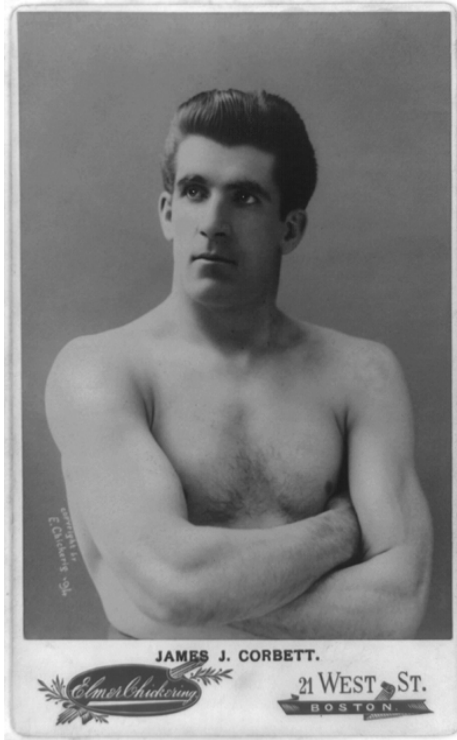


The Fight that Changed it All

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

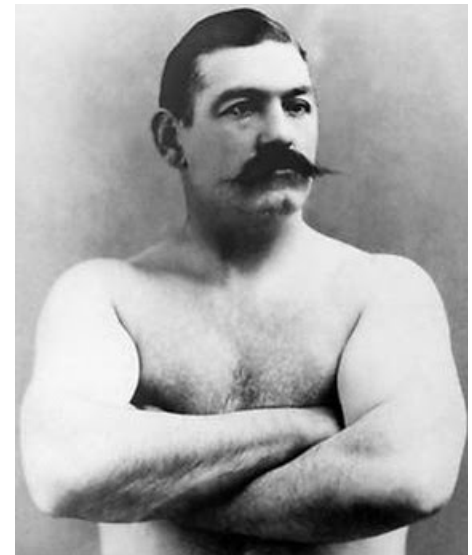


Taking some courses in college and working as a bank clerk doesn't necessarily qualify someone as a 'gentleman'. But if you were a professional boxer in the 1890s with that sort of background – a little education and a bank job – that may have set you apart. That was why James J. Corbett was so different from most of his peers. That, and the fact that he wore his hair in a full-grown pompadour, dressed in well-cut clothes and spoke excellent grammar, meant that he was well entitled to his famous nickname, Gentleman Jim.

In 1854 Jim Corbett's father, Patrick, immigrated to America from Ballinrobe, Co Mayo. Corbett was born into a working-class Irish family in San Francisco in 1866. He had a high school education, some college and was a literate and articulate man. He learned his craft of boxing not from the street but from a coach. He refined the art of boxing and fighters copied his style. He began his career in 1886 and fought all his matches wearing gloves under the Marquis of Queensberry rules.

John L. Sullivan was a legend in his time. Both his parents immigrated from Ireland. He was the last of the bare-knuckle champions who pounded each other without gloves for hours in marathon matches that lasted as many as 75 rounds. He had won the Heavyweight Championship title in 1882 by knocking out Paddy Ryan and had successfully defended it for 10 years. To be the Heavyweight Champion at this moment of time was to be the most famous man in the world. And Sullivan's championship matches attracted thousands.

As Corbett rose through the ranks, he regarded his fellow Irishman, John L. Sullivan, with envy. Sullivan, twenty-five pounds heavier than Corbett, was a bruiser who specialized in overpowering anyone who stepped into the ring with him. Corbett's approach was more scientific and deliberate. He studied his opponents and went into each fight with a game plan and used his athleticism and maneuverability to stay out of trouble to wear down his man.



On September 7, 1892 the two men met in New Orleans in a Heavyweight Championship match governed by the Queensberry rules. The Sullivan-Corbett fight marks a turning point for professional boxing as the sport moved out of the shadows of criminality into the world of acceptable public entertainment.

Jim Corbett later published a book describing that night. We begin with a synopsis of his account. *From the beginning of the round Sullivan was aggressive – [He] wanted to eat me up right away. He came straight for me and I backed and backed, finally into a corner. While I was there, I observed him setting himself for a right-hand swing...I sidestepped out of the corner and*

was back in the middle of the ring again, Sullivan hot after me. I allowed him to back me into all four corners, and he thought he was engineering all this....But I learned what I wanted to know. He had shown his hand to me.

The New Orleans crowd was not pleased at what they perceived as Corbett's reluctance to mix it with the champion. A section of the audience began to hiss 'Sprinter'. Corbett kept moving around until the third round, when he started swinging, and broke the champion's nose and Sullivan bled profusely for the remainder of the round.

In the seventh round, Corbett shifted his attack to the body and began to bury punches in Sullivan's midsection. By the 14th round, Corbett was easily landing punches and Sullivan wasn't offering much in return. The match was hardly competitive, Corbett boxed beautifully dancing around the ring, sidestepping Sullivan's punches and peppering him with counters. A minute and a half into the twenty-first of the scheduled twenty-five rounds, Corbett ended the fight with a vicious combination of punches which left Sullivan on the canvas.

After the fight was over, Sullivan gathered himself, he stood on the ring apron and announced to the crowd: "Gentlemen, gentlemen, I have nothing at all to say. All I say is that I came into the ring once too often – and if I had to get licked, I'm glad I was licked by an American. I remain your warm and personal friend, John L. Sullivan."