The First American Championship Prizefight

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Ho, all ye fancy gentlemen,
And patrons of the ring,
Give ear unto the pleasant song,
I am about to sing.
Tis not of merry revellings,
Nor love and ladies' charms,
But of two doughty champions,
And fearful feats of arms."

--From the Spirit of the Times, 10 March 1849

Americans at the end of the twentieth century have become so accustomed to our multi-billion dollar sports industry that it is difficult for us to imagine an era when organized sports hardly existed. Yet in the middle of the nineteenth century, there were virtually no professional sports, no teams that played regular schedules, and no national or even state-wide sporting organizations. A few horse races attracted national attention; a handful of men made a living running in sporadic footraces (known as pedestrian contests); football was little more than a once-a-year form of freshman hazing; and a few informal baseball clubs played each other now and then, though drinking and feasting were at least as important as the games themselves.

All of this began to change in the mid-nineteenth century, and boxing led the way. Although it was known as the "national sport of England" by the late eighteenth century, boxing did not catch on in America as quickly. English and American seamen occasionally settled their differences according to the rules of the London Prize Ring, but no one paid much attention. An American black and former slave, Tom Molineaux, went to England and twice fought for the championship in 1810 and 1811; Molineaux's name became extremely well known in England (especially since he almost beat the great champion Tom Cribb in their first fight), yet few Americans had heard of him. The sport was completely illegal; the courts hounded boxers, and when fights did occur, they were roundly condemned in the press. Only a few dozen fights occurred before 1842, and then no matches at all were staged for a few years after a bout in Hastings, New York in which one of the fighters died.

All of that changed forever in 1849.

A notice in the Spirit of the Times directed readers to Baltimore harbor on Tuesday, 6 February 1849, where they could catch steamboats to the secret location of what was billed as America's
first championship fight. James "Yankee" Sullivan, an Irish immigrant, political strong-arm boy, and New York City saloon keeper who had won a few good matches during the past decade, was about to battle Tom Hyer, a native-born American, also a political "shoulder-hitter," and a butcher by trade with a ferocious reputation as a street fighter.

"We do not remember," the New York Herald declared, "ever to have seen so great an excitement among certain classes of society, as has been developed during the last few days in relation to the approaching prize fight between Yankee Sullivan and Tom Hyer. It is similar in some respects to the agitation produced in the public mind by the first accounts of the Mexican War. . . ." It was a "winner take all" battle, with each side putting up five thousand dollars, in an era when a laborer earned around three hundred dollars a year. Most of the money was probably raised from New York's underground economy of gambling, unlicensed liquor sales, and prostitution, as well as from such working-class institutions as volunteer fire companies and political ward bosses.

The fight occurred in an atmosphere of great tension in labor and politics, especially in New York City. Irish immigration to America was cresting at the time, and the newcomers--landless peasants mainly, who had been thrown off the land by absentee landlords--became the objects of nativist scorn, religious persecution, and working-class suspicion. The last element was extraordinarily important. The Irish immigrated at a time when the economy was in the midst of a great transformation from small-scale shops and artisan-based craft production to large-scale manufacturing. This shift resulted in heightened barriers between workers and owners and growing specialization of labor. The new capitalist order--including not just industries based on machine technologies, but also large firms using massive amounts of cheap "sweated" labor--posed a serious threat to American workers who saw their chances for upward social mobility dwindle. One result of this massive social transformation was a powerful resurgence of anti-immigrant sentiment, in part because the newcomers were accused of undercutting the wages of American workers. Moreover, the Irish had managed to establish a foothold in urban politics, and native-born politicians now depicted the Irish as a threat to American democracy.

At the peak of hostility between the Irish and native-born--and consequently within the working-class--Sullivan and Hyer were about to engage in their landmark bout in the most elemental of sports. For months before the battle, fights broke out almost daily between supporters of the two men, as talk of their respective merits filled the working-class saloons. Sullivan believed that his ring experience would allow him easily to defeat "Young America," as Hyer was known, despite great disadvantages in age, weight and height. Yet their one street encounter in April of 1848 did not bode well for Sullivan. Half drunk, "Yankee" Sullivan entered a New York oyster bar, spotted Hyer, and the two immediately attacked each other. Within a few minutes, Hyer had Sullivan in a headlock and punched him into insensibility. At this moment, officer George Walling, future New York City chief of police, entered the room:

_There stood Tom Hyer, whom I knew well by sight and reputation, placing a percussion-cap upon the nipple of a pistol which he held in his hand. In one of the boxes was Yankee Sullivan, who looked as if he had been roughly handled. I took in the situation at once._

"Put up that pistol," I said to Hyer, who looked calm and collected enough and with no trace on his person of having been engaged in a fight.
"Who the devil are you?" he asked, in a gruff voice.

"I'm an officer," I replied, exhibiting my star.

"They're going to bring the gang here," said Hyer, in a calm voice; "and I'm not going to let them murder me without a pretty tough fight for my life."

"Come, get out of this. Come along with me," I said, and Hyer, taking hold of my arm, we left the saloon . . .

No sooner was he out of sight than a howling mob of Sullivan's friends came rushing toward me. They had heard of Sullivan's discomfiture, and were in search of Hyer, who, if they had caught him, would most assuredly have been murdered. Some of the crowd asked me where Sullivan was, and when I told them where I had last seen him, they made a rush for the oyster saloon. I could plainly hear their yells of rage when they found their friend. Hyer had not left the place a moment too early.

The incident was the talk of the Bowery for weeks, and stories of the "Irish Braggart's" humiliation filled the newspapers. Sullivan and Hyer exchanged accusations and counter-accusations, and finally the two signed "articles of agreement" in August: "The said James Sullivan agrees to fight the said Thomas Hyer a fair stand up fight . . . in a twenty-four feet roped ring, according to the new rules as laid down in the Fistiana for 1848. . . . The said fight shall take place within the states of Virginia or Maryland, or some other place, if the parties can mutually agree upon such other place."

The paradox here is striking. Prize fighting was associated with rough young working-class men who rejected all of the canons of bourgeois gentility then so powerful in America. Indeed, boxing was illegal not so much because fights were ugly or dangerous, but because the culture of the ring valorized drinking, carousing, gambling, and swearing. Yet, the language of the articles of agreement was extremely controlled and legalistic. The rules were written in the same language. Bare knuckle boxing allowed the throws and holds of wrestling; rounds had no fixed time, but ended when a man went down. Thus, a sixty round fight, with half a minute rest between rounds might last little more than an hour. The rules took care not only to outlaw behaviors like biting, kicking, and gouging, but also to maintain custom and protocol. For example, one of the rules under which Hyer and Sullivan fought addressed the construction of the "sacred inclosure," stating that the ring "shall be made on turf, and shall be four and twenty feet square, formed of eight stakes and ropes, the latter extending in double lines" and that "in the centre of the ring a mark be formed, to be termed a scratch; and finally that "at two opposite corners . . . spaces be inclosed by other marks sufficiently large for the reception of the seconds and bottle-holders, to be entitled 'the corners.'" The fighters were enjoined to conduct themselves "with order and decorum" and to confine themselves "to the diligent and careful discharge of their duties."

Hyer and Sullivan went through weeks of strenuous training. Meanwhile, their friends and backers engaged in endless saloon speculation on the outcome of the fight, speculation that constantly threatened to degenerate into violence. Finally, a secret venue was selected. Poole's
Island was a deserted bit of land in the Chesapeake Bay claimed by both the federal government and the state of Maryland. The disputed jurisdiction, it was hoped, would confound authorities bent on breaking up the event. So it was to Poole's Island that thousands of fans directed their thoughts as they made their way to Baltimore on Tuesday, 6 February 1849. There, in Baltimore Harbor, they boarded ships chartered especially for the fight.

Maryland officials, however, refused to cooperate. They obtained writs against the vessels, and on the eve of the fight forbade them from sailing. Meanwhile, High Constable Gifford of Baltimore County led a posse to Poole's Island to arrest the pugilists, who were already billeted there. After the narrowest of escapes, the fighters sailed with their friends and backers into the Bay, only to be pursued by other magistrates who had pressed the ship *Boston* into service to stop the fight. In a stroke of pure luck, however, the *Boston* went aground, just as it bore down on the vessels carrying Hyer, Sullivan, and about two hundred of their friends. The pugilistic party gestured their contempt to the Maryland officials. All aboard were itching for a fight, and they were ready to anchor at the first convenient spot, whether it was, as one newspaper put it, in Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, or Hell.

They landed at Still Pond Heights in Kent County, Maryland. A ring was constructed from local pine and rope from the ships' riggings. A light blanket of snow covered the ground. At about ten past four in the afternoon, Yankee Sullivan emerged from a local farmhouse and threw his hat in the ring, and Tom Hyer followed a few minutes later. They tied their colors to the ropes--red, white, and blue for Hyer; emerald green with white spots for Sullivan. Their seconds flipped for choice of ground. Sullivan won, and gave Hyer the corner facing the sun. Finally, the two stripped for battle in the cold winter air. The disparity in size was striking, as Sullivan was four inches shorter and thirty pounds the lighter man. But both men were impressive, as the *Police Gazette* noted:

*They were as finely developed in every muscle as their physical capacity could reach, and the bounding confidence which sparkled fiercely in their eyes, showed that their spirits and courage were at their highest mark. Sullivan, with his round compact chest, formidable head, shelving flinty brows, fierce glaring eyes, and clean turned shoulders, looked the very incarnation of the spirit of mischievous genius; while Hyer, with his broad, formidable chest, and long muscular limbs, seemed as if he could almost trample him out of life, at will.*

The fight began as the sun started to set. After a few cautious blows, Sullivan rushed Hyer, and gripped him in an underhold. This represented a crucial moment; Yankee's friends counted on his wrestling ability to counter Hyer's size and strength and to weaken him for the later rounds. Sullivan knotted his muscles to throw his man--but in vain. Hyer now grabbed Sullivan with an upper hold and wrenched him to the ground.

The reporters of that day captured the scene in colors still vivid: "Both men came up bloody to the scratch; Sullivan being literally clotted with gore, while the clear crimson smoked on Hyer's chest, from a lance wound which had been made under his right eye to prevent it from closing out his sight." By the sixteenth round Yankee's efforts were at an end:
Hyer . . . let fly both right and left in Sullivan's face, who, though he could not return it took it without wincing in the least. Hyer then rushed him to the ropes again, and after a short struggle there, threw him and fell heavily upon him. . . . When he was taken off, Sullivan was found to be entirely exhausted, and when lifted up reeled half round and staggered backward towards the ropes. The fight was done. He could not come in again, and one of his seconds took him from the ring.

The "Great $10,000 Match" took less than ten minutes of actual fighting time.

At most a few hundred men witnessed the battle. But tens of thousands awaited word of the outcome. In one of the earliest uses of the new technology, telegraph lines flashed the fight's result to the multitudes gathered at newspaper offices in northeastern cities. Newsboys hawked thousands of papers, lithographers sold pictures of the combatants as fast as they could print them, and saloon keepers worked overtime filling the glasses of men who gathered to share the word from Maryland. In Philadelphia, crowds packed Chestnut Street and mobbed Tom Hyer when he appeared. In New York, one newspaper declared, "nothing has been heard or talked of for several days past but the fight between Hyer and Sullivan." Hundreds gathered at Yankee Sullivan's New York saloon, but save for occasional cheers for their man, the crowd remained quiet. Hyer's favorite haunt, in contrast, the Fountain House in Park Row, witnessed fireworks, wild celebrations, and the hanging of a brilliantly lighted transparency with the words, "Tom Hyer, the Champion of America." The phrase signified something new, a single unified title owned by the one man who unequivocally could best all others in the ring.

Not everyone was so pleased with boxing's new-found popularity. For example, Philip Hone, former mayor of New York, noted with revulsion that James Gordon Bennett's New York Herald had lavished attention on the fight. "The appropriate organ of such disgraceful recitals is filled this morning with the disgusting details," he wrote. Similarly, the Christian Advocate called the mob scenes on the streets of New York "painful and humiliating." Good bourgeois citizens still considered prize fighting and the culture of the ring to be beneath the dignity of a democratic and Christian land. But the press coverage of this fight was unprecedented, and a few journals now defended the ring. The New York Evening Mirror declared, "In spite of the mawkish twaddle which we daily see in the newspapers about the affair, we are inclined to believe from other manifestations that public feeling is decidedly favorable to the fight. There are certainly much worse vices tolerated and encouraged by society than prize fighting."

The contest between the Irish-born Sullivan and the native-born Hyer focused amorphous social conflicts into the crystal-clear image of two great fighters battling for an enormous amount of money. In noting the schisms that divided men, however, we must not lose sight of the larger unities of the sporting fraternity. Boxing was primarily a working-class preserve, the property, as the Herald so elegantly put it, of "the low and the vulgar." True, a small but growing number of more or less respectable men now attended an occasional sparring exhibition, and a greater number read accounts of prize battles even as they condemned the ring. But boxing still belonged primarily to working-class males who rejected bourgeois standards of value, to laborers dispossessed by new economic alignments, and to men who lived in the netherworld of gambling, bootlegging, and petty crime. It was to these men--deeply divided by cultural and
religious conflicts, by competition for status and power, and above all by a wrenching transformation of America's economy--that the great championship fight spoke most eloquently.

With the Sullivan-Hyer match paving the way, prize fighting became one of the most important expressive forms of a flourishing plebeian culture. Indeed, half a century after their epic struggle, Hyer and Sullivan continued to square off in lithographs that hung from the walls of working-class taverns.

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