarkable things occurred. One was that the time away from the ring gave his hands a chance to heal. The other was that his stint on the docks transformed Braddock from a 175-pounder into a much stronger, well-muscled heavyweight.

Braddock had given no thought to a comeback, and hadn't been near a gym in months, when his loyal friend and ever-scuffling manager Joe Gould crossed the Hudson bearing news of an offer to fight again. Primo Carnera was scheduled to defend his title against Baer at the Madison Square Garden Bowl in Queens two nights later, and an up-and-coming heavyweight named Corn Griffin, whom the boxing powers hoped to groom for the big time, was slated to perform on the undercard, but his scheduled foe had fallen out.

Garden matchmaker Jimmy Johnston needed an Opponent - with a capital 'O' - for Griffin, and Braddock could earn \$250 for serving as cannon fodder. Because he needed the money - Gould had wangled a \$100 advance, which he split with Braddock, out of Johnston - he agreed. On June 14, 1934, Braddock knocked out Griffin in three rounds.

Three fights and 364 days later James J. Braddock was the heavyweight champion of the world - "At a time when the heavyweight champion, was, inarguably, the biggest man in sports," noted Schaap.

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Or, as the tag-line for promotions of the upcoming film puts it: “When America was on its knees, he brought us to our feet.”

The “Cinderella Man” film will be released in June – fortuitously, just a month after the book hits the stands. Schaap hasn’t seen a minute of Ron Howard’s movie, nor has he read the script, which had already been completed by the time he started work on his own project, but because they share the same name, the two will doubtless be intertwined in the mind of the public. Schaap sees this as a win/win situation. It isn’t entirely clear what the movie people think about it.

“If I were casting a film, I think Russell Crowe would be a perfect choice to play Braddock,” said Schaap. “I haven’t seen the movie, but from what I understand Baer (played by Craig Bierko) gets a pretty short shrift. He’s portrayed as almost a buffoon. Yes, he was colorful, and ran against the grain, but there are people to this day who’ll tell you that he packed the hardest right hand of any heavyweight champion in boxing history. And at the time, it was widely assumed that he’d reign as champion for years to come – which made Braddock’s upset all the more remarkable.”

If Braddock’s accomplishment was among the most inspirational sporting achievements of all time, how did it vanish from the public consciousness?

Schaap reckons that Braddock’s “Cinderella” (It was Damon Runyon who bestowed the moniker on Braddock) tale lapsed into obscurity for at least two reasons: The first was that Braddock’s immediate heir was Joe Louis, whose own legend grew to such proportions that it quickly obscured that of his predecessor. And the other is that Braddock’s accomplishments took place in the bleakest period of 20th-Century America: Once it was over, Americans wanted to put the Great Depression, and everything connected with it, behind them.

“But to me the Twenties and thirties were a fascinating era for boxing,” said Schaap. “Far more interesting than the 40s or 50s or 60s. The NFL was in its infancy, the NBA and NHL didn’t exist. Baseball and horse racing were the only other games in town. Boxing champions were celebrities, and the heavyweight champion was the biggest celebrity of all.”

As he researched the Braddock tale, Schaap found himself increasingly drawn to Baer, whose story had also faded into relative obscurity. Although remembered as almost a caricature, when he is remembered at all, Baer was a sporting icon of his day. He fit perfectly into an era when tennis stars were wont to arrive for a championship match still clad in the previous night’s tuxedo and reeking of champagne.

The very epitome of the playboy athlete, Baer cut a swath through Manhattan society that wouldn’t be emulated until Joe Willie Namath hit town thirty years later. He married one movie star, dated countless others, even starred in a major motion picture, and his exploits were a staple of the daily gossip columns in the New York papers.

Behind his *bon vivant* façade, Baer was an enormously conflicted man, dogged by the memory of a 1930 California ring tragedy in which he killed an opponent named Frankie

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Campbell. (Born Francisco Camilli, Frankie Campbell was the older brother of future Brooklyn Dodger Dolph Camilli.) San Francisco authorities arrested Baer and briefly attempted to prosecute him for manslaughter. Although he was cleared, he was haunted forevermore, even as the heavyweight champion continued to send money from his purses to Campbell's widow and orphaned children.

Baer also wore a Star of David on his trunks and engaged in verbal warfare with Hitler, Goebbels and Max Schmeling. Baer's Hebraic ancestry (he was at best one-quarter Jewish, and that on his father's side – the one that by Talmudic law does not count) appears to have been an afterthought, there is no question that it became economically beneficial once he transferred his base of operations from the West Coast to New York.

Although boxing historians, including Nat Fleischer, always regarded Baer's Jewish claims with some cynicism, Schaap seems to bend over backward to give Baer the benefit of the doubt. Electing to ignore what I've always considered the final word on the subject (the late Ray Arcel's observation that "He wasn't. I know. I saw him in the shower"), Schaap apparently decided that perception was more important than reality: "What is clear is that while Fleischer, Arcel and others did not accept him as one of the chosen people, the Nazis certainly did."

Indeed, if there's a criticism to be made of Schaap's endeavor to retell the stories of Braddock and Baer, it is this occasional tendency - Baer being Jewish makes for a better story, so let him be Jewish - to selectively sculpt the facts to enhance the narrative.

In an almost parenthetical reference, for instance, to Joe Jeannette, in whose North Bergen gym Braddock trained, Schaap notes that "Jeanette, who was black, was constantly passed over for title shots in favor of white men, as was his black contemporary Sam 'The Boston Tar Baby' Langford. Even Jack Johnson refused to defend his title against Jeannette or Langford, opting instead for less dangerous opponents."

This is technically accurate but somewhat misleading. The fact is that Jack Johnson fought Jeannette **nine** times, the last of them in 1908, the year in which he would win the title at Rushcutter's Bay. Jeanette won exactly one of those fights – and that on a foul. (Johnson also fought Langford, winning a 15-round decision in John Ruiz's hometown of Chelsea, Massachusetts in 1906.) As champion, it seems improbable that Johnson ducked Jeannette because he was afraid of him. It is more likely that he didn't defend his title against him because it made no economic sense. (Were James J. Jeffries and Stanley Ketchel "far less dangerous" than Joe Jeannette?)

But such quibbling is almost insignificant in the face of such a wonderful story. "Cinderella Man" is a mighty tale, and one splendidly told by Jeremy Schaap. Somewhere, Dick Schaap is smiling proudly.