

# Testimonials

‘A must-read for all serious boxing fans. It really hits the mark.’

*Ricky ‘The Hitman’ Hatton MBE, holder of multiple world championships at light-welterweight and one at welterweight*

‘Starting out boxing at the age of 12 at Buxton ABC, Chris was one of my first boxing coaches. Chris was a great teacher and trainer. He would sometimes get in the ring and spar with us, which not many coaches do. I have much respect for Chris as he’s played a part in where I am today in the ring and out.’

*Jack ‘One Smack’ Massey. WBC Youth Silver champion, International Challenge Belt, British Challenge Belt, Junior ABA elite champion, IBF European cruiserweight champion and IBO cruiserweight world champion*

‘Avec l’approbation de (with the approval of)’

*Frederic ‘Le Scientifique’ Klose, welterweight champion of France 1999–2001 and EBU welterweight champion of Europe 2003/04 and 2006*

‘In my 35 years of training and competing in amateur and professional kickboxing, MMA, BKB and numerous unlicensed boxing fights, I’ve come to the conclusion that a true ‘master’ of the martial arts is someone who has both experiential and scientific knowledge of their art(s).

‘Chris Sykes is exactly such a person in my opinion. Both his considerable first-hand physical experience in a variety of disciplines and his analytical mind for all things fight-related have helped him craft a fantastic book.

‘I’m fairly well acquainted with the history of boxing, and already had a fair amount of knowledge of many of the characters that feature in Chris’s book. However, there was much information that was completely new to me, and the way it is presented makes for an excellent and highly enjoyable read. This is no mere textbook. Chris has brought the characters to life thanks to a phenomenal amount of research and his own considerable insight into the fight game.

‘I would highly recommend this book to anyone who has a passion for, or even just a passing interest in, the story of boxing.’

*Jonathan Santry, professional martial arts instructor, professional stunt performer for film and TV, former professional fighter (No.4 ranked WAKO pro-kickboxer in Britain, 2009), numerous times British light continuous champion, WKA amateur full contact bronze medallist in 2002 and English cruiserweight bare knuckle boxing champion in 2022.*



# BLOOD, BRAWN, BRAINS

**AND BROKEN NOSES**

Pugilism. A Very British Art

**'A must-read for all serious boxing fans.  
It really hits the mark.'**

Ricky 'The Hitman' Hatton MBE

**Chris Sykes**

# Contents

My Thanks	11
About the Author	12
Foreword	15
The History of Pugilism	19
James Figg	36
Jack Broughton	40
Daniel Mendoza	49
Tom Cribb	56
Tom Spring	66
Lenny McLean	86
Bartley Gorman	90
Conclusion	97
Glossary of 'Flash' Language	101
The Social and Philosophical Factors which Determine Participation in Pugilism	108
To Captain Barclay	163
References	166

# The History of Pugilism

The aim of this section of the book is to explore the history and evolution of pugilism, or bare-knuckle boxing, from ancient to contemporary times. Our journey begins in Ancient Greece, where pugilism became a sport in the early Olympic Games. After that we will travel to Ancient Rome, where the blood-thirsty Romans watched barbaric pugilistic contests in their amphitheatres. (In passing, the word pugilism is derived from the Latin noun *pugil*, meaning a 'fist fighter).'

Next, the voyage takes us through the early history of England, where martial skills such as pugilism were essential and were practised by commoners and monarchs alike, in order to repel invaders and raiders, and as a means of self-defence in those turbulent, lawless times. Thereafter, pugilism became increasingly used as a form of entertainment with pugilists fighting for prize money. Pugilism's 'Golden Age' lasted from the early 18th century until 1826, and we will follow the careers of five renowned pugilists, namely James Figg, Jack Broughton, Daniel Mendoza, Tom Cribb and Tom Spring. We will imagine what it was like to stand at the stage or ringside and spectate, and indeed participate, during their brutal contests, many of which were portrayed by Pierce Egan

(1772-1849) the author of the pugilistic chronicle *Boxiana*. Indeed, this section of the book is indebted to his works. In addition, we will learn some of the slang, or 'flash', used by the pugilists and their followers. It must be noted that different 'flash' words were used to describe the same thing, for example 'blinkers, daylighters, peepers' and 'sparklers' all meant the eyes, which were targeted in the sport. A glossary at the end of this book translates the 'flash' terms to English.

As the Golden Age of pugilism came to an end we will travel through the Victorian era in which bare-knuckle boxing clashed with Victorian morals and the sport was banned as it was viewed as a brutal anachronism, being superseded by the gloved, sanitised, sports version of boxing. However, in spite of the ban, prize-fighting continued to be practised clandestinely in Welsh mining and Gypsy, or traveller, communities and by the criminal underworld.

Nowadays, the sport is enjoying a renaissance with an abundance of bare-knuckle boxing fights, several documentaries available on the internet, and legal contests being promoted. Are we about to witness a new Golden Age? Let us begin our journey.

## **Greco-Roman Pugilism**

According to Greek mythology, pugilism was invented by the god Apollo, although Philostratus, a Greek biographer and orator, credited the Spartans with its conception. The Spartans were elite warriors, trained from childhood to be fearless, perfect soldiers who expected to prevail and instilled a sense of dread in their adversaries. Generally, in Ancient Greece, boys from the age of seven

were instructed in sports that prepared their bodies and minds for warfare, such as boxing and wrestling. This was necessary due to the belligerent nature of the Greeks, whose small-city states, or *polis*, such as Athens and Sparta, were often at war and therefore required an elite force of warriors. Whatever its obscure beginnings, pugilistic scenes have been found on vases emanating from Crete, which suggest that boxing was practised there around 3,000–1200BC. Therefore, boxing was a Greek, or Hellenic, martial art and was introduced into the early Olympic Games in 688BC. Along with wrestling and the brutal pankration (an almost no-holds-barred contest in which only eye-gouging and biting were disallowed), it was one of the ‘heavy events’ as there were no weight divisions. The Greek poet Pindar wrote this poem in honour of Olympic boxers:

*O father Zeus that rulest over the height of Atabyrium,  
grant honour to the hymn ordained in praise of an  
Olympian victor, and to the hero who hath found fame  
for his prowess as a boxer; and do thou give him grace  
and reverence in the eyes of citizens and strangers too.*

*For he goeth in a straight course along a path that  
hateth insolence; he hath learnt full well all the  
lessons prompted by the prudence, which he inheriteth  
from goodly ancestors.*

Sandys, J. E., 1915, [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)

This Greek boxing, or *Pyxmachia*, was totally different to contemporary boxing as kicks, knee strikes and many methods of striking with the hand were permitted; even

hitting an opponent on the ground was not forbidden. Generally, strikes to the head were dominant. However, body strikes were also used in order to slow the opponent down, thereby exposing the head as a target.



*Pyxmachia. The belligerent Greek pugilists fought naked and only eye-gouging and biting were prohibited. They wore himantes, straps of ox-hide, to protect their hands.*

As the Greek Empire retreated and the Roman Empire rose and dominated, boxing was transformed into a bloody gladiatorial spectacle, with boxers wearing a *caestus*, an iron-weighted, metal-studded glove, or thong, and a *myrmex*, known as the ‘limb piercer’, which was similar to





*Bloodlust! A gladiator, armed with an iron-weighted caestus in his left hand and a spiked, limb-piercing myrmex in his right, ready to maim and kill in the amphitheatre.*

the *caestus*, but had a spike, or spur, attached, designed to satisfy the spectators' bloodlust in the amphitheatres.

The gladiators were slaves, expertly trained to fight people and wild animals in order to entertain spectators, with body shapes totally different from Kirk Douglas' muscular physique in the film *Spartacus* and Russell Crowe's character General Maximus in the film *Gladiator*. They were very strong, fit and fat, and were nicknamed 'barley munchers' as they had a mainly vegetarian diet that consisted of simple carbohydrates, which covered their bodies with a thick layer of subcutaneous fat, enabling their cuts to be sewn and shielding their nerves and blood vessels during combat.

In the Ancient Roman poet Virgil's (70–19BC) poem, the *Aeneid*, translated by the English poet John Dryden

(1631–1700), the *caestus*, used by the character ‘Erix’, is described in the following way:

*He (Entellus) threw  
Two pond'rous gauntlets down, in open view;  
Gauntlets, which Erix wont in fight to wield,  
And sheath his hands within the listed field.  
With fear and wonder seiz'd, the crowd beholds  
The gloves of death,—with sev'n distinguish'd folds  
Of tough bull's hides; the space within is spread  
With iron or with loads of heavy lead.  
Dares himself was daunted at the sight,  
Renounc'd his challenge, and refused to fight.  
Astonish'd at their weight, the hero stands,  
And pois'd the pond'rous engines in his hands.*

Egan, P, 1824, p.5

The Romans introduced boxing into England after their conquest from AD43 to AD84 but outlawed it in AD393 as the Romans adopted the Christian faith. Roman rule in Britain ended in AD410 when the Roman legions were withdrawn to protect Italy from raids carried out by barbarian hordes and the emperor Honorius instructed Britons to ‘look to their own defences’, after which they became increasingly subjected to attacks by Scots, Picts, Angles, Vikings and Saxons.

### **The Development of Pugilism in Albion**

During its early history, England was constantly raided and invaded, and so, in order to remain free and independent, the English practised martial arts. The ruling elite had to rely on commoners to repel invaders due to the fact

that for centuries England had no standing army, and the English considered it their duty to learn martial skills such as archery, sword-fighting, wrestling and boxing. In addition, high levels of social violence such as assaults, armed robberies and murders, committed by wrong-doers and bands of outlaws, were common as the forces of law and order were not developed. It meant that knowledge of martial arts was necessary for self-defence, protecting one's family and settling disputes and insults.

The Anglo-Saxon monarch King Alfred the Great (AD849–899) was as proficient in wrestling and boxing as he was with weaponry. King Alfred ensured that wrestling and boxing were included in the training regimen of his warriors. The word 'box' is most probably derived from the Germanic influence on the English language, possibly from onomatopoeic words such as 'boke', 'buc' and 'bask', which mean a 'blow', in Middle Dutch, German and Danish, all spoken from the 12th to the 16th centuries.

In the 14th century ballad 'The Geste of Robin Hood', a king called Edward was capable of holding his own at 'fisticuffs' with the legendary outlaw, who robbed the rich but not the poor in Nottinghamshire's Sherwood Forest. In the ballad, King Edward is disguised as a monk when he encounters Robin. Part of the ballad goes:

*He folded up his sleeve,  
And such a buffet he gave Robin,  
to the ground he yede (fell) full near.  
'I make mine avow to God,' said Robin,  
'Thou art a stalwart frere (friar)!'  
'There is pith in thine arm,' said Robin.*

Wynkyn De Worde, 1510, [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)

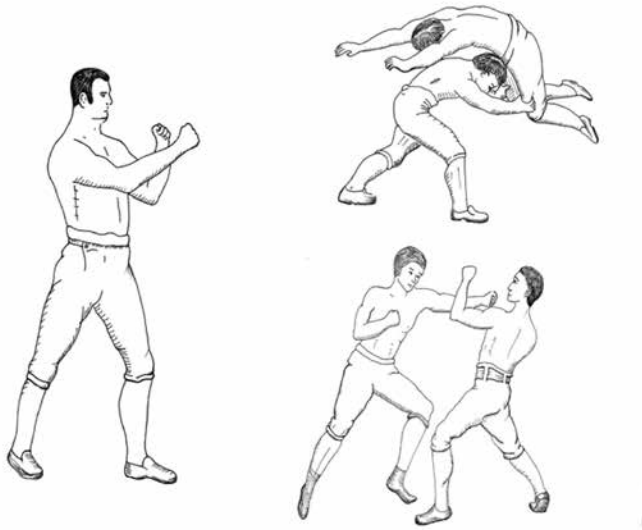
There were three King Edwards, who reigned from 1272 to 1377, and all three visited Nottinghamshire. But only one of the Edwards, King Edward II (1284–1327), reputed to possess exceptional physical strength, visited both Nottinghamshire and Plumpton Park in Lancashire in 1323, which is mentioned in the ballad. Edward II belonged to the House of Plantagenet and ruled ingloriously from 1307 until he was deposed in 1327.

Indeed, many English kings, such as King Richard III (1452–85), were skilled in the use of the ‘clenched fist’. Richard III, known as ‘Crookback Richard’ due to the curvature of his spine, was the last Plantagenet king and possessed potent skills in boxing and unarmed combat, as well as archery, javelin throwing and using a slingshot.

Consequently, it was in this constant ‘state of emergency’ that pugilism was preserved, perfected and promoted for self-defence, and, increasingly in the late 17th century, as a form of entertainment where crowd-drawing bare-knuckle bouts took place in the Royal Theatre in London. The men who participated in these events became known as ‘stage gladiators’, with fights taking place on raised, wooden, ring-shaped, unfenced stages. As Pierce Egan, the aforementioned sports journalist, wrote about the physical prowess of the Ancient Britons:

*The ancient Britons have always been characterised as a manly, strong and robust race of people, inured to hardship and fatigue, and, by the exercise of those manly sports, acquired that peculiar strength of arm, which rendered them so decisive in their warlike combats.*

Egan, P, 1812, p.14



*The entertainment! 'Stage gladiators' prepared to prove their physical prowess, show off their pugilistic skills and earn their crust in the sporting arena.*

The prize-fight contests were tremendous, dramatic, theatrical spectacles, with the onlookers indulging in hard drinking, or 'sluicing the ivories', and especially gambling, upon which prize-fighting absolutely depended. Like knights in days of yore, on entering the ring the fighters wore 'colours' – i.e. ribbons around their waists – which were then tied to their corner posts before the bout began. At the end of the contest, the winner tied the loser's 'colours' around his hat or neck as a trophy as he paraded triumphantly around the ring and on leaving the pugilistic arena.

### **Pugilism's Golden Age and Five Classic Pugilists**

The golden age of boxing began in the early 18th century and only developed and boomed by attracting fashionable society, or the Corinthians, also known as 'the diamond

squad', 'nibs', 'the ton', 'plumbs' and 'swells' – i.e. rich, influential patrons such as royals, dukes, lords and affluent gentlemen, collectively known as 'the well breeched' and men 'up in the stirrups'. These patrons provided the necessary social connections and financially supported their fighters while they trained and, in addition, wagered fortunes on their contests. Collectively, the rich patrons and prize-fight followers from more humble backgrounds were known as 'the fancy', made up of a wide range of social classes whose mutual interest in prize-fighting was such that class distinctions were put to one side. It was the fashion for members of 'the fancy's' demi-monde to use their own slang, known as 'flash', in order to be 'in the know' or *gnostic*, *fly* and *leary* regarding the venues of contests, etc, and to baffle the uninitiated and the powers that be in what was an outlawed sport.

Moreover, the late 18th century was a period of revolution in Europe – the French Revolution in 1789 being a prime example – and many of the English ruling class feared that they would lose their fortunes and estates. Consequently, they gambled. Some Europeans at the time viewed the English as primitive brutes who relished 'beer, beef and boxing', which enabled them to win battles, and that British soldiers were physically tough due to the practice of pugilism. As Pierce Egan put it:

*The manly art of boxing has infused that true heroic courage, blended with humanity, into the hearts of Britons, which have made them so renowned, terrific and triumphant in all parts of the world.*

Egan, P, 1812, p.3

During that period, bloodsports such as cock-fighting and bear-baiting became less popular and the public needed another violent sport to wager on. Therefore, the martial art of pugilism, referred to as 'the sweet science' and 'the noble art', a human bloodsport, became in vogue.

During the golden age, the sport of pugilism, also called 'milling', which means to box, beat or thrash, was practised by lion-hearted, unyielding and invariably uneducated, working-class men for prize money. Their trades, plied by blacksmiths, butchers and watermen, who rowed boats carrying passengers and merchandise across England's waterways, including the Thames, required impressive upper-body strength. There were no weight divisions, with the heavier pugilists weighing around 180–210lbs. The pugilists fought until they were unconscious, or 'on the bankruptcy list', or exhausted, or 'told out', and physically incapable of standing. Contests lasting over an hour were quite common.

The low socio-economic background of a typical prize-fighter is explained by the character Webber in George Bernard Shaw's novel *Cashel Byron's Profession*, who says, 'Gentlemen are not likely to succeed at work that needs the strength of a bull and the cruelty of a butcher.' In fact, many prize-fighters were butchers by trade and were renowned for their pugnacity and iron will. Generally, the upper classes did not participate in prize-fighting, but arranged contests for entertainment and learned boxing through private tuition in order to acquire pugilistic skills, vitality and courage.

Furthermore, many pugilists, or 'pugs', were poor, disadvantaged and discriminated-upon Irish, African and Jewish male immigrants who turned to pugilism to better

their prospects. To succeed when fist fighting, or 'milling' against men of this calibre, it was necessary to possess attributes such as 'bottom', which meant to be courageous and firm of purpose, and 'gluttony', which meant to have stamina and to be capable of taking a lot of punishment. At the beginning of the golden age, the contests, or 'set-tos', also known as 'turn-ups', were toe-to-toe affairs with blocks used to stop and evade blows, as moving was frowned upon and deemed unmanly. However, towards the end of the 18th century pugilism became more scientific and skilful.

London became the epicentre of prize-fighting due to its size and therefore increased opportunities to participate in the sport. However, by 1790 the Bristol, Bath and Birmingham areas were also important prize-fighting centres, with Bristol especially being acknowledged as a prominent pugilistic breeding ground. A study of 112 British-born prize-fighters, active between 1780 and 1824, showed that 80 per cent of prize-fighters were from three main areas, with 36 from London, 26 from Bristol and Bath, and ten from the Birmingham area.

Much was written about bare-knuckle prize-fighting during its golden age by Pierce Egan In his *Boxiana* series Egan glorified pugilism, extolling the sport as a cure-all for fostering and producing a manly population by stamping out effeminacy, thereby contributing to Britain's military strength and philosophical wisdom, and as an outlet for reducing dissent and other social tensions. He also advocated pugilism as a means of directing aggression into a form of self-defence and a physically beneficial activity.

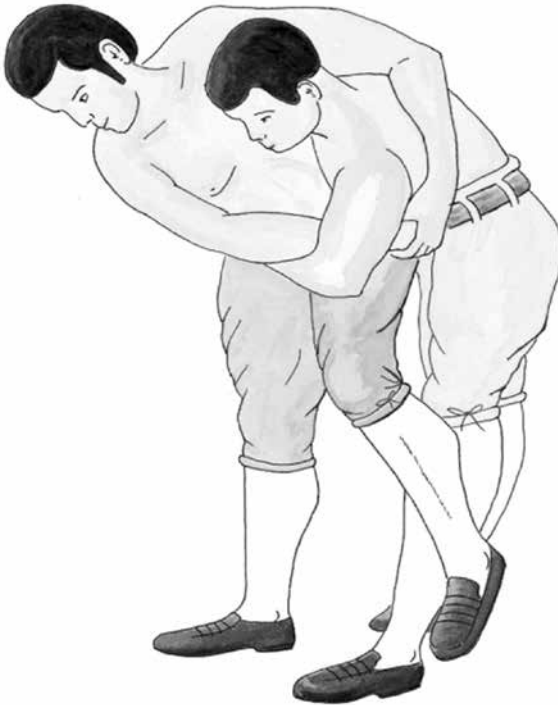
However, the sport's social, physical and moral benefits were counteracted by 'the fancy's' culture of gambling and



hard drinking. Even the prize-fighters were given brandy between rounds by their seconds – or cornermen, known as ‘knee-men’ – as the pugilists sat on the second’s knee at the end of a round. One method of reviving a fighter involved his cornerman blowing brandy up the fighter’s nose! Therefore, it can be surmised that consuming alcohol enabled many prize-fighters to withstand the punishment they were subjected to because they were drunk, or ‘lumpy’, also known as ‘snuffy’. In addition, members of the criminal underworld were attracted to the prize-fights by the large crowds of spectators in order to relieve them of their money and possessions. Moreover, Egan omitted to mention the fact that, generally, the pugilists came from impoverished communities in the newly industrialised parts of Britain, in which the poor worked and lived in appalling conditions. Desperate to escape from this environment, the pugilists were exploited by prize-fighting’s upper class and aristocratic promoters. That said, in spite of Egan’s omissions, this work is indebted to his writings.

‘Olde English pugilism’ was a no-holds barred, barbaric spectacle and incorporated a variety of techniques similar to those found in oriental martial arts syllabuses. For example, hand strikes, with the hands being conditioned by performing press-ups on the knuckles; punching punch bags and sand in buckets, and then soaking the hands in a brine solution until the knuckles became calloused; leg strikes, such as shin kicks; and wrestling moves, such as the very popular cross buttocks, after which the pugilist usually fell heavily on his opponent in order to wind him, known as a ‘burster’; and savage techniques, such as headbutting, seizing and striking below the belt, and ‘knuckling’ – i.e.

extending one, or all, of the middle knuckles in order to attack vulnerable areas such as the eyes, or 'daylights', and throat, or 'daffy passage', and eye-gouging with the fingers and thumbs.



*The popular cross-buttocks throw. The pugilist who had executed the throw would often fall heavily on his downed opponent in order to 'burst', or wind him.*

Brutal Lancastrian techniques were also used, such as 'purring', also known as 'up and down fighting'. It involved kicking an opponent, even when he was on the ground, whilst wearing clogs or iron-tipped boots, attacking areas below the belt, running at an opponent and headbutting

him in the stomach and then biting his ear or nose. The savagery of the Lancastrian manner of fighting was highlighted in Bee's *Sportsman's Slang* in 1825:

*Kick, boloc, and bite' – Lancashire brutality, which they call fighting, but we 'won't have it at any price'. They kick at any vital part; boloc, or ramp like a bullock; and when down, the brute uppermost bites off the ear, the thumb, or nose of the brute below. Purr and boloc, we apprehend to be synonymous.*

Bee, J, 1825, pp. 108 & 142

However, during the golden age and the introduction of rules, many of the brutal martial techniques were forbidden, for example eye-gouging and kicking an opponent after he had been knocked to the ground. As pugilism evolved and was eventually sanitised, striking using hand techniques increased until bare-knuckle boxing became the modern gloved sport of boxing, in which only punches are thrown.

Straight punches, or 'darts', were favoured as they were considered quicker and more powerful as they were thrown from the body's centre line – i.e. the line that runs through the body from the top of the head to the base of the torso, around which the body pivots. They were delivered using the large knuckles of the hand as the smaller knuckles are weaker and therefore more prone to injury. Some fighters fought with their heads down to deliberately cause damage to their opponent's hands and knuckles as their foreheads were struck. Strikes, or 'clicks', were directed purposely just under the ear, which was considered very dangerous, and between the eyebrows to cause swelling, bleeding and to obstruct the vision, and to the stomach.

Moreover, strategies were used to wear the opponent out whilst conserving strength for later on in the contest, such as forcing an opponent to take more steps – i.e. finishing a round near your own corner so at the end of a round the opponent had to walk all the way back to his corner; fighting from the centre of the ring and pivoting, thereby forcing the opponent to take more steps; and inflicting punishment on, or ‘serving out’, an opponent and then going down on one knee to get 30 seconds’ rest. In addition, covering, or ‘barring’, was used as a form of defence – i.e. using the arms and forearms to protect and minimise damage to the face and body from the opponent’s strikes, and to conserve energy.