

Ancient times. Boxing is one of the oldest known sports. Stone carvings indicate that the Sumerians, who lived in what is now Iraq, boxed at least 5,000 years ago. The sport probably spread from the Sumerians to peoples throughout the ancient world.

Boxing was a brutal spectacle in ancient Greece. Two young men would sit on flat stones, face to face, with their fists wrapped in thongs (strips of leather). At a signal, they began to hit each other until one of them fell to the ground unconscious. The other man then continued to beat his opponent until he died. According to legend, the thongs were later fitted with metal ****es so that the fights ended more quickly.

The Romans also staged brutal boxing matches. On their hands and forearms, the fighters wore cestuses, which consisted of leather straps plated with metal. In time, the sport became so savage that the Romans forbade the use of cestuses. In the last hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Romans prohibited boxing.

The beginning of modern boxing. Boxing almost disappeared as a sport until the late 1600's, when it reappeared in England. However, it remained a cruel sport, and many fighters were crippled, blinded, or even killed while fighting.

In the early 1700's, James Figg, one of England's most famous athletes, introduced modern boxing. In Figg's day, boxing involved much wrestling. Figg became successful by punching instead of wrestling. In 1719, he opened a boxing school in London and began to teach his style of bare-knuckle (gloveless) fighting.

Figg's boxing rules were still brutal, however. For example, one rule required that boxers continue to fight without rest periods until one man could not go on. In 1743, Jack Broughton, a well-known British boxer, introduced new rules. Under Broughton's rules, a fight ended when one man was knocked down and could not get up within 30 seconds. However, bouts were still continuous. Broughton's rules, with some additions, became standard for all bouts. They were known as the London Prize Ring Rules, and they helped make boxing less savage.

From bare knuckles to gloves. In the mid-1860's, the Marquess of Queensberry, a British sportsman, sponsored a new boxing code of 12 rules. In 1872, the Queensberry Rules were first used in a professional tournament in London. They have been used throughout the world ever since with only slight changes. The rules require boxers to wear gloves. They also call for three-minute rounds with a one-minute rest period between rounds. The rules further state that a man down on one knee may not be struck and that a fallen man must be given 10 seconds to get back on his feet.

During the 1850's and 1860's, British boxers visited the United States, where they tried to create greater interest in boxing. But many Americans opposed the sport. It was also illegal in many areas. The matches themselves drew only small crowds that watched boxers battle with bare knuckles. In 1882, John L. Sullivan, an American, claimed the world bare-knuckle championship. But he realized that there was no future in bare-knuckle fighting and that the police allowed matches held under the Queensberry Rules. Sullivan therefore joined a traveling theatrical group and staged gloved boxing matches throughout the country. Huge crowds turned out to watch these exhibitions.

The golden age of U.S. boxing. During the early 1900's, boxing remained illegal in many parts of the United States. Then in 1920, New York passed the Walker Law, which permitted public prizefighting. Soon other states legalized boxing. Boxing then grew quickly as a spectator sport and entered its golden age.

George L. (Tex) Rickard was the leading fight promoter of the 1920's. In 1921, he promoted the first match to draw a "million-dollar gate." The bout was between the U.S. heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey and the French challenger Georges Carpentier, the light heavyweight champion. Dempsey reigned as heavyweight champion from 1919 until 1926, when Gene Tunney defeated him for the title.

When Dempsey and Tunney fought again in 1927, more than 100,000 persons paid \$2,658,660, a record

at that time, to watch the bout, which Tunney won.

Joe Louis became one of the most famous boxers of the golden age. He held the heavyweight title longer than any other fighter--from 1937 until he retired in 1949. Louis came out of retirement in 1950, but lost to the heavyweight champion, Ezzard Charles. He then won several comeback bouts. In 1951, in his last fight, Louis was knocked out by Rocky Marciano.

Several outstanding boxers of the golden age held the championship title in more than one weight class. Harry Greb held the light heavyweight crown from 1922 to 1923 and the middleweight crown from 1923 to 1926. Mickey Walker was the welterweight champion from 1922 to 1926 and the middleweight champion from 1926 to 1931. In the late 1930's, Henry Armstrong held the welterweight, lightweight, and featherweight titles all at the same time.

The rivalry between middleweights Tony Zale and Rocky Graziano was a boxing highlight of the 1940's. The two men fought for the championship three times. Zale knocked out Graziano in the first and third fights, and Graziano won the other.

The mid-1900's. Archie Moore, Sugar Ray Robinson, and Rocky Marciano were three of the greatest fighters of the 1950's. Moore held the light heavyweight title from 1952 to 1961. Robinson was the welterweight champion from 1946 to 1951 and then went on to win the middleweight crown five times. Marciano was the heavyweight champion from 1952 to 1956 and won all his 49 professional fights.

However, attendance at boxing matches declined during the 1950's with the rise of television. Many fans preferred to watch major fights on television at home rather than attend other fights in person. As a result, small boxing clubs, where fighters got their start in the sport, were forced out of business. In time, the general public's interest in boxing decreased to the point where only some championship bouts were televised.

Recent developments. Muhammad Ali became one of the most colorful fighters in boxing history and helped stimulate renewed interest in the sport in the 1960's and 1970's. Ali won the heavyweight title in 1964 with an upset victory over Sonny Liston.

A new generation of fighters sparked even greater interest in boxing during the 1980's. One of the most popular was Sugar Ray Leonard. He won a gold medal in boxing at the 1976 Olympic Games. After winning the WBC welterweight title in 1979, he fought Roberto Duran twice in 1980, first losing his title and then regaining it from Duran. In 1981, Leonard defeated previously unbeaten Thomas Hearns for the world welterweight title. In 1987, Leonard defeated Marvin Hagler for the WBC middleweight championship.

Larry Holmes was generally considered the top heavyweight of the late 1970's and early 1980's. In 1986, Mike Tyson became the youngest heavyweight ever to win a portion of the world championship when he won the WBC title at the age of 20. In 1990, Buster Douglas knocked out the previously undefeated Tyson in one of the greatest upsets in boxing history. Late in 1990, Evander Holyfield defeated Douglas to become the world heavyweight champion.