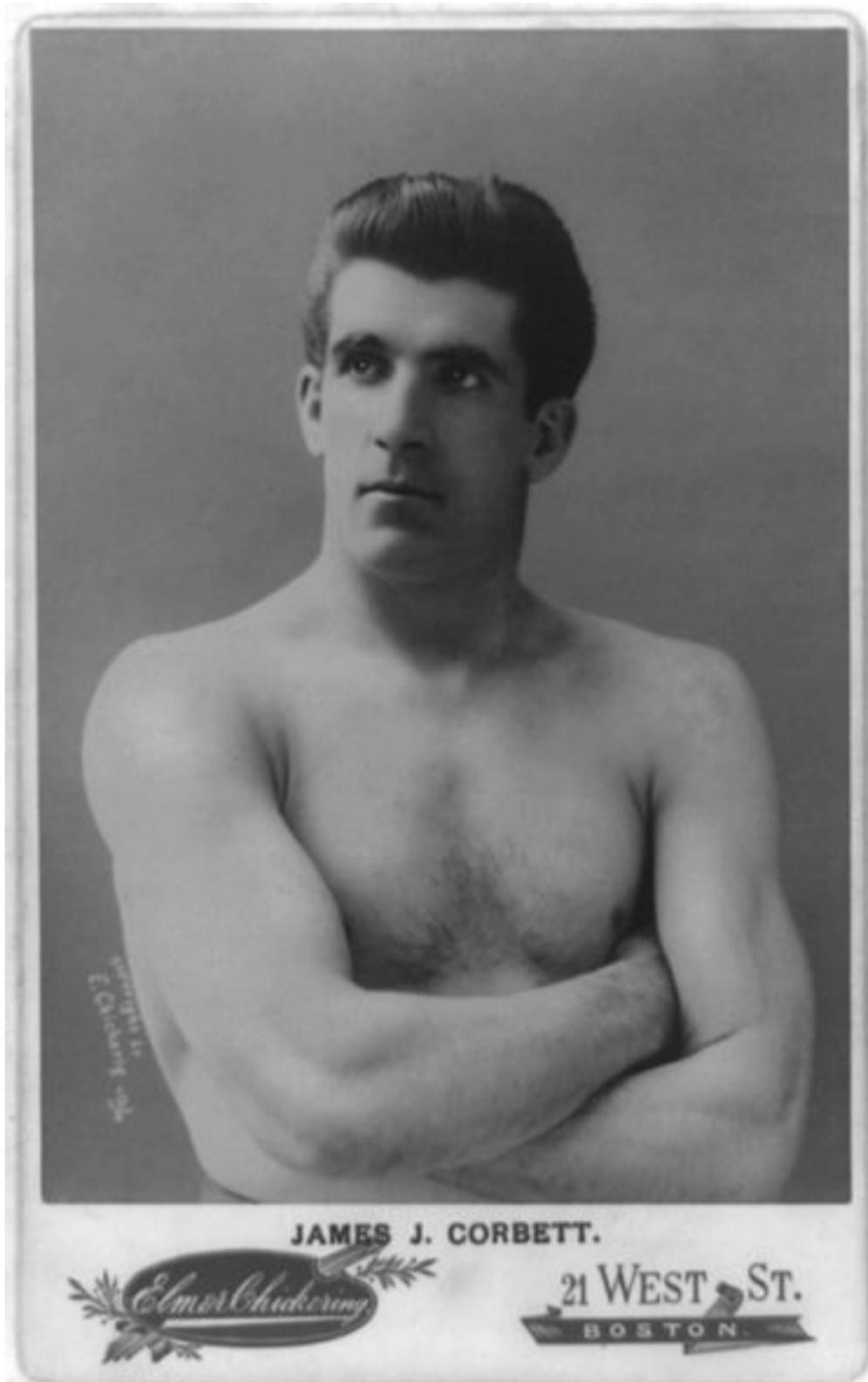


James J. Corbett, John L. Sullivan and the 1st Gloved Hwt Championship of the World

Written by Kelsey McCarson
Tuesday, 12 June 2012 08:24



He was no gentleman at all. In that way, James J. Corbett, who was promoted under the moniker "Gentleman Jim", was like all pugilists. He was a rough and tumble sort who made his living beating people up.

No matter how beautiful a particular style may appear to the eye or how effortlessly a boxer may seem to glide across the canvas as if he were an ice dancer or a ballerina, make absolutely no mistake: these men are in the business of hurting people.

And for Jim Corbett, business was good.

Corbett was the antithesis of the man he succeeded as heavyweight champion, John L. Sullivan, in many ways. Where Sullivan was brute force, sheer will and indomitable forward aggression, Corbett made the science of beating people up look sweeter than that. Corbett employed impeccable footwork and precise timing. He used his jab the way a man like Sullivan couldn't understand. He studied his opponents as the fight unfolded itself before him. He was always thinking and always moving. Everything he did had purpose.

The two men finally met September 7, 1892. Sullivan had been the most popular champion in the sport's history. By many accounts, he was the Babe Ruth of boxing. Better put, when he came on the scene years later, Babe Ruth might actually have been the John L. Sullivan of baseball.

Sullivan was bigger than life. The barrel-chested, gregarious puncher, sporting arguably the greatest mustache in history, made his way to the top of the sport the most difficult way possible, and he probably liked it that way. He became heavyweight champion of the world before that title really even existed, and he did it without gloves or timed rounds or boxing commissions, and at a time when boxing was illegal and men fought anyway.

Perhaps the best way to describe Sullivan is this: when he passed away at age fifty-nine, he did so with only ten dollars in his pocket and a smile on his face. The ground was so frozen that day they had to use dynamite to bury him.

Sullivan had held the heavyweight title for ten years before he met Corbett. By most accounts, he was on the downward slope of the most impressive heavyweight career to date. "The Boston Strong Boy" had carried the sport from bare-knuckled, back-alley street fights into a future that would go on without him—one of timed rounds, reduced clinching and gloved combatants.

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Corbett's defeat of Sullivan in 1892 is recognized as the first heavyweight title match under the Marquess de Queensbury rules. It ushered in a new era for the sport.

It would be difficult to do, but Corbett knew that Sullivan would wear out as the rounds went on and, as always, Corbett had a plan.

"Now, I knew that the most dangerous thing I could do was to let Sullivan work me into a corner when I was a little tired or dazed, " he wrote. "So I made up my mind that I would let him do this while I was still fresh. Then I could find out what he intended doing when he got me there. In a fight, you know, when a man has you where he wants you, he is going to deliver the best goods he has."

Corbett used the early rounds to figure his opponent out. Sullivan would continue to rush him, throwing the wide, looping and powerful shots that had made him champion. Corbett's fancy footwork, fints and sharp jabs were just effective enough to keep the menacing marauder at bay.

In the third round, it was time. Corbett knew he'd have to let loose his power.

Just as the first two rounds had gone, Sullivan had corralled Corbett into the corner. Up to that point, the fleet-footed challenger was able to slip away unharmed, though he also had yet to land anything substantial in return. Not this time.

"Then just as he finally set himself to let go a vicious right I beat him to it and loosed a left-hand for his face with all the power I had behind it," Corbett remembered. "His head went back and I followed it up with a couple of other punches and slugged him back over the ring and into his corner. "

Sullivan's nose was broken but his spirit was not. Like all great champions, he would not give up his title easily. It would have to be taken from the proud champion. The crowd roared as Sullivan

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made a made dash toward Corbett at the sound of the next bell.

“He came out of his corner in the fourth like a roaring lion, with an uglier scowl than ever, and bleeding considerably at the nose,” Corbett remarked.

For some reason, to a guy like Corbett, this meant he knew he had Sullivan right where he wanted him.

“I felt sure now that I would beat him, so made up my mind that, though it would take a little longer, I would play safe.”

Corbett played it safe the only way he could against a dangerous fighter like Sullivan: very carefully. He kept himself out of harm’s way with subtle tricks that were just coming into style at the time. Hell, he probably helped invent them. He’d feint. He’d sidestep. He’d hold on for dear life at times and turn his opponent around. And where all that failed, he used his fleet feet to stay out of Sullivan’s reach.

The fight lasted until the twenty-first round. Corbett tells the tale better than anyone. It’s his to tell, anyways—his and John L. Sullivan’s.

“When we came up for the twenty-first round it looked as if the fight would last ten or fifteen rounds longer. Right away I went up to him, feinted with my left and hit him with a left-hand hook alongside the jaw pretty hard, and I saw his eyes roll. . . . Summoning all the reserve force I had left I let my guns go, right and left, with all the dynamite Nature had given me, and Sullivan stood dazed and rocking. So I set myself for an instant, put just 'a little more' in a right and hit him alongside the jaw. And he fell helpless on the ground, on his stomach, and rolled over on his back! The referee, his seconds and mine picked him up and put him in his corner; and the audience went wild.”

James J. Corbett became the first gloved heavyweight champion of the world that night. He went on to successfully defend the title two years later against Charlie Mitchell before losing by knock-out to Bob Fitzsimmons via the famed “solar-plexus” punch in a fight he had been

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winning up to that point. Corbett tried to no avail to get the rematch (Fitzsimmons was smarter than that), but instead ended up facing his very own former sparring partner for the title, James J. Jeffries, who had dethroned Fitzsimmons by walking through the smaller man's punches before knocking him out in the eighth round. Corbett out-boxed Jeffries for most of the rounds of their two fights, but Jeffries was too big, too strong and too young for Corbett, winning both fights by knockout.

Corbett enjoyed the stage life while he was champion and continued his thespian pursuits even after. He brought a certain kind of flair to the ring, not only in how he fought inside of it, but what he did outside of it as well. He was schooled, well-read and could carry on conversations with all manners of society. He may not have really been a gentleman, as he was so often billed on fight cards, but he was one hell of a fighter and one hell of a man.

Reference: *Corbett, James J., The Roar of the Crowd: the true tale of the rise and fall of a champion (1926)*

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Radam G says:

Very nice, excellent copy. Holla!

deepwater says:

ahh the good ole days

jobcrosshookelbow says:

I love the history of this great sport. Please keep writing more on the bare-knuckle and early 1900's boxers. How about the Harlem Tommy Murphy and Abe Attel battle?

My Coach James Murphy is his nephew (and a Godan B.B. in A.J.J., level 5 Kickboxing Instructor, retired L.A.P.D.) and we'd both love to read-it?...P.S. Jim looks just like his Uncle but a bit taller. Thanks.