

## **PLEASURES BELOW THE BELT**

*Every talent must unfold itself in fighting.* - **Frederick Nietzsche**

Boxing is the ultimate celebration and fetishism of masculinity, a rite. As such, it is ultimately homoerotic, a confrontation of power...disrobing...the stench of sweat and flowing blood of heated combat. The relentless pursuit of one man by another towards an inevitable climax, a ritualistic courtship and bonding dance, a battle of raw strength between unbridled wills.

If it must be a sport, than it is like no other. It's our last surviving spectacle of pure tragedy. Boxing has evolved through the centuries. Today this ritual is refined and sophisticated, appropriate to contemporary civilisation, the culmination of an ancient tradition.

The earliest recorded boxing tournament dates back to Greece around BC 900. Two evenly matched fighting men entertained Thesus, a warrior ruler. They were seated, facing one another within arms reach, charged to pound each other to death with their bare fists. Later the seats were dispensed with and combatants wrapped leather thongs around their fists. For a while, the thongs were armoured with sharp steel spikes (cestus). A demarcated circle, or ring was introduced, as a neutral space where the wounded were allowed some moments to recuperate.

When the Romans revived the spectacle, it proved massively popular. Gladiators were prisoners of war, captured by the Roman armies and forced into slavery. Through fighting bravely in the arena, the strongest could win freedom, wealth and power. Final intervention by the Emperor (like today's referee) would decide the fates of victor and defeated. But woe betides any emperor who ignored the will of the crowd. Then, as now, it was essentially an aficionado event. Contrary to popular belief, the earliest Christian Roman Emperors, actually escalated the scale of gladiatorial games to their cruellest peaks. However, later Emperors (Constantine) gradually phased-out the games, eventually banning them.

The spectre of death still looms large over boxing. Clearly the crude, ostentatious displays of cruelty demanded by Roman citizenry have matured with the passage of time. But thankfully, the impending actuality of fate remains. It is cathartic, the final arena where society can shadow box and confront its own inevitable mortality. To ban boxing might sever humanity's only living link uniting its mythical pre-history and inescapable destiny. Modern boxing was born in England, the earliest account being a bare-knuckle fight in 1681. According to the *London Protestant Mercury* "A gentleman's footman and a butcher," were the contestants in the "Prize Ring."

This was a mobile circle, formed by spectators holding a perimeter rope; commonly held at village fetes. Within this, a "champion" and "challenger" would contest the "Prize Fight". Although there were no referees, the object was not to kill one's opponent, and subject to a code of fair play. A local champion would announce his intention to fight challengers to an assembled crowd. All those wanting a crack at it, threw their hats into the ring (hence the political expression). Bets were laid on the one to draw "first blood", or first to knock down his opponent. Regardless of the result, fighters were expected to shake hands afterwards. Thus, "The Noble Art" was born.

James Figg was the first official bare-knuckle champion, in 1719. The last significant change to boxing came with the introduction of Marquis of Queensberry rules in the late 19th century. Accordingly, the referee was incorporated and leather gloves would be worn by boxers (actually gloves were introduced to protect knuckles - which are easily broken, not heads or faces).

Among sports offering the greatest risk to the life and health of participants, boxing can only claim seventh place. Hang gliding, American football and motor racing all pertain to higher body counts. Yet it is boxing which provokes the loudest puritanical reaction from the 'Ban-it' brigade. There are many reasons for this. Boxing is - and always has been, a domain of the poor and repressed. Slaves, the Working Class, Negroes - for the many born into hopelessness and poverty, it represents the only chance of salvation. Why not ban poverty before its consequences? The fight is a truly existential event, a sanctioned realm, where two gods - almost naked, meet face-to-face on an equal footing. They are beyond the laws and conventions of wider society. Victory and defeat are the absolutes; the conclusion is unrehearsed and unpredictable.

If everything about boxing is homoerotic, excitement reaches euphoric levels when a boxer you fancy enters the ring. Even queens who usually eschew the brutality of boxing, find irresistible the lure of watching their favourite, young, pretty-boy boxer - bobbing and weaving...parrying...drawing...covering and clinching, getting his face mercilessly smashed to a pulp, and battered into insensibility by an experienced champion!

And oh...what perverse, pornographic pleasure with the realisation that you identify with the hapless victim!

After the final bell - the embrace, the genuine and passionate display of gratuitous, totally male affection - for all the world.

### **Chris Barber**

*HEAVYWEIGHT - weight unlimited*

*CRUISERWEIGHT - up to 195 pounds*

*LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHT - up to 175 pounds*

*MIDDLEWEIGHT - up to 160 pounds*

*JUNIOR MIDDLEWEIGHT - up to 154 pounds*

*WELTERWEIGHT - up to 147 pounds*

*JUNIOR WELTERWEIGHT - up to 140 pounds*

*LIGHTWEIGHT - up to 135 pounds*

*JUNIOR LIGHTWEIGHT - up to 130 pounds*

*FEATHERWEIGHT - up to 126 pounds*

*JUNIOR FEATHERWEIGHT - up to 122 pounds*

*BANTERWEIGHT - up to 118 pounds*

*FLYWEIGHT - up to 112 pounds*

[For knockout writing, inspired by boxing: Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, and Joyce Carol Oates each pull their punches.]