

The fight that nearly caused a war

by Richard Barber

Welcome to your ringside seat for this series on the most fascinating sport of all – boxing. Of the stories you are about to read some are old, some are new but they all reveal something of the strange drama, fantastic legends, raw courage and humour of a special breed of men – prizefighters!

So, give a little and take a little from stories sprinkled with resin dust. There goes the bell so pay attention to some of my favourite boxing stories.

THE FIGHT THAT NEARLY CAUSED A WAR

Nowadays an important boxing match is a multi-million pound spectacle that attracts international attention and, as in the case of Ricky Hatton, many tens of thousands of paying customers. But it was not always thus.

More than a century ago, two famous fighters fought a battle that lasted less than three minutes and attracted some rather unwanted attention: a company of Texas Rangers and the soldiers of two countries tried to prevent that heavyweight prize fight from being staged.

Way back in 1896, when 'Gentleman' Jim Corbett was heavyweight champion of the world, the middleweight title was held by the one-time blacksmith originally from Cornwall, England, Bob Fitzsimmons.

Bob, who had held the title for five years, yearned for a crack at the biggest prize in sport, the heavyweight crown, held by Gentleman Jim.

In his way stood the broad shoulders of a ponderous heavyweight named Peter Maher who also had designs on the heavyweight crown. Maher ridiculed Bob and threat-



ened to knock his head off his shoulders any time he felt brave enough to step into a ring to settle the issue.

While Fitz may have looked like a freak, with his thin waist, long legs and powerful arms and shoulders he was hardly the man to duck any fighter alive, no matter how big he was. It was easy for an enterprising promoter to match the two men and the fight was set to take place at Langtry, Texas, USA on the afternoon of February 21, 1896.

As soon as the match was set, things began to happen that would make the Fitzsimmons-Maher encounter one of the oddities of fistic history. To begin with, prize fighting was illegal in the territories of the West, including Texas. As soon as the State officials got word of the impending fight, a neat little surprise was arranged for the contestants. A company of hard-riding Texas Rangers was dispatched post-haste to prevent the battle.

At the same time the Federal authorities were not to be caught napping either. The armed forces stationed in New Mexico and Ari-

zona were ordered to march to the scene under instructions to stop the fight even if they had to resort to the use of arms.

With two armies converging upon him, the foxy promoter, in turn, arranged a little surprise for the enemy. He quickly selected a new site for the contest. To evade the law of the United States, he found a small strip of land midway between the Texas Rangers and the US Army.

When the Rangers and the Army arrived they were stumped. The battleground was now on Mexican territory. The ring was pitched in a circus tent and the handful of spectators were obliged to walk across a little bridge some five hundred yards from El Paso, Texas. The Feds and the Rangers could do nothing.

Come fight time and Peter Maher climbed through the ropes, blustering and bragging. "Where's that skinny freak," he roared. "I'll break him in half."

Bob Fitzsimmons arrived in the ring, cool as a cucumber with an amused smile on his lips.

As the referee called the two fighters together for instructions word was bought to the contestants that the Mexican government had dispatched soldiers to drive the Americans off Mexican territory.

There was no time to figure a way out of this new difficulty. The bell rang for the fight to begin. Maher made a wild lunge at the tricky and elusive Fitzsimmons. Just as the men made their first contact the promoter stuck his head through the ropes and shouted, "Make it quick, boys. The Mexican Army is on its way here to stop the fight!"

When Fitz heard this he decided he would have to work fast. With fists flying, he sailed into the lumbering heavyweight who stood between him and a chance at the title. After two minutes of inflicting the most terrible punishment on his adversary's face and body, Fitz dropped Maher to the canvas, out cold. Then, quickly, he helped Maher's handlers revive the fallen gladiator and the two fighters, the promoter, and the handful of spectators took to their heels towards the little bridge to El Paso and American territory.

They were thundering across the boundary between the two countries just as the Mexican soldiers hove into view, shooting their rifles into the air.

In a spot like this, American stood by American. The United States officers of the law did not interfere with the sorely pressed fighters and spectators, permitting them to board a waiting train.

Thus ended one of the strangest heavyweight fights in history – a ring battle that is now merely a line in musty record books, reading: 'Bob Fitzsimmons knocked out Peter Maher in one round on February 21, 1896.' But behind that brief description lies hidden a fantastic story of a heavyweight prize fight which lasted less than three minutes, yet had a whole company of Texas Rangers and the soldiers of two countries trying to stop it.

Richard Barber

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"Seldom, indeed have so many Carlisle people been seen in Liverpool at one time....."

by Elizabeth Broderick



William Rickerby of Carlisle, and Ralph Pooley of Longlands, signed the articles of agreement to wrestle Cumberland and Westmoreland style for £50 a-side, the best of five falls, for the 11 stone *championship of the world*.

The match took place in Cook's Circus, William Brown Street, Liverpool, on Monday August 26th 1872. Anticipation of the impending contest caused quite a stir - as the referee, Isaac Gates put it: "Seldom, indeed, have so many Carlisle people been seen in Liverpool at one time...."

The weigh in was at the Corporation scales, St. Johns Market. The pair had met 6 times previously having obtained 3 wins each. The men were evenly matched, their weights close. Pooley, being taller, had the longer reach. Betting on the outcome was at fever pitch.

At 2 o'clock the contest began. After an hour of tactical manoeuvring, Rickerby tried a hipe, Pooley dodged to the outside and clicked him. Rickerby went down.

In the second round, Rickerby again tried a hipe: Pooley calmly pushed his opponent on to his back for the fall.

In the final round Pooley avoided a 'back heel', springing into action with a 'back heel' of his own, to win the third fall.

Rickerby - a great wrestler - was on this occasion outclassed and Ralph Pooley proved himself to be *champion of the world* that Monday night in Liverpool.