



# Boxing & Being a Man

by Matt Schaefer

## AS A LAD

growing up with two brothers, one a year older, the other a year younger, I knew well the meaning of sibling rivalry. We three brothers were by nature a competitive lot; often our games would escalate into violence. Being boys, we all thought that the shortest distance to settling an argument was a short, sharp punch in the nose (or a kick in the stomach). Our father soon grew tired of officiating these disputes. He bought us a pair of boxing gloves and shoved us out to the garage, telling us: "Settle it like men."

**With a Victorian wicker rocking chair pushed back, light fixture globes turned up, and a referee and stopwatch close by, two young boxers eye each other. At the turn of the century, in athletic clubs and YMCAs, men and boys learned the rudiments of boxing.**

PHOTO FROM WILLIAM E. FELTON COLLECTION, SHS-IOWA CITY

This simple phrase, pregnant with unvoiced implications, hung over our heads each time we laced up the gloves to resolve our childish disagreements. I remember getting pounded several times by my older brother. This was to be expected, since he was a year farther along toward manhood. It was after being walloped by my younger brother (who by rights should have lagged me in developing manliness) that I stopped relying on boxing to settle disputes.

I began to question the whole premise that boxing was the definitive "manly" fashion to reach agreement. This first question introduced a train of follow-up queries: What was it about cut lips, bloody noses, and eyes watering from a stinging blow that equated to manhood? Was there something ennobling about a black eye? Did enduring a punch to the solar plexus make me more manly? More rational?



By the time this train of thought had run its course, I had decided to lay down my gloves and view boxing from a distance. Even the relative safety afforded by this abstract, intellectual redoubt did not completely dim my fascination with boxing as a sport. I followed the triumphs and foibles of its champions through the sports pages. Later I gained a more sophisticated understanding of boxing's place in our culture via my education in American sporting history.

## BOXING

is a sport about which Americans have always been strangely ambivalent. On the one hand, it is esteemed as the manly art of self-defense. Promoters of the sport label it the "sweet science." They emphasize the sportsmanship and fair play of boxing done well. They note that the skills of a boxer closely overlay attributes valued in men: grit, stamina, strength, speed, and the reasoned application of force. The ramifications of these overlapping concepts of manliness and boxing skills explain (in part) why the sport retains its popularity. It explains why many of us look with wonder on the heavyweight champion of the world, hoping to see in his form the paragon of manliness. This school of thought emphasizes boxing prowess as evidence of training of will, mind, and body to razor sharpness, esteeming the ability of the sport to raise a common man to uncommon levels of fitness.

On the other hand, boxing has been described as an atavistic vestige of man's more primitive (and savage) nature. It has been characterized as a throwback to cultures where gladiatorial combat more closely showed the true measure of a man, times when a man's ability to fight determined his worth to society. The bloodlust attendant upon a boxing match is a chilling sight. Discussion of whether boxing bur-nishes masculinity, within its rule-bound violence, its artful bloodletting, or its stylish brutality, becomes moot amid cries of "Kill the son-of-a-bitch!" and "Tear his head off!" Other combat sports (judo, wrestling, and fencing) do not have clobbering the opponent into submission as their object. Opponents of boxing point to the tangible human cost in human life, diminished capacity, and shattered lives of men whose prowess dooms them to be fistic fodder for the more skilled. The annals of prizefighting are replete with stories of men who had hoped to use boxing as an avenue up from poverty or ethnic and racial discrimination, only to find themselves at the dead end

of a fist, dazedly staring up at the lights while the referee counts out their dream.

Americans' attitudes toward boxing have moved between these two poles since the days of John L. Sullivan. During the 1880s, Sullivan, the Boston strong boy and heavyweight champion of the world, elevated boxing from its traditional roots as rustic recreation to a commercial enterprise. Prior to Sullivan, American boxing was a small-scale endeavor, pitting two local toughs in no-holds-barred competitions. These bare-knuckle fights often were brutal affairs with each combatant punching, kicking, and biting to gain an edge. They fought until one man was unable to continue. The winner cared more for the fame of being the roughest man in the county than for the pitifully small purse. In this, boxing recalled Greek cultural sensibilities, where male prowess was proven by violent competition.

## SULLIVAN

had his share of bare-knuckle bouts, but he earned his widest acclaim fighting under the Queensberry rules. These rules called for timed rounds, no hitting below the belt, no hitting an opponent while he was down, 12 rounds per bout, and, most importantly, boxing gloves (to reduce the damage done to hands and faces). The rules grew out of the English boxing tradition and attempted to reward skillful fighters over the more brutal.

Sullivan's charisma, indefatigable barnstorming, and his undefeated record against all comers brought boxing to the forefront of the American sporting scene in the 1880s. He was the most prominent sporting hero America had produced, earning (and spending) \$40,000 a year for his efforts. His heavy drinking, womanizing, and hot temper received nearly as much attention as his fistic accomplishments, leaving the American middle class to look askance at boxing.

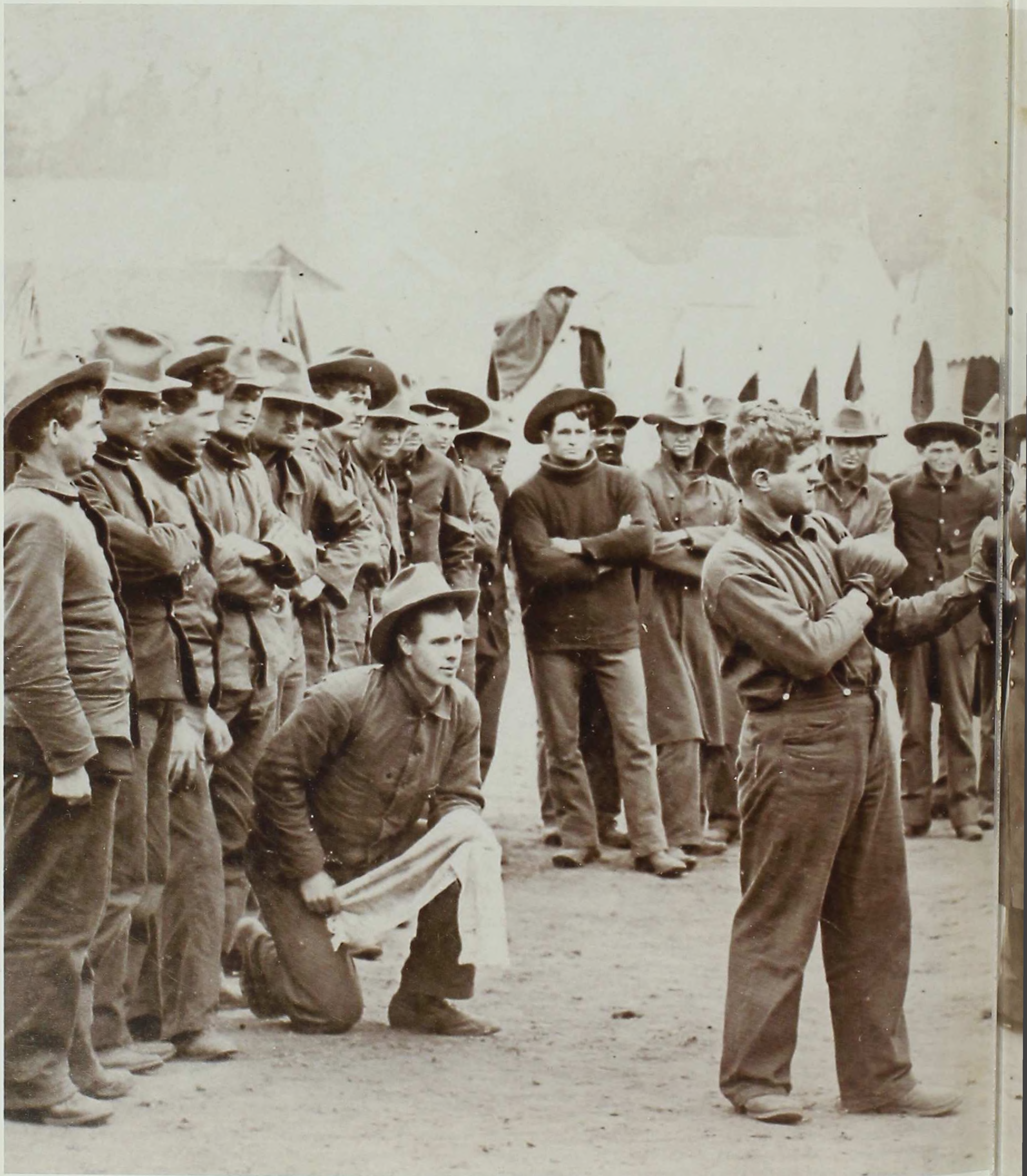
By the time Jim Corbett defeated Sullivan for the heavyweight title in 1892, America was ready for a new champion. "Gentleman Jim" was able to overcome Sullivan's brawn and sinew by skillfully slipping his punches and countering with jabs and combinations. Corbett epitomized the sweet scientific aspects of boxing as a manly art, aiming to outpoint (rather than bludgeon) his opponent. His style perfectly fit the middle-class expectations of fin-de-siècle middle-class American men. They saw in Corbett what they could hope to be—given enough time and training at their local YMCA or college gymnasium. Boxing afforded them a way to combat encroaching





**B**are-knuckle fighting (upper right) enlivened 1870s and '80s Mississippi River "clambakes" held on Offerman's Island (now Credit Island) near Davenport. By the late 19th century, bare knuckles gave way to padded gloves in American boxing. Next page: Soldiers box in a free moment during the Spanish-American War. Two fellow soldiers kneel nearby, ready with towels.









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Though barely visible at the top of the photograph, the words "Training for Jack Johnson The 17th round" were handwritten on the negative of this image of two young men in overalls and boxing gloves. In 1908, African-American boxer Jack Johnson won the heavyweight championship. Four years earlier, boxing had entered the Olympics. The same year, psychologist G. Stanley Hall's groundbreaking book, *Adolescence*, recommended boxing for boys as a way of molding character and working through evolutionary stages of savagery. Meanwhile, President Theodore Roosevelt was donning gloves in the White House.



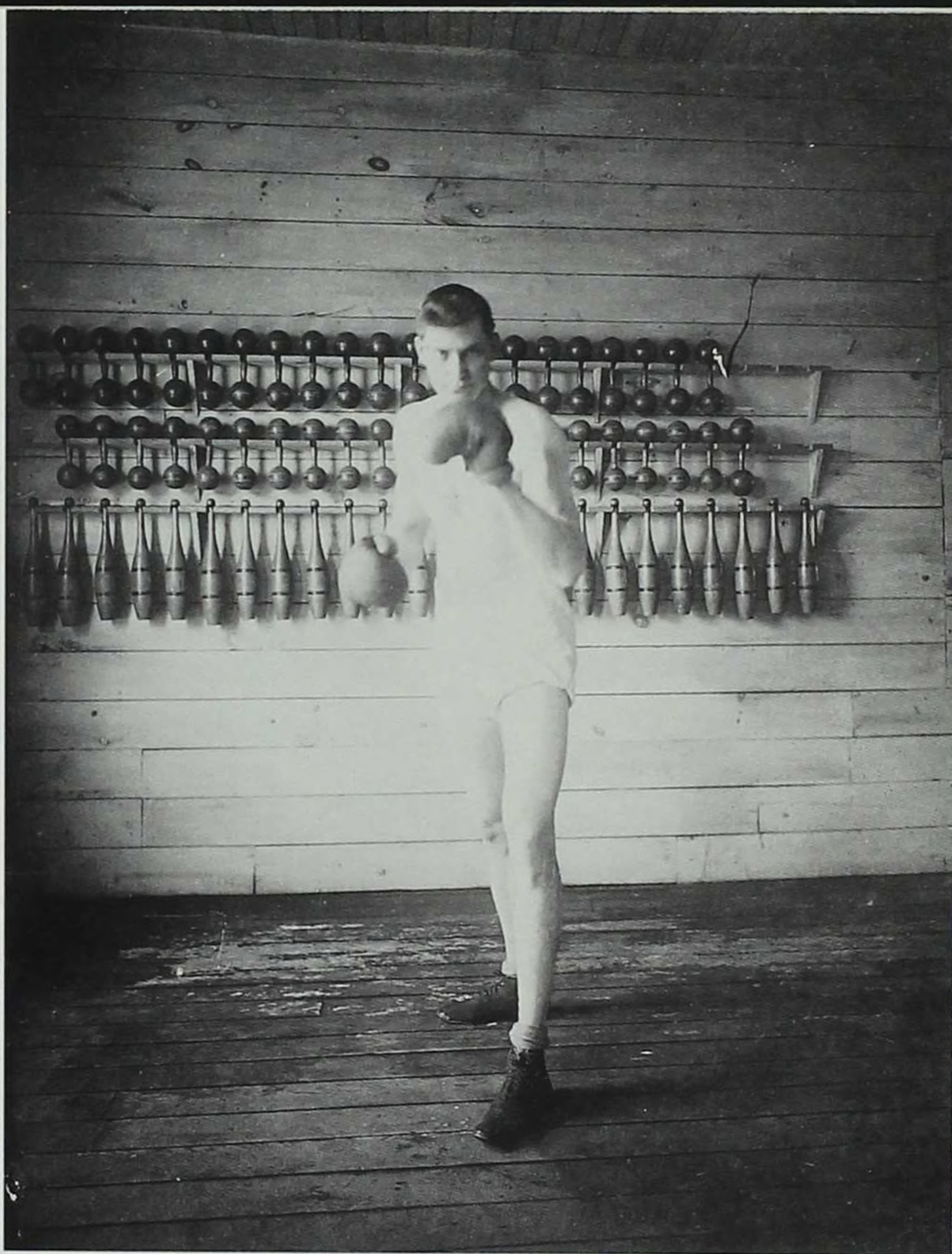
feminization brought about by urban, sedentary life; its training gave them the tools to withstand the strife of life in a competitive market. The new heavyweight champion of boxing was seen to embody the attributes that would conquer both opponents and environments and sustain the race.

With the ascent of Jack Johnson to the heavyweight throne in 1908, Americans now had to confront the issue of race in boxing. The African-American Johnson combined the boxing skills of Corbett with the power of Sullivan. This formidable combination rendered futile the efforts of a series of "great white hopes" to wrest back the title. Johnson's disdain of convention and his refusal to accept societal norms made him enormously popular among blacks, but led to fear and loathing on the part of middle-class white Americans. When Johnson defeated Jim Jeffries in 1910, race riots broke out in Houston, Little Rock, Norfolk, and Wilmington as whites put down blacks celebrating Johnson's victory. Time and enjoying the high life ultimately accomplished what no challenger could: Johnson retired from the ring.

Johnson's retirement cleared the way for the emergence of a new heavyweight champion, Jack Dempsey, who came to prominence just as Americans fully embraced sports as a commercial enterprise. During the 1920s, mass-market magazines, newsreels, and the radio made athletes instantly recognizable. Babe Ruth, Red Grange, Babe Didrikson, and Jack Dempsey were more than just sports figures; they were cultural icons. As an icon, Dempsey earned a fantastic income, boxing in front of tens of thousands in bouts staged in baseball stadiums. Clearly the reservations voiced against the brutality of boxing had receded, swallowed by the full-throated roar of the crowds. Whereas 19th-century opponents of boxing were able to attack the sport from the moral high ground, this ground had eroded by the 1920s. Dempsey lived the large life, adored by press and public.

## JOE LOUIS

—the second African-American heavyweight champion—was likewise lionized during his long tenure as titleholder. He won the belt in 1937 and held the title until 1948. Louis was esteemed as champion by nearly all Americans, regardless of race. This reveals less about the evolution of race relations in America (still a segregated society, riven by race) than it does about Joe Louis. He was willing to present himself humbly



SHS (IOWA CITY); WILLIAM E. FELTON COLLECTION

**F**or American males, boxing was part of developing and preserving the "body electric"—a man's vital force. The moral purity of such physical efforts as amateur sparring, gymnastics, and other elements of physical training, however, clashed with the moral dangers of gambling, drinking, and graft, which often accompanied commercialized prizefighting.

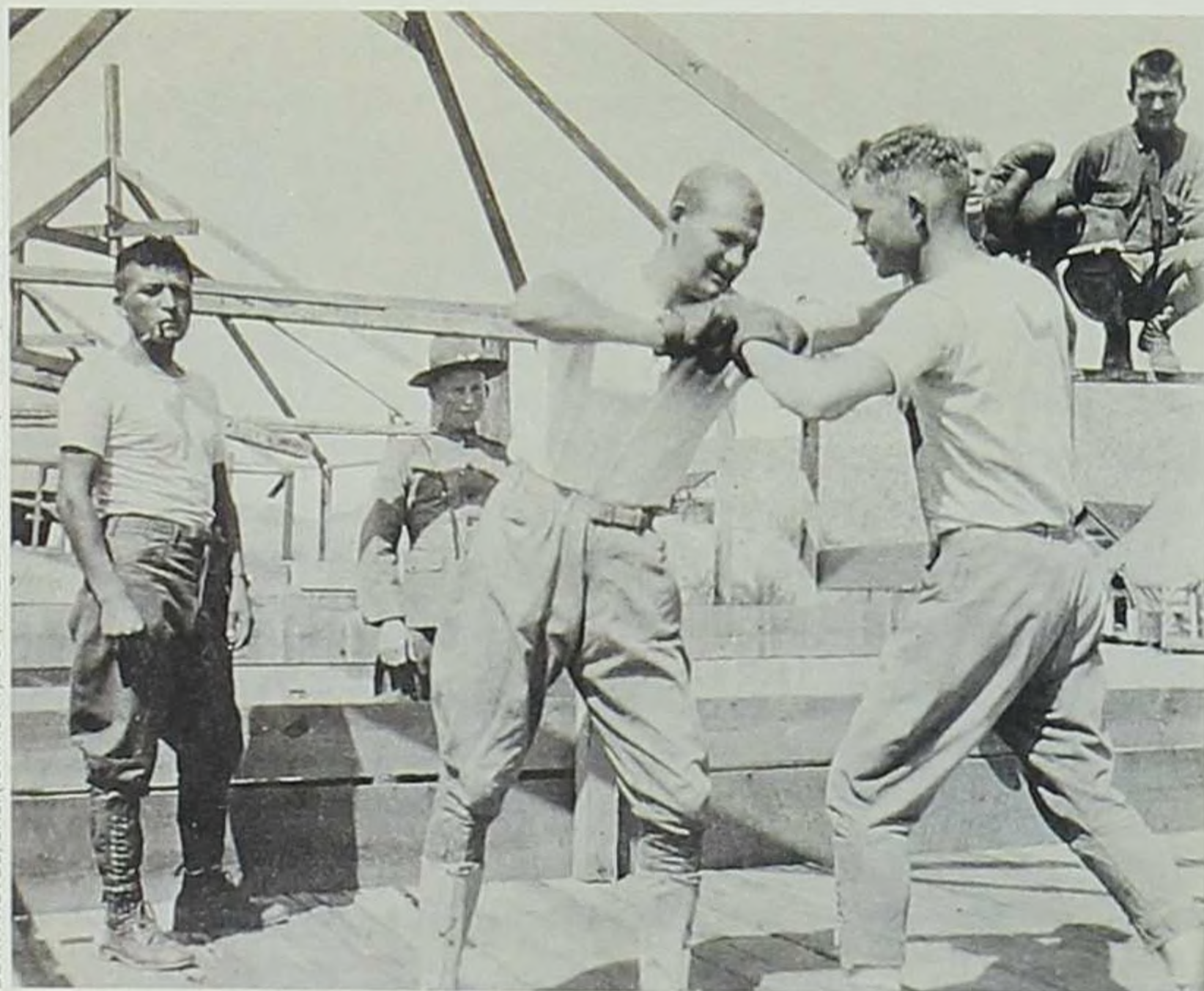
within America's racial hierarchy, keeping close counsel over his opinions. When Louis defeated the German champ, Max Schmeling, it was hailed by whites as triumph of the American way of life, and by blacks as a triumph for their race. When America entered World War II, Louis's victory over Schmeling was invoked to hearten the troops during training.

After the war, boxing found another vehicle to transport it into the heart of American culture—television. For most of the 1950s, the televised Friday night fights were a staple. This new medium revealed to many the more barbarous nature of the sport as men pummeled each other into bloody submission. Although the bloodier aspects of boxing could be obscured by the less visceral media of print and radio, live television did not have the luxury of rewrite or verbal gloss. Once again the vocal opponents of boxing were heard. This time their criticisms were lent credibility by medical evidence that repeated blows





**W**orld War I exposed American soldiers and sailors to boxing, where they learned it as a recreational outlet and as part of bayonet training. Then, during the Twenties, the growth of leisure time and spectator sports helped usher in boxing's Golden Age. Newspapers, too, did their part: sports coverage grew from a single sports page to entire sections, and in 1923, a Chicago newspaper started the Golden Gloves amateur competition. Nevertheless, social reformers fought prizefighting.



BOTH PHOTOS: SHS; (IOWA CITY); TOP, WALKER COLLECTION; BOTTOM, GIFFORD SCRAPBOOK

to the head did long-term damage. As it had in the 19th century, boxing moved to the periphery of America's sporting culture.

Into this arena stepped a brash young challenger from Louisville. Cassius Clay, the winner of the gold medal for boxing at the 1960 Olympics in Rome, emerged as a challenger for the heavyweight title. Clay was bright, bold, and not above gulling a credible press corps. His antic posturing and poetry could not obscure the fact that he was the most skilled, strongest, and smartest heavyweight of his time. He easily won the title in 1964. Clay announced his conversion to Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Ali shortly after winning the title. Ali then shocked the world by announcing that his faith rendered him a conscientious objector to the war in Vietnam. Americans could not accept the notion of a paci-



fist pugilist. Ali was stripped of his title, but ultimately won vindication through the courts. He resumed his career, a little older but still strong, stout-hearted, and sure of his skills. Unfortunately, Ali fought long after his skills had diminished and stands today as testimony to the damage a body can sustain in hand-to-head combat. Parkinson's disease has dulled Ali's rapier wit, tarnished his silver tongue, and slowed his lightning reflexes, offering opponents of boxing a telling case in point.

## IOWANS

—like many in America—historically have been of two minds about boxing. It was assumed that young men in Iowa would be able to defend themselves with their fists (and that such feistiness could be used to serve the state). But the 1897 Iowa Code explicitly prohibited prizefighting as an offense against the public peace. This ban was in the same section of the code as injunctions against obscene language, riot, and blasphemy. Those who engaged in a prizefight were subject to fines up to \$1,000 and imprisonment up to one year. Yet prizefights were held in Iowa (if newspaper accounts are to be trusted), and no one was jailed for it. Iowa's opponents of boxing had only the law on their side; without the will to enforce it, it meant little.

During the 1920s, as the popularity of boxing rose across America, the Iowa General Assembly reconsidered its ban on prizefighting. Young men, exposed to boxing as part of their military training during World War I, supported efforts to legalize boxing as a spectator sport. Neighboring states such as Illinois and

Missouri lifted their legislative bans on prizefighting, and bouts were drawing crowds to arenas and armories in Chicago and St. Louis. Each time the issue came to a vote in the Iowa legislature, the representatives from rural districts voted it down. They argued that prizefights brought in

**Whether protecting one's front porch (left) or one's nation (opposite), many American males gravitated to boxing for decades.**

their wake gambling, crass commercialism, and graft. The *Monticello Express* summarized the attitudes of many Iowans in a front-page editorial: "Boxing, when rightly indulged in, is a manly sport, but the staging of such contests as the Dempsey-Carpentier bout puts American sport on a level with the ancient gladiatorial contests and the modern Spanish bullfight. These fights are not promoted through love of clean sport, but as a betting and money-making proposition."

The Iowa Code was revised in 1970 to reflect the reality of scheduled prizefighting in the state. It aimed to control the carnage by establishing licensing boards, review commissions, and mandatory reports. The effect of the measure seems limited, as combatants recently entertained crowds in Davenport with a series of "tough man" matches. These bouts featured "no-holds-barred" action as men punched, kicked, bit, and clawed each other into submission. It was exactly this type of free-for-all that 19th-century boxers sought to replace with the rules-driven matches of gloved men, fighting timed rounds, governed by a referee.

Since the days of John L. Sullivan, champions and opponents of boxing have engaged each other in disputing the relative merits of the sport. This intellectual combat has gone on for well over a century in America. For each individual who rises to defend the character-building aspects of the "sweet science," another counters with evidence of physical damage done to combatants and the societal costs of exploiting young men. American culture is diverse enough, and flexible enough, to allow adherents from each school of thought free rein to voice their opinions. So the abstract battle over boxing continues, with each side landing telling blows, but with neither side able to land the knockout punch. ❖

*Matt Schaefer is many years removed from being a skinny little boy boxing in a suburban Cleveland garage. His doctoral research at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor focused on conceptions of physical fitness in America. He currently is Special Collections assistant at the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City).*

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

A useful source on the history of boxing is Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986). For a complete discussion of proposals to legalize prizefighting in the 1920s in Iowa, see Don S. Kirschner, *City and Country: Rural Responses to Urbanization in the 1920s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1970), 98-112.



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