

James Figg: Father of Modern Boxing

06.10.05 - By: **M.C. Southorn:** James Figg was born to a poor farming family in Thames Village, Oxfordshire in 1695. He was the youngest of seven children. Figg took to the martial arts early, and he was already renowned as a master of the short-sword and cudgel when he took up unarmed fighting. Based from The Greyhound Inn in Cornmarket, Thame, Figg travelled far and wide working the fighting booths of the popular fairs of the time. He was soon a regular at such festivals as the Southwark fair, where he challenged all comers at both armed and unarmed combat "from noon 'till night". It was here that he was first spied by the Earl of Peterborough, who became his patron and took him to London.

With the Earl's patronage, Figg opened a fighting academy in the Tottenham Court Road district. He called it "Figg's Amphitheatre" and became an instructor, and later, a promoter of some of his 1000 students.

His business card, designed by his artist friend William Hogarth (who later painted his portrait) declared Figg to be the "master of the noble science of defence" available to teach the use of the "small backsword and quarterstaff at home and abroad". Although there are records of prizefights in England dating from 1681 (the first being between the Duke of Albemere's butler and his butcher), Figg is the first to have attained national celebrity thanks in part to his association with Hogarth.

The boxing of Figg's day was not so much boxing as streetfighting. Bare knuckles and open-hand blows were allowed, as was grappling, and hip-throws. Kicking a man when he was down (known as "spurring") and eye-gouging were permitted as well. In these respects the sport was less civilized than it had been in ancient Greek times, and in fact, it closer resembled Pankration (Greek no-holds-barred fighting) than it did Pygmahia (Greek boxing). Thanks to his Academy, Figg popularized both armed and unarmed fighting techniques, and added the parries of the sword and staff to the conventional unarmed combat of the time.

In 1719, the 24-year-old Figg declared himself Champion of England. His claim was universally accepted, as he had beaten all the other major fighters including Tim Buck, Tom Stokes, Bill Flanders and Chris Clarkson.

In 1720, Figg effectively franchised sold his Amphitheatre to one of his students and set up shop at a place called The Boarded House in the Bear Garden, located in Marleybone Fields on Oxford Street in London. At this establishment contests between men, between women, and between baited animals were held. A printed article from the period featuring a challenge from one Rowland Bennett of Ireland asserts that, having seen a demonstration by James Figg, Bennett became "fully persuaded that if the proper method is executed against him, he (like Sampson with his hair off) is like other men." Bennett offered the following challenge: "For a trial of which I do now invite him to meet me and exercise the usual weapons fought on the stage."

Bennett is referring to the custom of the time that had fights consist first of a sword duel to first blood, then of a fistfight to first fall, and finally of a match of cudgels (clubs) to first fall. The winner of two out of three of these matches would win the contest. This method of combat was all the more risky considering antibiotic medicine did not exist, and there was little to prevent an infected wound from becoming fatal.

Figg replied that he would "give the said Rowland Bennett the opportunity of putting this proper method in execution," promising that he would, "not fail to meet at the place and time appointed". Figg goes on to express his hopes that "spectators may from thence receive entire satisfaction" and he closes by promising all that his methods will be "by the way of the old style". The article ends, like all good advertisements with, "The doors will be opened at four and the matters mount at six precisely."

Figg retained his claim to his Title against Rowland Bennett, and also against such fighters as Philip McDonald (the Dublin Carpenter), James Stokes (Citizen of London), and William Finn of Ireland. In all, Figg was believed to have had around 270 fights, and he only lost once, in 1726, to a pipe-maker named

Ned Sutton. Figg, then 31, claimed he was ill and demanded and received a re-match, which he won. Sutton demanded and received a third bout to determine who was The Champion once and for all.

In this third fight, Sutton was stabbed in the knee in the first round and was thus forced to retire before the unarmed round could begin so Figg regained his Title.

Shortly after this fight James Figg went into semi-retirement. He still called himself "Champion", yet he preferred to promote his young protégés, who tended to favour unarmed prizefighting over swords and cudgels.

In the years following his unofficial retirement, Figg's Amphitheatre attracted hundreds of young boxers – enough to keep the master in the business of fight promotions until his death in 1734 at the age of 38 (most likely of tuberculosis). With Figg gone The Championship of England was up for grabs and there is some confusion as to who exactly was the heir to The Title. Regardless of this, and in spite of the vast differences between today's sport and that of the early 18th century, the modern lineage of

The Heavyweight Championship of the World begins with James Figg.