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Ring Reminiscences

— Fights and Fighters —
(By JAMES FENDERGAST)

I saw the now famous "catch-weights" bout between Sandy Ferguson (210 lbs.) and the first Joe Walcott (145 lbs.). Little Joe, the Barbados demon was only 5 feet 1 inch in height; Sandy was 6 feet, 4 inches. They were both very cagey and canny, neither would "open up". It was a dull, monotonous match. Sandy kept Joe at long distance most of the whole fifteen rounds, but I don't remember of his landing a decent blow on Walcott, who was very fast and clever—at least none of those "terrific" punches which the nonpareil broadcaster Don Dunphy "spies" from Madison Square Garden. It must be amusing to old timers to hear of so many "terrific" blows delivered with no appreciable damage to the recipient.

Walcott had one peculiar blow, which I never saw any other boxer even try to use. It was a left "feint" to the stomach which ended up as a short arm hook to the face—a man must be lightning fast to be able to land it. There is nothing "terrific" about those short jolts but a succession of them would have a bad effect on an opponent; even a straight left feint and short follow-up gives an opponent quite a jolt.

Walcott tried to work his pet manoeuvre on Sandy, but the best he could do was to touch the tip of his nose, which required much wiping and blowing and reddened very conspicuously. The "demon" had another peculiarity in ring tactics. At opportune moments he would drop his hands, take two or three sideling steps which had the appearance of his walking away. The momentary dropping of hands eased the tension caused by having to hold them up to opponents generally much taller. It was a natural move to offset the disadvantage in height. It looks as if Jersey Joe Walcott got his cognomen from similarity of tactics to the original Barbados demon. In the pictures of his fight with Joe Louis he looked like an enlarged replica of the original Walcott. One who had ever seen the original would notice the similarity. If memory serves right the decision was a draw. At that time there were no judges and "point" system. The referee was "lord of all he surveyed, his right there was none to dispute." It was an unsatisfactory bout. I didn't know much more of the men's ability after watching the whole fifteen rounds. They wouldn't open up and try for real superiority. The "point" system puts more pressure on the fighters. If they get too careful they are liable to be disqualified.

Jack Dempsey ushered in the "kill 'em quick" era of ring tactics—after a long period of gradual cutting down tactics started by the clever Jim Corbett. Sullivan won his fights quickly. The champion lightweight, "terrible" Terry McGovern was a veritable whirlwind. His opponents generally lasted less than four rounds, till he met Young Corbett, who beat Terry as quickly as he (Terry) had disposed of his opponents. By the way, Young Corbett's real name was Rothwell, whose father was a first cousin of our Fraser Morrow, retired dairy inspector, Charlottetown. He was one of an Ontario family who moved to Aspen, Colorado, during the big mining migration to the Western States in the 1890's.

Mr. Fraser Morrow came down here to work in the newly established cheese factories—by the great old country Scotch promoter Professor Robertson. It was the first big Co-operative for this Province, and perhaps the first in all Canada. It was a unique experiment—a pet project of the great builder, which was eminently successful.

I was told an "inside" story of Young Corbett by Grant Henderson, son of Robt. Henderson, the real discoverer of gold in the Klondike. Grant was a schoolmate of the husky Young Corbett in Aspen.

Corbett, who had had a few local bouts around Aspen, was present at one of the "Terrible Terry's" championship battles, and saw or thought he saw, a weak point in Terry's movements, and declared quite openly that he could beat him. It was considered by the "wisenheimers" in the art of facial massage, to be the ravings of a diseased mind of an overoptimistic kid. The ambitious kid "bulled" better than he knew", whether or not "Providence" was his guide.

He proceeded to train faithfully and with intense purpose. He came along very fast, got many matches, won every bout, and within a year his reputation was good enough to rate him a bout for the lightweight championship with the "Terrible Terry."

The cockiness and self-assurance of Young Corbett was colossal. He had the supreme nerve to open Terry's dressing room door as he was passing any holler in an insulting, superior tone, "get out here you fake champion and take your trimming." Queer things had been done by fighters to one another to "get their goats", but this seemingly preposterous insult certainly capped the climax. It upset Terry's equanimity. The conceit and presumption of this comparative parvenu in the realm of fistiana angered him. He was sensitive and easily annoyed, and more so on this particular occasion by reason of being in too "fine" a condition—over "ripe" (as it were)—similar to Billie Conn in his second bout with Joe Louis. I used to train quite a lot with Andy Daley of Boston, who was Terry's sparring partner and confidential adviser in the preparations for his fight with Corbett. Andy told me quite a few things about Terry's "overfine" condition mentally and physically. He had a troubled sleep on the previous night—hallucinations and vain imaginings—which interfered with his usual effectiveness in the most important moments.

A trainer, to be rated as good, must be almost a superman. He must be resourceful, have an innate knowledge of human nature—and patience equal to that of Job. Most fighters develop a "cranky" complex under the high nervous tension. A good trainer figures out ways and means to provide diversions for his man, such as fishing trips, reading, card playing, or any of the numerous ways of taking his pupil's mind off the big event.

Terry was so enraged at Corbett's yaw-mouthed insult, that he decided to go right after him at the sound of the first gong. Corbett evaded McGovern's first rush by side-stepping and in the second desperate rush met him coming in with a terrific right counter. Mirabile! Spectators could scarcely believe their eyes—there was the supposed invincible McGovern stretched on the canvas. He managed to beat the "ten and out" count, but couldn't rally from the effect of the right hay-maker delivered by Corbett. The end came in the second or third round. Corbett's secret "hunch" had won him a world championship. It was considered the most unexpected and drastic upset in pugilistic history up to that time—not excepting Jim Corbett's victory over John L. Sullivan.

Jack Blackburn, colored middleweight, was another extra clever boxer. He became famous as the trainer of the great Joe Louis. Blackburn is "over the divide" in age now. He figured prominently in the time of Sam Langford, Jack and Mike (Twin) Sullivan, Honey Melody and Joe Walcott I. I saw Blackburn knock out Walcott in a Boston ring in 1908.

They were both clever, knew all there was to know about the game in those days—new blows and old. The ending was sudden and unexpected in the third round. Blackburn "feinted" Walcott into a straight left lead and was all set to counter with his right, which he did by slipping his head to the left slightly, enough to let the punch go by, and at the same instant bringing his right over and across the extended left arm. There is no "telegraphing". The right "cross counter" starts from the position in which the right hand is at the instant, and if timed right it is a devastating blow. It moves only about six to eight inches and has the weight of the deliverer's shoulder behind it.

The "cross counter" was so quick and neat in this case that few of the spectators saw it. Many thought it was a fake knockout.

In boxing contests sometimes blows that hurt most are scarcely noticed by the spectators. It is a rare occurrence for a boxer to get a good chance to use the counter, but if it is delivered right, it is like a "bolt from the blue."

There are quite a few "freak"

blows used sometimes in boxing, but it's only once in a thousand times they are used. The set-up for them has to be just right. Most every good boxer has some weak point. Even Joe Louis left himself open for a good right—didn't hold his left high enough. Earlier in his career it didn't matter so much, because he was always advancing and giving the punishment. He never gave his opponent time to "get set."

Generally a good ambitious boxer works out a master plan, based on what he knows to be his opponent's weakness. If he doesn't know of any particular weakness, he stands pat and does the best he can till he sees an opening. The main thing is to be in good condition—and there's the big "rub". Temperaments and physical characteristics are different in most humans. Some should have a hard long grind of training; others are nearly always in "shape" and need only a few workouts to put them at their zenith; prolonged training would make them "stale."

In the 1890's there was quite a famous fighter named George La Blanche (the Marine) who gets credit for introducing the so-called "pivot blow". The most opportune time to use it would be when an opponent would be getting tired. He would be feinted into a desperate lead, which would be side-stepped by the intended receiver. At the same time the intended receiver would "pivot" with arm extended and catch his opponent around the ear and neck with the back of his closed fist. It was generally a knockout punch if it landed right, and was soon barred from use in all boxing rings.

The "rabbit" punch is rather a late development in pugilistic evolution. I'm not sure, but I think it was one delivered with one hand free in clinches, at the base of the cervical vertebra (neck bones) thereby jarring the spinal column. It could only be done with the strength of the forearm, but could have a very paralyzing effect. It was soon barred.

The famous "solar plexus" used by Bob Fitzsimmons to win the championship from Jim Corbett was a new one to the world at that time. I venture Ruby Robert wouldn't have recognized it by that name, but he had all the glory nevertheless. It is rather a complex move and quick back pedalling would nullify it, but Corbett had been out-manoeuvring Fitz so much with his clever boxing, that he thought he had a "cinch" and was careless—held Fitz too cheaply.

It was done by making a feint with the left, then another feint with the right, putting the right foot forward at the same instant, then bringing the left forward with the whole power of the body behind it. Corbett was out for nearly a minute. He never saw it coming. He thought he was struck by someone outside the ring—thought he was the victim of a plot. The above differs from the version on the famous knockout given by Bill Stern in his book on ring artists called "Ten and Out", but that's the way it was demonstrated to the writer by some good authority in Boston shortly after it happened.

Jack Twin Sullivan used it on yours truly in Halifax. When we were going into the ring Jack said to me "Are you there for a good exhibition?" I said "O.K." I did a lot of foolish jumping around for the first four rounds—it was a ten rounder—had about ten or twelve pounds extra weight (214 lbs.). Got slowed down after the

(Continued on Page 14)

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