

Who Fights on Christmas?

Written by Aaron Tallent

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The notion of fighting on Christmas Eve or Christmas day reminds me of a story I once heard about a cockfight gone bad. Some years ago in Cocke County, Tennessee, two young men entered a chicken fight being held on Christmas Eve, robbed the spectators at gunpoint, and fled. They were quickly apprehended by the police. When the alleged thieves were told that bail had been posted for them, they refused because they had no family who would have bothered to bail them out, and had no idea who would be waiting for them when they walked out of the jailhouse.

This whole event begs many questions, but the first one is, "Who goes to a cockfight on Christmas Eve?!" Who goes to any fight for that matter? While the NBA, NFL, and NCAA will usually offer a Christmas day game, you never see HBO, Showtime, or ESPN presenting a boxing match. Only two professional fight cards will be held across the world this Christmas holiday, one on Christmas Eve in Japan and one on Christmas day in Belgium. No fights will be held in the United States, and have not been since 1969. Even when they were held in the U.S. during the 1950s and 60s, the events were sporadic and void of any major superstars.

There is no law against holding a boxing match on these days of course. It all boils down to popularity. For instance, ABC is advertising the annual Miami Heat/Los Angeles Lakers as a Christmas tradition. At the height of boxing's popularity and before the invention of television, going to a fight was a holiday event. Many hall-of-fame fighters have fought during the Christmas holiday, including Fritzie Zivic, Sam Langford, Battling Levinsky, Jimmy Wilde, and Benny Leonard.

One of the greatest boxing match-ups ever held on Christmas day was a bout between Harry Greb and Tommy Loughran at Pittsburgh's Motor Square Garden in 1923. The third-largest crowd in the arena's history packed in for an afternoon event that was billed as a "Holiday Matinee."

Many wanted to see the fight for the fact that Loughran had bested Pittsburgh native Greb two months earlier. It made Loughran and Gene Tunney the only champions to have beaten Greb at that time. The bout was also supposed to be for Greb's middleweight title, but the champion showed up eight pounds over the 160 pound weight limit and Loughran was eight and a half pounds too heavy.

Tunney, who had beaten Greb by a decision two weeks earlier, had exposed that he was susceptible to body shots. Loughran saw that attack and copied it for his Christmas day bout with Greb, giving him trouble throughout the fight. Pittsburgh Post writer Regis M. Welsh, who covered the bout, noted that Greb seemed to be losing a step as fighter.

Yet, Welsh was most critical of Loughran's seemingly lack of a fighting heart. He wrote that Loughran did not attack Greb with the relentlessness needed to win nor did he fight his way out of tough situations. It was most apparent in the ninth round when Greb had Loughran in a

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corner raining punches down on him. Loughran would not fight back and the referee would not stop the fight, so Greb backed away, dropped his hands, and invited Loughran out of the corner. The crowd laughed and Loughran offered his hand. As Welsh put it, “the affair, for the moment, became a lovely Christmas party.”

In the end, Greb won a 10-round decision. While the referee’s round scoring was not announced, Welsh gave Greb five rounds and scored two rounds even.

Arguably, the most significant title bout to be ever held on Christmas day took place in 1933, when Frankie Klick challenged Kid Chocolate for his world junior lightweight title. The Kid was in the waning days of his career. Only a month earlier, Tony Canzoneri had finished him in two rounds in a non-title bout, giving the Kid the first knockout loss of his career. However, most sportswriters felt that he still had enough ability to beat Klick. As the Philadelphia Inquirer’s John Webster quipped, “I’ll take a slice of chocolate for a Christmas tidbit.”

More than 5,000 fans came to the Philadelphia Arena for the bout. The Kid fought gamely, but only in spurts. A strong performance in the second round tired him to the point of susceptibility to Klick’s body and head shots in the third and fourth rounds. In the sixth, he looked like the Kid of old, hitting Klick at will. At the end of that round, Klick had a “mouse” under his eye.

Sadly for the Kid, the strong performance in the sixth slowed him dramatically for the seventh. Two minutes into that round, the Kid moved back towards the ropes and Klick closed in and landed a smashing right to the Kid’s jaw, sending him face first to the canvas.

The Kid was up at the count of six, but after seeing his rubbery legs, referee Spud Murphy stopped the fight at 2:58 in the seventh round, but the Kid’s handlers had also jumped into the ring to stop the bout right as the bell rang. Confusion ensued because Klick’s corner did not realize that Murphy had stopped the bout.

“Disqualify Chocolate,” screamed Klick’s manager Ray Carlin. “That guy hopped in the ring before the bell.”

The anger subsided after Murphy explained the situation and Klick’s arm was raised as the new champion. After the loss, the Kid wept.

For my generation, the most memorable Christmas day bout took place onscreen, when Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone) knocked out Ivan Drago (Dolph Lundgren) in “Rocky IV.” The reason that bout was held on Christmas day was because the Soviet Union wanted to ensure that all Americans would be in front of a television to see, as Russian government official, Nicoli Koloff (Michael Pataki), said, “The defeat of this so-called champion will show you how pathetic and weak your society has become.”

Of course, the Soviet government knew that every American would be at home watching this fight. In reality, if HBO, Showtime, or ESPN showed a bout on Christmas Eve or Christmas day, they could not guarantee that even their base audience would be able to catch the fight. Until they can, we will continue to ask, “Who fights on Christmas?”