

History of Amateur Boxing

Italian Amphora circa 500BC

Ancient History

The history of boxing starts from the history of Ancient Greece with perhaps the first mention being in Homer's "Iliad", written around 1100BC, describing a prize-fight between Epeus and Euryalus. There are, however, ancient Egyptian artefacts dating back to 3000BC that appear to depict boxing events and suggestions that "Boxing" occurred in Ethiopia as early as 6000BC. The earliest "pictures" of boxing appeared much closer to the times of Homer in the form of a fresco from Santorini Island dated around 1600BC that depicts two young boxers.

Mosaic from Roman Ruins in Tunis

In the Ancient Greek history, king Theseus is credited with introducing boxing as a form of entertainment before the fifth century BC. There were few rules, but traditional "Codes of Honour" were observed and, for boxing, there was an understanding that the contest involved punching and therefore wrestling and grappling was not allowed. At that time there were no "rings" and the fighting area was defined by the spectators. As a result, the boxers could often back away and, as they came closer to the spectators, they too could back away so that the ring size was continually changing. The result was that there was no ringcraft and an opponent could not be "cornered". In practice, the "honour" or pride of the boxers' was such that they would usually not back away and they stood with their feet in one place throwing blows at their opponent until one or the other surrendered or was knocked senseless. Although not then used as a word of terminology, it was from this start that phrases such as "toe the line" and "up to scratch" may have developed and were used later. Initially the boxers fought bare fisted but gradually, as they learnt ways to defend themselves, the contests became longer and longer and so they looked for ways to prevent injuries. They bound their hands with soft leather thongs. These were known as "himantes". The himantes were not designed to increase power or soften the blows but to protect the knuckles, thumbs, hands and forearms from fractures and cuts. The himantes were the only form of covering as the boxing was conducted in the nude.

Boxing was recorded as an Olympic sport as early as 688BC, at the twenty third Olympiad. At that time there were no weight divisions so,

inevitably, it was the large stronger men who became champions. It is said that one man (Milo) won the championship in 4 successive Games. A junior division was established in 616BC, 72 years after the first event, and this was used as a stepping stone for boys to gain entry to the Senior competition where they could make a living. Even in those days, sport at the highest level had a professional status. Indeed, it is recorded that not only did the champion receive his bay leaf wreath but also 500 Drachmas and also free food for life.

As time went by, the ancient Olympic Games became opened up to other nations and Romans took part. Boxing was taken to Rome where it became a gladiatorial contest and no longer a sport. The himantes, which had gradually changed from soft to hard leather and so had become a weapon rather than protection, were now replaced with the “caestus”. The Roman caestus was a lethal hand binding studded with stones or metal spikes. Boxing had changed from sport to lethal combat, and all the skills and art of defence were lost, as each bout was a bloody fight, usually to the death of one participant. As the Roman Empire collapsed, around 5th Century AD, so did gladiatorial boxing and there is little record of boxing until about the 18th Century AD.

Recent History

Records of “Boxing” re-emerged with the bare fist fighters of the early 18th Century. An Englishman, James Figg, advertised an event for “The Noble Science of Defence” in 1719. This not only included boxing but also use of sword and quarter staff. He also held an exhibition of boxing at Southwark fair in London. Figg not only promoted these events but also claimed to be “Champion Boxer” until he retired in 1734. A rudimentary ring was developed as the boxing took place in an arena that was surrounded by wooden planks.

The next person of note was John “Jack” Broughton who had been a pupil of James Figg and came to be known as “The Father of Boxing”. Broughton opened his own arena, known

Broughton’s Rules

- 1)** That a square of a yard be chalked in the middle of the stage, and on every fresh set-to after a fall, or being parted from the rails, each Second is to bring his Man to the side of the square, and place him opposite to the other, and till they are fairly set-to at the Lines, it shall not be lawful for one to strike at the other.
- 2)** That, in order to prevent any Disputes, the time a Man lies after a fall, if the Second does not bring his Man to the side of the square, within the space of half a minute, he shall be deemed a beaten Man.
- 3)** That in every main Battle, no person whatever shall be upon the Stage, except the Principals and their Seconds, The same rule to be observed in bye-battles, except that in the latter, Mr. Broughton is allowed to be upon the Stage to keep decorum, and to assist Gentlemen in getting to their places, provided always he does not interfere in the Battle; and whoever pretends to infringe these Rules to be turned immediately out of the house. Every body is to quit the Stage as soon as the Champions are stripped, before the set-to.
- 4)** That no Champion be deemed beaten, unless he fails coming up to the line in the limited time, or that his own Second declares him beaten. No Second is to be allowed to ask his man's Adversary any questions, or advise him to give out.
- 5)** That in bye-battles, the winning man to have two-thirds of the Money given, which shall be publicly divided upon the Stage, notwithstanding any private agreements to the contrary.
- 6)** That to prevent Disputes, in every main Battle the Principals shall, on coming on the Stage, choose from among the gentlemen present two Umpires, who shall absolutely decide all Disputes that may arise about the Battle; and if the two Umpires cannot agree, the said Umpires to choose a third, who is to determine it.
- 7)** That no person is to hit his Adversary when he is down, or seize him by the ham, the breeches, or any part below the waist. A man on his knees to be reckoned down.

as “Broughton’s amphitheatre” in Oxford Street in London, in March 1743. He then revolutionised boxing by fighting on a raised stage under strict new rules.

These rules applied to barefist fighting and the only use of gloves was during practise bouts. From these rules it is evident that there was no time limit for a “round” and only the rest period was defined. This only occurred once a boxer had been knocked “down”. The end of the “battle” happened if either boxer could not return to the edge of the square to “face up” at the end of the 30 seconds. It is also more likely that “toe the line” terminology started here when the 2 pugilists had to stand either side of the chalked in square in the centre of the main “ring” at the start of each new round. “Toeing the Line” could also apply to the later rules below.

Not until 1838, nearly another 100 years later, were the rules changed to be known as “The London Prize Ring Rules”. The biggest change was to define a ring as being 24feet square and the boxer’s rest period was 30 seconds plus an extra 8 seconds to get back to the “scratch line” in the centre of the ring rather than the square that Broughton had defined. These rules were modified in 1853 and 1866 to outlaw such actions as headbutting and holding hair while hitting the opponent. During this period there were many heroes and famous fighters who suffered contests lasting perhaps 3 hours with as many as 166 rounds. All of these fights were actually illegal according to the Law of the land because of the gambling and payments that occurred. A similar situation occurred in the USA with many prize fighters travelling across the Atlantic Ocean to try to become International Champion. The illegal aspect was avoided by calling the events “Exhibition of sporting skill” or “Exhibition of self defence” and they were never publicised as a fight.

The next big change occurred when the Queensberry Rules were produced.

These rules gained their name from the aristocrat John Sholto Douglas, 8th Marquess of Queensberry, who was the sponsor and patron to John Graham Chambers. Chambers was an athlete who started the

Marquis of Queensberry Boxing Rules Governing Contests for Endurance (1867)

- 1) To be a fair stand-up boxing match in a 24-foot ring, or as near that size as practicable.
- 2) No wrestling or hugging allowed.
- 3) The rounds to be of three minutes' duration, and one minute's time between rounds.
- 4) If either man falls through weakness or otherwise, he must get up unassisted, 10 seconds to be allowed him to do so, the other man meanwhile to return to his corner, and when the fallen man is on his legs the round is to be resumed and continued until the three minutes have expired. If one man fails to come to the scratch in the 10 seconds allowed, it shall be in the power of the referee to give his award in favour of the other man.
- 5) A man hanging on the ropes in a helpless state, with his toes off the ground, shall be considered down.
- 6) No seconds or any other person to be allowed in the ring during the rounds.
- 7) Should the contest be stopped by any unavoidable interference, the referee to name the time and place as soon as possible for finishing the contest; so that the match must be won and lost, unless the backers of both men agree to draw the stakes.
- 8) The gloves to be fair-sized boxing gloves of the best quality and new.
- 9) Should a glove burst, or come off, it must be replaced to the referee's satisfaction.
- 10) A man on one knee is considered down and if struck is entitled to the stakes.
- 11) No shoes or boots with springs allowed.
- 12) The contest in all other respects to be governed by revised rules of the London Prize Ring.

“Amateur Athletic Club” in 1866 at Cambridge. At the University he met John Sholto Douglas and proposed the new rules for boxing. John Sholto Douglas, who was also a boxer himself, liked the ideas and the rules were published in 1867 under his patronage.

These rules, as shown in the box, changed boxing totally, as it could become a gloved sport, with fixed length rounds and rest periods and therefore with a finite overall “competition” time, rather than a fight to an end only defined when one man was unable to continue. Even at that time the need to circumvent the Law is well shown by the rules being for “Contests for Endurance” and not for “fighting”.

Modern History

The first champion under the Queensberry rules was “Gentleman Jim” Corbett who defeated John L Sullivan in New Orleans in 1892. This was interesting as they were both American ex bare-knuckle fighters boxing under the English Queensberry rules, in America, wearing gloves. Sullivan had been bare fist champion under the Prize Ring Rules for the preceding 10 years and was supposedly out of condition in 1892 when he was knocked out by Corbett in the 21st round of the contest.

With the start of set duration contests, boxing regained a sporting basis even though most of the contests were still fights with large amounts of money being involved. The set rounds required points to be awarded to each boxer in each round, to determine a winner, if neither boxer had been knocked down and become unable to continue, and so paved the way for modern boxing. The result is that Amateur Boxing Associations around the world are deeply indebted to John Chambers and the Marquess of Queensberry as, without their foresight, there would be no possibility of an Amateur event with displays of skill rather than fighting to incapacitate the opponent.

At the time of the introduction of the Queensberry rules there were just 3 weight divisions, *lightweight* (upto 133 pounds [60kg]), *middleweight* (upto 156 pounds [70kg]), and *heavyweight* (over 156 pounds [70kg]).

The first reference in modern amateur boxing to organisations running the sport was the formation of the “Amateur Boxing Association” in England in 1880. At that time there were 12 clubs affiliated and it held its first championships the following year. Four weight classes were contested, Featherweight (9stone) [126pounds, 56Kg], Lightweight (10stone) [140 pounds, 63Kg], Middleweight (11 stone 4 pounds) [158pounds, 72Kg] and Heavyweight (no limit). (A stone is equal to 14 pounds). By 1902, American boxers were contesting the titles in the A.B.A. Championships, which, therefore, had become an international competition. By 1924, the

A.B.A. had 105 clubs in affiliation. In 1910 there were just 9 weight categories and since then the weight divisions have expanded upto 17 although for modern events there are now 13 main weight groups.

The Amateur boxing was only conducted with gloves being worn and with 3 rounds each of 3 minutes. This remained the situation until very recent times when Championship contests were reduced to 4 rounds each of just 2 minutes. It was, however, the rules of set rounds, of set duration for each round, being boxed with gloves, and points being awarded for skill in attack and defence, that allowed Amateur boxing to develop.

Modern Olympic Boxing History

1904 was the first modern Olympic Games to have boxing contested but as an exhibition event. These Games were held in St. Louis in the United States of America and every boxer was an American. There were seven weight divisions boxed and several boxers competed in more than one weight category with Oliver Kirk gaining 2 gold medals. There was even a women's demonstration bout that year. In 1908 The Olympic Games were held in London (England) with 5 weight divisions being contested and gold, silver and bronze medals being awarded. Great Britain won 14 of the 15 medals. In 1912 the Olympic Games took place in Stockholm, in Sweden, where boxing was illegal. This meant that that was the only Olympic Games since 1904 not to have any boxing competition. From 1972 to 2004, Cuba and the United States have won the most Gold Medals, 29 for Cuba and 21 for the U.S. It was the international profile of the Olympic Games that resulted in International organisation of boxing being developed. Initially the Federation Internationale de Boxe Amateur (International Amateur Boxing Federation) was formed in Paris in 1920, but there were only five member nations. In 1946, however, when the International Amateur Boxing Association (**AIBA**) was first formed in London, twenty-four nations, from five continents, were represented, and the A.I.B.A. has continued to be the official world federation of amateur boxing ever since. It has been the leadership of **AIBA** that has kept Amateur boxing flourishing and in the Olympic Games since 1920. One of **AIBA**'s first actions was to persuade the Olympic Games that the third place (Bronze Medal) should not be boxed for but should be awarded to both losing semi-finalists. That was approved in 1950 and in the 1952 Games both third place finishers were awarded diplomas. The proper Bronze medals have been awarded at every weight category competed for since 1956. There have been many problems along the way with accusations of flawed scoring, and unacceptable injury risk being just two. Always, **AIBA** has considered the safety of the Amateur boxer to be paramount with fairness of competition alongside. As a result, over the

years, 5 judges were used instead of 3 and more recently scoring has been computerised (from the 1992 games). Judges and referees are very closely monitored. Much closer medical care was introduced and the enhanced safety with better gloves and headguards (first introduced into Olympic competition in 1984) is covered in Dr. Jako's chapter which gives the history of **AIBA** and the **AIBA Medical Commission**.

Modern Medical Boxing History

Much of the advance of boxing as an Amateur Sport has been due to care of the boxer. This care is obvious in the ring when a referee stops a bout if a boxer has been outscored or is having difficulty in defending himself. The rules of standing counts do not exist in Professional boxing for example. Similarly a professional bout does not get stopped just because one boxer may be losing heavily on points. Outside the ring there are many more controls to protect the boxer. Whilst many Amateur Boxing Clubs had a doctor attached to them before the second World War (1939-1945), those doctors were usually only involved to treat boxers after boxing contests rather than in their preparation for the boxing. At a time when medical care still had to be paid for in England, they gave their time freely for a sport that they loved. Care progressed beyond treating boxers after they had competed and some of the most fundamental medical controls, that are still important today, are the initial checks to ensure that someone is fit to box. These were initially started in the Royal Air Force in the later 1940s. It was the standard practice for all new recruits to the RAF to have a general medical examination to ensure that they were fit to be in the Service. The RAF Boxing Association used those medical examinations as a control to ensure that the man was also fit to box. This practice soon spread outside the RAF and civilian boxing clubs started to use their club doctors to examine lads before they had ever started to box. The late Dr. J L Blonstein was one of the first to establish routine initial medical examinations when boys joined boxing clubs in the London area. In his book "Boxing Doctor" he records that "in 1951 a "welfare scheme" was established and upto 20,000 boys were examined to ensure that they were fit". This was the start of the English Amateur Boxing Association's medical scheme. Not long after that, the Royal Air Force realised that it was all very well that the boxers had had their initial medical but proof was required when the boxers were competing away from their home territory. Mr Jimmy Sephton, who worked for the RAF Sports Board, then came up with the idea of a Medical Record booklet that each RAF boxer could have and take with him to boxing events. At every tournament the officials would record in that booklet the result, so that the book had a recorded history of the boxer's career. It was then a very short step to also

include whether the boxer was fit to box again if the bout had been stopped rather than finishing on a points decision. This was the start of the “Medical Suspension” records that were adopted by the ABA of England and have since been used worldwide through the **AIBA Medical Scheme**.

Boxers hated the medical suspensions and initially it was not unknown for boxers to try to forge or have duplicate medical cards. Checks became more stringent and, in England, boxers were not allowed to hold their own cards on a permanent basis. The coach or club official brought the cards of all his boxers to contests and the cards were returned to the coach at the end of the event. There was another important reason for this. If a boxer had been knocked out there was always the assumption that there had been a degree of head injury and that he was not fully fit. The coach was (and still is) advised to look after the boxer and to ensure that full care is maintained. By giving the medical card to the coach, the officials at the tournament have ensured that a responsible person has been nominated to look after the boxer.

Boxing was the first sport to issue medical suspensions to ensure that every participant had adequate time to recover from any injury before competing again. That fitness is checked by the “pre-bout” medical that is carried out before every contest. The doctor must not only check that the boxer appears fit on the day but that there are no medical suspensions still current within the Medical Record Card. The various types of suspension are discussed in other chapters but the initial 28 day suspension for a boxer who had “failed to beat the count” or more severe “Knock-out” was initially established after research in England using EEG traces. It was shown that there were persisting dysrhythmias when boxers had been allowed to box again as soon as clinical signs of concussion had settled but no amateur boxers have been found to have persistent EEG changes since the enforced 28 days rest suspension has been established. This was also shown after the extended suspensions following second and third knockouts. It is for this reason that the mandatory “knock-out” suspensions remain, even though modern testing with neuro-psychometric assessments may change things in due course, when information can be extrapolated back from other sports. The introduction of other safety aspects, such as mouth and head guards and standardised gloves, are also discussed elsewhere. It is the **AIBA** medical standards that have ensured the safety of amateur boxers worldwide.

Conclusions

Amateur boxing has been resurrected as a sport by establishing rules for fair competition, with points scored for skills, accompanied by rigorous medical controls to limit injury and ensure that boxers only enter the ring when they are really fit to do so. Despite the fact that punches are deliberately aimed at the opponent, Amateur Boxing remains a sport with very low injury rates, no record of long term medical problems and a very high safety record.