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In The Rosin Dust

The Argus-Eyed Constabulary

According to the laws of Maryland, public prize fighting in all its branches is unlawful in Baltimore, and there is no doubt whatever that, if an attempt were made to stage a big battle here such as that in which Professor Jeffries recently came to grief before the hard knuckles of the unspeakable Carthaginian, the gendarmes, urged on by public opinion, would spring into the ring, club the contestants to death and drag the promoters, referees, masseurs, bottle holders and timekeepers off to jail. But ordinary combats, in the language of sport, get by. That is to say, the enforcement of the statutes is tempered with constabulary mercy, and those fights which do no great damage to the public morals are permitted—with conditions.

These conditions are the products of long evolution and show no little subtlety. One of them, for example, is that no contest in Baltimore city shall go for more than 15 rounds of three minutes each, with minute rests between rounds. Another is that no contestant shall be permitted to battle on after he has been clearly beaten. Still another is that no professional fighter who is known to fight unfairly shall be admitted to the squared circle. Yet another in that no match between a white man and a negro shall be arranged. There are others, a dozen or more, and all of them are designed to prevent brutality, to discourage betting and to preserve order. These objects, it must be admitted, they seem to attain. The tournaments of fisticuffs given two or three times a week by various local clubs are conducted in an orderly manner: there is no betting and no one is seriously hurt. During the past five or six years there have been no less than 3,500 separate encounters on the mat in Baltimore of from 3 to 15 rounds' duration, and yet not a man has been killed and not more than half a dozen even after knockouts have had to seek surgical attention.

The so-called athletic clubs which have charge of the exhibitions are one-man affairs organized for the frank purpose of taking advantage of a snake in the anti-fight laws. These laws forbid a private promoter to give for his own profit any boxing exhibition of combat at fists, however short or gentle, but the snake provides that this prohibition shall not affect any athletic club which sells tickets to its members only. Hence the fighting clubs of which Baltimore now has three big ones and a half a dozen lesser ones. Each of these clubs is the private enterprise of some pugilistic impresario, and he pockets all of the profits it makes (it is seldom that they are large), but no man may buy a ticket until he has gone through the hollow form of being elected a member. Once a member, always a member. Practically every Baltimorean who fancies the manly art has long since attained to membership in all of the local clubs, and so, when a fight is announced, he merely pays his "assessment" and walks in. Theoretically, the whole affair is strictly private.

The evening's entertainment usually consists of from six to eight bouts, ranging in length from 3 to 15 rounds. Some of the clubs always offer a main, or star, bout, of 15 rounds, with professors of some pretensions as the contestants. In such cases these star bouts are preceded by five or six lesser encounters, usually of three or four rounds, and with ambitious youngsters doing the fighting. Other clubs cling to what is called the Philadelphia style. That is to say, they make all bouts, whether important or not, six rounds long. Each system has its advantages, from the stand-point of the crowd. The former insures at least one very interesting encounter at each meeting, but the three or four-round preliminaries are apt to be tame. The six round system, on the contrary, makes all of the fighting exciting. It is difficult, in six rounds, to gain much advantage by careful boxing alone, but it is perfectly possible, in that time, to score a knockout by fast work, and so the professors wallop one another furiously, in the hope of doing damage quickly.

The Fighters Are Not Hurt

The novice is apt to conclude, on seeing his first fight, that the boys in the ring are hurting each other badly, but that is very seldom the case. The boxer is trained to submit to a pummeling which would kill an ordinary man out of hand. A hard blow on the nose draws his blood, true enough, but it never dazes him as it would a sociologist, nor does it seem to give him much pain. As for a blow on the eye, he dreads it only because it is apt to obstruct his vision. The wallops that he really fears are precisely those which seem most innocuous—those over the kidneys, for instance, or on the jawbone, or at the pit of the stomach. The knockout blow seldom draws blood. The bloody gladiator, coming from the ring bathed in scarlet, with his nose flattened, his eyes blackened and his ears swollen to the size of boxing gloves, is in no danger. A few minutes of rude medication with the sponge and smelling salts and he is back on the stage—a proud and apparently comfortable hero.

But bloody fights are not the rule. I have seen two men fight for 15 rounds—that is, for one hour—with great vigor and skill, and yet without drawing a drop of gore, or making a single mark upon each other. It was an exhibition in which it was extremely difficult to find any brutality. They were young men in the prime of youth and in superb physical condition, and though the blows that they struck were hard, their contest was not one of mere brute strength, but rather one of shrewdness and agility. Boxing, in a word, is an art of considerable pretensions. The man who has mastered it is able to defend himself, without harm, from blows that would half kill him if they landed squarely.

The Knockout And Its Effect

Even a knockout is not often so cruel as it seems when described in cold blood. Two men, let us say, have been boxing for 20 minutes and one of them has begun to show signs that he has met his master. The blows he is receiving are more than he is giving and they are harder ones. He seems to be finding it progressively more difficult to defend himself. Suddenly there is a rush and the arm of his opponent shoots out. As the glove at the end of it strikes the angle of his jaw, his hands drop, his knees bend and he sinks to the floor. The referee, standing over him, counts 10 slowly. He can't get up. He has been knocked out.

But has he been hurt? Not much. The blow that floored him did not hurt him, for as soon as it struck him he ceased to feel anything, and when, two or three minutes later, he is lifted to his chair and begins to take an interest in human events once more, he is in no pain.

But knockouts, like hemorrhages, are not very common. The great majority of bouts result in no damage whatever to the contestants. Their salient feature, in fact, is comedy rather than tragedy. Particularly if the combatants happen to be young darkies, ambitious for to shine, does the crowd howl with mirth. A terrific blow, let us say, fails to land—and it's author spins round like a top. Or the two come together with a crash and use skulls for weapons, as well as fists. Or, maybe, four darkies are thrown into the ring at once to fight a battle royal, and the largest of the four finds himself fighting the other three. Or, perhaps, one of the fighters beats a grotesque retreat, leaping the ropes and taking to his heels. In any case there is plenty of low comedy, and if the objection be made to it that it is extremely low, the answer may be made that it is also extremely funny. At the vaudeville theatres horse-play of the very same sort is applauded nightly.

The Police Are On Guard

In case a bout is hopelessly one-sided and one of the contestants seems in danger of injury, the police step in and that bout is over. This action is always supported by a crowd. As a rule in fact, loud demands that the bout be stopped arise long before the police interfere. The crowd seldom shows a taste for mere slugging. It admires skill more than mere might and its sympathy is always on the side of the contestant who makes a cool and scientific battle.

Such is the "fighting game" as Baltimore knows it. It is certainly far from elevating, but under the police restrictions which obtain it has been robbed of much of its customary perniciousness. Betting has been effectively stamped out, brutality is discouraged not only by the police, but by public opinion among the patrons, and no opportunity is afforded for race animosity to receive the baleful stimulus that it got from the disgusting slugging match and gambling festival at Reno.

(Source: Iowa State University, Parks Media Center, Microfilm Collection)