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Bare Fists: The History Of Bare Knuckle Prize Fighting



BARE FISTS

THE HISTORY OF BARE-KNUCKLE
PRIZE-FIGHTING

BOB MEE



Synopsis

In its heyday, which spanned the mid 18th to the late 19th centuries, the bare-knuckle prize-fight was a wildly popular sport which, as gloved boxing does now, produced some extraordinary characters and legendary bouts, both in Britain and the United States. With contests lasting hours and going into over 100 thrilling, punishing rounds, the sport drew crowds both common and elite-from royals and politicians to writers like Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope to Dickens and Thackeray, to the middle and working classes-all drawn together by the brutal excitement and the spirited wagering the sport generated. Much like gloved boxing today, average men could become superstars overnight, and they could lose the accolades and their health just as quickly. In *Bare Fists*, Bob Mee shows the fascinating evolution of bare-knuckle boxing, from the earliest days when there were no rules, to the introduction of the Broughton and London Prize Ring Rules, to what was, for bare-knuckle fighting, the beginning of the end-the Marquess of Queensbury Rules, with their call for gloves and timed rounds and their banishment of such brawl-like moves as wrestling holds. Rich in rare and exhilarating anecdote, *Bare Fists* recreates with thrilling immediacy all of the big bouts of the sport, including those of the legendary American champion of the 1880s, John L. Sullivan. Bob Mee brings the coverage full circle, with a report on how this strange sub-culture continues to flourish, fueled by films like Brad Pitt's *Fight Club*. *Bare Fists* is an exciting and important addition to the literature of boxing.

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Customer Reviews

At the end of the book, Mee writes, "Pugilism is dead--and, in spite of the adaptations it has made in

the 130 years since gloved boxing began to replace it, the signs are that we will not see its like again." (229) To understand this claim, and to weigh its merits and veracity, one has to actually understand something of the reality of bare knuckle boxing and what differentiates it from gloved boxing and the rule-bound and cleaned up combat sport of contemporary MMA (which is no Pankration). Mee's is the most comprehensive book on bare knuckle boxing that I know of at this time, and it has to be respected for this important contribution to preserving this legacy, requiring so much more skill and being so much more dangerous than anything extant today in combat sports. He surveys the major fighters and their battles throughout history, and anyone who does not know this history really should not venture to speak on the combat arts of mankind. His contributions acknowledged, I have to say that his writing style varies in quality from the witty and insightful to the convoluted, overly focused on minute and inconsequential details, etc. It would have been improved through a few revisions, quite honestly. I would love to see a real rebirth of the skilled bare-knuckle boxers, the tradition that seems to still be alive among the Gypsy travelers like Bartelby Gorman (his autobiography is excellent, by the way, and very well-(ghost)-written). One of my martial arts lineages is in CHA-3 Kenpo, which dates back to 1947, and, oddly enough for GM Tinawok was a champion boxer, we still have very many moves and techniques that date back to the bare-knuckle era and are much more "street-ready" than what one learns in gloved boxing (though I believe training in boxing is excellent, adaptations have to be made if you have not conditioned your bare knuckles).

This is an excellent read. Bob Mee takes you through the history of bare knuckle boxing from the past to the present day. My only gripe is that he sees modern day bare knuckle boxing as brutal. I disagree. While abroad, I have seen bare knuckle boxing. It is no more brutal than fights with gloves and there have been no deaths in the ring. The fighters are also evenly matched which is more than you can say for a lot of big fights. The fights I have seen have been fast, very exciting, and come to a conclusion quickly - usually with a knockout. If you get a chance to see one, do go. I found it thrilling. Apart from that, this is a good book.

This book gave good insights into the everyday life of these fringe boxers who polite society did not openly approve of but whose gentlemen sneaked off to watch, even following them when the police broke up a match just to be resumed in the middle of a field. Undaunted. It had a life of its own. I am a woman and not normally interested in boxing, but I thoroughly enjoyed it. It was well researched.

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