

*FIGHTERS illuminates the careers of twenty-two of the most colorful controversial and complex men who ever entered the Ring. 100 years of Boxing is documented through the insightful and witty observations of Mr. Miller.*

## **FIGHTERS**

By Thomas R Miller

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# FIGHTERS



**THOMAS R MILLER**

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## **John L. Sullivan**

They called him the "Boston Strong Boy." John Lawrence Sullivan was the last heavyweight champion of bare-knuckle boxing and the first heavyweight champion of gloved boxing and, perhaps, America's first sports superstar. He won over 450 fights in all sorts of circumstances, including some early in his career that were little more than extensions of barroom brawls. This number is extraordinary and becomes even more so when one considers that Sullivan's era was one in which the number of rounds in a prize fight was rarely specified, so they could last over 100 rounds and span an entire day. Anyone who's boxed but a few rounds knows how tiring the sport is and that to participate in one of these contests would've required a stamina that went well beyond what we in our day think of as superhuman.

Numerous times, early in his career, Sullivan wagered most of what money he had on himself, faced a crowd of potential opponents, and shouted, "My name's John L. Sullivan and I can lick any son-of-a-bitch alive!" While the odds almost demand that he must've gotten the worst of it in a few of these fights, the official record of his 46 professional bouts shows that, in these, his assertion was correct every time but the last.

John L. Sullivan was born in 1858 to Irish immigrant parents in the Roxbury Neighborhood of Boston. He did well in school, and his parents wanted him to become a priest. When he enrolled in Boston College around 1875, he pursued their dream at first. Several months later, he began playing professional baseball, earning \$30 to \$40 a week, big money in those days that allowed him to live the high life that a priest's vows of poverty didn't. Sullivan recalled, "...I threw my books aside and gave myself up to it. This is how I got into the baseball profession, and I left school for good and all. From the baseball business I drifted into boxing and pugilism."

Early on, he was arrested a few times for fighting in places where boxing was illegal.

He, as well as other boxers, went on exhibition tours and made money by betting on themselves.

Sullivan went on a nationwide tour in 1883-84 with five other fighters. They were to fight 195 matches in 136 cities over a period of 238 days. As a promotional device, Sullivan announced he would box anyone any time during the tour under the Marquess of Queensberry Rules which stipulated that rounds be three minutes long with one minute in-between them and that the fighters wear boxing gloves. He knocked out 11 men during their tour.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, formal boxing titles didn't exist. When Sullivan defeated Paddy Ryan in 1882, he became a "champion."

Boxing historians have dubbed Ryan the "heavyweight champion of America," but any claim to his having been "world champion" are suspect since he never competed internationally as Sullivan did. Depending upon which chronicler one listens to, Sullivan was considered world heavyweight champion for the first time either after he fought Charley Mitchell to a much disputed draw in France in 1888 or, more plausibly, in 1889 when he knocked out Jake Kilrain in round 75 of a bout scheduled to go 80. Some modern historians claim the first world heavyweight champion was the English boxer Jem Mace who defeated Tom Allen in 1870. But Mace was never proclaimed world champion because the boxing community of his day was predominantly Irish-American and thus decidedly anti-English. Some boxing authorities, when they refer to the "heavyweight championship of the world," are speaking of the championship belt awarded Sullivan in Boston in 1887. It carried the inscription "Presented to the Champion of Champions, John L. Sullivan, by the citizens of the United States" and, on its centerpiece, were the flags of the US, Ireland, and the United Kingdom.

Sullivan's 1888 fight with Mitchell was held in an outdoor ring in Chantilly, France. It took place in a driving rain and lasted over two hours. Both fighters were unrecognizable by the end of the bout, and too tired to lift their arms to punch. Mitchell was arrested, jailed, and fined, as bare-knuckle boxing was

illegal in France. Sullivan escaped the law by crossing the English Channel and spending several weeks recovering in Liverpool.

His fight with Kilrain was a turning point in the history of boxing, since it was the last world title bout regulated by London Prize Ring Rules which meant it was the last bare-knuckle heavyweight title bout. It was also one of the first sporting events in the United States to receive national press coverage.

Traditionally, the center for bare-knuckle boxing was New Orleans, but the current governor forbade the fight to be held in Louisiana. Sullivan trained in Belfast, New York with William Muldoon whose biggest problem was keeping his fighter off the sauce. A local reporter wrote that Sullivan would sometimes "escape" from his guard and in Belfast village a cry would be heard, "John L. is on the loose again! Send for Muldoon!" The trainer would arrive, snatch the champ from whatever tavern he was drinking in, and take him back to their training camp to dry out and continue training for the fight.

July 8, 1889. Some 3000 spectators boarded special trains bound for a secret location where the fight would be held so it couldn't be stopped as it had been in New Orleans. This secret spot turned out to be Richburg, a town near Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The fight began mid-morning, under a hellish sun that would drive the day's temperature to 104 degrees. Kilrain planned to use the weather to exhaust Sullivan, while Sullivan's strategy was, as usual, to use his brute strength against his opponent. Kilrain didn't trade punches with Sullivan but cornered him and wrestled him to the ground, a tactic permitted by the London Prize Ring Rules but not by the Marquess of Queensberry Rules.

But it was Kilrain who showed signs of weakening in rounds twenty through forty. Prizefighting rules had not yet established three minute rounds. Instead, rounds ended when one fighter knocked the other down. The shortest round of this fight lasted three seconds, the longest over 15 minutes.

In the forty-fifth round, it looked like Kilrain had gotten a break, when John L. threw up the big breakfast he'd eaten that morning and the even bigger lunch

he'd had the day before. The brandy and iced tea concoction he'd been drinking between rounds likely also contributed to his nausea. It was reported that he consumed more than a quart of whiskey during the fight. Despite the opportunity Sullivan's sickness offered Kilrain, he didn't move in and try to finish Sullivan but proposed a draw. This was just the motivation Sullivan needed to focus on the fight again.

In the 68<sup>th</sup> round, he hit Kilrain with a right uppercut that sent him flying through the air. A doctor present told Mike Donovan, one of Kilrain's trainers, that Kilrain would die if they let him continue to fight. Nonetheless, Kilrain fought on for 75 rounds. When the bell rang for the start of the 76<sup>th</sup>, he was unable to answer the call because he was barely conscious, bloodied, and exhausted. Sullivan was also covered with blood, but it was mostly Kilrain's. Donovan threw in the sponge, and the fight was over. The fight between John L. Sullivan and Jake Kilrain had lasted two hours and sixteen minutes.

Both men were arrested after the fight. They were found guilty and sentenced to a year of hard labor. The decision was appealed to the Supreme Court because the indictment had not successfully charged Sullivan with prizefighting and the decision was remanded back to a lower court. Here Sullivan was found guilty of prizefighting and Kilrain of assault and battery. Both men appealed their convictions. Sullivan's year of jail time was reduced, and he forfeited \$500 of his \$26,000 winnings. Kilrain got two months in jail and a fine of \$200.

He lost an appeal however, and one Colonel Charles Rich bought his sentence. This meant Kilrain had to work for the colonel long enough to complete it.

The fight's national press coverage made Sullivan arguably America's first sports hero to become a national celebrity.

John L. was undefeated at this point in his career and didn't defend his title for three years. He finally agreed to a title defense against "Gentleman Jim" Corbett to be held in September 1892 in New Orleans. The fight venue, the electrically



lighted Olympic Club, filled to its 10,000-person capacity despite the high ticket prices that ranged from \$5 to \$15 (roughly \$142 to \$426 today).

Corbett was younger, faster, and his more scientific boxing technique allowed him evade Sullivan's crouch and rush brawler's style. Unlike Sullivan, he had learned his craft from a coach rather than in the street. Corbett later published a book describing the fight. Here's what he had to say:

"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, 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.

"From the beginning of round one Sullivan was aggressive—wanted to eat me up right away. He came straight for me, and I backed and backed finally into a corner. While I was there I observed him setting himself for a right-hand swing, first slapping himself on the thigh with his left hand—sort of a trick to balance himself for a terrific swing with his right.

"But before he let the blow go, just at the right instant, I sidestepped out of the corner and was back in the middle of the ring again with Sullivan hot after me.

"I allowed him to back me into all four corners, and he thought he was engineering all this, that it was his own work that was cornering me. But I had learned what I wanted to know—just where to put my head to escape his blow if he should get me cornered and perhaps dazed. He had shown his hand to me.

"In the second round he was still backing me around the ring. I hadn't even struck at him yet, and the audience on my right hissed at me for running away and began to call me 'Sprinter.' Now I could see at a glance that Sullivan was not quite near enough to hit me, so suddenly I turned my side to him, waved both hands to the audience and called out, 'Wait a while! You'll see a fight.'

"...So far Sullivan hadn't reached me with anything but glancing blows, and it was my intention, when the third round started, to hit him my first punch, and I felt it *must* be a good one! If my first punch didn't hurt him, he was going to lose all respect for my hitting ability.

"So, with mind thoroughly made up, I allowed him to back me once more into a corner. But although I didn't intend to slip out, by my actions I indicated that I was going to, just as I had before. As we stood there, fiddling, he crowding almost on top of me, I glanced, as I had always done before, first to the left, then to the right, as if looking for some way to get out of this corner. He, following me and thinking I wanted to make a getaway, determined that he wouldn't let me out this time.

"For once he failed to slap himself on the thigh with his left hand, but he had his right all ready for the swing as he was gradually crawling up on me.

"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. 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. When the round was over his nose was broken.

"At once there was pandemonium in the audience! All over the house, men stood on their chairs, coats off, swinging them in the air. You could have heard the yells clear to the Mississippi River. But the uproar only made Sullivan the more determined. He came out of his corner in the fourth like a roaring lion, with an uglier scowl than ever, bleeding considerably at the nose. 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.

"From that time on I started doing things the audience were seeing for the first time, judging from the way they talked about the fight afterwards. I would work a left-hand on the nose, then a hook to the stomach, a hook up on the jaw again, a great variety of blows, in fact; using all the time such quick side-stepping and footwork that the audience seemed to be delighted and a little

bewildered, as was also Mr. Sullivan. That is, bewildered, for I don't think he was delighted.

"In the twelfth round we clinched, and, with the referee's order, 'Break away,' I dropped my arms, when Sullivan let go a terrific right-hand swing from which I just barely got away as it was it just grazed the top of my head. Some in the audience began should 'foul!' but I smiled and shook my head, to tell them, 'I don't want it that way.'

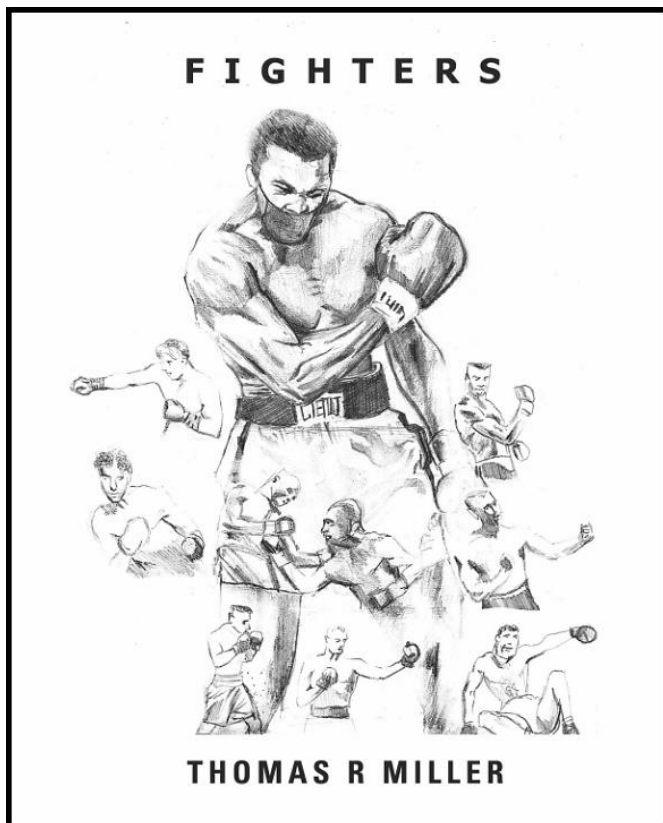
"When we came up for the twenty-first round it looked as if the fight would last 10 or 15 rounds longer. Right away I went up to him, feinted with my left and hit him with a left-hand hook alongside the jaw pretty hard and I saw his eyes roll.

"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."

When Sullivan came to, he announced to the crowd, "If I had to get licked, I'm glad I was licked by an American."

Sullivan retired to Abington, Massachusetts and appeared in several short exhibition matches during the next decade, but he would never again be the fighter he was in his prime. He also pursued various careers he'd developed outside boxing, as a stage actor, public speaker, celebrity baseball umpire, sports reporter, and bar owner.

In his later years, he won out over his lifelong addiction to alcohol and became a prohibition lecturer.



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