Bare-Knuckle Bastards: Examining Classism in British Bare-Knuckle Boxing Across Time

"The hour named for the meeting was 8 o'clock, and the interest excited amongst the amateurs of the fancy in Gloucester, Cheltenham, Tewksbury… was of the most moving description. Long before the appointed time, the different routes leading to the scene of action… were crowded with anxious passengers and vehicles of all descriptions" ("Boxing Match," 1821). This article published in the *British Press* details the enthusiasm surrounding a boxing match held between a farmer and a laborer in Worcestershire, sentiment reflective of public opinion of boxing at the end of the Regency era. Bare-knuckle boxing may not be a mainstream sport today, but for centuries it had the unique honor of being both a pride and scourge of its founding country. Poor working-class men used this brutal pastime to rise above their rank, while wealthy landowners and nobility capitalized off sponsoring skilled pugilists. The history of bare-knuckle boxing demonstrates sharp differences in how this sport, tainted by association with gambling, drinking and criminality, was perceived and used by men of different classes.

British bare-knuckle boxing originated in the 1600s, with the first officially recorded fight being in 1681 (Hauser et al, 2026). There were few, if any, rules; boxers did not use gloves, weight classes did not exist, there were no designated rounds, and wrestling moves were commonly used. Boxers battled for prize purses and were bet on by spectators. Most boxers were from poor families and occasionally received sponsorship from wealthy members of the upper class, though it appears a majority of pugilists travelled around the country to outdoor fairs, taking on challenge matches (Case, 2019). James Figg was a prominent boxer who in 1719 claimed the title of bare-knuckle champion of England. He was born in 1684 to a poor Oxfordshire farming family and learned boxing by traveling to local fairs to challenge booth

fighters. Eventually, Figg received sponsorship by the 3rd Earl of Peterborough, and opened his own boxing academy. He appears to have achieved not only fame but long-lasting success, which sets him apart from future famous boxers, many of whom died in poverty.

In 1743, Figg's most acclaimed student, Jack Broughton, instituted the first modern rules for bare-knuckle boxing (Hauser et al., 2026). Broughton's rules largely eliminated wrestling from the sport, emphasizing the use of fists, and introduced the first pre-modern gloves, called mufflers. This ruleset was a major step towards boxing being considered a respectable athletic endeavor, as it was commonly associated with criminal activity, as well as gambling and drinking, which were considered morally inferior. Most boxers during this era were not professional, but worked blue-collar jobs and took up boxing as a hobby (Biscontini, 2025). However, with Broughton's new rules and prizefighters such as Gentleman Jack Johnson taking to the ring, the interest of the aristocracy was piqued (Hauser et al., 2026). While prizefighting remained illegal and was still considered by many to be an affront to moral decency, the growing support from Britain's upper class resulted in lax law enforcement.

Aristocratic patronage of boxers grew from the mid 1700s to early 1800s (Ungar, 2010), with newspapers praising the sport's manliness regardless of continued concern about its brutality and moral implications (Cox, 2024). Men of the growing working class had particularly great appreciation for boxing and its status as a manly sport (Gorn, 2019). Boxing was considered an archetypal English sport and beloved by famous members of the nobility such as The Prince of Wales and Lord Byron (Ungar, 2010). Wealthy landowners would arrange boxing matches on their private estates to avoid any legal trouble that could result from conducting this illegal pastime in public. Patrons of both the middle and upper classes would hire pugilists to spar with them or arrange fights for their sponsored fighter. Middle class patrons were often

journalists or pub owners, the latter of whom were commonly retired boxers themselves. Patronage provided some financial stability but gave no guarantees, as boxers could be discarded at the patron's whim due to injury or poor performance.

Despite the existence of patronage, most boxers made little money and were still associated with crime (Ungar, 2010). Pugilists were often of low socioeconomic origin and performed manual labor as their day job. Aside from the unreliable financial benefits, boxing served as an opportunity for poor laborers to enjoy a moment of glory and display the hardy qualities of their communities. Many famous boxers indeed died poor; Daniel Mendoza was a renowned Jewish bare-knuckle boxer who came to symbolize manliness during boxing's height in the Regency era, yet he left eleven children and his wife penniless when he died. Mendoza was not only from the lower class but also struggled against the anti-Semitic stereotypes common in his day. Like so many other British boxers, Mendoza was born to a poor family and rose to fame for several years before his retirement left him with nothing, illustrating the harsh realities faced by men who sought financial success and fame in the ring.

Another famous pugilist of the early 1800s who faced racial discrimination and used boxing to rise from poverty is Tom Molineaux, who purportedly won his freedom from slavery in America by winning a major match (Smith, n.d.). Molineaux became a big name in Britain during boxing's golden age and was even wealthy for a time. But while men of any background were free to try their hand at success in the ring, sponsorship remained firmly hierarchical, and Black and Jewish boxers faced extra obstacles in the fight against classism (Ungar, 2010). Tragically, Molineaux's death from alcohol abuse only substantiated public concern about boxing's effects on morality. Ironically, the society that blamed boxing for the moral outcomes

of fighters also approved the hierarchical structure that took advantage of them and abandoned previously beloved heroes to die in poverty.

As pugilism entered the 1820s and the Regency era waned, newspapers returned to condemning bare-knuckle boxing as morally delinquent rather than praising its association with masculinity (Cox, 2024). Boxing, drinking and gambling were collectively thought to undermine the discipline of the working class, which most frequently engaged in pugilism (Gorn, 2019). From 1829-1837, public interest in the sport slackened as Queen Victoria and the police increased enforcement of laws against prizefighting (Cox, 2024). Even though prizefighting was illegal in every US state and America's middle class generally considered boxing immoral, this crackdown coincided with the rise of prominent Irish and American fighters, (Gorn, 2019).

Notable pugilists around 1830 included James Burke, a waterman who built a successful boxing career and took the title of champion ("James Burke," n.d.). One of Burke's infamous fights was against Simon Byrne, the heavyweight boxing champion of Ireland in the early 1800s. Byrne had left an impoverished Ireland to seek higher financial stakes in England but died from injuries three days after his fight against Burke (BKB figureheads, n.d.). The tragic end to the fight was not Burke's fault, but the legal fallout of this and several other fatal bouts increased public backlash against bare-knuckle boxing and served as a partial catalyst for the London Prize Ring Rules. Although Burke escaped extensive jail time, he died in poverty like many famous boxers before him.

In 1838, the British Pugilists' Protective Association released the London Prize Ring Rules, which established fouls and gave more detailed regulations for round length and ring size (Hauser et al., 2026). The Queensberry rules followed in 1867, enacting even stricter policies including requiring fighters to wear gloves during all bouts. After the establishment of these

rules, which drove true bare-knuckle boxing underground, boxing returned to its association with masculinity and underwent an increase in respectability. However, not all boxing afficionados took to the new rules; discreet bare-knuckle matches still occurred, with wealthy sponsors funding athletes who preferred the old ways (Cox, 2024).

James Mace was an English heavyweight champion who started out as a bare-knuckle fighter and transitioned to gloved fighting under the Queensberry rules (Britannica Editors, 2025). Mace began as a traveling youth violinist who also gave boxing exhibitions until he garnered the financial support of an established former boxer and started his boxing career in the 1950s. Mace remained part of the middle class, with a multifaceted career of circus performing, innkeeping, and boxing. Regarded as the last world heavyweight champion under the London Prize Ring Rules, Mace was notably respected for maintaining personal integrity while working in the morally ambiguous world of boxing.

After 1890, gloved boxing became more widespread and was portrayed as a physical discipline beneficial for men of any age or situation (Cox, 2024). By the 1900s, bare-knuckle boxing still existed but had been largely phased out and replaced by regulated boxing. The sport's most brutal days appeared to be behind it. Describing the remaining bare-knuckle fighters of this time, Cox writes that "Fighters who survived past 40 turned to training, went back to labouring, or... pursued career criminality." While boxing became more widely practiced, most boxers were still from the lower class and viewed boxing as a way to make money and rise above their origins (Hauser et al., 2026).

Roy "Pretty Boy" Shaw, a blue-collar worker who started boxing as a schoolboy to defend himself from bullies, became a big name in bare-knuckle boxing in the late 1970s. After Shaw's release from his lengthy eighteen-year prison term for armed robbery, he took up bare-

knuckle fighting and became “the hardest man in Britain” (Campbell, 2012). The fact that Shaw is one of many bare-knuckle fighters to be involved in criminal activity demonstrates that the sport’s historically negative media portrayals are not entirely unfounded. The opening line of Shaw’s autobiography captures a mildly dramatic sentiment that echoes through of generations of pugilists: “I am a ruthless bastard.” Bare-knuckle fighting served as a way for him to elevate himself above a degenerate past, much as it helped centuries of fighters rise a step from their impoverished class.

In 2015, Bare Knuckle Boxing (BKB) was founded and became the first modern bare-knuckle boxing organization to be legally sanctioned in the UK (“International Boxing,” 2026). BKB set regulations and standards for bare-knuckle boxing that played a large role in bringing it back into the spotlight. In 2024, the United States company BYB Extreme Bare Knuckle Fighting Series bought out BKB, furthering the sport's launch into mainstream media. These organizations focused on turning what was historically viewed as a disorderly activity into a credible and professional sport. Advocating for the return of bare-knuckle boxing was difficult, with BKB facing disapproval from many sources (“Bare-knuckle boxers,” 2020). The UK’s gloved boxing governing entity, mainstream media and the world of professional boxing still considered bare-knuckle too brutal to be sanctioned, while underground practitioners of bare-knuckle were vocal in their displeasure at the idea of moving it aboveground. Bare-knuckle is still facing disfavor but has grown significantly since becoming legal.

Jimmy Sweeney, today’s self-proclaimed “king of BKB,” serves as a final illustration of the issue of class in bare-knuckle boxing. Sweeney comes from an Irish Traveller heritage, where boxing is used to settle familial disputes; he grew up with bare-knuckle as a cultural practice and started representing Ireland in international fights at the age of 18 (“Everything You Need,”

2020). For centuries, Travellers provided England with seasonal farm work and practiced skilled trades, specifically tin smithing. Irish Travellers have historically faced intense discrimination; in 2020, 60% of Ireland's settled population reported they would not welcome a Traveller as a member of their family, with 64% rejecting them based on their way of life (Haynes et al., 2021). This prejudice is commonly based on ethnicity but also serves as a prominent contemporary example emphasizing bare-knuckle boxing's historic and modern importance to the lower classes of the UK as a sport that provides opportunity for advancement and a source of community pride.

A fascinating relationship exists in bare-knuckle boxing's history between the wealthy, who found great entertainment and profited off their penniless sponsees, and the poor, who sought something more through what many shunned as a barbarous and immoral sport. For generations, bare-knuckle boxing has offered opportunities for riches, fame and glory to low and middle-class men. These interactions between the upper and lower echelons of British society remained relatively constant from the 1600s to the 1900s, with fluctuations in public perception of boxing affecting mainly the lower class. While pugilism's unique mingling of classes might be considered egalitarian, the impoverished deaths of countless discarded boxers prove that the wealthy nearly always gained more financially than the athletes they sponsored. Boxing has served as a tool of exploitation for the wealthy and a means of advancement to the poor as proponents of the sport battle public opinion for respectability. With a recent resurgence bringing the sport aboveground for perhaps the first time in its history, time will only tell if bare-knuckle can fully emerge from the classism that has invariably defined it.

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