



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

An Athlone boxer in New York



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On July 4 1882, two renowned boxers faced each other in New York City's Washington Square Park.

One, the undoubted star of the occasion, was John L Sullivan, probably the most famous athlete in the United States at that time. His challenger was James Elliott, a veteran with over twenty years of fights behind him. Both fighters had a connection to Athlone. Elliott was born in Athlone before his family emigrated to the USA, while Sullivan's mother, Catherine Kelly, was also from the town.

A brutal sport

In 1882, Elliott was 44-years-old. He started fighting in the 1850s and many of his bouts had been bare-knuckle brutalities during a time when prize-fights continued for dozens of rounds. In the 1860s, he claimed the title of American Heavyweight Champion but his time at the top was short.

According to contemporaries, he was a vicious character and was sentenced to sixteen years imprisonment in 1870 following a violent robbery. He was released from Philadelphia's Easter State Prison after nine years. Sullivan was 23-years-old and had recently become American Heavyweight Champion, a title he took from Paddy Ryan with a ninth-round knockout during their bareknuckle fight in February 1882.

Sullivan's fight with Elliott would follow the Marquess of Queensbury rules. These were written by John Graham Chambers, a Welsh athlete and journalist, and published in 1867 with sponsorship from the ninth marquess of Queensbury.

Although we do not have space to go through the rules in their entirety, they became the foundation of modern boxing. The rules provided for three-minute rounds, with a one-minute gap between rounds; a boxer who was knocked down had ten seconds in which to gain his footing, unassisted;

no wrestling or holding was allowed; and fighting without good quality boxing gloves was prohibited. Before the introduction of Queensbury rules, most fights were staged under London Prize Ring Rules, a system of bareknuckle boxing which allowed an unlimited number of rounds.

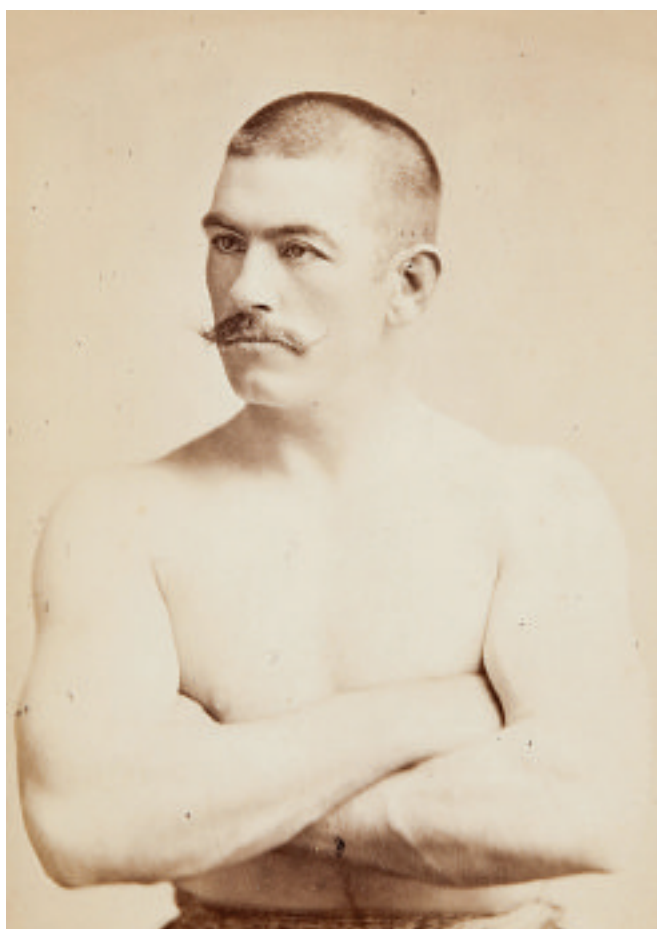
Sullivan, a keen businessman and self-promoter, realised that fighting under Queensbury rules was a means through which to quickly gain immense wealth. Why engage in bare-knuckle boxing and fight to exhaustion for 50 rounds, or more, when there was the option of a short bout, involving three-minute rounds? During the 1870s, Sullivan began touring the USA, offering challenges to local fighters: could they stay standing for four three-minute rounds?

The answer in almost all cases was a resounding no. Initially, Sullivan's challengers fought for prizes of \$50 to \$100 dollars but, in tandem with Sullivan's growing popularity, the crowds increased, as did the prize money. On that July day in 1882, if Elliott made it through four rounds he would earn \$500: a substantial sum of money. For example, the average annual salary for urban workers in the USA that year was around \$420.

In the world of boxing, all roads led to John L Sullivan. He insisted that his would-be challengers prove their worth by fighting each other in what amounted to elimination bouts. Those fights created a continuous narrative in the media, as newspapers charted the progress of boxers fighting for the right to meet Sullivan in the ring. It was through such fights that Elliott earned his meeting with Sullivan. Two months earlier, he defeated Dick Egan, the so-called "Troy Terror", with a fourth-round knockout. In the aftermath of that fight, which was widely reported in the media, Elliott issued a challenge to Sullivan, which was accepted.

Fight time

On the day of the big fight, Washington Square Park opened at 10am. Over 6,000 people entered the park, paying 50 cents per person. Most of those gate receipts went directly to Sullivan, who, as the New York Times put it, 'reaped a harvest of silver and greenbacks'.



John L Sullivan in 1882. That year Sullivan, whose mother was from Athlone, faced James Elliott in New York. Elliott was born in Athlone before emigrating to the USA.

However, the fight was delayed as rain began to fall that morning and persisted until the late afternoon, by which time the park was 'a sea of mud'. The long wait and the inclement conditions did not dampen the crowd's enthusiasm and, at 5.30pm, when Sullivan and Elliott were ready to fight, the 'excitement rose to fever heat'. The crowd surged towards the ring, which stood on a raised platform, but they were prevented from getting too close to the boxers by a contingent of the New York police force under the command of

John Gunner, one of the city's highest-ranking police officers.

As soon as the referee signalled the start of the fight, Sullivan advanced and Elliott retreated to his corner where he received a 'terrible blow' to the mouth that knocked him to the floor. Elliott got to his feet, drawing cheers from the crowd, but his face was already cut. The New York Times reported that 'First Blood according to the vernacular of the prize ring was claimed and allowed to Mr. Sullivan by the crowd'.

Urged on by the crowd, Sullivan

rushed forward again. Elliott sought respite by holding onto his opponent but the referee intervened, shouting 'break away, break away'. As Elliott stepped back, Sullivan hit him with a body shot and then an uppercut. Elliott fell to his knees, grabbing Sullivan's legs in a futile attempt to stay upright. At this point, the seconds rushed into the ring and pulled Elliott to his feet. Elliott, according to a spectator, seemed 'astonished' by the situation in which found himself. He tried to dodge Sullivan's subsequent attack but was again knocked down.

Different paths

At the close of the first round, Elliott's breeches were covered in mud. His face, according to the New York Times, had 'assumed a ghastly color' and blood trickled from his mouth. As Elliott sat in his corner, spectators could see that his back was cut and bruised from his many knockdowns. Across from Elliott, Sullivan sat and waited, 'fresh as a daisy'.

The second round was a replay of the first. Sullivan landed numerous punches, knocking Elliott to the ground on multiple occasions. The New York Times reporter, who was fond of analogies, described Sullivan as a battering ram, a living locomotive, a storm from which there was no shelter. Whereas Sullivan was a maelstrom of movement, Elliott was immobile, like a bowling pin whose function was to be repeatedly knocked down and set up again.

Somehow, Elliott made it through the second round but the end of the bout was near. In the third round, Sullivan caught Elliott with an uppercut that, in the words of the New York Times, 'completely ruined that gentleman as an antagonist'. Elliott fell against the ropes and then collapsed onto the floor, where he remained for perhaps twenty minutes. When Elliott recovered consciousness, Sullivan provided him with \$50. Elliott 'ill-naturedly accepted the money' and was assisted from the platform to a nearby dressing room.

The two men's paths would diverge from this point. Sullivan would gain international fame and become an epic figure in boxing history. Elliott, as we shall see in a later article, would remain in the public eye but his fame tended more towards notoriety.

