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Boxing for the British Empire: Working-Class and Ethnic Minority Pugilists in the Golden Age of the Prizefight

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SUMMARY: The following is the text of a 15 minute paper delivered to the **Breaking Barriers 2026: Reimagining Inclusion and Innovation in Sport** conference (*Richmond Gender in Sports Research Centre*, hosted at Richmond: The American International University).

ABSTRACT. "Prejudice," lamented the early boxing journalist Pierce Egan, often prevented spectators from recognising merit in fighters of a different "country, persuasion, or colour." Taking Egan's observation as its starting point, this paper examines the contradictory forms of inclusion produced by English prize fighting from the seventeenth century to the Regency period. Boxing was brutal, commercial, semi-legal, and deeply entangled with class hierarchy, patriotism, and imperial culture. Yet it also created unexpected routes to visibility, reputation, and social mobility for working-class men, women, Jewish fighters, black Americans, and other outsiders who entered its public culture. Focusing on Daniel Mendoza, Bill Richmond, and Tom Molineaux, the paper argues that the prize ring was neither wholly exclusionary nor straightforwardly progressive. Mendoza's fame exposed the antisemitism of sporting crowds; Richmond's career showed how boxing could allow talent and reputation to cross boundaries of race, nationality, and birth; while Molineaux's challenge to Tom Cribb revealed how quickly admiration could turn into racial anxiety and patriotic defensiveness when English supremacy appeared under threat. Early boxing therefore offers a longer history of problems often treated as modern: racialised crowd behaviour, conditional inclusion, and the uncertain relationship between sporting merit and social belonging. The paper concludes that visibility was not justice, participation was not belonging, and sporting inclusion, then as now, could be celebrated symbolically while remaining fragile, contested, and unevenly policed.

INTRODUCTION

"Prejudice," lamented the early boxing journalist Pierce Egan (1772–1849), "so frequently distorts the mind, that, unfortunately, good actions are passed over without even common respect; more especially, when they appear in any person who may chance to be of a *different* COUNTRY, *persuasion*, or *colour*."[1] Unfortunately for the fair-minded

[1] Pierce Egan, *Boxiana; or, Sketches of Ancient and Modern Pugilism*, vol. I (1812. Rept. London: Sherwood and Jones, 1823), 265.

Egan, nineteenth-century sporting crowds all-too-often allowed their racial prejudice to colour their reaction to athletes at live sporting events. Nowhere were such sentiments more publicly exposed than when Daniel Mendoza, the famous London-born Sephardic Jewish pugilist, entered the ring. But for Egan, the only thing that a boxing match crowd should focus on was the courage and skill displayed by the combatants. Egan's comment is striking because it comes not from an external moralist hostile to prizefighting, but from one of the sport's greatest celebrants.

While the antisemitic reaction to Mendoza is to be regretted, the history of early English boxing also complicates any simple account of sport as either wholly exclusionary or straightforwardly progressive. At the heart of the British Empire, boxing also created unexpected routes to visibility, reputation, and social mobility for working-class fighters, women, Jews, black Americans, who all entered, and were at times celebrated within, boxing's public culture.

Yet such inclusion was always conditional. The same crowds that admired a foreign fighter's courage and skill could quickly turn hostile when his success appeared to unsettle established assumptions about Englishness, masculinity, race, class, or national honour. By tracing these tensions from seventeenth-century English pugilism into the early nineteenth century, this paper speaks directly to modern debates about equity, diversity, and inclusion in sport. Then, as now, visibility did not amount to justice, and participation did not guarantee belonging. Sporting merit mattered, but it couldn't work miracles. A fighter might be cheered, backed, betted upon, and celebrated one week, only to discover the next that the old boundaries of colour, nation, class, and honour had not disappeared at all. They had merely stepped back from the ropes.

MALE AND FEMALE PUGILISTS IN BOXING'S EARLY YEARS

On 5 August 1660, Samuel Pepys visited an apothecary to procure some ointment for his wife. Passing by Westminster Bridge on the way back home, he was waylaid by watching "a fray," in which a Dutchman, named Clinke, was going head-to-head with a waterman. The delighted Pepys who, afterwards having to attend common prayer at church, and later taking dinner at an associate's house, recorded that the match was the highlight of his day.[2] The next recorded reference to a public boxing match came in a newspaper in 1681, which reported on a bout, arranged by the Duke of Albemarle, which was won by a butcher.[3] Watermen, butchers, blacksmiths—at this early stage of the sport's development, the leading players were all drawn from the working classes who possessed great physical strength.[4] The aristocracy generally encouraged such displays of fighting prowess, for they believed, as Eustace Budgell stated in the *Spectator*, that it kept England's men ready to fight any would-be foreign invader.[5]

The patriotic aspect of pugilism, or "prize fighting" (in which the winner would receive money), was promoted by contemporary commentators. It was no different with women boxers who, although in the mid-twentieth century were often excluded from the ring, were no strangers to it in the early days of the sport.[6] Oftentimes women used to publish their challenges to each other in the press. At other times, women would challenge men to a contest if they felt their honour had been offended. Such was the case with Sal Dab, who arranged an open match with a Frenchman in which, to the great delight of the press, she succeeded in which she succeeded in

[2] Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. John Warrington, vol. II (London, 1953), 87.
[3] T. B. Shepherd, *The Noble Art* (London, 1950), 88.
[4] Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History*, 2d ed. (Reaktion, 2019), 26.
[5] Eustace Budgell, "No. 161," in *The Spectator*, ed. Henry Morley (London: Routledge, c.1880), 236.
[6] Page Schneider, "Increasing Visibility and the (Re)presentation of Female Boxers in Print Media," in *Boxing, Narrative, and Culture: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Sarah Crews and P. Solomon Lewis (Routledge, 2024), 9.

giving him a bloodied nose.[7] Yet this early visibility of female pugilists would not survive unchanged. As boxing became increasingly professionalised, regulated, and associated with disciplined forms of masculine national character, women were gradually pushed to the margins of the sport, reminding us that the prize ring's inclusivity was always partial, unstable, and historically contingent.

In this respect, early English prize fighting became more than a mere spectacle of violence. It offered a public theatre in which class, gender, and patriotism could be brought together in the service of a shared national ideal. Working-class men supplied the strength, courage, and physical skill that made the sport compelling; women demonstrated that honour and national spirit were not masculine possessions alone; and the aristocracy, by patronising and promoting such contests, lent social legitimacy to what might otherwise have remained a rough pastime of watermen, butchers, and blacksmiths. Prize fighting therefore allowed all ranks and both sexes to participate, whether as fighters, backers, spectators, or commentators, in a shared patriotic culture. The ring became a symbolic space in which English bodies, however humble their origins, could be celebrated as evidence of national toughness, liberty, and martial readiness.

JOHN BROUGHTON AND THE CODIFICATION OF BOXING RULES

Perhaps because of boxing's ability to bring the classes together, King George I ordered that ring be erected in Hyde Park, London, in 1723. Such a move by the king suggests that boxing was the nation's favourite sport (at a time when football was largely being played in village streets in a most "medieval" manner).[8] But fights in the early eighteenth century were savage. No weight classes. No rounds. Just two men (or indeed women) punching each other's lights out with their bare knuckles—to the great delight of spectators who usually placed large bets on their favourite fighters. Deaths, either in the ring or without, were a not uncommon occurrence.

It was therefore left for John Broughton—a working-class waterman who succeeded in becoming one of England's most famous boxers—to produce the first rules for the sport. After the introduction of the Broughton rules, boxing became a game of umpires, set rounds, weight classes, payment for both fighters, and the gentlemanly stoppage of a fight if an opponent were unable to continue. Special training schools sprang up in and around the capital to train fighters. These early personal trainers also established a lucrative side business in giving lessons to members of the aristocracy and middle classes. The famous poet, Lord Byron, for example, often enjoyed a good sparring match (with padded gloves) with his trainer John "the Gentleman" Jackson.[9] A good bit of sparring practice also served as the perfect prelude for a night on the town, much as it did for Tom and Jerry in Pierce Egan's novel *Tom and Jerry* (1821).[10]

There was, in the eyes of Egan, the man who made boxing a media sensation, a national benefit to having all the classes training together, fighting each other, and becoming friends afterwards. The result (in theory) would be the cultivation of a firm sense of patriotism and a healthy love of the country.[11] For a country that, when Egan was writing in 1812, had been battling the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic armies for over century, this was most important. If nothing else, boxing proved that the Duke of Wellington could be sure of tough and hardy

[7] Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History*, 28.
[8] G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History* (1944, rept. London, 1973), 503.
[9] David Snowdon, "Boxing with Byron," *Wordsworth Grasmere*, January 22, 2016, accessed May 26, 2026, https://wordsworth.org.uk/blog/2016/01/22/boxing-with-byron/
[10] Pierce Egan, *Tom and Jerry; or, The Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorne, Esq., and Corinthian Tom* (1821, rept. London: John Dicks, 1888), 44.
[11] Egan, *Boxiana*, vol. I, iii–iv.

recruits were he ever to need men on the battlefield.[12] To be a boxer at this point, whether an amateur or a professional, was to serve, in a small way, the needs of the British Empire.

Boxing thus offered an unusually inclusive vision of national life: a sport rooted in working-class strength, patronised by aristocrats, embraced by the middle classes, and celebrated as a school of British courage. In the ring, social hierarchy did not disappear, but it was temporarily reordered around shared ideals of discipline, toughness, patriotism, and manly honour.

BILL RICHMOND AND TOM MOLINEAUX

There is some evidence to suggest that not every part of Great Britain readily adopted the Broughton Rules, and the northern part of the kingdom liked to follow the less civilised older form of prize-fighting.[13] But those who fought in the capital under the Broughton Rules fought for the highest honour: The Championship of England. The championship may have been up for grabs *in* England, but a fighter need not be English to fight for it. Despite the antisemitic reaction to Daniel Mendoza, at times the late-eighteenth and Regency boxing crowd produced a remarkable degree of racial inclusivity. Such was the experience of one black American boxer who came to fight in England, such as Bill Richmond. Richmond was born a slave, in 1765, in what was then the British colony of New York. In 1776, the colonists rebelled against Great Britain and the War of Independence ensued. During the war, the British government stationed Lord Percy in Staten Island and there he witnessed Richmond holding his own in a bar fight. Percy decided that he would be patron to this impressive bare-knuckle fighter and brought him back to England (where he would automatically be free because of the recent Somerset Ruling in 1772 which outlawed slavery in Britain itself) and pay for his apprenticeship and education.

By 1795, Richmond and his English wife Mary moved to London and under the patronage of Thomas Pitt, became a prize fighter, winning several bouts, before retiring from boxing and establishing a boxing academy in London. His fame saw him invited to serve as an usher at George IV's coronation. Richmond's rise from enslaved boy in colonial New York to respected London prize-fighter and royal coronation usher therefore reveals one of the paradoxes of the English ring: for all its brutality and prejudice, it could also offer a rare arena in which talent, courage, and reputation crossed boundaries of race, nationality, and birth.

Richmond coached another escaped slave, and one whose fame went on to shine brighter than his own: Tom Molineaux. His case illustrates the paradoxical nature of the allegedly inclusive nature of boxing at this point. Born a slave in Richmond, Virginia, in 1784, Molineaux won his freedom by fighting in a boxing match arranged between himself and a slave from a rival plantation (with whose owner Molineaux's own master had had a long-standing rivalry). Molineaux won and was subsequently manumitted. Having spent some time as a prize-fighter in New York, English sailors encouraged him to go to England, which he did, where he began training with Richmond.

After winning a bout against Jack Burrows (who had been trained by the English champion Tom Cribb), Molineaux became a sensation. Ladies of high and low rank were particularly impressed with him, and Molineaux often reciprocated their advances.[14] His success against Burrows allowed Molineaux to challenge Cribb for the title of Champion of England. Cribb accepted the challenge and the bout took place on 18 December 1810. It was a furious fight. Molineaux was getting the better of Cribb and 200 of Cribbs's fans, realising that the *honour* of England was at stake with a black man potentially winning the title fight, stormed the ring and interrupted the

[12] Pierce Egan, *Boxiana; or, Sketches of Ancient and Modern Pugilism*, vol. III (1812. Rept. London: Sherwood and Jones, 1823), v.
[13] Pierce Egan, *The Book of Sports* (London: William Tegg, c.1838), 120.
[14] Bill Calogero, "Tom Molineaux: From Slave to American Heavyweight Champion," in *The First Black Boxing Champions: Essays on Fighters of the 1800s to the 1920s*, ed. Colleen Aycock and Mark Scott (Macfarland, 2011), 13.

fight. By the twenty-eighth round, Cribb was in such a state that his seconds (or nowadays corner men) accused Molineaux of holding bullets in his hands and demanded that his fists be inspected. This last interruption allowed Cribb a longer rest and eventually, with Molineaux's rib having been broken, led to Cribb retaining his title as Champion of England.

Aggrieved with what he felt were the racialised interruptions of the spectators and the judges' decision, when Molineaux attempted to arrange a rematch, he tried to appeal to Cribb's sense of fairness and expressed "the confident hope, that circumstance of my being a different colour to that of a people amongst whom I have sought protection will not in any way operate to my prejudice."[15] A rematch was made and unfortunately for Molineaux, Cribb won the day. This appears to have broken him. He spent the next few years doing the odd bout, but his excessive drinking got the better of him. He died in Ireland, penniless; the only people by his side were three black soldiers whom he had befriended. Molineaux's career therefore reveals both the promise and the fraudulence of the ring's inclusivity: boxing could welcome a formerly enslaved black fighter, make him a celebrity, and allow him to challenge for England's highest pugilistic honour, but when his victory seemed imminent, admiration gave way to racial anxiety, patriotic defensiveness, and a refusal to let merit alone decide the outcome.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the early history of English boxing shows that its inclusion is both imagined and contested. The prize ring could break barriers: it allowed working-class men, women, Jewish fighters, black Americans, aristocrats, and labouring spectators to participate in a shared culture of courage, endurance, fame, and national display. Yet it also reveals how fragile such inclusion could be when it challenged deeper structures of prejudice. Mendoza, Richmond, and Molineaux were admired when they entertained the crowd, but that admiration was conditional, and could quickly give way to antisemitism, racism, nationalism, and exclusion when their success threatened established ideas of Englishness, masculinity, and social order.

Seen in this light, Regency boxing speaks directly to present debates about equity, diversity, and inclusion in sport. It reminds us that visibility is not the same as justice, participation is not the same as belonging, and celebration is not the same as structural change. The old prize ring therefore offers a warning as much as an inspiration: it could admit outsiders, applaud them, enrich them, and make them famous; but when they came too close to victory, the old prejudices could prove more than a match for an outsider fighter.

[15] Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History*, 46.