

“SUCH PERSUASIVE INFLUENCE”: THE IRISH  
INFLUENCE ON BOXING AND  
BASEBALL IN AMERICA

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## ABSTRACT

### The Role of the Irish in the Rise of Boxing and Baseball in America

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This study of the Irish influence on boxing and baseball in America, from the mid to late 1800s through the early 1900s, will examine the profound influence of three leading Irish American sports figures. Two of those athletes, John L. Sullivan and James “Gentleman” Corbett, helped redefine the world of pugilism, or prize fighting. In addition, Irishman Mike “King” Kelly became baseball’s first celebrity, helping to rewrite its antiquated rules with his unique style. All three athletes played a pivotal role in American sporting history, not only through their intrepidity in sports, but also through their promotion of the acceptance of Irish Americans by Protestant Americans. Also, they helped Irish Americans assimilate into their new culture while still facing hardships and religious persecution.

This exposition will begin with the Great Irish Famine. It will then proceed to reveal the roles of the Famine and intolerable British politics, which forced the Irish into exile from their homeland, and propelled them to American shores. The following chapters will detail each sporting figure, and the role he played in defining his respective sport in American history. The first Irish American athlete considered will be pugilist John L. Sullivan. This study will discuss his life, fights, and how he brought the sport of boxing from rat-infested gutters to the mainstream, sell-out venues, making the sport socially acceptable in America. The next Irish American to be reviewed will be pugilist



James “Gentleman” Corbett. A further exploration will focus on his role in boxing, and how he revolutionized the sport with his training methods and scientific approach to fighting. He is still considered by many to be the grandfather of modern-day boxing. The last Irish American athlete to be scrutinized will be baseball star Mike “King” Kelly. This chapter will examine his life and exceptional play on the diamond. Kelly, as a result, was the first player to be traded and became America’s first baseball luminary.

The discourse will conclude with how each athlete, though once obscure, played a significant role in shaping America’s athletic culture, in addition to helping Irish Americans blend in after their audacious transition from Ireland into the American culture, in general. Certainly, it will focus on how the Great Irish Famine led to their mass immigration, which eventually laid the foundation for the developmental explosion of American athletics, and the impact they continue to have on America’s historical panorama. Noted Irish writer George Bernard Shaw perhaps summed up the Irish plight best when he stated, “Just do what must be done. This may not be happiness, but it is greatness.” No doubt, the contributions of Irish Americans in this country, and especially those of Sullivan, Corbett and Kelly, prove Shaw correct.



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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

“I’m Irish and always will be, but America has taught me so much. Maybe it’s here in the U.S. that we find a healing, for in the broader melting pot we get to look at some of these self-destructive attributes that we bring to bear upon our own quarrels and begin to solve them in ways other than just splitting apart.”

Fionnula Flanagan

#### **Statement of the Topic**

A famous Irish performer once quipped, “There is something about the Irish that is remarkable.”<sup>1</sup> Although possibly biased as an Irish actress, Fiona Shaw is not alone in her sentiments. The Irish are survivors and achievers, as the evidence presented here will prove. This dissertation will explore the Irish influence on boxing and baseball in America from the mid-nineteenth through early twentieth centuries by examining in depth three leading Irish American sports figures. It is the contention of this study that in the early years of professional sports in America, Irish immigrants and their children dominated several of the most popular of these sports, including boxing and baseball. In addition, Irish athletes, coaches, managers, and trainers were responsible for radical changes in the fundamental nature of these sports, in many cases spearheading key innovations that led to exponential growth in the sports’ popularity and profitability.

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<sup>1</sup> Fiona Shaw, Brainy Quotes,  
<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/f/fionashaw207872.html>.



Further, many of these Irish and Irish American<sup>2</sup> athletes became major figures in popular culture, thus becoming America's first generation of sports celebrities, and were often labeled "heroes." This phenomenon had a significant impact on the acceptance of the "foreign" Irish by mainstream Protestant America, which leads to another claim of this study: that the success of Irish sports stars played a key role in the assimilation of the Catholic Irish into American society. A related aspect of this argument is that these sports heroes actually changed American culture in two ways. First, they made sports accessible to the common man and woman, and second, they contributed to the expansion of the role of celebrities in American society.<sup>3</sup>

The Irish assimilation to America has been explored in several scholarly studies, most notably by Patrick Redmond in "The Irish and the Making of American Sport" (2014). Jerrold Casway coined the phrase "The Emerald Age of Baseball" to describe the 1890s, when so many Irish names dominated teams' rosters.<sup>4</sup> Redmond contends that we can easily expand that period from the mid-1830s well into the first decade of the twentieth century and assign the term to American sports in general. His book covers the Irish sportsman from the arrival of James "Deaf" Burke in 1836 through Jack B. Kelly's rejection by Henley regatta and his subsequent gold medal at the 1920 Olympics. His study is an overview of the Irish in sport, seeking to deal with the complex interaction that they had with alcohol, gambling and Sunday leisure: pleasures that were banned in most of America at some time or other between 1836 and 1920. He also covers the Irish

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<sup>2</sup> For purposes of this study, the term "Irish" will be used to apply to both immigrant Irish and Irish Americans. However, birthplaces of important figures will be noted throughout.

<sup>3</sup> Mick Moloney, *Far From the Shamrock Shore* (New York, Crown, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Jerrold Casway, *Ed Delahanty in The Emerald Age of Baseball* (Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 2004).



sportsman's close relations with politicians, his role in labor relations, his violent lifestyle and, by contrast, his participation in bringing respectability to sport. It also deals with native Irish sports in America, the part played by the Irish in "Team USA's" initial international sporting ventures, and the making and breaking of amateurism within sport.

This dissertation differs from Redmond's work in that the focus here is on a select number of these preeminent early Irish sports stars who were at the forefront of the trends and movements Redmond explores. In a very real sense, the case studies presented here provide a deeper illumination of the themes Redmond covers in his work. While Redmond explores these issues from a macro level, this study goes into greater depth on a limited number of figures. In the end, however, the evidence from this work demonstrates that the claims of both Redmond and this study are well supported and help us to understand the life of the Irish in America in the nineteenth century and the process of their assimilation into American culture and society.

This study also touches upon the historical, social and political significance of sport in nineteenth-century America. It contributes not only to wider debates about American history, ethnic history, society, and politics but also to the steadily growing body of work devoted to understanding the role of sport in the shaping of modern societies. Similarly, it touches upon the key issue of the relationship between sport and national identities.

This work has a particular focus on the sports of boxing and baseball, the sports at which the children of Irish immigrants excelled almost from their arrival on American shores. The study will begin with a brief history of both sports, their importance and how they eventually spread to America. However, broader social and historical factors that



led to the presence of the Irish in America inform the history of Irish Americans in sports, so this study also explores relevant elements that contributed to Irish immigration to America.

This story of the Irish in American sports only came to be because of the arrival of more than 1.5 million Catholic Irish, many of them not English speaking, in the 15 years from 1845-60, overwhelmingly due to the Great Irish Famine and its aftermath. In 1845, Ireland was struck by a deadly potato blight that substantially changed the futures of both Ireland and America. The Irish Famine was one of the worst tragedies of the nineteenth century, nearly destroying a culture, a country, its population, and forever altering the history of Ireland and the world. This blight decimated the indigent Irish and the land.<sup>5</sup> Evicted from their homes with no shelter or place to go, the Irish were left with no other choice but to leave in hope of a better life. As a result, from 1845 to 1852 and beyond, at least one million people died as another two million escaped, most of them fleeing to America. This massive influx of immigrants to America would drastically change the culture and history of America.<sup>6</sup> In order to help the reader to understand the massive migration of the Irish to America and its relevance to this study, a summary of the Famine and its eventual influence on sports in America will be provided.

Another significant element of the Irish American experience that influenced the centrality of the Irish in American sports was the battery of difficulties they overcame in order to survive in America. Upon their arrival, most things did not seem much better than they had in Ireland. The United States was a country in a state flux with cities that

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<sup>5</sup> Christine Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 2, 125.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.



were overpopulated: disease, poverty, and violence ran throughout.<sup>7</sup> Immigrants were pouring in and one ship after another would drop off scores of passengers. They all had the same hope and needs in common, creating competition for jobs, shelter, and food. The Irish did not arrive to a warm and friendly welcome at their destinations throughout the United States. The Irish were looked down upon, viewed as unintelligent, barbaric savages, the same as they were viewed by the British. The Irish were not welcome and had difficult times ahead to survive in this new and foreign country.<sup>8</sup>

The streets were not “paved with gold,” and the Irish had to create their own opportunities in an unwelcoming environment. They had to be willing to work harder than they had back home and do jobs that others were unwilling to do; these jobs were often dangerous and garnered low pay.<sup>9</sup> The Irish immigrants had to take any work opportunity they could or they would be unable to provide food and other basic necessities of life. If they were unwilling to work hard, they once again would find themselves starving. Americans already had a poor view of the Irish as they arrived on their shores.<sup>10</sup> Most Irishmen took jobs in mills, digging canals, mines, or constructing railroads and buildings while many Irishwomen took jobs as servants.<sup>11</sup> They had no choice but to work hard, despite difficulties. It was an embarrassing life, as they were often treated nearly as badly as slaves, and mainstream American viewed the Irish immigrants as stupid, unskilled, and lazy. Though living conditions frequently were

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<sup>7</sup> Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, 147.

<sup>8</sup> Michael T. Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 17.

<sup>9</sup> Kinealy, *A Death Dealing Famine*, 2

<sup>10</sup> Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 134.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



unbearable, as a group they did not give up or go back to Ireland, as these were not seen as viable options.<sup>12</sup>

The Irish survived this dangerous journey to the new world would make a significant impact on the young nation. Upon their arrival, the Irish faced both discrimination and religious persecution. The Irish were discouraged from jobs and pressured to keep their religious beliefs to themselves. This research project will explore how social class and living conditions evolved to play an important role in sports. It will examine the rise of Irish athletes out of obscurity into the limelight. This study focuses on the role the Irish played in making sports the path out of poverty for their countrymen, often by financially supporting and backing athletes, and, especially, fighters.

The three figures under scrutiny in this project are John L. Sullivan, who became the first modern sports celebrity and the last bare knuckle champion under the London Prize Rules; Gentleman Jim Corbett, who modernized and professionalized the sport of boxing while beating Sullivan along the way; and Michael “King” Kelly, the first national star of major league baseball and an innovator in his sport.

This dissertation will focus on Sullivan’s audacious accomplishments in boxing, his rise to celebrity status and how he redefined a sport that was considered by most to be dangerous and a pastime of the lower classes. It will explore his fighting techniques, training methods that forever altered the sport, and the impact of his being openly Irish. For example, Sullivan always carried an Irish flag.

Corbett is considered the first true boxer, rather than merely a fighter, and developed many boxing techniques, both inside and outside of the ring that further

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<sup>12</sup> Lawrence McCaffrey, *Textures of Irish America* (Syracuse: University of Syracuse Press, 1998).



professionalized the sport. While not as openly Irish as Sullivan, he furthered the reputation of the Irish as fighters, champions and sports heroes. These two boxers, as much as any, helped define their sport.

King became as big a star on the baseball field as Sullivan and Corbett were in the boxing ring, and was as equally innovative, if not more so. Not only were the rights to his playing skills bought at incredibly high amounts for the time, but his innovations more than any other single person since Alexander Cartwright first wrote down the rules of baseball and created the sport as we know it today.<sup>13</sup> His skills at baseball and infectious charm turned him into the game's first hero and a symbol of what it meant to be a celebrity in America in the 1880s and 1890s. A Hall of Famer and a two-time batting champion, Kelly's greatest contributions were in the popularity he brought to the game, due both to his personality on and off the field and his imaginative innovations. Taken together, they resulted in the twentieth century's first fans, as the game began to mature from the rough and tumble times of Kelly and his cohorts.<sup>14</sup>

There is little debate that these three men were major figures in their sport and in society at large. What is not fully appreciated, however, is the role their Irishness played in their achievements, and the impact of their successes on the stereotypes of the Irish and their acceptance by and assimilation into American society.

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<sup>13</sup> Jay Martin, *Live All You Can: Alexander Joy Cartwright and the Invention of Modern Baseball* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide: The Wild Life and Times of Mike King Kelly, Baseball's First Superstar* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1999).



## Survey of Existing Discussions

The dissertation will explore how a single ethnic group made an enormous impact on sports over a thirty year period, and will focus on what three different Irishmen, fighters John L. Sullivan and James Corbett and baseball player Michael Joseph Kelly, accomplished for their sports. Patrick Redmond's new work on the role of the Irish in sport in America and how it differs from this study has already been discussed. This will not be a biography of the athletes but rather will be focused on the key aspects of their lives that helped shape the growth and development of boxing and baseball. The sources for this study will include John L. Sullivan's autobiography, the current leading biographies of the three figures, along with other secondary materials such as the works of Michael T. Isenberg, Armond Fields, Jeffrey T. Sammons, Ralph Wilcox, Christine Kinealy, and Hasia Diner, as well as many others. The research will center on the athletes' celebrity status, how they helped define their respective sports, and their impact on the Irish—and non-Irish—in America. Of course, in order to provide the historical context for the influence of sport in the transformation of Irish American identity, historical analyses will be used. Regarding the Great Irish Famine, leading texts will include Christine Kinealy's books *This Great Calamity* and *A Death Dealing Famine*.

Several full-length works have been written about (and by) John L. Sullivan, and these will be used to elucidate his contributions to his sport and to the Irish experience in America. Michael T. Isenberg's *John L. Sullivan and His America* focuses on American society of the nineteenth century and the lure of the ring that Sullivan created. It also discusses Sullivan's rise to the top in a male-dominated society. John L. Sullivan's



autobiography, *Reminiscences of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Gladiator*, was written in 1892 and discusses the trials and tribulations of his career. Adam Pollack's *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion* focuses mainly on his boxing career and the major matches he fought. Other works such as Jeffrey T. Sammons's *Beyond the Ring: Role of Boxing in America* will be used for the historical overview of boxing.

Gentleman Jim Corbett is not nearly as well documented as Sullivan, with only a few biographies from smaller publishing houses, such as *Gentleman Jim* by Patrick Myer from Robson Books in 1999 and *Gentleman Jim: The Story of James J. Corbett* by Nat Fleischer from Literary Licensing in 2011. Both books are relatively short, and demonstrate the paucity of materials available about Corbett. Most mentions of Corbett are usually in books and articles about boxing's greatest fights, fighters and upsets, mainly due to his "upset" of Sullivan in 1892. While not truly an upset, it is often cited as the most important boxing match in history as it signaled mainstream acceptance of boxing as a legitimate sport and helped it leave its criminal reputation behind.<sup>15</sup>

For Michael Kelly, there is only one significant biography: Marty Appel's *Slide, Kelly, Slide: The Wild Life and Times of Mike King Kelly, Baseball's First Superstar*, published in 1999. Another work, Howard Rosenberg's *The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly: U.S. Team Sport's First Media Sensation and Baseball's Original Casey at the Bat*, details the connections between baseball and the theater during the first 50 years of professional baseball, focusing particularly on Kelly. David Fleitz' book, *The Irish in Baseball: An Early History*, is on the Irish in the early years when professional baseball

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<sup>15</sup> James John Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd: The True Tale of the Rise and Fall of a Champion* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1926); Elliot J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (London: Ithaca University Press, 1986).



took root in America in the 1860s, the same years during which the sons of the first wave Irish Famine refugees began to reach adulthood. The Irish quickly demonstrated a special affinity for baseball and this survey is helpful in cataloging the enormous contribution of the Irish to the American pastime and the ways in which Irish immigrants and baseball came of age together, including Mike Kelly.

### **Methodology**

This research follows the case study methodology. Case study research excels at bringing us to an understanding of a complex issue or object and can extend experience or add strength to what is already known through previous research. Case studies emphasize detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events, figures, or conditions and their relationships. Researchers have used the case study research method for many years across a variety of disciplines. Social scientists and historians, in particular, have made wide use of this qualitative research method to examine contemporary and historical real-life situations and provide the basis for the application of ideas and extension of methods. Researcher Robert K. Yin defines the case study research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.<sup>16</sup>

This case study will include some discussion of the general ascent of Irish athletes and their contributions to sports in America, but, as a whole, it will focus on how the

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<sup>16</sup> R. K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1984), 23



Great Irish Famine immigration laid the foundation for the true developmental explosion of sports of America. It will touch on all aspects of sports, including how they served the Irish, training practices, social class issues, finances, and how the three athletes improved their sport through their notoriety. A single chapter is devoted to each athlete and his influence on the sport and on the Irish. The research will focus mainly on these athletes and how their cult of celebrity, their Irishness, and their innovations affected American culture.

This research effort will use a variety of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources will include autobiographies, journal articles, and newspaper articles, summarizing the boxing matches. The secondary resources will include the books and articles noted above on each athlete. While major figures during their lifetimes, sport has only recently become the subject of serious scholarly study, so many of the sources available are written for a more general audience, and don't always contain the proper citation and bibliography necessary for scholarly research. Therefore, this study attempts to be a modest addition to the scholarship that is being produced on sport in America and its significant effects on nearly all aspects of society.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For example, see Jay Coakley, *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), now in its 10<sup>th</sup> edition and D. Stanley Eitzen, *Sport in Contemporary Society: An Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Also see Michael Lewis, *Moneyball* (New York: Norton, 2004); Stefan Szymanski and Andrew Zimbalist, *National Pastime* (London: Brookings, 2005); and Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski, *Soccernomics* (New York: Nation Books, 2009).



## **Chapter Outline**

Chapter 1 is the introduction to the topic, reviewing the thesis, methodology and organization of the study.

Chapter 2 will focus on the Great Irish Famine and British relief programs that pushed the Irish to leave their homes. It will recount briefly the cause of the conditions of pre-Famine Ireland, the causes of the Famine, the British response, and the need for emigration by millions of Irish, along with the treacherous voyage to America and the harsh living conditions they encountered after they arrived. The chapter will focus on the Irish and the uphill battle they faced to prove themselves in a new world. The Irish were labeled as the lowest of the social classes along with African-Americans, and faced religious persecution for being Catholic. It will explain how sports had an effect on the Irish, providing some of the Irish with a way out of poverty and degradation.

Chapter 3 will focus on boxing in England and how it eventually traveled to Ireland. It will explain its development in Ireland, in the back street alleys and pubs. The chapter will then examine boxing in America, explaining the origins of the London Prize Rules, then move to the Queensberry Rules and how they differed from the London Prize Rules. Also, it will examine the life of John L. Sullivan, the man who truly made boxing what it has been for more than 130 years. The chapter will look at the key points in his early life that helped shape him into a boxer, and his early career and how he entered the sport. Sullivan was supposed to be a sparring partner for the Heavyweight Champion, Joe Goss, but Sullivan put on a dominating performance that launched his career. The chapter will present his famous fights: how they affected boxing and made it a national



pastime. In addition, it will show what he did to change the sport, including his training regime and preparations for a fight and his fighting tactics. Most importantly, this chapter will explore how his oversized personality, including his open display of Irishness, made the sport larger than life in America. The section will conclude with Sullivan at the end of his career and a review of his accomplishments.

Chapter 4 will focus on James L. Corbett and his contributions to the sport of boxing. Corbett's parents escaped the Famine and came to America. This chapter will focus on Corbett's life and achievements as a boxer, as well as what he did for the Irish. Corbett was the first heavyweight champion under the Queensberry Rules and considered to be the father of modern day scientific boxing.<sup>18</sup> The chapter will begin with his early life and his transition into boxing, as well as the important bouts that helped shaped his career. The main focus of the chapter will be on Corbett's training and the bouts that helped him get the opportunity to enter the first title fight with gloves against John L. Sullivan. Corbett revolutionized the sport of boxing, making it an art form. He was a technical fighter, who trained very hard, taking a crude sport and making it respectable amongst the general population. The chapter will conclude with the end of Corbett's career and his impact on American society in general, and on Irish America in particular.

Chapter 4 will switch the focus to "America's pastime," baseball, and focus on the life and contributions of Michael "King" Kelly.<sup>19</sup> Kelly was America's first baseball

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<sup>18</sup> Mike Silver, *The Arc of Boxing: The Rise and Decline of the Sweet Science* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), Kindle.

<sup>19</sup> To start the 1910 season, President William Howard Taft threw out the ceremonial "first pitch" to open the season for the Washington Senators game with the Philadelphia Athletics. Vice-president James Sherman and other national political leaders were also in attendance at the game. Many historians recognize this unprecedented event as marking baseball as the "official" national pastime.



superstar, who redefined the game of baseball, helping it evolve into what it is today. His motivation and dedication were pivotal to the development of baseball. King Kelly was the greatest player of his time, because he helped devise and introduce such plays as the hit and run, the hook slide, the catcher backing up first base, using signals for the pitcher, and strategies for running the bases. Kelly was a ball player with a larger-than-life persona who became baseball's first media sensation.

Chapter 6 will review the results of the study and present my closing thoughts on all three athletes and their contributions to their sports, as well as to the Irish experience in America.



## Chapter 2

### THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE

#### **The Beginning**

On the eve of the Great Famine in the early 1840s, Ireland was home to 8.3 million people, the biggest population that Ireland had seen.<sup>20</sup> The boom in the population partly was due to a healthy diet that was based on the potato. The potato, originally from South America, was brought to Europe by the Spanish Conquistadors in the early sixteenth century. Sir Walter Raleigh then brought it to Ireland during the reign of Elizabeth I.<sup>21</sup> The potato was successful because of its ability to grow in Ireland's damp, but temperate climate. Another favorable characteristic of the potato was its ability to grow between rocks and in less spacious plots of land. This would enable the cottier or peasant to get the most usage of his land. He would be able to grow potatoes in poor quality, boggy or rocky soil in hilly areas.<sup>22</sup> The potato eventually became the staple crop of Ireland, and more than two-thirds of the Irish people were dependent on agriculture for their livelihood in 1841.<sup>23</sup>

As the potato became the dominant crop, it was able to feed the poorest, which led to a surge in population growth. The potato provided a nutritional diet on which the people could live. If served with milk, the potato diet provided a healthy amount of

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<sup>20</sup> R.B. McDowell, *The Great Famine*, ed. Dudley Edwards and Desmond Williams (Dublin, The Lilliput Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Kinealy, *A Death Dealing Famine*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>23</sup> T.W. Moody and F.X. Martin, *The Course of Irish History* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967), 220.



protein, carbohydrates, energy, minerals, and are full of vitamins.<sup>24</sup> The average person ate ten to fourteen pounds of potatoes a day, and pigs and other farm animals also ate potatoes.<sup>25</sup> This hardy source of nutrition was an opportunity for the lower classes to survive.

The potato created a viable but unstable society; young couples would now marry earlier and have more children. Parents had less worry about how they would provide for their children; farmers generally divided portions of their land and rented a conacre, a small plot of potato ground.<sup>26</sup> It was a process of subletting, but it worked to provide a subsistence existence. Despite their poverty the potato provided the Irish a joyful, happy life. There is no doubt that the potato had a tremendous effect on society, agriculture, population, and the culture in Ireland; however, the potato can be susceptible to disease, and the entire fragile structure of society rested on this one crop.

### **The Potato Blight**

*Phytophthora infestans* is an oomycete that causes the irresistible fungus known as potato blight.<sup>27</sup> The spores of this disease can survive the duration of the winter in the soil, particularly those that are left in the ground after the previous year's harvest, in cull piles, soil, or infected plants. The disease spreads rapidly in warm and wet conditions and

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<sup>24</sup> Amy Hackney Blackwell and Ryan Hackney, *The Everything Irish History and Heritage Book* (Avon: Adams Media, 2004), 146.

<sup>25</sup> Kinealy, *A Death Dealing Famine*, 49.

<sup>26</sup> John Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2012), 21.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth M. Harris, *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 2.



has the ability to destroy entire crops. Spores develop on the leaves, spreading through the crop onto the stem and leaves which eventually makes their way to the potato.

Farmers tried to dig dry pits to prevent the spread of the disease, but the spores traveled through the air and soaked into the ground and rain.<sup>28</sup>

It is believed that the blight traveled to Europe on cargo ships from South America carrying guano, a new fertilizer,<sup>29</sup> reaching countries in Europe such as England, Scotland, Belgium, Holland, and Ireland.<sup>30</sup> The blight arrived in Ireland in September, 1845, destroying one-third of the potato crop. This was not the first time that Ireland had seen diseases affect the potato crop. Other diseases, such as taint and dry rot, had annihilated crops in the past, but nothing to the magnitude of how the blight would forever alter life and the population of Ireland.<sup>31</sup> There was no way to stop the blight, as they did not have an antidote.

The destruction of the 1845 potato crop was only the beginning of what was to come. Nobody could perceive what the future had in store for Ireland. In the summer of 1846, there was a complete failure of the potato crop.<sup>32</sup> The blight would continue to linger on for another three years, creating destruction and mayhem for the people of Ireland. The blight decimated the population as the natural increase from 1841 to

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<sup>28</sup> Blackwell and Hackney, *The Everything Irish History and Heritage Book*, 147.

<sup>29</sup> Mary E. Daly, *The Famine In Ireland* (Co Louth: Dundalgan Press, 1986), 53.

<sup>30</sup> Kinealy, *A Death Dealing Famine*, 52.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Killeen, *Ireland: Land, People, History* (London: Running Press, 2012), 187.



1851 should have resulted in a population over nine million; instead, the actual population at 1851 was six and a half million.<sup>33</sup>

### Conditions

The arrival of the blight destroyed not only the potato crop but also many of the people who depended on it. The laboring population was dependent on a potato diet.<sup>34</sup> Families disappeared without a trace, with men, women, and children all suffering and having tragic ends to their lives, with the young and the old mostly affected by the conditions. Approximately one to one and a half million people died during the Famine.<sup>35</sup>

Smallpox, dysentery, and “famine” fever were the major contributors to the death toll; bronchitis, diarrhea, influenza, measles, and tuberculosis, although not usually as harmful, could also cause death.<sup>36</sup> Disease was rampant throughout the years of the famine. As people rushed to the soup kitchens or workhouses, it became easier for diseases to spread through the population, and there was not enough medicine or relief to help cure the population.

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas P. O’Neil, *The Great Famine*, edited by Dudley Edwards and Desmond Williams (Dublin, The Lilliput Press, 1994), 255.

<sup>34</sup> R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972* (New York, Penguin Press, 1988), 320.

<sup>35</sup> Paul F. State, *A Brief History of Ireland* (New York, Checkmark Books, 2009), 189.

<sup>36</sup> Kinealy, *A Death Dealing Famine*, 93.



## Reasons to Leave

The United Kingdom was to be a unification of the countries in the British Isles. This goal of unification was far from being met, in reality. The British looked down upon the Irish. The Irish were more of a colony of the British Government, and they were expected to be British in every aspect of life. The British took a laissez-faire approach to the problem in Ireland, which advocated a hands-off policy in the belief that all problems would eventually be solved on their own through “natural means.”<sup>37</sup>

The British felt no urgency to rush to the aid of the Irish, having been down this road before. Ireland had experienced fourteen partial or complete blights between 1816 and 1842.<sup>38</sup> As in the past, the British felt the Irish were greatly exaggerating the loss of the crops and the condition of their people. British Prime Minister Robert Peel went as far as to send a scientific commission to Ireland to view the status of the blight. To their dismay, they were greatly surprised by what they discovered. Eventually newspaper reports and illustrations by such artists as James Mahony began to make their way to the British population.<sup>39</sup> These illustrations would show the British just how grim the situation had become since the arrival of the blight. Britain knew Ireland was in trouble and needed relief, but would the help they were willing to provide be enough?

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<sup>37</sup> “The History Place: The Irish Famine,”  
<http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/famine/begins.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> State, *A Brief History of Ireland*, 185.

<sup>39</sup> Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, 131.



## Corn Laws

Ireland was not the only country to feel the effects of the blight. Many countries in Europe were also suffering food shortages. This created a difficult food market, so that although there was food available on the island, Britain was more concerned with supplying themselves with food and protecting their market, as Ireland was their main supplier of corn. This protection was provided by the Corn Laws.<sup>40</sup>

The Corn Laws were established in the early 1800s to protect the farmers' profits from the importation of foreign corn to Britain.<sup>41</sup> All imported corn and wheat already had a set price, which was based on Britain's rate. This would allow British farmers to charge the same prices for their food, eliminating any competition, which kept the prices high in the United Kingdom. Massive amounts of food were being exported from Ireland to Britain to keep their nation flourishing.<sup>42</sup>

Sir Robert Peel wanted to repeal the Corn Laws, which were an issue for many years. This would allow for free trade within the United Kingdom. It would have allowed prices to rise and allowed the people of Ireland to get a good price for their crops. This issue eventually cost Peel his job, as he resigned from his position as Prime Minister in June of 1846, after the Corn Laws were finally repealed that month.<sup>43</sup> Peel's effort at relief had been successful enough to prevent excess mortality. His replacement

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<sup>40</sup> Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger* (London, Penguin Books, 1991), 42.

<sup>41</sup> Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1994), 8.

<sup>42</sup> Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, 79.

<sup>43</sup> Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 104.



as Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, had very different views towards Ireland and relief programs, and the Irish would suffer from them.

### **Indian Corn**

Prior to his resignation, and recognizing that disaster was imminent, Robert Peel created a temporary relief commission in November 1845.<sup>44</sup> Peel's first order of business was to buy Indian corn from the United States, secretly ordering 100,000 pounds of corn. This supply of corn was enough to feed one million people for forty days.<sup>45</sup>

For several reasons, Indian corn was not the best choice to feed the starving Irish population. Indian corn was difficult to grind, since there were few mills to grind it. Also, it lacked vitamin C.<sup>46</sup> The Irish people were never informed properly how to prepare or cook the corn, so they ate it raw or half-cooked, and many people fell ill from incorrectly preparing it.<sup>47</sup> The Irish would consume this corn because they were starving, but their bodies were unable to break down the kernels and it subsequently cut up their stomachs and intestinal lining. The corn would then cause inflammation in the body, leading to dysentery.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> O'Neil, *The Great Famine*, 213.

<sup>45</sup> Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 57.

<sup>46</sup> Blackwell and Hackney, *The Everything Irish History and Heritage Book*, 152.

<sup>47</sup> Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, 64.

<sup>48</sup> Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 224.



Since corn is high in fiber and sugars and lacks vitamin C, it is not the most nutritional food.<sup>49</sup> The British were barely even giving these starving people a chance to survive. Obviously, the Irish were desperate for any food and would eat anything in front of them, but their increasingly frail bodies could not process the food, causing more harm than good. This episode is a good example of how British relief efforts, whether well intentioned or not, all went awry during the Famine.

### **Public Works**

The Public Works program was created in 1846-47, using methods similar to relief programs of the past based on previous crop failures and shortages, with a goal of keeping ordinary relief and famine relief distinct. The main purpose of the works program being to provide employment and wages, thereby stimulating the economy.<sup>50</sup> The poor would be working, repairing and building new roads, digging land drainages, and constructing new piers.<sup>51</sup> The British did not fund this program but rather lent the money which was to be repaid by local and imperial taxation.<sup>52</sup>

Wages were based on the average exchange between laborers and farmers which was not easy to determine, so the average rate was 10d. per day. An exceptional worker could earn up to 1s 6d and a weak laborer could earn as little as 8d. per day.<sup>53</sup> The British

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<sup>49</sup> Blackwell and Hackney, *The Everything Irish History and Heritage Book*, 152.

<sup>50</sup> Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, 63.

<sup>51</sup> Blackwell and Hackney, *The Everything Irish History and Heritage Book*, 154.

<sup>52</sup> Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, 91.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.



did create jobs and opportunity for the Irish to work and get some food; however, overall, it failed miserably. The laborers earned wages for their work, but was not nearly enough to provide sufficient food for survival. The price of Indian corn and other food continued to rise due to supply and demand, and laborers' wages were not enough to cover the expenses of an entire family. Another problem the workers faced was collecting their wages. There were not enough funds in the relief program to pay out wages to all employees. A week's wages were barely enough to buy half a week's food supply for a family of any size.<sup>54</sup> The starving people were worse off than they were before because of the physical toll of working outdoors in harsh weather.

Poor laborers fought to stay healthy. They were expected to repair and build roads, dig holes, repair railroads, and work on piers with scant amounts of food. The starving were weak, hungry, beaten down and susceptible to disease, yet expected to perform manual labor jobs. An active person should consume anywhere from 2,000 to 3,000 calories a day, and the workers were not consuming nearly this much. It was virtually impossible for workers to sustain these harsh working conditions, and men, women, and children would perish on the job.<sup>55</sup> Workers were unable to work a full day and lost wages.

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<sup>54</sup> Blackwell and Hackney, *The Everything Irish History and Heritage Book*, 154.

<sup>55</sup> Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 172.



### Soup for the poor or poor soup

As 1847 wore on, there was no end in sight to the blight or the Famine. Starvation and mortality rates were rapidly escalating. The British recognized that the public works were failing, and new relief needed to be implemented quickly.<sup>56</sup> For the first time, the British were going to allow outdoor relief and provide food regardless of their fear that the poor would become more dependent upon the British. The new relief program ran under the Temporary Relief Act, better known as the Soup Kitchen Act.<sup>57</sup> This, again, was to be a temporary act until the next potato harvest in September. The new act was under the leadership of Lord John Russell and his “To keep the people alive” motto.<sup>58</sup>

Under this new act, Parliament was able to extend the Poor Laws, allowing the Irish more time to receive relief. Similar to the Public Works, this act was also to be funded through taxation, but only through local taxes which would be provided by Irish landowners and merchants. The plan was to immediately end the Public Works and begin to provide food for the starving. The act was introduced to the House of Commons on January 25 and became law on February 26, 1847.<sup>59</sup>

The Soup Kitchen Act was passed in February, but all the soup kitchens were not fully operational until mid-June.<sup>60</sup> The delays were caused by committees determining who received relief. The problem was that the Public Works were immediately ended,

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<sup>56</sup> Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, 98.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> “The History Place: The Irish Famine.”

<sup>59</sup> O’Neil, *The Great Famine*, 237.

<sup>60</sup> Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, 98.



yet the soup kitchens were not yet fully up and running; this left a gap in time during which there was no relief at all for the poor. The British could have waited until the process of implementing the soup kitchens was completed before abolishing all other forms of relief. Soup was the food of choice because it was the least expensive to make. On the recommendation of Alexis Soyer, a French chef, soup supposedly would be nutritional yet inexpensive, without much meat. The soup kitchens required large numbers of people to wait together in close quarters in order to receive food, and diseases spread more easily in these groups of weakened people who were in close proximity to one another. The British had again a relief policy in place, but did it do any good? Starvation mortality rates went down, but disease mortality rates were on the rise.<sup>61</sup>

### Workhouses

The workhouses were originally created in Ireland under the Poor Laws in 1838.<sup>62</sup> Modeled on the British workhouse system, their purpose was to provide shelter and employment for the poor Irish but not to be the primary source of relief. The workhouses were not built for a large scale famine, such as the one through which Ireland was suffering, but rather to aid the poor. The Poor Law was recommended by Poor Law Commissioner, George Nicholls, after two short visits to Ireland, which helped him to recognize that 2.5 million Irish lived in poverty.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> O'Neil, *The Great Famine*, 244.

<sup>62</sup> Blackwell and Hackney, *The Everything Irish History and Heritage Book*, 153.

<sup>63</sup> Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 39.



As the blight continued through 1847, failed relief efforts and debt from taxation were mounting, and the Irish were unable to pay their bills. The responsibility fell on the locals. The poor were unable to pay rent for their sub-letted land; for many, this meant that their leases ran out and were not renewed by the landowner.<sup>64</sup> The poor would then be evicted from their homes with no place to go except the workhouses.

The workhouses became overcrowded with poor Irish. The British feared the Irish would abuse the system and use the workhouse to avoid work, so supporters thought they could solve the problem by making the living conditions in workhouses unpleasant.<sup>65</sup> The living conditions in the workhouses were extremely unhealthy. Families were separated by gender and age. The workhouses were already damp and unsanitary; now, they were overcrowded. The conditions got even worse, with as many as three to four people in a single bed. By 1847, the workhouses were described as “crowded and unhealthy.”<sup>66</sup>

Similar to the soup kitchens, the workhouses became a breeding ground for germs. Many who entered did not exit and were buried within the confines of the property. There were 130 workhouses within Ireland; yet, most poor were still rejected due to overcrowding.<sup>67</sup> The British could have provided better living accommodations, medical assistance, housing, and food, but the British Government chose not to do that.

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<sup>64</sup> Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 63.

<sup>65</sup> Blackwell and Hackney, *The Everything Irish History and Heritage Book*, 153.

<sup>66</sup> Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 131.

<sup>67</sup> Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 84.



## Emigration

The Irish Famine from 1845 to 1852 is one of the greatest tragedies ever endured by the human race. Approximately one to one and a half million people perished. Many of those who did not perish chose to leave. They left everything they had ever known and grown to love and appreciate behind; almost none ever returned. Ireland was part of the United Kingdom; however, the British treated it like a colony. The British looked down upon the Irish for their dependence on the potato, but it was the British who created that dependence. There was food on the island, but the British were more concerned about their own well-being and let the Irish poor suffer greatly. The British had exiled the Irish from their motherland, forever altering the population of Ireland and the future of America.

From 1845 through the early 1850s, 1.8 million Irish immigrants left for North America.<sup>68</sup> This seemed their only hope to escape destruction and death. Many of those who chose to leave for America endured horrific conditions on the Atlantic Ocean, with so many dying before even setting foot on American soil.<sup>69</sup>

Upon their arrival, living conditions were not much better than they had been in Ireland. The Irish were not accepted by their fellow Americans, who often viewed and treated them just as poorly as had the British.<sup>70</sup> The Irish were able to survive and flourish due to their past experiences with the famine and their journey across the Atlantic Ocean. It was not easy for either an Irish female or male to find work in

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<sup>68</sup> Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 280.

<sup>69</sup> Blackwell and Hackney, *The Everything Irish History and Heritage Book*, 271.

<sup>70</sup> Hasia Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 41.



America, but they did as they had to do to assimilate into their new world with their Irish customs and traditions. Many women took jobs as domestic servants, while males took on hard manual labor, working on the railroad or canals.<sup>71</sup> The work force did not offer many opportunities to Irish Americans, as they were perceived to be on the same level as African Americans.

As the Irish arrived they would settle and have their own families. The Sullivans, Corbetts, and Kellys would have children who would make an impact on American sports history. These athletes had great effects on their sports and American culture. The Irish redefined these sports. Without mass Irish immigration, sports in America may have never evolved into what they became. The Great Famine was a tragedy for the people of Ireland, but those who left forever changed the landscape of America in athletics.

The Irish helped pave the way for many athletes of the future and helped develop professional sports into their current form. The great John L. Sullivan brought boxing into the mainstream, becoming the first sports celebrity; the quick and nimble James “Gentleman” Corbett redefined the boxing with his scientific training and professionalized approach to the sport. Mike “King of Ballplayers” Kelly, the first baseball celebrity of our nation, helped baseball become the national pastime of America, and James “Orator” O’Rourke had the first hit in the National League and helped develop the first players union. The Irish immigrants looking to escape the Famine came to America, forever leaving their mark on our culture.

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<sup>71</sup> Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America*, 70.



## Chapter 3

## JOHN L. SULLIVAN

John L. Sullivan was a legend even in his own time: a fighter, producer, politician, and celebrity, eventually transforming into a publicly-acclaimed national figure in America. Sullivan was a superior boxer who worked his way up the ranks, ultimately becoming the heavyweight champion under the London Prize Rules and earning over a million dollars throughout his career. In some ways he was a stereotypical Irishman with a love of alcohol and tough as nails persona; however, his impact on boxing and Irish American culture was pivotal. Sullivan embodied and embraced the negative stereotypes of the Irish in America, using them to make a name for himself. In doing so, Sullivan reinvigorated the sport of boxing and gave Irish Americans a source of ethnic pride.

**The State of Boxing in the 1800s**

The term “boxing” is believed to arise from the action of clenching the fist, the folding of fingers and thumb into a box.<sup>72</sup> In the mid–nineteenth century, boxing was a dying sport. The public at all levels stopped showing interest in the sport due to the degenerate people involved in it. It was viewed as a violent and barbaric sport, and the public did not want to see men beat each other over and over again.<sup>73</sup> Most bare-knuckle prize

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<sup>72</sup> Peter Arnold, *History of Boxing* (Edison: Chartwell, 1985), 6.

<sup>73</sup> Rex Lardner, *The Legendary Champions* (New York, American Heritage Press, 1972), 13.



fights took place in out-of-the-way places, such as on barges, in alleys, in back rooms of saloons, or in any other shady areas that allowed for a good brawl.<sup>74</sup> As the sport made its way across the Atlantic, not all rules and regulations followed. Boxing in America did not strictly follow the rules of boxing in England. Boxing was illegal in most of the United States due to the lack of rules and gloves.<sup>75</sup>

Each fighter would arrive at the designated area, generally at nighttime. Spectators would soon surround the fighters, screaming and yelling as they were clearly excited to see two grown men pummel each other. The fighters would take their places center-stage and get ready for battle. The bell would sound, and the two men would charge each other as the crowd would go into a frenzy. The fighters would swing at each other's face, chest, and stomach, doing whatever necessary to destroy their opponent. There would be broken noses, black eyes, missing teeth, and much blood, as fighters would be dazed, confused, and swollen, having gone to battle with each other. There were no referees to stop the fight if it became too violent. The sport became quite corrupt and had developed into an underworld full of crime, alcohol, blood, gambling, corruption, and utter chaos.<sup>76</sup> Boxing in the United States became a social underworld consisting of workingmen, saloon keepers, gamblers, criminals, and prostitutes.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> James B. Roberts and Alexander G. Skutt, *The Boxing Register: International Boxing Hall of Fame Official Record Book*, (Ithaca, McBooks Press, 2006), 13.

<sup>75</sup> Adam J. Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion* (London: McFarland and Co., 2006), 9.

<sup>76</sup> Adam J. Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 9.

<sup>77</sup> Michael T. Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 74.



### Rules: London Rules vs. Queensberry Rules

Bare-knuckle champion Jack Broughton is credited as “the father of boxing” for writing in 1743 the first rules and regulations of the sport. Broughton beat George Stevenson so badly in a thirty-five minute fight that Stevenson died a few days later.<sup>78</sup> Experiencing extreme guilt afterwards, Broughton decided that boxing must have implemented guidelines for safety. These guidelines consisted of twenty-nine new rules that included, but were not limited to, the size of the ring, length of a round, eye gouging, hitting a downed fighter, hitting or grabbing below the waist, and kicking; however, the rules were rarely enforced and fighters just fought, beating each as they pleased without any concern for legality or the safety of each fighter.<sup>79</sup> Broughton even invented boxing gloves or muffers, which were only used during exhibitions.<sup>80</sup> Broughton’s new guidelines lasted for nearly a century until the arrival of the London Prize Rules that added rules to provide increased safety for the fighters.<sup>81</sup> With boxing’s newfound structure, it became an integral part of popular culture in Britain, Ireland, and eventually America. The Irish journeyed across the Atlantic to America, bringing not only their culture and customs, but also the revamped sport of boxing and their ability to fight.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> James B. Roberts and Alexander G. Skutt, *The Boxing Register* (New York, McBooks Press, 1999), 18.

<sup>79</sup> Elliot J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America* (London, Cornell University Press, 2012), Kindle.

<sup>80</sup> Roberts and Skutt, *The Boxing Register: International Boxing Hall of Fame Official Record Book*, 18.

<sup>81</sup> Adam J. Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 5.

<sup>82</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 60.



The London Prize Rules were first introduced in 1838 and were a more detailed extension of Broughton's rules. There were still, however, bare-knuckle fights. Fights required a ring that was twenty-four feet long and was bounded by ropes. This would give the fighters a more contained area in which to fight. A toe line, or scratch line, was added into the center of the ring. A boxer had eight seconds to report to the scratch line without any assistance or help. The purpose of this line was to make fighters prove they were still able to fight under their own power. Fighters now had thirty seconds between rounds and an extra eight to report to the scratch line. Head butting, hitting behind the head, kidney punches, and falling on an opponent all became fouls. Fights were still extremely violent; life in the prize ring was hard and dangerous, and sometimes cut short by serious injury.<sup>83</sup>

In 1865 John Graham Chambers wrote a new set of rules, referred to as the Marquess of Queensberry Rules, that was published two years later in London.<sup>84</sup> The set of rules received its name from John Douglas, 9<sup>th</sup> Marquess of Queensberry, who endorsed the new rules.<sup>85</sup> The Queensberry rules became the foundation for modern day boxing. These rules were the first to include the use of boxing gloves and eliminated wrestling moves or hugging the other fighter.<sup>86</sup> Each round now had a three-minute duration with one minute in between rounds. Fighters who were knocked down now had a ten-second standing count in which the fighter was required to get up under his own power. If a fighter hung on the ropes, he would be considered down. Referees had the authority to stop a fight if a fighter was no longer able to stand on his own. A fighter

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<sup>83</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 75.

<sup>84</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.

<sup>85</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 12.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.



could not hit another fighter while he was down and each had to wear appropriate-sized gloves of the best make and model.<sup>87</sup>

Most of the new rules of boxing were intended to clean up the sport and make it more appealing to the public. Much of the public did accept boxing as a more acceptable sport under these new rules, and the sport was now considered legal in the United States.<sup>88</sup> The use of gloves protected a fighter's hands and gave him a cushion as he punched his opponent. Some felt this gave a fighter the authority to hit harder, making the sport more aggressive. Fights under the Queensberry Rules were now much faster than bare knuckle fights, due to timed rounds. Fighting with no gloves was risky, as hands, knuckles, and fingers were easily injured.<sup>89</sup>

Fighting with gloves under the Queensberry Rules was legal as long as it was an exhibition and no wages were placed on the outcome of the fight.<sup>90</sup> Bare-knuckle fighting was a punishable crime for both fighters; they risked lengthy prison sentences and could be charged with murder if an opponent died.<sup>91</sup> After the imposition of these new rules, seemingly out of nowhere, John L. Sullivan burst into the pugilistic world, altering the boxing world as no other man in history had previously done. Sullivan single handedly breathed new life into the dying world of prize fighting.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 5.

<sup>88</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 74.

<sup>89</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.

<sup>90</sup> Christopher Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero* (Guilford: Lyons Press, 2013), Kindle.

<sup>91</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 7.

<sup>92</sup> Roberts and Skutt, *The Boxing Register*, 44.



### The Beginnings of John L. Sullivan

John L. Sullivan was born in Roxbury, Massachusetts on October 15, 1858 to Irish immigrants Michael Sullivan and Catherine Kelly. Sullivan's father, Michael, was from the town of Tralee, in County Kerry, Ireland while his mother came from the town of Athlone, in County Roscommon.<sup>93</sup> His paternal grandfather was a noted Celtic wrestler and champion performer with shillelagh.<sup>94</sup> Michael Sullivan and Catherine Kelly fled Ireland to escape the horrific conditions of the Great Potato Famine. Leaving the homeland was the only option. Michael Sullivan, at the age of 25, traveled alone from Ireland around 1850.<sup>95</sup> Catherine Kelly, with her family, left Ireland in 1853 after losing their land due to the effects of the blight.<sup>96</sup> Both Sullivan and the Kelly family made the treacherous journey across the Atlantic Ocean, arriving traumatized and demoralized. They settled in the Boston area with other Irish Americans. Upon their arrival in America they quickly encountered the same problems of hardship, poverty, and racial and religious discrimination.

Michael Sullivan and Catherine Kelly met in 1855 and were married a year later on November 6, 1856, eventually having two sons and one daughter.<sup>97</sup> Michael Sullivan worked as a laborer, performing jobs as they came available; Catherine Sullivan worked as a domestic servant. These were the only types of opportunities offered to the Irish.

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<sup>93</sup> John L. Sullivan, *Reminiscences of a 19th Century Gladiator* (Texas : Prometheus Press, 2008), 11.

<sup>94</sup> Nat Fleischer and Don Rafael, *An Illustrated History of Boxing* (New York: Citadel Press, 1959), 57.

<sup>95</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 44.

<sup>96</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 18.

<sup>97</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.



Michael Sullivan moved from job to job as a common laborer, digging trenches for sewers, smoothing roadbeds, and laying bricks.<sup>98</sup> Many Irish men took jobs as construction workers on canal and railroad crews.<sup>99</sup>

John was the second child of Michael and Catherine, and early on, he displayed the potential characteristics of a fighter, having unusual strength and size for a child, giving his aunt a black eye.<sup>100</sup> John L. Sullivan had very fond memories of his childhood and of his parents. John's father stood only five feet three inches tall and weighed only 125 pounds, but was known for his vicious temper.<sup>101</sup> A rumor circulated that he had once given a politician a black eye. At the height of his career, John's father always reminded him that there were ten tougher men back in Ireland. John's mother stood five feet eight inches tall and weighed 188 pounds.<sup>102</sup> It was obvious that Sullivan inherited his mother's physical genes, and his father's temper and tenacity. The Sullivans had aspirations that their son would turn to a career in religion and become a priest.<sup>103</sup>

John Sullivan was a respectful student, concerned with appeasing authority, yet was known for creating havoc in the schoolyard amongst his classmates.<sup>104</sup> Sullivan attended a number of different schools due to relocation, but eventually graduated from the Dwight Grammar School.<sup>105</sup> Although he respected authority, Sullivan did not excel in his studies and acquired most of his education rough-housing and playing games in the

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<sup>98</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 19.

<sup>99</sup> Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 41.

<sup>100</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 18.

<sup>101</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 44.

<sup>102</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.

<sup>103</sup> Sullivan, *Reminiscences of a 19th Century Gladiator*, 13.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 12.



schoolyard.<sup>106</sup> Sullivan later went on to attend Comer's Commercial College and Boston College; however, he did not receive a degree from either institution.<sup>107</sup>

After these failed attempts at college, Sullivan had to get a job but still faced the battle of discrimination against the Irish, as most opportunities during this time were hard, unskilled labor jobs. Sullivan first tried his hand at plumbing, but ultimately was dismissed after letting his temper get the best of him and unleashing his fury on a fellow employee; after this, he drifted from trade to trade throughout his teens until settling for two years working as a mason.<sup>108</sup> Sullivan went from job to job with no purpose in life, with his fiery temperament jeopardizing every opportunity.<sup>109</sup> He was living the life of many Irish American men: a life of poverty. Times were harsh for the Irish, as they had been for many years. The Irish were persecuted for being Catholic, and often were not given a fair chance in society. Many worked dead end jobs with no hope of getting better ones. Sullivan tried other avenues to better his life; he played baseball for many local clubs earning \$25 a week and was offered a contract of \$1300 to play for the Cincinnati Red Stockings.<sup>110</sup> His drive to excel in baseball propelled him into the world of athletics; however, his large frame and weight became an obstacle preventing his dream of playing ball from becoming a reality. He became more interested in fighting, as he was not as good as baseball as he thought.<sup>111</sup> Boxing could offer him more than baseball.

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<sup>106</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 29.

<sup>107</sup> Sullivan, *Reminiscences of a 19th Century Gladiator*, 13.

<sup>108</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.

<sup>109</sup> Stephen Thernstorm, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress In The American Metropolis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 73.

<sup>110</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 45.

<sup>111</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 32.



Sullivan had unusual strength and often displayed his power in many unique ways. In front of a crowd, he was able to lift a horse car that eight other men had failed to lift. Sullivan was known to lift full barrels of flour, beer, and nails over his head to further develop his strength, demonstrating techniques of weight training that were unknown during this time.<sup>112</sup> These feats earned him the nickname “The Boston Strong Boy” and a plethora of other nicknames such as “The Boston Hercules,” “Knight of the Fives,” “The hard-hitting Sullivan,” “The Boston Miracle of Huge Muscles,” and “The King of the Ring.”<sup>113</sup>

A visit to the Dudley Street Opera House would forever change Sullivan’s life. A man named Jack Scannell challenged Sullivan to a fight.<sup>114</sup> Scannell had heard of Sullivan and his reputation for fighting, and wanted to teach him a lesson. Sullivan laced on a pair of gloves and went to battle. Scannell was a tough fighter but was no match for Sullivan, who destroyed his opponent in a matter of seconds.<sup>115</sup> Scannell landed one good punch to Sullivan’s head, which ignited Sullivan’s temper as he went on to beat Scannell’s head on a piano and eventually knocked him right over the piano.<sup>116</sup> Sullivan stated, “I didn’t know the first thing about boxing then, but I went at him for all I was worth and licked him quick. It wasn’t much of a fight, and I done him up in about two minutes.”<sup>117</sup> It was at that very moment that Sullivan had found his calling in life, and a fighter was born, even though he did not know how to box.

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<sup>112</sup> Sullivan, *Reminiscences of a 19th Century Gladiator*, 15.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America’s First Sports Hero*.

<sup>115</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 32.

<sup>116</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 45.

<sup>117</sup> *National Police Gazette*, February 26, 1887.



### Early Career in Boxing

“There is a fellow up in Boston by the name of Sullivan, who is going to be the boss of them all.”

Mike Donovan, 1879

Sullivan’s career began just like one of his fights, fast and furious, as he quickly worked his way up the pugilistic ladder. Sullivan first became champion of Massachusetts. With the financial backing and guidance of Jim Keenan, Sullivan’s career was underway. Keenan had witnessed Sullivan shred fighters apart and felt he had the necessary tools to be very successful as a professional. Jim Keenan was a Boston gambler and owner of the famed trotting horse Emma B.<sup>118</sup> Keenan began to promote fights for Sullivan, believing they could make some money. Sullivan had the opportunity to spar with middleweight champion Professor Mike Donovan. The champion had a difficult time with the young Sullivan, as he nearly got knocked out, walking away with a broken nose and wrist.<sup>119</sup> Donovan stated, “It was like being kicked in the head by a runaway horse!”<sup>120</sup>

Joe Goss, the English champion, was to fight American champion, Paddy Ryan, for the world championship in June of 1880.<sup>121</sup> Fighters during this time would train for fights by having three-round exhibitions for the public. Sullivan was chosen to spar with

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<sup>118</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America’s First Sports Hero*.

<sup>119</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 45.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 17.



Goss on April 6, 1880.<sup>122</sup> Sullivan put on a show as he beat down Goss for three rounds. Goss was much older and more experienced than Sullivan and thought he was going to teach this kid a lesson in fighting, but the teacher became the student. In the first and second rounds Sullivan pummeled Goss with blow after blow until he fell to the ground.<sup>123</sup> The master of ceremonies, Thomas Earley, stated that Goss “went reeling like a drunken man across the stage.”<sup>124</sup> Sullivan had to be told to take it easy on him in the third round so Goss could recover and maintain his status as a fighter, as he was clearly outclassed.<sup>125</sup> Goss’s statement regarding Sullivan’s punch was: “It was like the kick of a mule.”<sup>126</sup>

This exhibition put Sullivan on the map, as the Bostonian crowd went into a frenzy over their new hometown hero, John L. Sullivan. The fight garnered Sullivan national press, as it was the first fight ever to get front page coverage in the *Boston Globe*.<sup>127</sup> In this fight, Sullivan made boxing popular again in the sports world. The fight also attracted close to 2,000 spectators, many more than previous exhibitions. Sullivan had made a case that he could fight with the best fighters and began to increase the public’s interest in prize-ring fighting again. People were excited to have a local hero whom they could support.

Joe Goss fought Paddy Ryan in June, two months after his exhibition with Sullivan, losing the fight. Sullivan was the logical choice to get a title shot against Ryan,

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<sup>122</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America’s First Sports Hero*.

<sup>123</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 86.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>125</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 18.

<sup>126</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 46.

<sup>127</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 86.



but Ryan refused to fight Sullivan. Sullivan disposed of Goss much more easily than Ryan had, but Sullivan was not given credit, as he fought with gloves under the Queensberry Rules. A recognized fight was a bareknuckle London Prize Rules contest.<sup>128</sup> Sullivan began to pester, harass, and even write letters to local newspapers and directly to Ryan trying to get him to fight, but with little success. At the Ryan vs. Goss fight, Goss became hurt, and Sullivan offered to take his place. According to Sullivan, Ryan responded by telling him, “Go get a reputation first.” Sullivan replied, “I will.”<sup>129</sup>

Sullivan attempted to build his notoriety by publicly advertising for competitors:

To The Editor of the Enquirer:

I am prepared to make a match to fight any man breathing, for any sum from \$1,000 to \$10,000 at catch weights. This challenges especially directed to Paddy Ryan and will remain open for a month if he should not see fit to accept it.<sup>130</sup>

John L. Sullivan

Sullivan followed suit with a few exhibition fights that both gained him notoriety and brought the public’s attention to boxing, a sport that had been struggling.<sup>131</sup> He quickly made some opponents, such as George Rook, “Professor” John Donaldson, and John Flood, sorry they stepped in the ring with him, even if it was just for an exhibition fight.<sup>132</sup> Sullivan had no professional training in boxing; he was just quick with tremendous power and did not fear any opponent. Rook learned this lesson quickly, as he

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<sup>128</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 18.

<sup>129</sup> Sullivan, *Reminiscences of a 19th Century Gladiator*, 25.

<sup>130</sup> *Cincinnati Enquirer*, December 9, 1880.

<sup>131</sup> Adam J. Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 18.

<sup>132</sup> Sullivan, *Reminiscences of a 19th Century Gladiator*, 22.



was knocked down three times in the first round. The next two rounds were similar to the first, with Rook taking a beating and finally being knocked out in the third round.<sup>133</sup> The unique aspect of this fight was that it attracted not only the usually low-life gamblers but also spectators from the upper and middle classes.<sup>134</sup>

Sullivan then traveled to Cincinnati in December to get more experience in the ring and further advance his name in the world of prize fighting. John McCormick, a reporter for the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, was looking for new talent to fight John Donaldson, the champion of the West.<sup>135</sup> On December 11, 1880, Sullivan fought Donaldson, but this fight was different from his previous fights. For the first time, Sullivan was going to fight under London Prize Ring Rules. Sullivan used gloves, but they were skin tight without any padding. This fight lasted for ten rounds, with Sullivan being the victor. The Donaldson fight proved to be quite comical, as Donaldson dodged Sullivan and ran from one corner of the ring to the next.<sup>136</sup> The *Cleveland Herald* stated that the fight was one sided, as Donaldson was knocked down in every round and refused to come out of his corner in the eleventh round.<sup>137</sup> Upon finishing the fight, both were arrested for their involvement in bare-knuckle fighting and the laws prohibiting fighting.

Police began to question the spectators, trying to find evidence to press charges on the fighters. Sullivan was brought to a judge who had attended the fight and dropped all charges due to the fact it was not a fight but rather a footrace, as Donaldson ran from

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<sup>133</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 189.

<sup>134</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Sullivan, *Reminiscences of a 19th Century Gladiator*, 22.

<sup>137</sup> *The Cleveland Herald*, December 24, 1880.



corner to corner to escape Sullivan's vicious punches.<sup>138</sup> The two men would fight again two weeks later, on Christmas Eve, with Sullivan the victor in ten rounds; it greatly upset Sullivan that the fight took that many rounds.<sup>139</sup> Sullivan returned to Boston and met Billy Madden, former boxer, who took Sullivan under his wing and began to train him.<sup>140</sup> Sullivan and Madden began to tour, promoting Sullivan and his abilities. They visited Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, Chicago, and Philadelphia with Sullivan bringing in \$150 a week—roughly ten times more than he would make per week as a laborer.<sup>141</sup>

John Sullivan's next fight was his biggest fight to date. Due to New York's laws on bare-knuckle boxing, this fight was to take place on a barge off the coast of Yonkers, New York on May 16, 1881.<sup>142</sup> Sullivan's opponent was John Flood, who was known more for his bar fights and "tough" persona than for his boxing ability.<sup>143</sup> This fight was also to be fought under the London Prize Ring Rules and was going to be a true test for Sullivan because Flood was known for his quickness and power and was known as the "Bulls Head Terror."<sup>144</sup> The fight was an easy task for Sullivan, lasting only sixteen minutes, eight rounds, ending with Flood knocked out cold. The payout was \$750—not much money compared to today's million dollar contracts, but it was a significant amount

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<sup>138</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 46.

<sup>139</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 23.

<sup>140</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 46.

<sup>141</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.

<sup>142</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 27.

<sup>143</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.

<sup>144</sup> Sullivan, *Reminiscences of a 19th Century Gladiator*, 26.



of money for that time. John Sullivan, an Irish American, was moving up the ranks in the boxing world and catching the attention of the wider community.

These were just a few of the fights that Sullivan had during the years 1880-1882. These fights earned Sullivan a reputation as a fighter on a national scale. Sullivan traveled to Cincinnati, Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, and Boston, gathering more fans with every visit becoming a sensation in the west.<sup>145</sup> As he was knocking out opponents, he was gaining recognition, which made it more difficult for Paddy Ryan to dodge him as the pressure was mounting against him. There was a renewed interest in the prize-fighting world, thanks to Sullivan and his larger-than-life persona, as members of all social classes began to show interest in boxing. The name “John L. Sullivan” became a “brand” in the boxing world as he would no longer be referred to as “John L.” or “John Sullivan.” Sullivan was now a significant name in boxing, not only in Boston but across America, as he shot up the boxing ranks as the top heavy weight contender to Paddy Ryan.<sup>146</sup>

John L. Sullivan’s time had finally arrived when Paddy Ryan agreed to fight the top heavyweight contender under the London Prize Rules on February 7, 1882. Ryan’s team insisted they fight under the London Prize Ring Rules, thinking this would give Ryan an advantage over Sullivan due to the fact Ryan was a lethargic champ who was out of shape and busy running a saloon.<sup>147</sup> In actuality, it was only Ryan’s second professional fight, as the other fights were bar brawls; however there was no one else to

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<sup>145</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 101.

<sup>146</sup> Sullivan, *Reminiscences of a 19th Century Gladiator*, 30.

<sup>147</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 102.



consider as champion so the title went to Ryan.<sup>148</sup> Paddy Ryan was much bigger than Sullivan, but Ryan's team failed to understand that gloves or no gloves, Sullivan was determined to be victorious.

The fight was first announced on October 5, 1881 with much anticipation from the public on all levels, as many gathered to hear the exciting news at every hangout and joint.<sup>149</sup> The fight became a hot topic in the sports world, and the public hotly debated who would win the fight. The Championship bout was set, with each side getting financial backing. Each side was to put in \$2,500. Sullivan put in \$500 of his own money; another \$1000 came from sporting men from Boston, and the last thousand came from James Keenan, a Boston gambler.<sup>150</sup>

Sullivan went into training in December 1881 under the direction of Billy Madden.<sup>151</sup> Sullivan's training was intense and consisted of a healthy diet and plenty of exercise. His training regimen consisted of running up to ten miles, one hundred yard sprints, fighting a ball tied to the end of a rope, weightlifting two-and-a-half-pound dumb-bells, sparring, and long walks.<sup>152</sup> Ryan, on the other hand, was not taking the fight as seriously; he only sparred up to an hour and a half per day. Rumor even spread that Ryan had ballooned to 230 pounds and lacked experience in the ring.<sup>153</sup> Sullivan, in

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<sup>148</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 34.

<sup>149</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 47.

<sup>150</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 104.

<sup>151</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 34.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>153</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.



contrast, was in prime form, dropping thirty pounds to weigh 175 pounds by fight day.<sup>154</sup>

Sullivan was determined to be the better conditioned fighter in a fight expected to last several rounds. Proud of his Irish heritage, Sullivan chose to enter the ring with a white handkerchief with a green border, American flag on the upper and lower left side, an Irish flag on the upper and lower right side, and the American eagle in the center.<sup>155</sup>

The match was scheduled to take place at an undisclosed location. Due to legal restrictions, the fight was to be held within a hundred mile radius of New Orleans, because authorities there had a tendency to turn a blind eye.<sup>156</sup> Sullivan and Madden arrived in New Orleans in late December and set up training headquarters at Schroeder's Summer Garden in Carrollton.<sup>157</sup> Sullivan performed many exhibitions on his journey to New Orleans and while he was there preparing for the fight. The location had to be secret, as the Mississippi Legislature had ordered a \$1,000 fine and five years in prison for fighting.<sup>158</sup>

Fight day finally arrived after much hype and speculation regarding the bout. The fight was covered by numerous newspapers throughout the country; this fight fostered the development of modern sports coverage.<sup>159</sup> That morning around 5:00, the fighters and spectators boarded a train and traveled to Mississippi City, Mississippi where a ring was

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<sup>154</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 35.

<sup>155</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 104.  
Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.

<sup>157</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 104.

<sup>158</sup> Sullivan, *Reminiscences of a 19th Century Gladiator*, 41.

<sup>159</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.



set up in front of the Barnes Hotel in a grove of live oaks.<sup>160</sup> The two fighters engaged in battle shortly after noon. The crowd was alive; energy and excitement was in the air, with the expectation that this fight would be a long testament of will and strength. The audience of this fight was different, as the crowd consisted of merchants, lawyers, and judges, as well as the usual gamblers and lowlifes.<sup>161</sup>

Thirty seconds into the first round, Ryan was knocked to the ground. Sullivan, with his cat-like reflexes, pounded on Ryan's ribs then caught him with a vicious right to his jaw. Ryan did survive Sullivan's fierce attack, but was never the same fighter; he had trouble walking to his corner after the first round.<sup>162</sup> Sullivan was in charge for the duration of the fight. Ryan tried many tactics, but had no defense against Sullivan's fierce offensives. Ryan made a brief comeback in the eighth round, only to receive crushing blow to the head that would send him to the canvas.<sup>163</sup> After nine rounds, Ryan threw his hands up in defeat, as he was unable to make it to the scratch.<sup>164</sup> Ryan's jaw had been broken in two places, his lips were gashed, his nose was cut, and the left side of his neck was swollen; for these reasons, he could not continue the fight, which lasted only a total of eleven minutes.<sup>165</sup> "When Sullivan struck me," Ryan said after the fight, "I thought that a telegraph pole had been shoved against me endways."<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.

<sup>161</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.

<sup>162</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 37.

<sup>163</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 48.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>165</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 40.

<sup>166</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.



Sullivan was recognized by many national papers including the *National Police Gazette* and the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* as the new champion while others discredited Sullivan, accusing him of being more of a wrestler than a boxer.<sup>167</sup> All of this media attention helped bring attention to both the sport of boxing and the Irish. An Irishman had garnered national attention and acclaim, ushering in a new and more exciting version of the stereotyped Irish fighter. Everyone wanted to fight and be like Sullivan. Fighters even changed their names to have a more Irish appeal, and Irish American boxers' reputations eclipsed all others'.<sup>168</sup> There were also discrepancies over which rules should be used in the championship match. Some accused Sullivan of being afraid to fight with his bare knuckles. Sullivan's reply revealing that he had fought Ryan without gloves in order to dispel the rumor that Sullivan feared bare-knuckle fighting: "For that reason, I consented to fight Ryan as I did. Now anyone who wants to tackle me will have to do it in my fashion."<sup>169</sup> It was no secret that he preferred gloves over bare knuckles, realizing they were safer and would prolong his career in the ring. Sullivan had now gotten the taste of money and did not want to miss out on this opportunity. Sullivan was crowned Champion of America, but not of the world.<sup>170</sup>

Sullivan issued a challenge to fight any man in the country for \$5,000, on the condition that he would fight with gloves due to the fact he did not want to get

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<sup>167</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 42.

<sup>168</sup> Larry McCarthy, *Making The Irish American*, edited by J.J. Lee and Marion R. Casey (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 272.

<sup>169</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 134.

<sup>170</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 42.



arrested.<sup>171</sup> He now had the money and the confidence to do so. Sullivan went on another tour, accepting challenges to see if opponents could last four rounds with the champion. He fought Jim Eliot and John McDermott, each man only lasting three rounds.<sup>172</sup> Sullivan's next opponent was an Englishman named Joe Collins, who fought under the name "Tug Wilson." Wilson, a boxer from London, accepted the challenge, and the two fought on July 17, 1882 at Madison Square Garden in New York for the world championship title.<sup>173</sup> The fight was to be called an exhibition for four rounds, and the fighters were to wear gloves, as Sullivan claimed he would not fight again without gloves and that he had proved he could fight without them by defeating Ryan.<sup>174</sup> Sullivan was declared the loser, as Wilson lasted the four rounds. It was a controversial decision, as Wilson would constantly drop to the floor to avoid being hit. This never gave Sullivan a chance to fight Wilson, but rather dance around the ring, as Sullivan referred to him as "artful dodger."<sup>175</sup> The fight may have been called an "exhibition," but it attracted 5,000 spectators.<sup>176</sup> The sport of boxing was growing in popularity, mainly because of an Irishman.

Sullivan, the American Champion, was presented with many opportunities to make more money, such as through another exhibition tour across the country. Not all the opportunities were good, since Sullivan had a fondness for alcohol and was offered

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<sup>171</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.

<sup>172</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 49.

<sup>173</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 48.

<sup>174</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.

<sup>175</sup> Sullivan, *Reminiscences of a 19th Century Gladiator*, 63.

<sup>176</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 121.



free drinks where ever he went. He went from wine to champagne to rum to whiskey.<sup>177</sup>

As it was for his father, alcohol became a real problem for Sullivan. It became a tough situation during the tour because he would sneak out of training sessions and go to the local pub and get very intoxicated.<sup>178</sup> When Sullivan drank he would fight, risking getting hurt and ruining his career. Sullivan was notorious for getting extremely drunk and violent, challenging the entire tavern to fight claiming, “I can lick any son-of-a-bitch in this tavern.”<sup>179</sup> Sullivan claimed not to drink much or in excess. When asked about his drinking, Sullivan would reply, “Say, five or six glasses of ale a day and a bottle for dinner if I feel like it.” Sullivan embraced this Irish stereotype of drinking, as he drank without a care in the world. The Irish were known for their love of “the drinks,” as the number of liquor dealers increased from 850 to over 1,200 in Boston at the height of Irish immigration in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>180</sup>

Sullivan began his Grand Heavy Weight Tour on September 28, 1882.<sup>181</sup> Sullivan and four other fighters were to travel through twenty-six states, five territories, the District of Columbia, and British Columbia. The tour was to hit every major city in each of the states they visited. The purpose of the tour was to spread the art of boxing by letting the public see the sport of boxing in a different way, rather than as the barbaric contest people assumed it was. Sullivan was cocky and would again challenge any man to last four rounds with him. This time the ante was a little steeper: the payout was now

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<sup>177</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.

<sup>178</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.

<sup>179</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 137.

<sup>180</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.

<sup>181</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 123.



anywhere from \$500 to \$5000. Sullivan claimed that “He could lick any man in America.”<sup>182</sup> He was gaining popularity and notoriety, and he was on his way to becoming the world’s first sports celebrity.

Sullivan would be challenged again by another Englishman, Charley Mitchell, whom he fought on May 14, 1883 in a gloved bout under the Queensberry rules.<sup>183</sup> Mitchell had toured England, defeating every opponent that challenged him. The fight took place at Madison Square Garden. For the first time ever, the Garden was packed to its upmost limits, with at least 10,000 spectators.<sup>184</sup> Sullivan outweighed his opponent by forty pounds, and it was a given that he would win; however, Mitchell proved to pose a much tougher challenge than anticipated. In the first round, the building was silenced as Mitchell caught Sullivan with a right hook, knocking him down.<sup>185</sup> A stunned Sullivan would go on to prevail. The second and third rounds were not good for the Englishman, as he was pummeled each round and the fight was stopped in the third in fear that Sullivan would kill Mitchell.<sup>186</sup>

### **John L. Sullivan vs. Jake Kilrain**

In 1889, when Sullivan was thirty-one, his career reached a turning point, for both personal and athletic reasons. After many tours around the country and a trip to the

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<sup>182</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America’s First Sports Hero*.

<sup>183</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 59.

<sup>184</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 134.

<sup>185</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 49.

<sup>186</sup> Sullivan, *Reminiscences of a 19th Century Gladiator*, 69.



United Kingdom, Sullivan was to fight Jake Kilrain on July 8, 1889 in Richburg, Mississippi.<sup>187</sup> This fight gained national attention and was the first fight to do so. The fight was also to be the first championship fight to be fought under London Prize Ring Rules, or bare knuckle.<sup>188</sup> Kilrain, similar to Sullivan, was the son of Irish immigrants and grew up working hard jobs in the mills.<sup>189</sup> He quickly became known for his fighting skills and attracted attention in the boxing world, as did Sullivan.

Kilrain was ranked as the top contender at the time, and many boxing fans had wanted this fight to happen for some time. Kilrain had offered to fight Sullivan twice for \$5,000 a side, but Sullivan had to reject both offers due to a broken arm he had suffered during his fight against Patsy Cardiff.<sup>190</sup> The fight was highly anticipated and greatly hyped, as there was a question who was the real champion, Sullivan or Kilrain. While Sullivan had been off the fighting circuit recovering from his injury, Kilrain was making his name known throughout the pugilistic world. At this time, Kilrain was declared by some as the champion while others still held Sullivan as the champion, and each fighter was awarded a championship belt.<sup>191</sup> Sullivan was angered by the argument and was eager to fight Kilrain and end the debate. On December 7, 1888, Sullivan challenged Kilrain to a fight for a sum of \$10,000 to take place six months from the challenge, as well as under the London Prize Rules; this would be only the third time Sullivan fought

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<sup>187</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.

<sup>188</sup> Roberts and Skutt, *The Boxing Register*, 45.

<sup>189</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 260.

<sup>190</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 141.

<sup>191</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.



without gloves.<sup>192</sup> Each fighter had trained for months, with the attention of the press covering their training, moods, and progress.<sup>193</sup> Similar to today's media coverage and pre-fight hype, national newspapers kept track of their every move, as each fighter was interviewed regarding his predictions for the outcome of the fight.<sup>194</sup>

Sullivan trained under the supervision and guidance of William Muldoon, a championship wrestler, in Belfast, New York. Muldoon had a few difficult tasks, which included not only getting his fighter ready for the fight of his life, but also keeping his fighter sober, as Sullivan indulged himself with food and alcohol and his weight ballooned to 240 pounds.<sup>195</sup> It was no secret that Sullivan liked his alcohol, and he could not stay on the wagon, even for this fight. Sullivan was known to escape his trainers and quickly go to a pub to get drunk. It was difficult to train a drunken boxer. There was an expression when Sullivan was missing, "John is loose again. Send for Muldoon."<sup>196</sup> With a great deal of effort, Sullivan was able to sober up and get his weight down to 204 pounds for his first fight in one year and four months.<sup>197</sup>

Fight day had finally arrived. Governors of many Southern states vowed to prevent the fight from happening: troops stood at all railroads, and a \$1000 bounty was offered for the arrest of Sullivan.<sup>198</sup> Similar to the Paddy Ryan fight, 3,000 spectators boarded trains to be taken to the fight, which would take place in a secret location. The

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<sup>192</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 263.

<sup>193</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.

<sup>194</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 193.

<sup>197</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 171.

<sup>198</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.



onlookers included lawyers, doctors, and scholars. Prize fighting was no longer looked upon as a barbaric sport, but rather was seen as an athletic pastime, as this fight garnered national attention.<sup>199</sup> The fight location was Richburg, Mississippi, though most thought it would take place in New Orleans.<sup>200</sup> The fight began at 10:00 in the morning and lasted seventy-five out of eighty scheduled rounds, ending around 12:30 in the afternoon.<sup>201</sup> Both men were extremely exhausted as the hot sun beat down on them all day and the temperature continued to rise throughout the fight. Sullivan controlled the majority of the first half of the fight. He was knocked down and got sick in the forty-fourth round, continued to fight, and although it was not an easy victory for Sullivan, he was victorious.<sup>202</sup> Sullivan's corner claimed it was a mixture of tea and whiskey that made him vomit, and Kilrain felt bad and offered to call the fight a draw, but Sullivan eagerly declined, saying, "No, you loafer."<sup>203</sup> Sullivan regained himself after the knock down and continued to dominate the next thirty rounds.<sup>204</sup> The last few rounds were lopsided in Sullivan's favor. Kilrain had been severely beaten. He was dazed and barely conscious; his manager wanted him to continue to fight, but he was unable to walk, so his corner threw in the towel.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 275.

<sup>200</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.

<sup>201</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.

<sup>202</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 185.

<sup>203</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.

<sup>204</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.

<sup>205</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 275.



### The End of a Career

Sullivan was the last World Champion under the London Prize Ring Rules. He did not fight for the next three years but eventually defended his title against Jim “The Gentleman” Corbett. During those three years, Sullivan was demanding extreme amounts of money to fight. This title fight was fought under Marquess of Queensberry Rules. Sullivan was out of shape for his fight with Corbett, having not taken his training seriously, and it was rumored that Sullivan would have sex before his fights. Tired, sluggish, and out of shape, Sullivan was no match for his younger opponent.<sup>206</sup> Corbett was faster and in much better physical condition. Corbett toyed with Sullivan throughout much of the fight. Corbett had a scientific approach to the sport. He was able to expose Sullivan’s weaknesses. Sullivan was knocked out in the twenty-first round.<sup>207</sup> The crowd was silent as their beloved John L. had been defeated. Nobody gave Corbett a chance to survive Sullivan’s power and attacks, but he out-boxed Sullivan.<sup>208</sup> Sullivan was carried to his corner, and when he finally awoke he went into a rage, trying to continue the fight. He was graceful in defeat stating “that if he had to get licked he was glad it was by an American.”<sup>209</sup> Sullivan was the heavy weight champion for ten years.

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<sup>206</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America’s First Sports Hero*.

<sup>207</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 318.

<sup>208</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 84.

<sup>209</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 318.



Sullivan put prizefighting on the map. His contributions both in and out of the ring paved the way for other Irish fighters, such as Jack Dempsey, in years to come, as Sullivan made boxing a more socially accepted sport during his time as champion. He is the last link between the two rules and was elected into the Boxing Hall of Fame in 1990.<sup>210</sup> Sullivan was the world's first athletic superstar, earning over a million dollars in his career and garnering endorsement deals with companies, yet he died broke.<sup>211</sup> Sullivan established his own motion picture company and even tried his hand in politics. He appeared in plays and had books written about him. He rose to the top in a time when the Irish were at the bottom. Men and women of all classes spoke of Sullivan. Sullivan was a showman who was spirited, wild, strong, and aggressive. He brought boxing from the shadows into primetime and met royalty, presidents and the Pope.<sup>212</sup>

Sullivan was an Irishman who seemingly fitted into every Irish stereotype, according to many bigoted Americans at the time. He drank, fought, stole, was a bully, was a wife beater and a womanizer, but he was to become America's first sports celebrity. A young lad born to poor Irish parents, he rose to the top but brought all Americans, especially the Irish, with him for the ride. Sullivan gave the Irish something of which to be proud. Sullivan always wore green during his bouts, had a harp present along with his handkerchief that was decorated prominently with Irish and American symbols.<sup>213</sup> Sullivan was a hero among Irish Americans, as well as in Ireland. He traveled to Ireland, visiting such places as Dublin, Queenstown, Waterford, Cork, and

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<sup>210</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 379.

<sup>211</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*, Kindle.

<sup>212</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*, Kindle.

<sup>213</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 104.



Limerick, always arriving to a hero's welcome.<sup>214</sup> His parents fled Ireland because of the horrific conditions the Great Famine; however, their flight helped America find a legend that changed the history of boxing. His story begins with famine, but ends with much success. Before his arrival on the scene, boxing was illegal and associated with criminals, prostitutes, and gambling. He always insisted on fighting under the Queensberry rules which still exist. John L. Sullivan made boxing a sport for all classes and, as a person prominently portrayed in the media, gave an Irish face to American celebrity.

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<sup>214</sup> Jack Anderson, "A Champion in Ireland: The visit of John L. Sullivan," May 2002, [www.cyberboxingzone.com](http://www.cyberboxingzone.com).



## Chapter 4

### JAMES “GENTLEMAN” CORBETT

Gentleman Jim Corbett was a great Irish American fighter who redefined the sport of boxing. Corbett was not the biggest fighter, most successful, or even the hardest puncher, but he was hardworking, intelligent and took a scientific approach to the sport. He would study his opponents and find their weak point, then counter attack and use his quickness and ability to react rather than standing toe to toe with his opponent. Corbett did the impossible by defeating the unbeatable John L. Sullivan to become the heavyweight champion of the world in 1892. Corbett, the first boxing master, changed the sport from a grueling, barbaric, pugilist sport to a scientific art form using fast footwork, tight defense, clever feinting, and precision punching.<sup>215</sup>

### Escaping the Famine

James John Corbett was born on September 1, 1866 in San Francisco, California. He was born to Irish immigrants, Patrick and Catherine Corbett. Patrick Corbett was from Tuam, North County Galway, while Catherine MacDonald was from Dublin.<sup>216</sup> Patrick worked on his family farm while he was growing up, living through the Great Hunger; even after it was over, conditions did not improve for many, living in Ireland was a continual struggle. Patrick, unsatisfied with his living conditions, decided to

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<sup>215</sup> Patrick Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend* (London: Robson Books, 1998), Intro XIII.

<sup>216</sup> Nat Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story Of James J. Corbett* (New York, Literary Licensing, 2011), 4.



escape the hard life the blight had created and he set sail for America. As Patrick left, he knew that he would most likely never see his home country or even his family again, but he had no choice; however, Patrick did take with him his strong Catholic faith.<sup>217</sup>

In 1854, at age of eighteen, Patrick Corbett departed for New Orleans.<sup>218</sup> He had received word from his older brother John, who was already in New Orleans, that there was an opportunity to make money and for a better life, as jobs were available. John Corbett was already in the hotel business when Patrick arrived, and he helped his younger brother to get a job.<sup>219</sup> Patrick Corbett only lasted one year in New Orleans, as he did not like his new home. During his year stay, a yellow fever epidemic had broken out and taken the lives of many immigrants, including his brother John, which angered Patrick and made him even more hostile to the city of New Orleans.<sup>220</sup> He decided to pack his belongings and move to San Francisco, California, which was more accepting of immigrants from all over the world.<sup>221</sup>

Patrick journeyed by boat to Panama, crossed the land by wagon, and then got another boat to San Francisco. The trip cost around fifty to seventy-five dollars and took nearly a month; it was just as rigorous as his dreadful trip across the Atlantic from Ireland.<sup>222</sup> Patrick arrived in a city that was up and coming due to the Gold Rush. The population had grown quickly over the years, with immigrants coming from all corners of

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<sup>217</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 9.

<sup>218</sup> Armond Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner* (London: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2001), 5.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 69.

<sup>222</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 6.



the world, including Ireland, so the city had a large Irish population, with 4,000 Irish residents in a population 36,000 by 1852.<sup>223</sup> San Francisco was a much better place for Irish immigrants than New York or Boston because it provided greater opportunities for owning property and a better education for immigrants' children.<sup>224</sup>

Patrick Corbett, a very religious man, had a hard time adjusting to life in the city. San Francisco was a squalid town rampant with disease, infested with rats, and known for its gambling, prostitution, saloons, and crime.<sup>225</sup> Fighting was also a big part of the culture in a city that had produced many fighters. Patrick again found employment in a hotel and eventually opened his own business as a hack driver.<sup>226</sup> He would eventually have his own horses, stables, and carriages. Patrick, a devout Catholic, met a young woman in church, Catherine MacDonald, who had a similar story to Patrick's: she had left Ireland for Philadelphia then made the rough trip to San Francisco.<sup>227</sup> The two fell in love, were quickly married, and started a family that produced a total of twelve children.<sup>228</sup> Patrick employed his strong work ethic as his business continued to prosper. The couple had their first child in 1862, their second in 1865, and their third child, James, in 1866. The family was growing quickly and it was time to move into a larger house in the Irish neighborhood.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 8.

<sup>224</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 8.

<sup>225</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 9.

<sup>226</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 69.

<sup>227</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 9.

<sup>228</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 9.

<sup>229</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 69.



## Early Life

Jim Corbett was a healthy child and was very big, much bigger than the average child.<sup>230</sup> Corbett was athletic and participated in many sports, such as baseball, track and field, and gymnastics.<sup>231</sup> Corbett learned at an early age that he had a skill for fighting, as he would fight in streets, lots, and school yards.<sup>232</sup> He was a good child but did have quite a temper that he inherited from his father. The Corbetts were strong believers in education and sent their children to school. Jim attended St. Ignatius College in San Francisco, which provided elementary, secondary, and college-level education.<sup>233</sup>

Jim's stay at St. Ignatius did not last long due to his expulsion for fighting. Since the school had students of all ages, the playground was divided into two sections: the "Little Yard" for students age twelve and under and the "Big Yard" for students thirteen and older.<sup>234</sup> Due to his large size and mature looks, Jim and his friend would sneak over to the "Big Yard" to play with the older children. As typical boys, they got carried away and the playground bully, "Fatty" Carney, became angry with Jim, and the two began to fight until it was broken up by school authorities.<sup>235</sup> "Fatty," who was around thirteen or fourteen, quickly threatened Jim and told him he would see him after school. Jim was scared and dreaded hearing that dismissal bell as he didn't want to get "licked." Jim even

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<sup>230</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 9.

<sup>231</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 70.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story Of James J. Corbett*, 7.

<sup>234</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 3.

<sup>235</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 12.



contemplated running home, but the Irish in him kicked in and he did not want to be known as a coward.<sup>236</sup>

The two boys met outside. “Fatty” was much bigger and stronger than Jim and began to charge. Jim liked boxing and had watched fighters spar with each other. He studied their movements and watched how they would counter attack. He realized that he could do this with “Fatty.” “Fatty” would charge Jim and Jim would dodge and then jab him.<sup>237</sup> He did this repeatedly to “Fatty” and was beating the playground bully until a police officer showed up, but the fight just continued in another vacant lot. “Fatty” became desperate and began to fight dirty. He managed to get on top of Jim and give him a beating. Jim continued to dodge and jab until Fatty gave up. Jim did take a beating and had to go home to his father with a black eye and a fat lip.<sup>238</sup>

The following day, both students were expelled from school but the fight proved to be much more than a playground brawl for Jim. The fight gave Jim confidence, and he began to believe that he could fight. Jim learned a lesson from that fight that lasted his entire life: “that the size of a man does not count, and that by using my head and feet I could lick a man much stronger than myself.”<sup>239</sup>

The following year Jim attended Sacred Heart College, but with similar results. He got into many fights, but it was an altercation with a teacher that led to his dismissal. Jim refused a punishment for his behavior and tried to run out of the school. By the time Jim made it to the main door, there were many teachers waiting for him. Jim picked out the biggest teacher, “a big fat fellow looking like Friar Tuck,” and delivered his version

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<sup>236</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 6.

<sup>237</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 11.

<sup>238</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story Of James J. Corbett*, 8.

<sup>239</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 7.



of the solar plexus with his head.<sup>240</sup> Jim was expelled for his behavior. His school days were now over, and Jim's father sought help for his son, as Patrick Corbett had opened a livery stable and had many connections. Patrick spoke with John W. Mackay, owner of the Nevada Bank.<sup>241</sup> Mr. Mackay gave Jim his first job as a bank messenger. Jim worked at the bank for six years, rising to the post of assistant receiving teller.<sup>242</sup> This job gave Jim a glimpse of the good life, which he vowed to have for himself one day. Jim's father could live with his decision but would rather have had his son become a priest.<sup>243</sup> Patrick had left Ireland before his younger brother, who would eventually become a priest, was born. Jim's parents had hoped he would follow the same path that his uncle had, but they did not realize that they were dealing with the future champion of the world.

### **The Beginning**

Jim continued to grow, getting bigger, stronger and more athletic. He showed interest in boxing, but baseball was his first love until a freak accident on the pitcher's mound ended his baseball career. Jim was supposed to play second base for the Olympic Athletic Club of San Francisco but was unable to play due to his injury.<sup>244</sup> The Athletic Club, where Jim would go to watch fights, was known for its sports, especially boxing.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 12.

<sup>241</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 12.

<sup>242</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 9.

<sup>243</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 70.

<sup>244</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 10.

<sup>245</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 16.



His interest now became strictly boxing. He kept an old pair of boxing gloves at his father's stable, where he would box with the neighborhood children and his brothers. Two of his brothers were shocked when Jim knocked both of them all around the stable.<sup>246</sup>

Jim took fights in the livery and beat almost everyone, except for a kid named Billy "Forty" Kennealy.<sup>247</sup> Jim and Billy had only sparred once in the stable, with Jim being on the defensive for the duration of the fight. Kennealy was bigger and stronger than Jim and had a mule kick as a right punch. Jim was afraid of Kennealy and Kennealy knew it. Kennealy would make fun of Jim and call Jim out, but Jim never did much about it due to his fear of Kennealy's right fist.<sup>248</sup>

The two later crossed paths again at an entertainment event. The master of ceremonies of the event had known of the rivalry between the two young men and offered a four-round exhibition between the two.<sup>249</sup> Jim was very hesitant to fight due to his father's views on fighting, and he knew it would not be an exhibition. Kennealy sealed his fate when he called Jim out in front of the entire crowd, stating that Jim did not want to fight because he was afraid his beautiful face would be spoiled.<sup>250</sup> This angered Jim, who then agreed to fight. Kennealy was much larger than Jim, and was intent on knocking him out, but Jim had other plans. As Kennealy would charge, Jim would quickly move out of the way and use his left jab.<sup>251</sup> As each round passed, Kennealy became more frustrated and wild with his punches. He threw a punch which Jim ducked,

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<sup>246</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 9.

<sup>247</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story Of James J. Corbett*, 9.

<sup>248</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 15.

<sup>249</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story Of James J. Corbett*, 9.

<sup>250</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 15.

<sup>251</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story Of James J. Corbett*, 10.



but on his way back up his head caught Kennealy on the chin, which dropped Kennealy to the canvas for the ten-count. It happened so quickly that everybody thought Jim caught him with a left. Jim was declared the winner but kept that secret to himself.<sup>252</sup> Jim was learning that the important thing in boxing was skill, rather than going punch for punch. A good defense is better than a wild offense.

At the bank Jim would often spar with the other bank clerks during their lunch break. Jim would develop footwork and begin hitting with his left. While working at the bank, Jim would use his right hand all day, leaving his left hand unused. Naturally, his muscles in his right hand became strong as the left became more fatigued, thus making a fist with the right much easier than making a fist with his left.<sup>253</sup> Jim vowed to strengthen his left arm and he did this by constantly practicing with the left. He would punch a pillow with his left hand to develop strength, speed, and accuracy. This eventually developed into to his left hook, of which he is considered the founder.<sup>254</sup> Steadily, Jim was learning to box.

Corbett's friend, Lew Harding, began talking around town and setting up fights for some extra cash because he knew Jim could fight. Jim said, "Lew saw in me things I didn't see in myself, quickness of the eye and feet and a natural understanding of and instinct for the game."<sup>255</sup> They began by traveling to blacksmith shops and fire houses. These were tough neighborhoods with many willing and eager to take down this pretty boy. Jim always wore a white collar due to his affiliation with the bank. He would take a

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<sup>252</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 15.

<sup>253</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 15.

<sup>254</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 14.

<sup>255</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 14.



ripping from the locals for his good looks and white collar.<sup>256</sup> Looking back on those years, Corbett said,

I had a good many fights in those places, some of them pretty tough ones. At first they used to sneer at me and look upon me as a dude, for, being a bank clerk, I naturally took pains with my personal appearance. However, I fought myself into their estimation and soon they forgot to call me this withering name and made no more remarks about my white collar or kid gloves.<sup>257</sup>

Corbett proved himself that he was tough and could fight in the rough neighborhoods of San Francisco.

Harding had decided to take it a step further and head to the outskirts of the Barbary Coast. This area was as rough and tough as they come, known for its crime and as a melting pot of the lowest of the lows, who had come in search of fortune and glory by finding gold.<sup>258</sup> It was not a place the average citizen would want to hang around. Harding and Corbett dared to enter saloons and other places they could fight. He was able to outwit and outbox his opponents with finesse and grace, and he could handle his opponents' larger size and full rush charges.<sup>259</sup> Corbett was still young, but he was learning to refine his boxing skills and began to believe in himself.

Jim's older brother, Harry Corbett, worked as a clerk at city hall in San Francisco. Harry was proud of his little brother's fighting skills, about which he would often talk at

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<sup>256</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 70.

<sup>257</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 12.

<sup>258</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 70.

<sup>259</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 71.



work.<sup>260</sup> One day, while at work, Harry Corbett and a fellow coworker, Herbert Choynski, began to argue over whose brother was tougher and the better fighter.<sup>261</sup> Both men went home to set up a fight between the two brothers, Jim Corbett and Joe Choynski. The Corbetts were of Irish decent while the Choynskis were Polish and of Jewish faith.<sup>262</sup> The very next day, Herbert Choynski brought his younger brother Joe to the Corbetts' livery stable. Jim and Joe met and agreed to fight with gloves. The fight lasted only two minutes before Jim knocked Joe out cold.

The argument between the two older brothers continued for the next year until both Corbett and Choynski agreed to fight again, but this time it was to be bare fisted.<sup>263</sup> The fight was scheduled for a Sunday afternoon in a quarry on the outskirts of San Francisco. Patrick Corbett got word of this proposed fight and was not the least bit happy with Jim's choice.<sup>264</sup> Jim's father was still disappointed with his son's fighting and preferred him to stay at the bank. His parents were very proud how far had come and what he had accomplished at the bank. Patrick Corbett told his son to cancel the fight, as it would ruin his career at the bank. Jim listened to his father and went to the Choynski household to cancel the fight and focus on his career at the bank.<sup>265</sup>

The Corbett brothers arrived at their destination to follow their father's orders. Jim Corbett knocked on the door and asked to speak with Joe. One of Joe's other siblings answered the door and as soon as he saw Jim became angry and began to belittle and

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<sup>260</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story of James J. Corbett*, 18.

<sup>261</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 13.

<sup>262</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 73.

<sup>263</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story Of James J. Corbett*, 19.

<sup>264</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 38.

<sup>265</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 39.



insult Jim. “You wait until this afternoon, you’ll see him then, all right. He’ll knock you all over the lot.”<sup>266</sup> That old Irish tempered flared, and Corbett was determined to beat Joe. The five young men walked four miles to their destination at the quarry. Upon arrival, the two men stripped down and began to brawl. Choynski had shown great improvement in his boxing ability since their first fight a year before.<sup>267</sup> Corbett was surprised at first by his opponent’s new-found fighting skills but he soon adjusted and again began to counter attack. Jim beat Joe again, but this time it was a hard, bruising, bloody fight.<sup>268</sup> Patrick Corbett was disappointed with his son’s decision to fight but was proud of his son’s ability and the outcome.<sup>269</sup>

Patrick Corbett was right that this would affect his son’s job at the bank, but it did not affect his job in the way that he had predicted. John W. Mackay, Jim’s boss, who helped Jim get the job, was an avid sports fanatic and was an officer of the Olympic Club, an organization that supported amateur athletes in a variety of sports.<sup>270</sup> Corbett was summoned to Mackay’s office. A fearful Corbett sat nervously as he thought his father’s prediction had come true, but to his surprise, his boss explained how he was passionate about boxing and heard about his fights with Joe Choynski. This was the beginning of Corbett’s professional career as his boss, Mackay, was about to introduce him to people who would be able to train and work with the young and talented fighter.

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>267</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 27.

<sup>268</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 14.

<sup>269</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story Of James J. Corbett*, 19.

<sup>270</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 14.



### Amateur Status

The Olympic Club, founded in 1860, was the most prestigious club in San Francisco and the oldest athletic club in the nation.<sup>271</sup> It was home to a variety of sporting activities such as track, swimming, wrestling, gymnastics, and boxing. It was a place for young amateur athletes to get exercise, stay fit and escape the troubled streets of San Francisco. The Olympic Club had strict rules and regulations for the young athletes. All athletes were required to pay a monthly fee, to retain an amateur status, and to represent the club in their sport at all sponsored events or tournaments.<sup>272</sup>

The Olympic Club had just hired Walter Watson as one of their new boxing instructors.<sup>273</sup> Professor Watson, as he was called, was a middle-aged former boxing champion. He was known for his scientific approach to the sport, which would suit Jim Corbett very well.<sup>274</sup> Watson also had a good eye for young, raw talent, with the ability to shape and mold athletes through his rigorous training. This truly was a match made in boxing heaven. The professor taught Corbett the art of straight punching, footwork, feinting, slipping blows and correct hitting.<sup>275</sup> The two men met on Corbett's first day at the club. Professor Watson immediately knew that this young lad had talent but needed to be trained. Watson asked Corbett if he had boxed before. Corbett, young, arrogant, and cocky, replied that he had been in hundreds of bouts and was always victorious. The

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<sup>271</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 15.

<sup>272</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story of James J. Corbett*, 11.

<sup>273</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 20.

<sup>274</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 16.

<sup>275</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 17.



two men got in the ring to spar. Professor Watson may have been a middle-aged man but still was able to box, and box he did.

The very next day Corbett returned to the Olympic Club for another opportunity in the ring, but again things would not go his way. Corbett noticed a larger man with a long beard sparring in the ring. Corbett was unimpressed with what he saw and wanted the opportunity to lace up his gloves and go a few rounds, thinking it would be an easy victory. The trainer on duty gladly put the gloves on Corbett, but he forgot to tell the newcomer one thing: the man in the ring was known as “Blackbeard,” the heavyweight champion of the club, known to be a heavy hitter. The fight did not last long. The next thing Corbett knew, he was on a stool with water being splashed on him as someone was rubbing his legs and another holding smelling salts to his nose.<sup>276</sup> Corbett had been knocked out cold. Corbett then began to run around the gymnasium, stumbling and knocking over equipment. Then it dawned on him that he was not as good as he had thought, even though he had won many bouts. Corbett stated that being knocked out by Blackbeard was the biggest blow to his pride and made him realize that he needed boxing instruction.<sup>277</sup>

Upon his arrival, Walter Watson was not quick to make friends. He immediately got into an argument with Olympic Club’s middle weight champion, David Eiseman. Eiseman offered to go a few rounds with the much older Watson. Eiseman took advantage of his youth, and a friendly sparring match turned into a one-sided victory with Watson on the wrong side.<sup>278</sup> This greatly angered the professor as he swore his revenge,

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 14.

<sup>278</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 18.



and that in three months he would train some young fighter to give Eiseman the greatest beat down that he would ever endure in his life.<sup>279</sup>

Corbett became obsessed with the sport and trained three days a week. His confidence grew every day, as he became Watson's favorite student.<sup>280</sup> Corbett would spend all of his free time practicing his new-found love. He would stand in front of the mirror at night watching his every move, looking to improve himself as a fighter. Corbett would practice jabs, punching, feints, and shifts.<sup>281</sup> His practice paid off, as he was getting better with every passing day.

Six months had passed, and the professor staged his first boxing night at the club. The club was packed with boxing fanatics waiting to see the fight between Corbett and Eiseman.<sup>282</sup> Everybody knew of the grudge between Watson and Eiseman. Corbett really did not think of it as a fight but rather as a friendly exhibition, until the professor urged him to go at Eiseman with all that he had. Watson wanted blood and urged his understudy to knock out his opponent. Corbett then realized that his trainer adamantly sought revenge.

The two fighters met in the center of the ring; the crowd was in for a real treat with the display of fighting they were going to see. For three straight minutes the two men slugged it out. Neither of them moved as they went punch for punch.<sup>283</sup> The Olympic Club was not accustomed to fights like this. The fighters went to assigned corners to their trainers. Both men were exhausted, but Eiseman was worse off than

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<sup>279</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 15.

<sup>280</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 16.

<sup>281</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 15.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>283</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 18.



Corbett. Watson told Corbett, “No matter how tired you feel, remember the other fellow is worse off than you are, and that the pace is killing him.”<sup>284</sup>

After intermission the two men returned to the center of the ring. The club was in frenzy, as everyone anticipated another round like the previous. The fighters began to slug it out, but this time Corbett dodged a punch and countered with a right punch that caught Eiseman in the jaw. Eiseman was not only knocked out, but Corbett had knocked him clear out of the ring and through the ropes.<sup>285</sup> For the very first time in his life, Corbett heard the ten-count. The club erupted with excitement with this new tough-as-nails fighter. All of the spectators rushed the ring and put Corbett on their shoulders and whisked him away.<sup>286</sup> Watson knew that Corbett was something special as he was fast, strong, but most of all, an intelligent fighter who was yet to reach his prime.<sup>287</sup> Corbett would become the middle weight champion, followed by the heavy weight champion at the club for the next four years.<sup>288</sup>

Corbett would take on any challenger that came his way, but the only problem was that he was an amateur and did not get paid.<sup>289</sup> The other fighter would receive financial compensation for his work in the ring, but not Corbett. Corbett fought many top heavy weights such as James C. Dailey, Martin “Buffalo” Costello, and Mike Brennan.<sup>290</sup> One of his most prolific fights was against another Irishman named Jack Burke or “the

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<sup>284</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 17.

<sup>285</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 23.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 18.

<sup>288</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 24.

<sup>289</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 15.

<sup>290</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 73.



Irish Lad.”<sup>291</sup> Burke’s claim to fame was that he stepped in the ring with the great John L. Sullivan. Sullivan was in his prime at this time and was knocking everybody out in under four rounds. The Irish Lad exceeded expectations, lasting eight rounds, and was not knocked out by the top heavy weight fighter in the country.<sup>292</sup> Corbett adopted a rigorous training program for this fight that included running, sprinting, and a healthy diet. The fight gained attention around San Francisco from local newspapers. The two men battled for eight rounds to a draw on August 27, 1887.<sup>293</sup> Corbett was proud of his efforts and told years later that if he was not so young and naive he would have knocked Burke all over that ring.<sup>294</sup>

Another significant fight in Corbett’s amateur career was against Jack Dempsey, “the Nonpareil.” Dempsey was a middle weight champion and was in his prime. This was not the same Jack Dempsey of the 1900s. Dempsey was in town and was training at the club. He was looking for someone to give him a sweat or workout. He had chosen Corbett to go a few rounds, so the two began to fight.<sup>295</sup>

Dempsey was the more experienced fighter with an arsenal of tricks and tactics, but they did not seem to work with Corbett.<sup>296</sup> Dempsey was a master at the art of feinting. Feinting is a mock attack or punch to fool your opponent. The opponent will retreat then counter attack, leaving him open to get punched. The problem Dempsey had with Corbett was that Corbett did not fall for his feints. Corbett had seen Dempsey fight

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 187.

<sup>293</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story Of James J. Corbett*, 15.

<sup>294</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 20.

<sup>295</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 29.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 30.



before and practiced the feints he saw Dempsey perform during his fight, so Corbett never flinched and knew what to expect during their friendly sparring exhibition.<sup>297</sup>

Dempsey grew frustrated that this young gun was giving him a run for his money. Corbett was smart and was able to keep Dempsey at a distance where his punches could not reach him.<sup>298</sup> Dempsey then tricked Corbett into stepping in, and Dempsey caught him with his wrist and gave Corbett his first nose bleed.<sup>299</sup> Corbett's temper flared as he went after the champion. The two exchanged fierce blows without either fighter backing down. Word spread through the club that the two were in a fierce battle. Everybody rushed upstairs to witness Corbett and Dempsey fight a grueling match.<sup>300</sup> The fight lasted for thirty minutes with no intermission. Dempsey finally stopped and told Corbett that the fight was over.<sup>301</sup> This fight was important in Corbett's career, as he was able to witness the importance of feinting and the art of boxing. Dempsey even bragged about Corbett's skills and how he gave him a tough go around during their sparring exhibition. The two men became friends until Dempsey chose to be Joe Choynski's trainer in his fight with Corbett the near future.<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 19.

<sup>298</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 30.

<sup>299</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 20.

<sup>300</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 19.

<sup>301</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 73.

<sup>302</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 33.



## Turning Pro

Jim Corbett spent four years of his life fighting at the Olympic Club for no pay or compensation, as was club policy. Corbett and his friend had fallen for two girls, so the foursome opted to move to Salt Lake City and get married with \$500 among them.<sup>303</sup> After six weeks in Utah the \$500 was dwindling, as food and rent were expensive. Corbett knew they had to get money. He saw an advertisement in a local paper that the heavyweight champion of Utah, Frank Smith, was looking for opponents.<sup>304</sup>

Corbett knew he was not allowed to fight for a purse due to his commitment to the Olympic Club, but he needed the money. This left Corbett no choice but to fight the match. He decided to change his name to “Jim Dillon” for the fight.<sup>305</sup> The two fighters met to discuss a date. Smith wanted six weeks of training while Corbett wanted to fight the following Friday; Corbett got his way. Corbett, his girlfriend and fellow roommates were nervous for the fight. Frank Smith was much bigger than Corbett, and Corbett was out of shape as he was living large for six weeks, enjoying life. Fight night finally arrived and Corbett was abnormally nervous, as he thought he was going to lose. A man randomly appeared in his training room, telling him that Smith wanted to talk to him outside by the tree. Corbett agreed as he nervously approached Smith. Smith explained to Corbett that he knew who he really was, and that he was really Charlie Mitchell. Mitchell was an English pugilist who had recently fought John L. Sullivan to a draw.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 23.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>305</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 47.

<sup>306</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 63.



He begged Corbett not to beat him badly, so Corbett went along with the hoax. Corbett told him to take a dive in the second round and warned him if he did not oblige he would get the beat down of a lifetime. The fight began, and Smith did what he was told and took the dive. Corbett was exhausted from being so out of shape, but no one knew. Corbett was the victor, earning \$460.<sup>307</sup>

The money did not last long, and Corbett knew he needed to fight again. He soon received an offer from a miner in Wyoming who was willing to fight for \$1000. Corbett knew this was an opportunity of a lifetime and accepted the offer to fight. Upon his arrival, people this time mistook him for Jack “Nonpareil” Dempsey. Once again, Corbett went along with it. Once the miner heard who he was fighting, he quickly backed down. Corbett ended up fighting Duncan McDonald, who, like Smith, was a professional fighter.<sup>308</sup> There was no real outcome to this fight. According to some Corbett won, while others claim Smith was victorious. It is noted in many sources that it was a six-round draw with neither getting the purse.<sup>309</sup>

Corbett quickly returned to Salt Lake City only to find his father waiting for him. The older Corbett demanded that his son return to San Francisco. The younger Corbett agreed to return home in a few weeks. Jim was broke. He had no money left and could not get home. Duncan McDonald, whom Corbett had just fought, paid for all four to go home by selling his personal items. Corbett went back to work at the bank, but this time worked at a different branch selling insurance.<sup>310</sup> This lifestyle bored Corbett, as he

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<sup>307</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 55.

<sup>308</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 24.

<sup>309</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 21.

<sup>310</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 60.



yearned for more out of life. One day he ran into Joe Choynski. He had just turned pro and told Corbett of his success, both in the ring and financially. This struck a nerve in Corbett, as he beat Choynski twice in back yard brawls and then twice as an amateur. Corbett knew he could fare better, but initially did not want to turn pro until a few local papers began to write of Corbett's fear of Choynski. The paper quoted Choynski as saying he would "knock the stuffing out of that dude, the first time he met him on the street."<sup>311</sup> Corbett turned pro against his father's will, and Choynski would be his first professional opponent.<sup>312</sup>

This bout was well promoted throughout San Francisco. The media went into a frenzy over the bout, acting as if it was a heavyweight title fight. Both men agreed on a fight to the finish with no set number of rounds and a winner-take-all purse of \$2,000 on May 30, 1889 at a barn in Fairfax, CA.<sup>313</sup> Newspapers hyped it as Irishman vs. Jewish, Athletic Club vs. California Club, Professional vs. Amateur, Labor vs. Capital, and Golden Gate Avenue vs. Hayes Street.<sup>314</sup> Every word of each man was quoted, twisted, and turned to grab headlines for the fight. Their training regimens were closely followed to see who was training harder for the bout.<sup>315</sup>

Fight day finally arrived, and thousands flocked to Fairfax to see two gladiators go to battle. To his surprise, Jack Dempsey was the corner-man for Corbett's rival, so an upset Corbett bet Dempsey \$500 that Corbett himself would be the victor, Dempsey declined to place a wager, indicating he knew that Corbett was the better fighter with the

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<sup>311</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story of James J. Corbett*, 19.

<sup>312</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 63.

<sup>313</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 26.

<sup>314</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 65.

<sup>315</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story of James J. Corbett*, 21.



right skills to beat Choynski.<sup>316</sup> The fight got under way, with the men going toe to toe and neither backing down. The crowd was wild as the fighters exchanged blows. Corbett side-stepped and punched Choynski in the head, but caught his thumb and popped it out of joint; yet he continued to fight.<sup>317</sup> In the fourth round the local sheriff intervened and stopped the fight due to its brutality and state laws.<sup>318</sup> The fight ceased, but both fighters wanted to continue the fight.<sup>319</sup>

The fight was rescheduled for June 5, but this time it would take place on a barge in San Francisco Bay. The second fight day finally arrived, but this time the problem was that Choynski did not have his two ounce gloves. A pair of gloves was found and the fight, once again, was under way with both men wreaking havoc on each other.<sup>320</sup> Round after round passed: one round to Choynski, the next to Corbett. It was a battle of two fierce warriors. At one point, Choynski had Corbett wobbled with both hands at his side, but Corbett was able to pull himself together and fight.<sup>321</sup>

The fight continued on the barge in the hot California sun. Both men were getting weak and tired. Choynski was bleeding all over, and Corbett's right eye had swollen shut.<sup>322</sup> Each man continued fighting for a spot of shade in the corner of the ring. Back and forth they went. Finally, in the 28th round, Corbett went for it all. He threw a right handed punch that caught his opponent square on the chin. Down went Choynski for the count, and Corbett was declared the victor. The keys to Corbett's victory were his speed,

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<sup>316</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 69.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>318</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 30.

<sup>319</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story of James J. Corbett*, 23.

<sup>320</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 79.

<sup>321</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 76.

<sup>322</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story of James J. Corbett*, 26.



stamina, and ability to punch with more power with his left hook.<sup>323</sup> He was well conditioned and was able to take the physical abuse of a tough match. He learned to watch his opponent as he fought but also as he walked away. Corbett would watch his opponent to see if he was hurt or wobbled as he approached his corner. Corbett himself stated this match taught him more about fighting and becoming a scientific fighter than any other fight had.<sup>324</sup>

Corbett went back to the Olympic Club to teach the younger club members the art of boxing, while earning \$250 a month for his services.<sup>325</sup> He soon got an invitation to tour the west coast cities. He would be the main attraction on the tour, and each fight would be an exhibition that went no more than ten rounds. Corbett began to make a name for himself on the tour, as one newspaper claimed him to be the next heavyweight champion of the world. During the tour, Corbett continued to work on his feints, footwork, and his jabs. At this point in boxing, jabs were not a crucial part of the sport.

Corbett received an invitation to fight Jake Kilrain. Kilrain had recently lost a seventy-five round fight to John L. Sullivan, so Corbett eagerly accepted the fight. The fight took place on February 18, 1890 in Louisiana.<sup>326</sup> Fight day had arrived, and the two men were eager to get going as they had never met or seen each other fight. The two met in the center of the ring, but Corbett knew Kilrain was bigger and stronger, and he could

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<sup>323</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 30.

<sup>324</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 79.

<sup>325</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 32.

<sup>326</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 33.



not go blow for blow with Kilrain. Corbett had to have a plan to combat this disadvantage, using the boxing skills as an art that he had developed to out box Kilrain.<sup>327</sup>

Round one was underway, and Kilrain could not get a finger on Corbett. He was quick, he jabbed, and he counterattacked Kilrain's every move.<sup>328</sup> In the second round, Corbett caught a left to his neck but countered with a left to Kilrain's stomach.<sup>329</sup> The next four rounds were similar to the first two. Corbett would back up and let Kilrain tire himself out by chasing. By the sixth round Kilrain could barely reach Corbett with his punches.<sup>330</sup> Corbett continued to bob and weave, dodging every move then counterattacking. Kilrain was bruised, battered, cut, and bleeding.<sup>331</sup> By the end of the sixth round, the referee had stopped the fight because Kilrain could not continue; and Corbett was declared the victor. Corbett left the ring unscathed, with the crowd chanting his name and \$3,500 in his pocket.<sup>332</sup> This was a significant fight because it caught the headlines of newspapers across the country.<sup>333</sup> Corbett was now in the mainstream and had backers to support him financially. Most importantly, he caught the attention of Sullivan, who declared Corbett's victory over Kilrain a joke.<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 77.

<sup>328</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 106.

<sup>329</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 33.

<sup>330</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 38.

<sup>331</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 107.

<sup>332</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 38.

<sup>333</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story of James J. Corbett*, 30.

<sup>334</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.



### Bring on the Champion (John L. Sullivan)

Corbett continued to fight, thus making a name for himself in the fighting world. He fought Dominick McCaffrey who had recently lost a six-round fight to Sullivan. McCaffrey did not fare much better against Corbett, as he was knocked out of the ring in the fourth round.<sup>335</sup> After the fight, McCaffrey compared Sullivan to Corbett and predicted that if the two ever met in the ring that Corbett would lick the great John L. Sullivan.<sup>336</sup>

Corbett's next opponent was Australian heavyweight champion Peter Jackson. Jackson was bigger than Corbett and was favored to win the fight. Many did not expect Corbett to make ten rounds with Jackson. The two men battled it out for sixty-one rounds with no winner. The contest was declared a draw.<sup>337</sup> It was heart-wrenching fight, lasting for over four hours and leaving both men bruised and battered.<sup>338</sup> Corbett did learn how to defend against Jackson's fierce uppercut. He would watch Jackson, then move to his right, making Jackson miss each time.<sup>339</sup> He would then counter with a left hook to the stomach. Jackson claimed that Corbett's body blows did not hurt, but he sustained broken ribs.<sup>340</sup> During the last few rounds, both men could barely stand but wanted to land a knockout punch. The fight left both men extremely exhausted and

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<sup>335</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 41.

<sup>336</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 35.

<sup>337</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story of James J. Corbett*, 41.

<sup>338</sup> F. Daniel Somrack, *Boxing in San Francisco* (New York: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), 13.

<sup>339</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 46.

<sup>340</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 42.



thinking they were robbed of a victory. Later in life, Corbett reflected on this fight and Jackson as an opponent: “That night I thought Peter Jackson was a great fighter. Six months later, still being tired from that fight, I thought him a great one. And today, after thirty-three years, as I sit on the fifteenth floor of a New York skyscraper writing this I still maintain that he was the greatest fighter I have ever seen.”<sup>341</sup>

Corbett trained for four months for his fight with Jackson. During his training, he took a break and traveled to New Orleans to see Jack Dempsey fight.<sup>342</sup> After his time in New Orleans, he traveled to New York, then back to San Francisco. On his way home, he stopped in Chicago, where John L. Sullivan was performing in the play “Honest Hearts and Willing Hands.”<sup>343</sup> Sullivan got word of Corbett’s attendance at the play and offered him his balcony seats, which very much shocked Corbett.<sup>344</sup> At the end of his performance, Sullivan asked Corbett to join him for some drinks. As the night wore on, Sullivan drank excessively, and as he became more intoxicated he boasted that he could lick any man at the bar. He continued this repeating this until Corbett’s temper began to flare. He confronted Sullivan about his comments, telling him he was offended by them, and that he was not afraid of him.<sup>345</sup> Sullivan was taken by this young, brash man. Sullivan stared straight at Corbett, trying to intimidate him, but Corbett did not back down. Realizing he could not intimidate Corbett, he then invited him to have another drink; Sullivan never repeated his boast again that night.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 145.

<sup>342</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 39.

<sup>343</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 296.

<sup>344</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 147.

<sup>345</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 39.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.



The two men would meet again in a sparring exhibition in San Francisco. Sullivan was in town with his play. Both men agreed to a sparring match at the Grand Opera House on June 26, 1891.<sup>347</sup> The odd thing about this exhibition was that Sullivan only agreed on the condition they fight in their tuxedos. Corbett thought that this was odd but agreed on a four-round match. The first round both men went exchanging fierce punches, enticing the crowd.<sup>348</sup> The second round was much the same until Sullivan put his hands at his side and stuck his chin out, daring Corbett to hit him. He continued this foolishness for the next two rounds. Sullivan wanted to box in tuxedos so nobody would see him without his shirt. He was fat and out of shape. He put his hands down because he was tired and could not continue to fight.<sup>349</sup>

Corbett studied his every move. He was faster, stronger, and more athletic than the world champ. He knew he could lick Sullivan and wanted to fight him.<sup>350</sup> The media was hailing Corbett as the next champion. Corbett, being the gentleman he was, had a box of cigars sent to Sullivan's boat before it sailed. When Sullivan received the gift he went into a rage and threw the box overboard.<sup>351</sup> Corbett now knew he was physically better than Sullivan and had the necessary tools and training to defeat the champion. Corbett was so eager to fight Sullivan that he wrote a letter to the Olympic Club in New Orleans, asking them to offer a purse for a fight between Sullivan and himself.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 47.

<sup>348</sup> Somrack, *Boxing in San Francisco*, 13.

<sup>349</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 48.

<sup>350</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.

<sup>351</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 150.

<sup>352</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 48.



### Fight of the Century

Corbett finally got what he wanted: a challenge from Sullivan himself. On March 5, 1892, the *Associated Press* from St. Paul, Minnesota printed a challenge that Sullivan sent to Frank P. Slavin, Charles P. Mitchell, and James Corbett in particular.<sup>353</sup> In the ad, Sullivan explained that he was doing his theatrical tour of the country. His contract expired on June 4, and he would start touring again on September 12. He wanted the fight to be at the end of August or beginning of September. This would give him three months to train adequately for the fight.<sup>354</sup> His challenge read thus:

This country has been overrun with a lot of foreign fighters and also American aspirants for fistic fame and championship honors, who have endeavored to seek notoriety and American dollars by challenging me to a fight, knowing full well my hands were tied by contract and honor. I have been compelled to listen to their bluffs without making reply on account of my obligations.

But now my time has come. I hereby challenge any and all of the bluffers who have been trying to make capital at my expense to fight me either the last week in August this year or the first week in September this year at the Olympic Club, New Orleans, Louisiana, for a purse of \$25,000 and an outside bet of \$10,000, the winner of the fight to take the entire purse. I insist upon the bet of \$10,000 to show that they mean business.

I give precedence in this challenge to Frank P. Slavin, of Australia, he and his backers having done the greatest amounts of bluffing. My second preference is the bombastic sprinter, Charles Mitchell, of England, whom I would rather whip than any man in the world. My third preference is James Corbett, of California, who has achieved his share of bombast. But in this challenge I include all fighters- first come, first served- who are white. I will not fight a negro. I never have and never shall.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 164.

<sup>354</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.

<sup>355</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.



Slavin declined due to his next fight with Peter Jackson, whom Corbett just fought. Mitchell was willing to fight the champ, but only on his terms. Immediately, Corbett contacted his manager, William Brady, to front the money to cement the deal. They were able to come up with \$1,000, but Sullivan gave them a week to find the rest.<sup>356</sup> Desperate to make this fight happen, Corbett traveled to Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York. It was here where he ran into some of his connections over the years. He was able to get backers and come up with the rest of the money to ensure he would get his shot at the title.<sup>357</sup> Many believed that Sullivan demanded a high purse believing nobody would be able to come up with the money, and he would not have to fight. Sullivan had not fought for three years and was no longer in his prime, nor was he in physical condition to fight. He was always drunk and looking for another big pay day to continue living the good life.<sup>358</sup>

The first ever heavyweight championship fight in America under the Marquess of Queensberry rules was to take place on September 7, 1892 in New Orleans. The fight, named the "Battle of New Orleans," was to be no ordinary fight, but a three-day boxing festival. This fight was huge in the world of boxing, as it demonstrated that boxing had evolved from a frowned-upon, barbaric sport to a sport now considered acceptable entertainment by mainstream Americans. The fight was hyped as a thinking brain versus

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<sup>356</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 53.

<sup>357</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 167.

<sup>358</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.



animal force and “Lace-curtain” Irish versus “Shanty” Irish.<sup>359</sup> This fight differed from every other fight that had taken place. It was being fought for the highest purse ever, and it the most media coverage. Large numbers of newspapers, including respected newspapers, were covering the fight and discouraged the average scum such as criminals and gamblers from attending.<sup>360</sup> The notoriety of the impending fight spread across the Atlantic, with Corbett claiming that many Irish citizens hated him because he was willing to fight Sullivan.<sup>361</sup>

Both men began their training for their fight. Sullivan started training in Good Ground, Long Island and Corbett started his camp in Asbury Park, NJ.<sup>362</sup> Sullivan was cleared by his doctor to be physically fit to fight. He had some problems, though. One was his motivation to get started. He trained when he felt like it and was more concerned with his theatrical career.<sup>363</sup> Sullivan also had extra weight in his midsection and weighed around 250 pounds.<sup>364</sup> He did not take his training seriously and had a hard time cutting weight. Sullivan stated, “Corbett will leave a badly beaten man.”<sup>365</sup> Corbett, on the other hand, was ready to make his dream a reality and trained extremely hard. He had been boxing over the years and was still in great shape from his fight with Pete Jackson and from participating in boxing exhibitions.<sup>366</sup> Every morning his training consisted of

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<sup>359</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*, Kindle.

<sup>360</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*, 253.

<sup>361</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 171.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>363</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 308.

<sup>364</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 214.

<sup>365</sup> *New York Times*, March 1, 1892.

<sup>366</sup> Somrack, *Boxing in San Francisco*, 13.



running, hitting the bag, and sparring. Corbett trained so hard that at one point he had to focus on gaining weight, as he was becoming too light from all his condition training.<sup>367</sup>

Sullivan left for New Orleans on September 1, and Corbett arrived a few days later. Both men arrived to media frenzy. Sullivan's camp was located at the Young Men's Club of New Orleans, while Corbett set up camp at the Southern Club.<sup>368</sup> Corbett was confident that he would defeat Sullivan, even stating that "Sullivan was gonna be the worst licked man you ever looked at and that he did not care if Sullivan weighed 200 lbs or half a ton."<sup>369</sup> Sullivan weighed in at 212 while Corbett was 25 pounds lighter, weighing in at 187.

Fight day had finally arrived. Corbett was cool and calm, as his moment had finally arrived. He was mentally prepared for his fight and what to expect from the mighty Sullivan. He was so confident that he bet on himself. The day of the fight, Sullivan went from a 3/1 favor to 5/1, although one of Corbett's backers bet \$1,000 on a Sullivan victory.<sup>370</sup> Corbett had no doubt that he would win this fight, but others doubted he had a chance. His friends stated, "it's a shame to let him get in there with a rugged, roaring lion of a fellow like the mighty Sullivan. It will not be a contest."<sup>371</sup>

Corbett was trained by Billy Delaney, Jim Daly, John Donaldson, and Mike Donovan. Donovan was a respected teacher of boxing and spent many hours teaching Corbett defenses against Sullivan's three basic blows: a chopping left, a right jab, and a

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<sup>367</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 183.

<sup>368</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story of James J. Corbett*, 51.

<sup>369</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 56.

<sup>370</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 315.

<sup>371</sup> John Keiran, *New York Times*, February 19, 1933.



right cross.<sup>372</sup> Corbett knew that Sullivan was powerful and aggressive, but he had a plan. He knew that he could not let Sullivan back him into a corner when he was tired, fearing he would get knocked out. He decided that he would let Sullivan back him into a corner while he was still fresh at the beginning of the fight. This would allow Corbett to study Sullivan and his moves, as well as tire the champ out for the later rounds.<sup>373</sup>

Corbett offered Sullivan the corner of his choice as long as he entered the ring first. This greatly angered Sullivan. Both men were in the ring standing toe to toe. Sullivan wore his green tights, and Corbett wore dark shorts with a belt made of red, white, and blue. As they stood listening to the instructions from the referee, Corbett looked like a fine-tuned athlete; however, Sullivan simply looked old and fat.<sup>374</sup> At 9:00 P.M. the ring was cleared and by 9:07 the two warriors were off to battle.<sup>375</sup>

Sullivan came out fierce, growling, hooting, and hollering; Sullivan was trying to intimidate his opponent, but it did not work, for Corbett would stick to his plan. As soon as Sullivan would charge him, Corbett would back himself into a corner and watch Sullivan.<sup>376</sup> Corbett recognized that when Sullivan wanted to throw a right punch, he would slap his thigh with his left hand. Corbett would time his actions and when Sullivan threw his right punch Corbett would side step and Sullivan would miss greatly.<sup>377</sup> The two would be in the center of the ring again, and Corbett would back into

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<sup>372</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.

<sup>373</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.

<sup>374</sup> Somrack, *Boxing in San Francisco*, 12.

<sup>375</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 60.

<sup>376</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 197.

<sup>377</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.



another corner to do it again.<sup>378</sup> The second round was much of the same as the first. Sullivan had not landed a punch, but neither had Corbett. The crowd began to grow restless, as they had paid to see a fight. They began to boo Corbett and he waved to them, acknowledging to the crowd that he knew what he was doing and this was part of his plan.<sup>379</sup>

The third round was a little bit different. Sullivan again had Corbett in a corner, thinking that Corbett was trying to escape. Sullivan went to throw his devastating right hook, but Corbett countered with a left, knocking Sullivan back into the center of the ring. Corbett followed with a few more hooks to his opponent's face. Sullivan grew frustrated and angry when Corbett broke his nose.<sup>380</sup> Sullivan began to lunge at his opponent and was swinging like a madman, hoping to land a knockout blow, but all he was doing was tiring himself out and exposing his weaknesses.<sup>381</sup>

In the fourth round, Sullivan came out like a rabid animal looking to destroy his enemy, but this is when boxing would be forever changed. People watching the fight would see something in that ring that they had never seen before, a true boxer with a scientific logic to the sport.<sup>382</sup> All the years of hard work and dedication began to pay off. All the moves, jabs, and feints began to work. Corbett was faster than Sullivan. He began to use his footwork and danced around the ring. Sullivan charged at him like a

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<sup>378</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.

<sup>379</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 199.

<sup>380</sup> Pollack, *John L. Sullivan: The Career of the First Gloved Heavyweight Champion*, 214.

<sup>381</sup> . Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 318.

<sup>382</sup> Maureen Connolly, "James 'Gentleman Jim' Corbett," *Irish America*, November 30, 1999, 84.



bull, but Corbett, with quick reflexes, would quickly get out of the way.<sup>383</sup> Corbett began to jab with his left to Sullivan's head. He would use combinations to the head then a blasting blow to the body. The crowd grew silent as Sullivan was dazed and confused, not knowing what was happening.<sup>384</sup>

As the fight continued, the beating got worse. Corbett was a true boxer, while Sullivan was merely a street fighter. Sullivan continued to charge, missing every time, and landing in the ropes.<sup>385</sup> Corbett was not even fazed as Sullivan grew tired. He was defeating himself, as he could not keep up with the young Corbett. Sullivan became increasingly frustrated with every round that passed. Corbett continued dancing around the ring. For every punch that Sullivan threw, Corbett had an answer.<sup>386</sup> He continued with jabs, feints, and counter punches. The champion never gave up and kept charging. In the later rounds, Sullivan attacked with a few rights, but Corbett would step away and counter with his own barrage of punches.<sup>387</sup> He landed a few punches to the body, leaving Sullivan keeled over and badly hurt. It was just a matter of time until the mighty John L. Sullivan was defeated, and Corbett had all the time he needed.<sup>388</sup>

The twenty-first round arrived, and it would be the last round in which Sullivan would ever be heavyweight champion of the world. Sullivan was tired, battered, and defeated. He still came out swinging, though, but without much force.<sup>389</sup> Corbett patiently waited for his attack. Sullivan came at Corbett, and Corbett threw a right punch

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<sup>383</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.

<sup>384</sup> Connolly, "James 'Gentleman Jim' Corbett," 84.

<sup>385</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 199.

<sup>386</sup> *New York Times*, September 9, 1892.

<sup>387</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 199.

<sup>388</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.

<sup>389</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.



that landed square on the champ's jaw.<sup>390</sup> There was no hope for Sullivan, as his eyes rolled back into his head, and his knees buckled; he was soon on his back and then rolled onto his side.<sup>391</sup> The referee counted to ten, and the crowd remained silent as if in a church. When the count hit ten, the crowd was in a frenzy as Corbett was the new heavyweight champion of the world. For the first time, Corbett heard the roar of the crowd. James Corbett was the first ever gloved heavy weight champion of the world.<sup>392</sup>

Corbett held the Championship Belt for the next five years. He successfully defended the belt against Charles Mitchell, winning in three rounds.<sup>393</sup> Corbett would eventually lose the belt to Bob Fitzsimmons in fourteen rounds.<sup>394</sup> Corbett was dominant throughout most of the fight but was caught in the abdomen, a blow from which he could not recover. Corbett would get two more chances to get the belt back, but he was unsuccessful in both attempts, losing to his old sparring partner, James Jefferies.<sup>395</sup> Corbett finished his career with a record of 11-4-3 and was inducted into the boxing hall of fame in 1990 along with Sullivan.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 200.

<sup>391</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 63.

<sup>392</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story Of James J. Corbett*, 54.

<sup>393</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 116.

<sup>394</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 249.

<sup>395</sup> Fleischer, *Gentleman Jim: The Story Of James J. Corbett*, 98.

<sup>396</sup> Boxing Hall of Fame,  
<http://www.ibhof.com/pages/about/inductees/oldtimer/corbettjamesj.html>.



## Conclusion

James J. Corbett had a lasting effect on the sport of boxing. Some could argue that he is the founder or first master of modern-day boxing. Corbett was a true underdog who always faced an uphill battle to become the heavyweight champion of the world. He did the impossible and defeated the unbeatable John L. Sullivan: a feat that many thought was unattainable. Corbett never reached the same level of popularity with the public and with Irish Americans as Sullivan did. Sullivan embraced his Irish culture, whereas Corbett did not. Sullivan was a drunk while Corbett did not drink, nor would he hang around drunks in saloons.<sup>397</sup> Corbett stated, “I was always more controlled and a little too businesslike, perhaps, to vie with him in popularity. You can’t destroy a public hero without it being resented.”<sup>398</sup> As time went on, Corbett would win over the public and was often mauled by crowds.<sup>399</sup>

Two different families were forced to leave their beloved country due to the conditions of the Famine. Both survived the treacherous journey to America and then to San Francisco. They met and had a son who would redefine the sport of boxing and become part of United States history. James J. Corbett helped shaped boxing as we know it today. He took a sport considered by many to be barbaric and unacceptable in society to a level never thought imaginable. Before Sullivan, the sport took place in saloons and dark alleys, and after his influence, it was one of America’s pastimes covered by media outlets. Jim Corbett took the sport to another level. He changed the approach to the

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<sup>397</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America’s First Sports Hero*.

<sup>398</sup> Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd*, 171.

<sup>399</sup> Myler, *Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend*, 82.



sport, and his most important innovation was the realization that a fighter has to fight intelligently and effectively.

Corbett was not the biggest or the strongest, but he was a smart fighter. He took a scientific approach to the sport.<sup>400</sup> When he was a little boy, he fell in love with fighting and became a true student of the sport. He trained hard and was a sponge, taking in all he could about fighting. He attended every fight he could, watching and learning from what he saw. He trained with the best and was teachable. He revolutionized the sport and saw it as an art form.<sup>401</sup> He introduced footwork and dancing around the ring. He mastered the feint and the left jab. He learned to box and read his opponents. Corbett would counter with combinations, hooks, jabs, and body blows. He was the first heavyweight to use these tactics. Corbett gave Irish Americans a reason to be proud as he had a tremendous impact on refining boxing technique and can be rightly be labeled the father of modern scientific boxing.<sup>402</sup> He paved the way for future fighters, such as Jack Dempsey and even Muhammad Ali. The Great Famine was a true tragedy, but it altered boxing in American history. Corbett was did not fit the typical Irish stereotype, but was pride of his Irish heritage.

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<sup>400</sup> Bob Burrill, *Who's Who in Boxing*, (New York: Arlington House, 1974), 51.

<sup>401</sup> Bob Burrill, *Who's Who in Boxing*, (New York: Arlington House, 1974), 51.

<sup>402</sup> Mark Silver, *The Arc of Boxing: The Rise and Decline of the Sweet Science*.



## Chapter 5

### MIKE “KING OF BALLPLAYERS” KELLY

“I was a crank on the game, and couldn’t leave it alone if I wanted.”

Mike Kelly<sup>403</sup>

Mike “King” Kelly was America’s first baseball superstar who redefined the game of baseball, helping it evolve into what it is today, “America’s pastime.” His motivation and dedication were pivotal to the development of baseball. King Kelly was the greatest player of his time, as he helped to develop and implemented such plays as the hit and run, the hook slide, the catcher backing up first base, using signals for the pitcher, and running the bases.<sup>404</sup> Kelly was an excellent ball player with a larger-than-life persona, and he became baseball’s first media sensation.<sup>405</sup>

The King became a sports celebrity during a time when the United States was recovering from the Civil War. He gave many citizens of America a reason to cheer again. King Kelly signed big contracts and could be considered the Michael Jordan of his era. He played for sixteen seasons as both a player and a manager before dying at the young age of 36.<sup>406</sup> He spent most of his career with the Chicago White Stockings and

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<sup>403</sup> Mike “King” Kelly, *“Play Ball” Stories of the Diamond Field* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006), 13.

<sup>404</sup> Paul Gillespie, *Mike “King” Kelly: First of the American Baseball Legends*, 2012, <http://fromdeephrightfield.com/mike-king-kelly-american-baseball-legends/>.

<sup>405</sup> Larry McCarthy, *Making The Irish American*, 447.

<sup>406</sup> “Baseball Hall of Fame,” <http://baseballhall.org/hof/kelly-king>.



the Boston Beaneaters.<sup>407</sup> He twice led the National League in batting average and constantly led the league in stolen bases. Born to Irish immigrants looking to escape the Famine, this man forever changed the face of baseball, as did the Irish, in general. Forty-one percent of baseball players between 1876 and 1884 were Irish.<sup>408</sup>

### **Brief History of Baseball**

Games involving a stick and ball have been dated as far back as ancient Egypt. The English had games such as Cricket and Rounders. Rounders being considered by many English as a “girls’ game.”<sup>409</sup> Rounders is much more similar to baseball than is any of the other sports mentioned. Rounders is played by two teams consisting of six to fifteen players. The game includes of a batter and a pitcher and is divided into innings.<sup>410</sup> Rounders eventually made its way to America.

In the nineteenth century, Rounders had become very popular amongst the citizens of America, and it took the name Town Ball, as it was played within the town.<sup>411</sup> As time progressed, it was called a variety of names such as Bass-Ball, Base, Base Ball, and Goal Ball.<sup>412</sup> Each town had its own rules, and these varied from region to region.<sup>413</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, Alexander Cartwright and Louis Wadsworth created new

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<sup>407</sup> “Baseball-reference.com,” <http://www.baseball-reference.com/players/k/kellyki01.shtml>.

<sup>408</sup> David L. Fleitz, *The Irish In Baseball: An Early History* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 6.

<sup>409</sup> John Durant, *The Story of Baseball* (New York: Hastings House, 1947), 1.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>411</sup> “History of Baseball,” <http://www.historyofbaseball.us>.

<sup>412</sup> “Welcome to the 19th Century,” [www.19cbaseball.com](http://www.19cbaseball.com).

<sup>413</sup> Durant, *The Story of Baseball*, 4.



rules and regulations for Town Ball, which became the rules of baseball that are the fundamental rules of today. The first modern baseball game was played in 1845 at Elysian Fields in Hoboken, NJ, and all the rules were written in an official rule book by 1858.<sup>414</sup> The National Association of Professional Baseball Players began in the late 1860s, with the Cincinnati Red Stockings becoming America's first professional team.<sup>415</sup> As time passed more cities began creating their own clubs and leagues, including the National League which still stands today, all of which resulted in baseball becoming America's national pastime.<sup>416</sup>

### **Early Childhood**

Michael Joseph Kelly was born on December 31, 1857, in Troy, New York and was the second son born to Michael Kelly and Catherine Kylie.<sup>417</sup> Both of his parents were born in Waterford, Ireland.<sup>418</sup> His parents left Ireland due to the horrific conditions of the Great Famine. In *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, Marty Appel states that both parents were

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<sup>414</sup> "infoplease," <http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/sports/baseball-history.html>.

<sup>415</sup> Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years* (New York: Oxford Press, 1960), Kindle.

<sup>416</sup> Mike Roer, *The Life Of A Baseball Radical: Orator O'Rourke* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2005), 60.

<sup>417</sup> Kevin Kenny, *Making The Irish American*, edited by J.J. Lee and Marion R. Casey (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 447.

<sup>418</sup> Howard W. Rosenberg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly, U.S. Team Sport's First Media Sensation and Baseball's Original Casey at the Bat* (Boston: Tile Books, 2004), 16.



born in 1820. In contrast, the 1860 census shows that his father was younger than his mother, being born in 1826 while Catherine was born in 1819.<sup>419</sup>

Michael and Catherine Kelly left Ireland in search of a better life in America. They made the treacherous journey across the Atlantic, during which many perished. Their ship arrived in New York, but their journey did not stop there. They continued to travel 125 miles up the Hudson River to the city of Troy. At the time of their arrival, Troy was home to many immigrants because jobs were available in Troy's iron trades and textile manufacturing.<sup>420</sup> Mike Kelly, Sr. got a job as a laborer in Troy, and he and his wife had two children.<sup>421</sup> A locomotive caused a fire that ravished the town of Troy, causing millions of dollars in damage. Out of work, Kelly's father enlisted in the U.S. military and served his three years for the Union Army.<sup>422</sup> After his three years of service was over he again enlisted in the military, in which he served until the end of the Civil War.<sup>423</sup>

At the age of five Michael Kelly began his educational career in Troy. His parents were keen on their children getting a good education. Growing up in Ireland, his parents were not so fortunate as to get an education due to the British rules and regulations.<sup>424</sup> So they emphasized to their children the importance of learning and being

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<sup>419</sup> *Troy Press*, October 26, 1894.

<sup>420</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 3.

<sup>421</sup> Kelly, "Play Ball" *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 6.

<sup>422</sup> Rosenburg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly, U.S. Team Sport's First Media Sensation and Baseball's Original Casey at the Bat*, 16.

<sup>423</sup> Kelly, "Play Ball" *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 7.

<sup>424</sup> Blackwell and Hackney, *The Everything Irish History and Heritage Book*, 125.



a good student. Towards the end of the war, his father was stationed in Washington, so the Kelly family relocated there.<sup>425</sup>

As a young boy, Michael Kelly was strong, healthy, athletic and fond of outdoor activities.<sup>426</sup> There were no real professional sports to follow. Children played outside and created their own games. During this time, children played a game similar to baseball called “burn ball.”<sup>427</sup> While Kelly enjoyed these pastimes, his family was still on the move. After Mike Kelly, Sr. had served his time in the military, he became ill, so he again moved the family north to Paterson, NJ, hoping to find employment in the silk mills.<sup>428</sup>

Things in New Jersey did not get much better for the Kellys. His father was ill and only grew worse, and soon passed away in 1870.<sup>429</sup> A few months later, his mother became ill and passed away, as well.<sup>430</sup> It is not known what either parent had died from but they had survived the treacherous journey across the Atlantic, settled in a new country, survived the deadliest war on American soil, raised two children while one parent was at war, and moved up and down the East coast. Losing both of his parents while he was only in his early teens affected Michael. He lost interest in his school work, and baseball became an outlet for him. During his teen years, Kelly spent most of his

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<sup>425</sup> Rosenberg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly, U.S. Team Sport's First Media Sensation and Baseball's Original Casey at the Bat*, 17.

<sup>426</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 9.

<sup>427</sup> John Durant, *The Story of Baseball*, 4.

<sup>428</sup> Kelly, “Play Ball” *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 8.

<sup>429</sup> Gillespie, *Mike “King” Kelly: First of the American Baseball Legends*.

<sup>430</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 12.



days on the baseball field. He spent many hours at Forty-Acres Park, where he learned to catch fly balls.<sup>431</sup>

### **Beginning of a career**

Mike Kelly gave the working world a chance, taking some jobs in his mid-teens. His first job was at the Murray Silk Mill for three dollars a week, where his duty was to carry baskets of coal from the basement to the top floor.<sup>432</sup> Kelly had a large physique and was very strong for his age, which gave him the opportunity to handle large baskets of coal. According to Kelly, the baskets were bigger than he was.<sup>433</sup> Kelly was often in trouble with his boss, as he would always try to leave work early.<sup>434</sup>

Mike Kelly decided to take a new job as a paper boy, delivering the *New York Clipper*.<sup>435</sup> Kelly would have to get up at four o'clock and take the train to Manhattan, only to be back by six o'clock to sell the paper in Paterson.<sup>436</sup> During his youth he met a young man named Jim McCormick. The two were obsessed with baseball player Joe Start who played first base for the Brooklyn Atlantics. They would often travel to Brooklyn to watch him play.<sup>437</sup> Kelly would read the sports section of the paper every day as his love for baseball only grew stronger, becoming the key focus of his life.<sup>438</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 13.

<sup>432</sup> "Society For American Baseball Research," <http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/ffc40dac>.

<sup>433</sup> Kelly, *"Play Ball" Stories of the Diamond Field*, 9.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid.

<sup>436</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 14.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid.



In 1873 Kelly began his professional career in baseball at the age of sixteen.<sup>439</sup> His close friend, Jim McCormick, asked if he would be interested in playing on a team, to which he gladly replied yes.<sup>440</sup> In many interviews Kelly claimed that he found professional baseball by accident. His friends were on a team called the Haymakers and were looking for a ninth player to field a team.<sup>441</sup> It included many future professional ball players, such as William “Blondie” Purcel, Edward Sylvester Nolan, and his friend Jim McCormick.<sup>442</sup> This is where Kelly developed into a crowd pleaser. He was blossoming into a true star. Kelly insisted on changing the name of the club to the Keystones, the name of his first club in Washington.<sup>443</sup> After much debate the players decided on the name Keystones. Kelly exerted an early influence on the team.

The Keystones lost their best pitcher, Nolan, to another club, so McCormick became the pitcher and Kelly was his catcher. Generally accepted as the most difficult position, the catcher had to be able to see the field and anticipate plays.<sup>444</sup> It was a role that Mike Kelly embraced. He took a beating behind the plate because they did not wear the equipment as they do in today’s game. If a catcher had to block a ball or tag a player out he used his body with no protection.<sup>445</sup> In addition to this, baseball mitts were still a

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<sup>439</sup> Kelly, “Play Ball” *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 9.

<sup>440</sup> “Society For American Baseball Research.”

<sup>441</sup> Rosenberg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly, U.S. Team Sport’s First Media Sensation and Baseball’s Original Casey at the Bat*, 15.

<sup>442</sup> “Baseball Hall of Fame,” <http://baseballhall.org/hof/kelly-king>.

<sup>443</sup> Marty Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 17.

<sup>444</sup> Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years*, Kindle.

<sup>445</sup> Adrian “Cap” Anson, *A Ball Player’s Career* (New York, Era Publishing, 1900), Kindle.



few years away from becoming part of the game, with players using their bare hands to catch the ball.<sup>446</sup> Kelly was tough as nails playing the position.

After three seasons together, 1876 proved to be the Keystones' most successful. The highlight of that season were victories over heavily favored opponents such the Stars of Covington, Kentucky and the Buckeyes of Columbus, Ohio.<sup>447</sup> They would eventually lose the championship to the Mutuals of Brooklyn, led by their star Joe Stuart.<sup>448</sup> These years proved to be significant in young Kelly's life. He established himself as a leader on the field. He learned the game well, but most importantly he learned to see the field from his catcher position. He showed the will and desire to lead and would sacrifice his body to win. He was impressive as a batter and aggressive as a base runner, not hesitating to steal a base. Kelly was a crowd pleaser and loved the attention, developing his larger-than-life persona. It was also during these times that he learned his love of alcohol at a young age. Players would frequent saloons after games with adoring fans, and Kelly would always participate in the festivities.<sup>449</sup> Mike Kelly was known for his ability to play well on the diamond, but was also becoming known for his drinking habits after the games had concluded. Kelly would become famous for his hard drinking ways.<sup>450</sup>

In 1877, Kelly moved to a new club, leaving the Keystones of Paterson for the Delawares of Port Jervis, NY.<sup>451</sup> His stay did not last long, as he found the place rather

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<sup>446</sup> "Welcome to the 19th Century."

<sup>447</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 18.

<sup>448</sup> Kelly, "Play Ball" *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 12.

<sup>449</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 20.

<sup>450</sup> Rosenburg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly, U.S. Team Sport's First Media Sensation and Baseball's Original Casey at the Bat*, VII.

<sup>451</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 20.



boring for his lifestyle.<sup>452</sup> While he played for the Delawares, he was their catcher, and again became known for his hustle and theatrics on the field. He did something that people had not seen before: run after foul balls for an out. He would make spectacular plays behind the plate, such as catching a foul ball lying flat on his back.<sup>453</sup> He continued to amaze with his ability to throw runners out at second and third, including one game in which he threw out five players trying to steal second and third.<sup>454</sup> Newspapers began to cover his play closely, and he earned a positive reputation for the way he played ball. His old friend, Jim McCormick, was now playing for the Buckeyes of Columbus, Ohio. They offered Kelly a position on the team and a better salary than the Delawares had been paying. He obliged and moved to his new club.<sup>455</sup>

### **Cincinnati Red Stockings**

Kelly quickly joined his new team. He was young, brash, and thought very highly of his baseball skills.<sup>456</sup> In his first at bat for his new club, he hit a single up the middle. As he was on first he decided to steal second. Kelly got his lead and off he went, running as fast he could with no doubt that he would make it. He dove into the dirt, sliding to second only to be called out.<sup>457</sup> This play really brought Mike Kelly back to reality. On his travels back to the dugout he began to question his skills. Reaching the dugout he

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<sup>452</sup> Kelly, *“Play Ball” Stories of the Diamond Field*, 12.

<sup>453</sup> Anson, *A Ball Player’s Career*.

<sup>454</sup> Rosenberg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly, U.S. Team Sport’s First Media Sensation and Baseball’s Original Casey at the Bat*, 20.

<sup>455</sup> Rosenberg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly, U.S. Team Sport’s First Media Sensation and Baseball’s Original Casey at the Bat*, 21.

<sup>456</sup> “Society For American Baseball Research.”

<sup>457</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 20.



took abuse from teammates, as they all laughed at him and his effort to steal second.<sup>458</sup> Things were different in Columbus than they were in Port Jervis since the talent was much better on this team and the competition was tougher. His stay in Columbus was short, for the team finished last in their league with low attendance.<sup>459</sup> Kelly had a horrible season batting, but did he play better in the field. At the conclusion of the 90-game season the team disbanded.<sup>460</sup> A positive aspect of that season in Columbus was that the teams played all the teams in the National League, so players were able show their talents to other clubs.<sup>461</sup>

Mike Kelly got an offer to play for the Cincinnati Red Stockings of the National League. It was his play as catcher that got him the offer. He was not a large man, 5'10 and 157 pounds, but his play impressed the manager of the Cincinnati Red Stockings enough that he offered Kelly a contract.<sup>462</sup> At the age of 19, Mike Kelly was a successful professional baseball player. His first season with Cincinnati went very well for the young rookie. Kelly finished the 1878 season with a .283 batting average, scoring 29 runs while only striking out seven times in 237 at bats.<sup>463</sup> He had developed into a contact hitter. Kelly proved that he had the skills to be a professional player, helping his team to a second place finish only four games out of first place and the pennant.<sup>464</sup>

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<sup>458</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 20.

<sup>459</sup> Rosenberg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly, U.S. Team Sport's First Media Sensation and Baseball's Original Casey at the Bat*, 21.

<sup>460</sup> "Society For American Baseball Research."

<sup>461</sup> Kelly, "Play Ball" *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 13.

<sup>462</sup> Astor, *The Baseball Hall of Fame*, 12.

<sup>463</sup> "Baseball-reference.com."

<sup>464</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 24.



Kelly's second season in 1879 did not start off as well for him as he had hoped. Although they were in first place, Kelly was struggling badly at the plate.<sup>465</sup> On a road trip the team did not fare well, losing most of their games and falling out of first place.<sup>466</sup> At one point Kelly was in such a slump that he had only reached base once in his last twenty-one at bats because of an error. He was doing so poorly that he was benched, and his new manager looked to bring in new players to replace him.<sup>467</sup>

The Cincinnati manager, Cal McVey, reached out to Jack Leary to join the club. This was a good indication that Mike Kelly's playing days were over, as he would most likely be cut from the team due to his poor offensive production. Fortunately for Kelly, Leary never made it to join them.<sup>468</sup> During the next game, in Boston, Kelly was moved to the outfield and did well in the field but even better at the plate, going 4 for 5 with two doubles, a triple, and a home run.<sup>469</sup> He did even better in the next game, batting in every run for his team in a victory.<sup>470</sup> His manager was delighted by his play and cutting him was no longer an option.<sup>471</sup> The great career of Mike Kelly almost came to a quick end, and the world might have never seen what he had to offer the sport of baseball. The 1879 season was not easy for this young player who went through many ups and downs, but he responded by batting close to .350 for the season.<sup>472</sup> He became more confident both on and off the field, more accepted by teammates and a player who would yell at fellow

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<sup>465</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 26.

<sup>466</sup> Kelly, "Play Ball" *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 14.

<sup>467</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 26.

<sup>468</sup> Kelly, "Play Ball" *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 14.

<sup>469</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 26.

<sup>470</sup> Rosenburg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly, U.S. Team Sport's First Media Sensation and Baseball's Original Casey at the Bat*, 22.

<sup>471</sup> "Society For American Baseball Research."

<sup>472</sup> "Baseball-reference.com."



players when he felt they were not giving it their all but was always cheering them on regardless of whether he was on the field or sitting the bench.<sup>473</sup>

### Chicago White Stockings

The Cincinnati club was having financial problems and released all of its players from their contracts at the end of the 1879 season.<sup>474</sup> Kelly was now a free agent and could sign where he pleased. At the conclusion of the season a few players from the Cincinnati and Chicago clubs traveled to San Francisco for some exhibition games against local clubs.<sup>475</sup> Kelly played extremely well on the West coast trip. Kelly caught the attention of Adrian “Cap” Anson, player manager of the Chicago White Stockings, as well as Chicago pitcher Albert Spalding.<sup>476</sup> Those two, along with William Hulbert, owner of the team, were the big names associated with baseball at the time.<sup>477</sup> The Chicago White Stockings were the top team of baseball and could afford to sign big names, similar to the New York Yankees of today. The Chicago club wanted Kelly on their team.<sup>478</sup>

Kelly was approached by Anson, but they failed to agree on an amount and the negotiation began. Kelly refused what Chicago was offering and requested a hundred

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<sup>473</sup> “Society For American Baseball Research.”

<sup>474</sup> Fleitz, *The Irish In Baseball: An Early History*, 19.

<sup>475</sup> Rosenberg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly, U.S. Team Sport’s First Media Sensation and Baseball’s Original Casey at the Bat*, 22.

<sup>476</sup> Kelly, “Play Ball” *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 22.

<sup>477</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 31.

<sup>478</sup> Fleitz, *The Irish In Baseball: An Early History*, 20.



more than what they were willing to pay for a yearly contract.<sup>479</sup> The standstill lasted for over two weeks. Each time Anson approached Kelly, he that stated he would join the club, but only at his price. He also told Anson that he would join another club, but in his heart Chicago was his dream and where he wanted to play. Anson refused to back down.<sup>480</sup> Finally, after two weeks, Anson gave in and agreed to Kelly's demands. Hulbert wired Anson the money so he would sign the contract. Mike Kelly was a member of the Chicago White Stockings at the young age of twenty-two.<sup>481</sup>

These baseball players forever changed the game. Their first three seasons together resulted in a Championship each year, as they took a new approach to the game and accomplished things that were never done before. The Chicago club took a scientific approach to hitting as well as base running.<sup>482</sup> They were not the best hitting team or even pitching team, but they were a smart, well-rounded team who knew how to field, hit, and run. It showed in the standings, as they achieved victory after victory.

Kelly reported to Chicago before the start of the 1880 season for training. Anson, seven years Kelly's senior, was very strict with his training regimen and demanded the same of Kelly. He first demanded that Kelly lose twenty pounds.<sup>483</sup> Kelly had trained, but with nowhere near the intensity of Anson. Kelly obliged, and the training began for the upcoming season. The off-season training consisted of early morning calisthenics, weight training, fifteen-mile runs, and intense intra-squad games.<sup>484</sup> Anson had high

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<sup>479</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 32.

<sup>480</sup> Anson, *A Ball Player's Career*.

<sup>481</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 32.

<sup>482</sup> Rosenberg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly, U.S. Team Sport's First Media Sensation and Baseball's Original Casey at the Bat*, 24.

<sup>483</sup> Anson, *A Ball Player's Career*.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid.



expectations of Kelly and of the team. Nothing short of winning a championship would do for Anson, and that mentality rubbed off on Kelly. Kelly got in good shape for opening day, which was on the road in Cincinnati.<sup>485</sup> It was somewhat ironic that in his opening day for Chicago, Kelly returned to the city in which he had played for his previous two seasons. To his delight, his club won the game by a score of 4-3. Kelly played right field during his first season in Chicago.<sup>486</sup>

Kelly mostly played in the outfield, but he would catch a few games every so often, giving the starter a rest, since catchers did take a beating with no equipment or glove.<sup>487</sup> While he was playing behind the plate he did not want runners to advance or steal on him. Kelly's main goal was to win, and he had the ability to see a play before it even happened; he had a great sense of the game.<sup>488</sup> To stop the runner he needed better communication with the pitcher, so he began to use signals. He would use a signal to call for a certain pitch, to let the pitcher know where he was going to throw, and if the runner was going to steal. King Kelly was the first signal caller in baseball.<sup>489</sup> Signaling began to catch on with other teams and was used across all the leagues within the next few years. He invented a part of baseball that is used today with every pitch that is thrown. The catcher is responsible for knowing the hitters' weakness and his strengths, and then uses signals for the pitcher to throw certain pitches.<sup>490</sup>

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<sup>485</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 40.

<sup>486</sup> "Society For American Baseball Research."

<sup>487</sup> Kelly, "Play Ball" *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 24.

<sup>488</sup> Astor, *The Baseball Hall of Fame*, 12.

<sup>489</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 44.

<sup>490</sup> Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years*.



The club had great fundamentals and a desire to win. They were very aggressive with their base running, and they introduced the hit and run.<sup>491</sup> The hit and run is a play in baseball in which the base runner will begin to run to the next base as the pitcher starts his motion towards home plate. The job of the batter is to hit the ball into play to the right side of the infield and get a base hit. This will allow the runner to either score or advance further on the bases.<sup>492</sup> This is a play that is used often today in both the American and National Leagues. It has been noted that Cap Anson and Kelly perfected this play. Kelly was the best runner on the team and did not hesitate to take off if Anson, a reliable hitter, was at bat.<sup>493</sup> Kelly and the club had an excellent season in 1880 with a record 67-17, including a 21-game winning streak and the league championship. Kelly finished the season with a .292 average and was third in the league in runs scored.<sup>494</sup> Kelly was growing in confidence and making a name for himself after his first season in Chicago.<sup>495</sup> He was not yet the King, but he was well on his way.

The 1881 season came, and the Chicago club fielded the same team that it had in the previous season. Anson was very demanding of his players. He believed in devoting significant time to practice, training hard, and working out.<sup>496</sup> It obviously paid off, as they won the championship, but Anson also demanded that they conduct themselves in a proper manner off the field.<sup>497</sup> He discouraged drinking, cursing, or womanizing by his players. Unfortunately, these were King Kelly's favorite pastimes. He loved his alcohol

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<sup>491</sup> Anson, *A Ball Player's Career*.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid.

<sup>493</sup> Astor, *The Baseball Hall of Fame*, 12.

<sup>494</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 43.

<sup>495</sup> Kelly, "Play Ball" *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 24.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid.

<sup>497</sup> "Society For American Baseball Research."



and his women; his behavior rubbed off on other players, which greatly angered Anson as well as Hulbert.<sup>498</sup> Kelly gave it his all on the playing field but also gave it his all with his drinking and womanizing. Kelly and Anson began to butt heads, and their relationship began to deteriorate due to Kelly's inappropriate behaviors.<sup>499</sup>

The club began the season with a victory, but victories did not come as easily as they had the previous season. However, Kelly's base running techniques, although not always legal, helped his team to garner wins. Kelly was becoming more aggressive running the bases, since most games were close so he had to seize every opportunity to get a player across home plate.<sup>500</sup> The games during this time utilized only one umpire to call a game.<sup>501</sup> Only having one umpire, Kelly knew that he could get away with certain antics on the field. It is difficult for only one person to see every play throughout the game. Kelly was smart and would watch the umpire as he ran the bases. If he felt the umpire was not looking or could not see the play, he would skip a base.<sup>502</sup> This would make it a lot easier and faster to get to home plate. Fans, players, and reporters would witness Kelly skipping third base by up to fifteen feet, and he usually got away with it.<sup>503</sup> He always made it a point to be very friendly with the umpire, hoping this would help his cause and the umpire would look in the other direction.<sup>504</sup> His teammates always knew that he would get home quickly and he had good speed. Many other players tried to copy his style, but none with the same success as Kelly. Given Kelly's base running style it

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<sup>498</sup> Anson, *A Ball Player's Career*.

<sup>499</sup> Fleitz, *The Irish In Baseball: An Early History*, 20.

<sup>500</sup> "Society For American Baseball Research."

<sup>501</sup> Astor, *The Baseball Hall of Fame*, 13.

<sup>502</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 48.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

<sup>504</sup> Gerald Astor, *The Baseball Hall of Fame* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1988), 13.



was not surprising that he was always at or near the top in the league in runs scored.<sup>505</sup>

Kelly had a banner year, hitting .323 and scoring eighty-four runs.<sup>506</sup> Chicago again were champions of the National League. Kelly proved to be an integral part of this championship team with play on the diamond.

The 1882 season quickly arrived. Kelly felt that this was, by far, the best team that the Chicago club had put together. He believed that this team was superior, even compared with the rapidly-rising New York Giants and the club in Boston.<sup>507</sup> The rivalry between the Boston and Chicago clubs became quite intense, as both were seeking to bring home the pennant. Each city was growing and baseball gave the people something for which to cheer and root. Kelly loved the rivalry between the two cities and the excitement and the energy of the crowd.<sup>508</sup> Kelly was a big fan of the city of Boston. It had a very high Irish population, and Kelly was very proud of his Irish background.<sup>509</sup> He even spoke in an Irish accent. He enjoyed going to Boston, but most of all, he enjoyed playing there.

Kelly played half the season at shortstop, in which position he felt uncomfortable.<sup>510</sup> He eventually moved back to right field, where he felt he played better.<sup>511</sup> The 1882 season would prove to be much more difficult than the previous two championship seasons. The league was growing in size, and more players with better

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<sup>505</sup> “Baseball-reference.com.”

<sup>506</sup> “Baseball Hall of Fame.”

<sup>507</sup> Charley Rosen, *The Emerald Diamond: How the Irish Transformed America’s Greatest Pastime* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), Kindle.

<sup>508</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 54.

<sup>509</sup> Fleitz, *The Irish In Baseball: An Early History*, 20.

<sup>510</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 55.

<sup>511</sup> Anson, *A Ball Player’s Career*.



skill were making the league increasingly competitive.<sup>512</sup> The Providence Grays proved to be the greatest obstacle for the White Stockings. For most of the season the Grays were in first place. Anson grew angry that his club had fallen six and a half games behind. Anson demanded his players follow strict rules, such as no drinking, following curfews, working out, and practicing rigorously.<sup>513</sup>

The season, as it often does, came down to the last month. Providence still held a slim lead over the White Stockings with a three game series set in Chicago.<sup>514</sup> Kelly claimed these games to be the most exciting of his career. Each game was close, with Chicago only winning by a run or two. This series proved Chicago to be the better team and launched them on top of the division.<sup>515</sup> Kelly played a pivotal part in these decisive victories. It was his base running that made the difference.<sup>516</sup> Kelly would steal bases and implement the hit and run. He was a nuisance to the Grays, because when he was on base he had to be watched or he would take off, stealing yet another base.<sup>517</sup> In one game the ball was hit and Kelly took off for second. Running as quickly as he could, he beat the second baseman, who was so concerned about Kelly that he failed to catch the ball that sailed over his head and into the outfield. Kelly, being the aggressive player he was, made it across home plate to tie the game. A routine play that should have resulted with an out and a Providence victory ended in a Chicago win because of Kelly's play on the

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<sup>512</sup> Anson, *A Ball Player's Career*.

<sup>513</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 56.

<sup>514</sup> "Society For American Baseball Research."

<sup>515</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 57.

<sup>516</sup> Kelly, "Play Ball" *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 28.

<sup>517</sup> Rosenberg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly, U.S. Team Sport's First Media Sensation and Baseball's Original Casey at the Bat*, 25.



field.<sup>518</sup> In this decisive series, Kelly proved to be the difference. The White Stocking and Grays series was a defining moment in Kelly's career, as it showed his all-out play and desire to win at any cost.<sup>519</sup>

The season ended with the rather strange absence of Kelly. The Chicago White Stockings were the champions of the National League, and the Cincinnati Red Stockings were the champions of the American Association. Chicago had embarked on an exhibition tour at the end of the season.<sup>520</sup> Their tour was to conclude in Cincinnati with a two game exhibition series. The series was to take place in October and was the first meeting of champions of the two leagues.<sup>521</sup> The series concluded with two Chicago victories and bragging rights as true champions even though the games meant nothing.<sup>522</sup> One would think Kelly's abilities on the field would have contributed to the clubs victories, but it was rather his antics off the field that led to his absence. There are many rumors regarding Kelly not being in the lineup.<sup>523</sup> Some say he was injured from playing all season and that his body took a beating, but most say it was his drinking that caused him not to be in the lineup. Supposedly he was too drunk or hung over to play, and he was a no-show at the game.<sup>524</sup> His captain, Anson, was a stickler for the rules and frowned upon wild behavior and drinking, so he was left out of the lineup.<sup>525</sup> His wild ways would eventually catch up with him.

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<sup>518</sup> Kelly, "Play Ball" *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 28.

<sup>519</sup> Society For American Baseball Research."

<sup>520</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 59.

<sup>521</sup> Anson, *A Ball Player's Career*.

<sup>522</sup> Robert Smith, *Illustrated History of Baseball*, (New York: Madison Square Press, 1973), 53.

<sup>523</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 61.

<sup>524</sup> Ibid.

<sup>525</sup> Anson, *A Ball Player's Career*.



The 1883 season was a difficult one for both the team and Kelly. New rules were implemented, and pitchers began to throw over hand rather than under hand. It changed the speed of the pitch and the approach of the batter. The season had many ups and downs for the club. They started off poorly, but turned it around only to play poorly again. After all the trials and tribulations of a crazy season, Chicago had found a winning formula towards the end of the season and was in a four-team race for the championship. The White Stockings traveled to Boston for a critical four-game series that would have serious implications on the season and a fourth championship season. Chicago lost all four, as Boston swept them and ended Chicago's dreams of another championship.<sup>526</sup> Kelly did not play well and was remembered more for his tricks on the field. He wasn't his usual self on the field and was said not to be a gentleman off the field. This greatly angered Spalding and Anson and they questioned keeping him on the team, since Kelly only hit .255 for his team. This was one of the lowest averages of his career, but he did manage to score ninety-two runs with 109 hits while committing sixty-three fielding errors.<sup>527</sup>

The 1884 season was a disaster for the Chicago White Stockings. They were never in the race for the championship, finishing in fourth place and twenty-two games behind the leader; however, Kelly himself had a remarkable season, making up for his poor batting average the previous year. Kelly led the league with a .355 batting average and scored a league high in runs with 120.<sup>528</sup> He was amongst the league leaders in most categories. He kept his win-at-all-costs attitude and continued to create havoc with his

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<sup>526</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 66.

<sup>527</sup> "Baseball-reference.com."

<sup>528</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 71.



running tactics and by stealing bases.<sup>529</sup> Stolen bases statistics were not kept for another two years.<sup>530</sup> In a game against Detroit, Kelly stole third then faked an injury. As his teammate came over to console him, the two concocted a play to score the winning run in the bottom of the ninth. As Williamson was walking back to second, Kelly jumped up and ran for home. His teammate quickly followed. As the Detroit players went to tag Kelly out, Williamson slid through his legs, scoring the winning run.<sup>531</sup> It was a dirty play that would never take place in today's game. Kelly was just as aggressive off the field with his drinking, which continued to create problems with the manager and the owner of the team.<sup>532</sup>

The 1885 season was much different from the previous season and proved to be a great disappointment to the club, Anson, Spalding, and all of Chicago. Anson was strong willed and had a great desire to win. He and Spalding greatly wanted to win and reclaim the championship of the National League.<sup>533</sup> Spalding brought in some new players, one being Kelly's buddy growing up and former teammate, Jim McCormick. This was both good and bad for Kelly. He was reunited with a good friend and teammate, as well as his good drinking buddy. Kelly's late night boozing had been a growing problem for the last two seasons.<sup>534</sup> With high expectations looming for the upcoming season, Anson demanded highly intense training of his team.<sup>535</sup>

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<sup>529</sup> Anson, *A Ball Player's Career*.

<sup>530</sup> Rosen, *The Emerald Diamond: How the Irish Transformed America's Greatest Pastime*.

<sup>531</sup> Kelly, "Play Ball" *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 44.

<sup>532</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 66.

<sup>533</sup> Anson, *A Ball Player's Career*.

<sup>534</sup> Rosenburg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly, U.S. Team Sport's First Media Sensation and Baseball's Original Casey at the Bat*, 36.

<sup>535</sup> Anson, *A Ball Player's Career*.



The 1885 season got off to a good start, and all the hard work had paid off with a 14-6 record in May.<sup>536</sup> Chicago was building a new stadium, so for the first month and a half all games were played on the road. The team became accustomed to playing away from home, and its poor winning record on the road seemed to disappear. Anson believed that his team was better than the previous three championship teams with acquisitions of pitchers McCormick and Clarkson.<sup>537</sup> Things seem only to get better as their new stadium opened. They began their home stand with 21-2 record. This was good enough for first place, but they only had a slim two-game lead over New York.<sup>538</sup> It proved to be a two-team race for the championship. As both teams continued to win and battle through the hot summer, the season came down to the final seven games, with Chicago still clinging to a two-game lead. Kelly, again, would prove to be the difference. In the first game, Kelly had three triples, which led to a Chicago victory.<sup>539</sup> Chicago went on to win the next three and had at least guaranteed themselves a tie. New York lost their game and Chicago had won another National League Championship.<sup>540</sup>

Kelly and his teammates finished strong, winning the league championship. In those four decisive games Kelly mustered seven hits and scored five runs.<sup>541</sup> The team celebrated so hard that they lost the last three in Philadelphia due to their hangovers.<sup>542</sup> They would play a seven-game series against the St. Louis Brown Stockings.<sup>543</sup> This

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<sup>536</sup> "Baseball Almanac," <http://www.baseball-almanac.com/teamstats/schedule.php?y=1885&t=CH6>.

<sup>537</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 73.

<sup>538</sup> "Baseball Almanac."

<sup>539</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 76.

<sup>540</sup> Anson, *A Ball Player's Career*.

<sup>541</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 77.

<sup>542</sup> Kelly, "Play Ball" *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 45.

<sup>543</sup> Anson, *A Ball Player's Career*.



series proved to be a bad showing for the growing sport. Game one ended in a tie due to darkness and game two ended due to a forfeit. The umpire was making very bad calls that nearly caused a riot. The Chicago club had to be escorted off the field. The rest of the series would go back and forth, leaving each team with a 3-3-1 record and no championship.<sup>544</sup> It was bad for baseball, but Kelly did well. He played hard, hit well, and scored runs. Kelly batted .288 for the season and scored a league high 124 runs.<sup>545</sup> Kelly was not yet the King, and his time in Chicago was coming to a close.

The 1886 season would result in another Championship but would prove to be the last for Kelly. Anson and Spalding had enough of his inappropriate behaviors and his late-night drinking habits.<sup>546</sup> Both men felt that Kelly was a bad influence on his teammates and a bad representation of the team, as they felt that ballplayers had a certain image to uphold. The 1886 season proved to be the best season of Kelly's entire career. He scored a league high 155 runs, led the league with a .388 batting average, and .483 on base percentage. Kelly also added fifty-three stolen bases.<sup>547</sup>

The new season came with some rule changes. A batter would get bases on balls or a walk on six pitches instead of seven.<sup>548</sup> A captain did not have to make his lineup available to the other team until the end of first inning. The 1886 season would be the first season ever that the stolen bases would be counted as a statistic. Kelly had already

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<sup>544</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 79.

<sup>545</sup> "Baseball-reference.com."

<sup>546</sup> Anson, *A Ball Player's Career*.

<sup>547</sup> Rosenburg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly, U.S. Team Sport's First Media Sensation and Baseball's Original Casey at the Bat*, 107.

<sup>548</sup> Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years*.



six seasons in the National League during which stolen base statistics were not counted, but many believe he was tops in the league due to his aggressiveness on the bases.<sup>549</sup>

Prior to the 1886 season, Anson did something that was never done before. He took the team to the South for a rigorous training. Before their departure Anson and Spalding made the team take an oath to behave and be respectful. Spalding went as far as to withhold \$250 of Kelly's salary, hoping that this would motivate him to stay sober.<sup>550</sup> He would receive the money at the end of the season if his mission of sobriety was successful, but everybody knew he would not be able to do it and he did not. This angered Kelly so much that he vowed never to play for the White Stockings again and stated that he would rather farm than play in Chicago. Kelly did get his \$250 even though he failed to stay sober.<sup>551</sup>

Kelly kept with his usual behaviors, taunting fans and conversing with the umpires. Kelly was a likable man who had fun as well as the desire to win. Kelly's wild ways with his drinking continued. Kelly was constantly being fined for his drinking, as Spalding had detectives follow Kelly at night, but this did not keep him from having success on the field.<sup>552</sup> Near the end of the summer the White Stockings finally surpassed Detroit in the standings. This comeback had a lot to do with Kelly's play on the field. He had matured as a hitter and was a hustler on the bases, and his game continued to evolve, both offensively and defensively. The season came down to the final two games of the season as both Chicago and Detroit had an identical record of 87-34. Chicago had a two-game series in Boston while Detroit had a double header in

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<sup>549</sup> "Baseball-reference.com."

<sup>550</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 99.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid.

<sup>552</sup> Astor, *The Baseball Hall of Fame*, 15.



Philadelphia. Chicago went on to win both games in Boston as Detroit lost their two in Philadelphia. This gave Chicago another pennant. It would be Kelly's fifth championship in seven seasons with the White Stockings.<sup>553</sup>

The 1886 Championship Series would again pit Chicago against the St. Louis Brown Stockings. This year the series would be played with three games at home at Chicago, then three games at home for St. Louis. If the series was to go a seventh game, the game would be held at a neutral playing field. After the first two games, the series was tied at one game apiece. In the third game Chicago had an offensive explosion and Kelly not only had a home run but played well behind the plate. He made exceptional plays, throwing and tagging runners out. Chicago would take a 2-1 lead in the series but would drop the next two games and trail in the series 3-2. Game six was a win or go home affair for the White Stockings. Chicago quickly jumped off to a 2-0 lead but at the end of nine innings the game was tied 3-3. In the bottom of the eleventh St. Louis scored the winning run and were the Series Champions. Kelly did not have a good series at the plate. He only had four hits out of twenty-four opportunities with a .208 batting average, only scoring five runs.<sup>554</sup>

Anson blamed Kelly's poor play on alcohol. Kelly would often arrive drunk to games. This was a common practice of Kelly throughout his time in Chicago.<sup>555</sup> He would often fake injuries or not even appear for games.<sup>556</sup> The Series loss bothered Anson tremendously, and he blamed it on Kelly and his drinking.<sup>557</sup> This would be

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<sup>553</sup> "Society For American Baseball Research."

<sup>554</sup> "Baseball-reference.com."

<sup>555</sup> Astor, *The Baseball Hall of Fame*, 15.

<sup>556</sup> Fleitz, *The Irish In Baseball: An Early History*, 27.

<sup>557</sup> Anson, *A Ball Player's Career*.



Kelly's last game in a Chicago uniform. The team had won five championships in seven years, were referred to as the "Heroic Legion of Baseball," and considered by some baseball historians as the greatest team in baseball history.<sup>558</sup>

### **Boston Beaneaters**

In modern day baseball it is not unusual for players to switch teams via free agency or trade. Today's contracts are astronomical in terms of the amount of money for which a player will sign. In the late 1880s players did not sign for lucrative contracts as they do today. Players were not even traded. But in 1886, the Chicago White Stockings were weary of Kelly's drinking and his behavior on and off the field and wanted to get rid of him. He was a trickster whose weird plays, such as skipping bases and hiding extra baseballs in his jersey, drove umpires mad.<sup>559</sup> Anson and Spalding felt the team would be better off without him and that Kelly would no longer influence his teammates to drink with him.<sup>560</sup> Kelly still refused to play for Chicago and continued to fight with club owner, Spalding, in the media.<sup>561</sup> Kelly requested to be released to another club or traded. His top two choices were New York or Boston: New York because he had grown up in Paterson and he still had a home there, and Boston because he loved the city and its Irish population.<sup>562</sup>

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<sup>558</sup> Durant, *The Story of Baseball*, 31.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>560</sup> Fleitz, *The Irish In Baseball: An Early History*, 22.

<sup>561</sup> Astor, *The Baseball Hall of Fame*, 15.

<sup>562</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 101.



Boston had contacted Spalding regarding obtaining Kelly. The negotiations had begun, as the teams went back and forth with prices for Kelly's release.<sup>563</sup> The two owners settled on a total of \$10,000, an unheard of amount in baseball during this time.<sup>564</sup> This did not guarantee that Kelly would agree to play for Boston, but gave them an opportunity to negotiate a contract with him. If they did not agree no money would change hands.<sup>565</sup> Boston's owner, Billings, traveled to Chicago to discuss Kelly's price. The league still had a salary cap of \$2,000, but Kelly was refusing to sign for anything under \$7,000.<sup>566</sup> The two sides finally came to an agreement, with Kelly receiving \$2,000 to play for the season and an extra \$3,000 for allowing the club to use his picture for advertising.<sup>567</sup> This was just a way to get Kelly to sign, and it worked: he agreed to play for Boston. Kelly was excited and wanted to become captain of the team. News of the deal and of the amount of money Boston paid for Kelly quickly spread. This immediately shot Kelly to super stardom. News spread across the country regarding the deal between the two clubs. The fans in Chicago were devastated that they had lost Kelly.

The excitement only grew as opening day neared. Kelly was named captain of the team, but his wild behavior on and off the field did not stop. Kelly vowed to play every position on the field. The media were printing articles daily regarding Kelly with some papers calling him the King of Baseball, while others referred to him as King of the

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<sup>563</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 101.

<sup>564</sup> Durant, *The Story of Baseball*, 32.

<sup>565</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 103.

<sup>566</sup> Astor, *The Baseball Hall of Fame*, 15.

<sup>567</sup> Kelly, "Play Ball" *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 46.



Diamond and Royalty on the Diamond.<sup>568</sup> Over the years this would continue and eventually lead to the nickname King Kelly. When Kelly would arrive at the stadium and hordes of people, mostly school children, would be waiting for his arrival. The Bostonians were very excited to have such a star on their team. He was now officially the King of Baseball.<sup>569</sup>

The Beaneaters started their season on the road in Philadelphia on May 2, 1887.<sup>570</sup> The team would next travel to New York, then have their home opener the following week. Opening day in Boston was mayhem, with the fans eager to see Kelly in a Boston uniform for the first time. More than 10,000 people attended the home opener.<sup>571</sup> Boston would lose the game 5-2 to the Philadelphia Phillies. They lost two out of the three games but would go on a six-game winning streak at home, leading to a 12-4 start.<sup>572</sup> Kelly quickly became a hero to the citizens of Boston, especially with the city's large Irish population.<sup>573</sup>

Kelly's former club arrived on May 23 for a three game series. The White Stockings got the best of the Beaneaters, taking two out of the three games. The Beaneaters traveled to Chicago for a four game series in late June, where Kelly was treated to a hero's welcome.<sup>574</sup> Kelly arrived at the stadium followed by a band with gifts and flowers awaiting his arrival. The team cheered for Kelly as he ran onto the

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<sup>568</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 111.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid.

<sup>570</sup> "Baseball Almanac."

<sup>571</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 115.

<sup>572</sup> "Baseball Almanac."

<sup>573</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 101.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid., 116.



field, but as the game progressed the fans soon realized that he was wearing their rival's uniform. Kelly did not have a good day at the plate in his homecoming.

Kelly had a good season statistically but the club did not have a good season overall. Kelly finished the season with a .322 batting average, scored 120 runs, and collected more than 150 hits.<sup>575</sup> He was the leader of the team on the field, but not so off the field. He was eventually stripped of his captaincy, which was returned to John Morrill who had relinquished his role upon the signing of Kelly to the club.<sup>576</sup> The club did improve with Kelly's arrival, but not as much as the city had hoped. They finished a game over .500 which was good enough for fifth place in the National League.<sup>577</sup>

In his first season in Boston, Kelly played many positions, but mostly catcher and in the outfield. For both positions he had tricks up his sleeve so plays would go his way and give his team an advantage.<sup>578</sup> As catcher he would often take his catcher's mask off and throw it on home plate to obstruct the hitter and get under his skin.<sup>579</sup> Kelly would have signals with the outfielder, so if a runner was on first, Kelly threw the ball over the first baseman's head on purpose. The right fielder, knowing that this was going to happen, would be waiting for the ball behind the first baseman. The runner would think this was a throwing error and take off for second. The right fielder would then throw the ball to second and get the runner out.<sup>580</sup> It was a sneaky play, but it worked. Kelly would

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<sup>575</sup> "Baseball-reference.com."

<sup>576</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 121.

<sup>577</sup> "Baseball Almanac."

<sup>578</sup> Durant, *The Story of Baseball*, 32.

<sup>579</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 122.

<sup>580</sup> Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years*.



often yell when the batters were at the plate about to swing.<sup>581</sup> This would break their concentration and their swing, causing them to miss the ball and strike out.

Kelly was a master of the rules and workings of baseball, and he used his knowledge to his advantage as he made unorthodox plays. A manager could make a change or substitution at any time throughout the game. In one game, Boston was winning, but the opposing team had bases loaded in the ninth inning with two out. The batter hit a pop fly that the catcher could not catch, as the ball was heading towards Boston's dugout. Kelly, being the smart player he was, yelled, "Kelly now catching."<sup>582</sup> This allowed him to enter the game and catch the ball. The game was over and Kelly made the final out. Kelly knew the rules and the game. Another trick that the King would perform in the outfield would be to carry extra baseballs that he had stuffed into his jersey. It is believed that on a number of occasions if Kelly could not catch the ball, he would run as quickly as he could and dive for the ball. If he missed it he would grab one from his jersey and put it in his glove. Again, this was completely illegal, but it worked; with only one umpire it was difficult to catch Kelly in one of his tricks.<sup>583</sup>

Kelly was mostly known for his speed on the bases and his base stealing. The statistic had only been on record for a year, but in his first year with Boston he stole eighty-four bases, the most of his Hall of Fame career.<sup>584</sup> The significance of this season was that he was sliding in order to successfully steal a base. The method which Kelly created became known as the hook slide.<sup>585</sup> The hook slide is a slide to avoid being

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<sup>581</sup> "Society For American Baseball Research."

<sup>582</sup> Kelly, *"Play Ball" Stories of the Diamond Field*, 93.

<sup>583</sup> Astor, *The Baseball Hall of Fame*, 15.

<sup>584</sup> Baseball-reference.com."

<sup>585</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 125.



tagged as a player slides into the base he is stealing. As Kelly approached the bag he would slide to the outside of the bag on his right side. He would slide feet first. As he would slide by the bag, he would quickly reach over and tag it. This move made it difficult to throw Kelly out. This is why he became so dangerous and could change a pitcher's game just by his base running and stealing. Kelly's base running became a sensation in Boston. The crowd was eager for Kelly to get on base and take off, chanting: "slide, Kelly, slide."<sup>586</sup>

The 1888 season arrived with high expectations for the Boston Beaneaters. The club was again paying big money for free agents. Boston struck another deal with the Chicago White Stockings, acquiring John Clarkson, the best pitcher in the league. Boston again shelled out ten-thousand dollars for their player. The addition of Clarkson, paired with Kelly, led Boston to believe that they had a good chance to win the pennant.<sup>587</sup> Fans rushed to ballpark to see Kelly catch Clarkson. Kelly would spend most of the season playing catcher. However, he did not fare very well behind the plate, allowing many passed balls and throwing errors. The Beaneaters got off to a quick start leading the National League in victories, but stumbled the rest of the season.<sup>588</sup> Boston did do better this season than the previous, finishing in fourth place and six games over .500. Kelly had better luck at the plate than he did behind the plate. He batted .318 with 140 hits. His base stealing dropped to fifty-six, which placed him sixth in the league.

The Detroit club had folded, so Boston again was signing players. They added four of Detroit's best players. Kelly preferred to play in the outfield after the miserable

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<sup>586</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 125.

<sup>587</sup> Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years*.

<sup>588</sup> "Baseball Almanac."



season he had behind the plate in 1888. Boston's manager, John Morrill, had a disagreement with ownership and was sold to the Washington club.<sup>589</sup> With Morrill no longer in the picture, Kelly was able to resume his role as leader and captain of the Boston club.<sup>590</sup>

The club got off to a fantastic start and was ahead of the pack for most of the 1889 season. It was a two-team race between the Boston Beaneaters and the New York Giants. New York had a one game lead over Boston late in September, with the season ending soon. It all came down to the final games of the season, and this was when things fell apart for Boston. Kelly never changed his ways with his late night living and love of alcohol. This time, it cost him the pennant. Kelly was so hung over from all his late night partying that he was unable to play, and the team lost to Cleveland. The Beaneaters would win their next two games as Kelly returned to the lineup, but New York would win, as well, and hoisted the Championship.<sup>591</sup>

Kelly's batting average dropped to .294, but did lead the league in doubles. His base stealing rose to sixty-eight for the season, but he performed poorly in the field, committing many errors.<sup>592</sup> The highlight of the season was the song based on Kelly's base running called "Slide, Kelly, Slide," written by John W. Kelly in 1889.<sup>593</sup> It became an instant hit. The phrase "Slide, Kelly, Slide" ran rampant throughout the country and took on a life of its own.<sup>594</sup> Kelly had become a true star. He was an amazing baseball

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<sup>589</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 138.

<sup>590</sup> Kelly, "Play Ball" *Stories of the Diamond Field*, 97.

<sup>591</sup> Fleitz, *The Irish In Baseball: An Early History*, 101.

<sup>592</sup> "Baseball-reference.com."

<sup>593</sup> Durant, *The Story of Baseball*, 33.

<sup>594</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 137.



player with great talents, but his worst enemy was himself. He could not turn down a drink. It was a problem throughout his career and was now causing problems in Boston.

### New League

Things drastically changed in the 1890 season. The National League instituted a salary cap for their players. The players were given a grade and then their salary was based on that grade. The higher the grade, the higher the salary. This action from the National League greatly angered many players and some of the financial backers.<sup>595</sup> After many rumors and rumblings about a new league, the Players National League, was formed placing teams in all major cities that played in the National League.<sup>596</sup> Many players were conflicted about in which league they would play, with some staying in the National League while others migrated to the Players National League.<sup>597</sup> Kelly opted to leave for the new league, but he stayed in Boston. The new club in Boston was called the Boston Reds.<sup>598</sup> Kelly was given more responsibilities, including serving as manager of the club as well as captain, and he relished his new opportunities.<sup>599</sup>

Kelly did well as manager and captain in his first year with the club. The Boston Reds finished in first place.<sup>600</sup> This was the first time Kelly had won since his days in Chicago. Spalding had even contacted him, offering him a \$10,000 salary to come back

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<sup>595</sup> Roer, *The Life Of A Baseball Radical: Orator O'Rourke*, 171.

<sup>596</sup> Fleitz, *The Irish In Baseball: An Early History*, 69.

<sup>597</sup> Roer, *The Life Of A Baseball Radical: Orator O'Rourke*, 172.

<sup>598</sup> Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years*.

<sup>599</sup> Rosenburg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly, U.S. Team Sport's First Media Sensation and Baseball's Original Casey at the Bat*, 182.

<sup>600</sup> "Baseball Almanac."



to Chicago and the National League, but Kelly refused.<sup>601</sup> He did not want to abandon his new team and his ball players. Kelly had a great season, batting .326 and stealing more than fifty bases.<sup>602</sup> He became the true King of Boston and of baseball. His new club attracted more fans than did any other team of either league, but the Players League folded after one season and King Kelly was out of a job.<sup>603</sup> He was royalty in Boston, but his old club did not want him. The reason that the Boston Beaneaters did not invite him to return to their ranks is unknown: it is possible that they were unwilling to welcome him back because he jumped leagues or because they saw his skills rapidly diminishing.<sup>604</sup>

### **Back to Cincinnati**

Kelly was offered a job as manager and captain back in Cincinnati.<sup>605</sup> It was not with his old club, The Cincinnati Red Stockings of the National League, but rather the Cincinnati of the American Association.<sup>606</sup> His time with his new club was not long, as Kelly did not take this team seriously at all, spending most of his time drinking and fighting his own teammates.<sup>607</sup> He allowed anyone to play for him, for example, meeting people at saloons and then giving them the opportunity to play the following day.<sup>608</sup> The

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<sup>601</sup> Astor, *The Baseball Hall of Fame*, 15.

<sup>602</sup> "Baseball-reference.com."

<sup>603</sup> Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years*.

<sup>604</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 154.

<sup>605</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>606</sup> Roer, *The Life Of A Baseball Radical: Orator O'Rourke*, 193.

<sup>607</sup> Rosenberg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly, U.S. Team Sport's First Media Sensation and Baseball's Original Casey at the Bat*, 193.

<sup>608</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 161.



club was in last place and the attendance was poor. The team was making no money and folded before the season's end. Kelly was granted his release and was again out of a job.<sup>609</sup>

### **Back to Boston**

After his release, Kelly returned to the city he loved: Boston. He was not rejoining his old club, but rather the Boston Reds of the American Association.<sup>610</sup> He was still a superstar in the city, and fans greeted him with a warm welcome. His time with the Boston Reds was not long, only a week, or four games and fifteen at bats. Kelly then was offered a contract by his old club, the Boston Beaneaters. Kelly's jumping leagues and breaking contracts caused problems in baseball.<sup>611</sup> The Beaneaters were in first place, as were the other Boston team. Kelly only played in sixteen games and batted .231 in his triumphant return.<sup>612</sup> Kelly had been gone for two years, and this was no longer his team. He was thirty-four years old and at the end of his career. The Beaneaters finished the season strong, edging out Kelly's old team, Chicago White Stockings, for the 1891 pennant.<sup>613</sup> Kelly had the experience and knowledge to help the team of new young players who admired and respected him.

Kelly was re-signed for the 1892 season. It was to be his last season in Boston. The club had a great season, winning the pennant for the second consecutive year. The

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<sup>609</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 162.

<sup>610</sup> Society For American Baseball Research."

<sup>611</sup> Roer, *The Life Of A Baseball Radical: Orator O'Rourke*, 180.

<sup>612</sup> "Baseball-reference.com."

<sup>613</sup> Society For American Baseball Research."



season was not as good for Kelly himself. He was ineffective as catcher as he was old and slow, committing many errors behind the plate.<sup>614</sup> He batted well below .200 and was cut midseason only to be re-signed a week later.<sup>615</sup> Kelly did not take care of his body: he drank on a daily basis, and his lifestyle had taken its toll on him.<sup>616</sup> He gained weight and did not have the reflexes that he once had. The game was changing and evolving, and young pitchers emerging with new pitches.<sup>617</sup> They threw harder than those of the past, incorporating many pitches, such as fast and curve balls into the sport.<sup>618</sup> Kelly had a hard time keeping up. He was not the hitter he used to be. Boston did win the championship, but Kelly was benched due to his poor play and had to watch from the bench. Kelly would never wear a Boston uniform again.

### New York

In 1893 Kelly had decided to call it a career and turned to acting in plays to earn a paycheck.<sup>619</sup> Frequently, it is very difficult for athletes to walk away from a sport they have dominated for many years. Kelly found it difficult to hang up his cleats. The 1893 season began without Kelly, but by May he was lured out of retirement and signed a contract with the New York Giants.<sup>620</sup> Kelly was obviously not the player he once was, but he still was a top attraction in the sport. He was greeted with a hero's welcome, as

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<sup>614</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 164.

<sup>615</sup> Baseball-reference.com.”

<sup>616</sup> Astor, *The Baseball Hall of Fame*, 16.

<sup>617</sup> Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years*.

<sup>618</sup> Durant, *The Story of Baseball*, 37.

<sup>619</sup> Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years*.

<sup>620</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 170.



thousands came to see the King play in New York. The season did not go well for Kelly, as his body could no longer handle the wear and tear of the game.<sup>621</sup> He only played once a week, as his drinking again became a problem; he was suspended for skipping games to drink.<sup>622</sup> This would be his final season in baseball. He left the game he loved, broke and without a job.<sup>623</sup>

### Final Out

King Kelly loved the fast life and all the good things that go with it, such as expensive clothes, liquor, and houses. His baseball career was done, as he was not the ball player he once was. All athletes have to face the fact that their body will deteriorate and they will not be able to perform as they once did. That day had come for Kelly, and it is not known how he dealt with it or if he had a difficult time with the fact that his career was finished. He still had a love for all the fine things in life, so he needed to continue to get a paycheck. He decided to try his hand at acting since he had become a national celebrity and he believed it would not be difficult for him to sell tickets. Kelly had decided to join a play in Boston, and on his journey there he became ill with a fever and the chills. As the days passed he became even more ill. When word got out the King had fallen ill with pneumonia, it became front page news.<sup>624</sup> At this time no cure

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<sup>621</sup> Society For American Baseball Research.”

<sup>622</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 172.

<sup>623</sup> Astor, *The Baseball Hall of Fame*, 16.

<sup>624</sup> Durant, *The Story of Baseball*, 33.



existed for this illness. On November 8, 1894, Mike Kelly passed away; he was only thirty-six years old.<sup>625</sup>

The nation was in shock that their beloved baseball player had died at such a young age. The story that the King had died dominated the national headlines.<sup>626</sup> Kelly had died amongst friends and former teammates. The Elks club helped with funeral arrangements, with the Elks Lounge hosting the wake from nine in the morning to noon. The streets were jammed as everyone tried to get into the church to see Kelly's remains.<sup>627</sup> His casket was then placed in the back of a carriage and went through the city streets. There was a silence through the city as Kelly made his last journey through Boston.<sup>628</sup> He was brought to his final resting spot at the Elks plot.<sup>629</sup> It was a cold, cloudy, and windy day, and the ground was covered with snow. The nation had lost its first baseball superstar.

### Legacy

Mike Kelly was born to Irish immigrants who had left their country due to the conditions of The Great Famine. As they left one country and arrived in another, fate would intervene, as they would marry and have a son who would forever change the landscape of baseball. His father was a hero who fought for the North during the Civil War. He fought for a country that was not even his native land, but fought for the

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<sup>625</sup> Society For American Baseball Research.”

<sup>626</sup> Durant, *The Story of Baseball*, 33.

<sup>627</sup> Society For American Baseball Research.”

<sup>628</sup> Appel, *Slide, Kelly, Slide*, 185.

<sup>629</sup> Durant, *The Story of Baseball*, 33.



freedom of all men regardless of their skin color. His father's characteristics and traits ran through his son, as Michael Kelly would become a hero for a nation that encompassed all races, ages, religions, and both sexes, taking a new sport to a status that people could not have imagined.

Kelly revolutionized the game of baseball, bringing the sport into national headlines. In a time when a young country was attempting to heal from the Civil War, Kelly would help that process with his larger-than-life persona. Baseball, with Kelly as its representative, gave all Americans both a common interest and a healthy outlet for regional rivalries. Kelly was a trickster on the field, and there was nothing that he would not attempt, as he felt that rules did not apply to him on or off the field. He had his own way of interpreting rules and how the game should be played. His teammates admired his desire to win and give all he had on the field. The fans in all the cities in which he played loved him, and he always put on a show for them. Even the fans of the teams against which he was playing respected what he did on the field. He was honest, fun loving, and made friends everywhere he went. Kelly was the type of person who would borrow money and then give it away to someone who needed it more. Kelly felt that money was made to be spent.<sup>630</sup>

Kelly was very charismatic and became a superstar in the 1880s. He revolutionized base running and turned stealing and sliding into an art form. Kelly would run the bases as hard as he could, but would often skip bases to score a run. He had such a great will and desire to win. Kelly could play any position of the field and could see a play before it happened. King Kelly was the greatest player of his time as he helped

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<sup>630</sup> Durant, *The Story of Baseball*, 33.



implement such plays as the hit and run, the hook slide, the catcher backing up first base, using signals for the pitcher, and running the bases.<sup>631</sup> In his short life this Irish American helped develop a sport into the country's national pastime. Umpire Hurst referred to Kelly as "the Napoleon of Baseball" and Congressman Fellows referred to him as "the foremost player in the Country."<sup>632</sup>

Mike "King" Kelly had a Hall of Fame career. He did things on the field that were inconceivable. He was one of the best and purest hitters of his time. His leadership and skills led him to eight championships with Chicago and Boston. Kelly was inducted into the baseball Hall of Fame in 1945 with a batting average of .308, 400 stolen bases, 1,813 hits, 1,357 runs scored, 950 RBIs, and 69 home runs.<sup>633</sup> He truly revolutionized the game. It is sad that his life was cut short as he could have coached and had more of an impact on the game. It was said that half the rules in the baseball rulebook were rewritten to keep Kelly from taking advantage of loopholes.<sup>634</sup> It would not be off base to suggest that Kelly's parents' work to adjust to their new surroundings and their ability to persevere through difficulties had influenced Kelly's innovative tendencies and, in this way, the legacy of the Great Famine in Ireland led to the maturing of America's long-lasting national pastime.

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<sup>631</sup> Society For American Baseball Research."

<sup>632</sup> *New York Times*, May 20, 1893

<sup>633</sup> Baseball-reference.com."

<sup>634</sup> Baseball-reference.com."



## Chapter 6

## CONCLUSION

*“The immigrant’s heart marches to the beat of two quite different drums, one from the old homeland and the other from the new. The immigrant has to bridge these two worlds, living comfortably in the new and bringing the best of his or her ancient identity and heritage to bear on life in an adopted homeland.”*

Former Irish President Mary McAleese

This dissertation is a study of the impact the Irish had on sports in America utilizing case studies of three of the premiere Irish sports stars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Due to the Great Irish Famine many Irish were forced to leave their country in order to survive, thereby greatly influencing life in America. The Irish played a key role in shaping American politics, economics, and social structures, including popular culture, and in the process, paving the way for many other groups of immigrant peoples.<sup>635</sup> They made an impact on sports that continues to this day.

The Great Famine was a catastrophic disaster for the people of Ireland between the years 1845 to 1852 and beyond. The British offered relief, but with not much success. More than two million Irish who emigrated, the majority to America, faced a treacherous journey across the ocean in hopes of a better life with more opportunities. While the Irish emigrated to many countries, among those who chose America were the Sullivans, Corbetts, and Kellys whose children would have a great effect on American boxing and baseball.

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<sup>635</sup> McCaffrey, Lawrence. Textures of Irish America. p. 7



Upon their arrival the Irish faced many hardships that often were unexpected, finding it very difficult to be accepted in their new world.<sup>636</sup> The Irish immigrants had trouble seeking shelter, food, and employment. The only jobs available for most were those of hardship such as working in menial labor for men or housekeeping for women. Further complicating their status in the United States, Irish Americans faced religious persecution as well for being Catholic, yet most persevered as they found jobs and settled in their new home, making the best of the opportunity.<sup>637</sup>

Michael Sullivan and Catherine Kelly left Ireland for a better life in America. Surviving the trip to America, the two would meet and settle in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Their second child, John L. Sullivan, would become America's first sports celebrity, making boxing a major sports phenomenon in America, and the last link to bare knuckle fighting. He rose from obscurity and menial jobs to become America's heavyweight champion of the world for the ten year period, 1882-1892.<sup>638</sup> During his famous tenure as boxing champion, he was embraced by all America even though he openly flaunted his Irish culture. Sullivan made it known that he was Irish and that he was proud of his heritage. John L. Sullivan was a boozier and a bully and a braggart, and despite this—or because of it--was loved by millions of Americans.<sup>639</sup>

John L. Sullivan became the world's first sporting celebrity and forever changed the boxing world, and American popular culture. It would not be exaggerating to accord to Sullivan the status of the first major cultural celebrity in American history, thus setting the United States on the path to the modern cult of celebrity. Before the great John L.,

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<sup>636</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>637</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>638</sup> Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America*.

<sup>639</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 43.



boxing was considered to be a raucous sport and frowned upon by most Americans and law enforcement agencies.<sup>640</sup> He garnered national attention, bringing wide notice of boxing, and making the sport socially accepted by most classes. He fought in front of thousands, selling out venues throughout his tours, becoming a sports icon. John L. Sullivan was a larger-than-life persona who put the sport of boxing on the map of American popular culture.<sup>641</sup>

The Corbetts left Ireland for the same reason as the Sullivans, in search of a better life and opportunities due to The Great Famine. Patrick Corbett and Catherine MacDonald not only survived their Atlantic expedition, but another as well, reaching San Francisco. The two would settle in the rugged town, full of crime and corruption.<sup>642</sup> The Corbetts would bear a future boxing champion of the world, who would redefine the sport of boxing, and is considered to be the grandfather of modern day boxing.<sup>643</sup>

James Corbett had a similar childhood to John L. Sullivan, in that the parents of both future boxers encouraged them to become priests. Corbett, like Sullivan, was very athletic as a child and participated in many sports such as baseball, track and field, and gymnastics.<sup>644</sup> The turning point of his career was when Jim attended a local event and got into a fight with a local bully. Agreeing to fight a four-round, Corbett defeated him with his quickness, dodging, jabbing, and counter movements. It was at this time that the approach to boxing and fighting would forever change.<sup>645</sup>

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<sup>640</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.

<sup>641</sup> Redmond, Patrick. *The Irish and the Making of American Sport*, 80.

<sup>642</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 69.

<sup>643</sup> Mark Silver, *The Arc of Boxing: The Rise and Decline of the Sweet Science*.

<sup>644</sup> Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 70.

<sup>645</sup> Mark Silver, *The Arc of Boxing: The Rise and Decline of the Sweet Science*.



Corbett began to train on a daily basis, developing such moves as the feint and the jab. He worked with trainers on his footwork, changing how fighters prepared for fights taking a more scientific approach. Jim Corbett finally got his chance on September 8, 1892 to fight champion John L. Sullivan. Most of America did not think this young man had a chance to defend himself against the mighty John L. To the surprise of all, Corbett did the impossible by beating Sullivan in a twenty-one round, one-sided fight. On this day Corbett made moves that nobody had ever seen in a boxing ring. He shifted gracefully across the ring, dodging Sullivan's vicious attacks, and countering with perfectly-timed jabs that broke the champion's nose. Corbett had achieved the unimaginable and he did it in a new and unique way that he had developed himself. He learned to box and realized that a good defense is a better offense.

Michael Kelly was born to Irish immigrants Michael Kelly and Catherine Kylie. Michael "King" Kelly became baseball's first celebrity and helped revolutionize how the game was played. As a youth Kelly was very athletic and fond of outdoor activities, so when he lost both his parents at young age he turned his attention to baseball. His career began as a teenager with the Paterson Haymakers, and he changed the landscape of professional baseball.<sup>646</sup>

Michael "King" Kelly was full of life and charisma. He played for the Chicago White Stockings and the Boston Beaneaters, winning over teammates and fans, and winning several championships along the way. King Kelly was the first player to be sold from one team to another, helping to further develop a players union as well as free

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<sup>646</sup> Appel, Martin. *Slide, Kelly, Slide: The Wild Life and Times of Mike King Kelly*, 16.



agency. King Kelly was the greatest player of his time in that brought celebrity and showmanship to the game (as with Sullivan) and he helped implement such innovative plays (as with Corbett) as the hit and run, the hook slide, the catcher backing up first base, using signals for the pitcher, and running the bases differently depending on the game situation.<sup>647</sup> Mike “King” Kelly certainly helped bring professional baseball to a higher level, both as played on the field and in the minds of American sports fans.

All three Irish Americans discussed in this dissertation played a key role in their respective sports and helped to redefine the Irish, aiding in bringing respectability to this ethnic group in America. Each reached a new level of celebrity status that Irish Americans—or Americans in general—had never yet seen in this country. Sullivan, Corbett, and Kelly brought their sports national headlines, bringing attention not only to the sport, but to their Irish heritage as they reached an elite status comparable to today’s athletes. They had become the talk of the country and brought the nation’s attention to athletes of all nationalities. These men were able to pave the way not only for the Irish, but for other athletes as well. They were able to help break down social barriers in ways similar to what Jackie Robinson and Larry Dolby accomplished for African Americans. They gave the Irish Americans something to be proud about and helped Irish Americans to achieve acceptance during harsh and grueling times in a new world. The celebrity status that these three men enjoyed because of their athletic prowess also brought them acceptance by Americans from all walks of life, even though they were Irish. They became a topic of conversations for all classes in society, as so many followed their exploits and cheered them on.

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<sup>647</sup> “Society For American Baseball Research.”



Sullivan, Corbett, and Kelly were the children of Irish immigrants escaping the bleak conditions of The Great Irish Famine. All three had a similar upbringing that was greatly influenced by their Irish culture. The Sullivans and the Corbetts were all devout Catholics, and all of their parents had hopes and aspirations that these men would become priests.<sup>648</sup> As we have learned they defied their parents and chose a life in athletics, with great success as they persevered during a time that Irish Americans were persecuted for their religion and for their “otherness.” Irish Americans were labeled with many different stereotypes. Obviously, the issue of status of Irish Americans during this time period is very complex, and beyond scope of this dissertation, but it is an issue that cannot be ignored when discussing the impact of Irish American sports stars. Protestant Americans frowned upon the Irish, often seeing them as barbaric, drunks, and fighters. Many Irish did display some aspects of these stereotypes such as the excessive drinking of John L. Sullivan and Mike “King” Kelly, but many others did not such as James Corbett who did not drink at all.<sup>649</sup>

These three men came into adulthood when most of America was anti-Catholic. There were very few opportunities for Irish Americans during this time, but these men succeeded despite the limitations facing Irish Americans. They achieved a high profile status, as did Irish American sports stars, and while some of these Irish athletes may have indulged in wild and inappropriate behavior, they were embraced as sport celebrities regardless of their religion, Irish culture, and Irish stereotypes. All three were proud of their Irish heritage and culture. John L. Sullivan toured the British Isles finishing his trip

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<sup>648</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 16. Lardner, *The Legendary Champions*, 70.

<sup>649</sup> Klein, *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*.



in Ireland. Sullivan was embraced by the Irish as 15,000 people greeted him upon his arrival in Dublin.<sup>650</sup> Jim Corbett traveled to Ireland with his parents and received a hero's welcome upon his arrival in Dublin with a reception, a parade, and hoards of people eager to meet him.<sup>651</sup> Mike Kelly, although he talked about returning, never made it to Ireland due to his early death.

The Irish have endured a troubled past, but clearly have left their mark on American athletic culture. It is still prevalent in today's world through the "Fighting Irish" of Notre Dame, the "Gaels" of Iona College, the "Celtics" of Boston in the National Basketball Association, and many others. The Irish had their own Gaelic games, but were forced to leave their country and start new in all aspects of their lives. Looking for identity in their new nation the Irish turned to athletic games such as track and field, pedestrianism, hurling, Gaelic football as well as prize fighting and baseball.<sup>652</sup> These athletes helped smooth the process of assimilation as Irish Americans had athletes they could look up to, relate to, and most of all cheer. They made the transition easier as more Americans began to accept the Irish and their athletic abilities as it is difficult to hate the men who bring your team to victory. Irish Americans sports figures were able to parade "the green" at public sporting events, helping bring unity and identity to Irish immigrants and their children.

The Irish influence on American sporting culture should be considered just as important as their influence on politics, entertainment, and religion. The Irish have suffered through many tragedies and hardships, but their culture helped to define our

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<sup>650</sup> Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America*, 244.

<sup>651</sup> Fields, *James J. Corbett: A biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner*, 84.

<sup>652</sup> Wilcox, Ralph. *Making The Irish American*, 455.



nation in many aspects, including athletics. Sullivan, Corbett, and Kelly should be considered heroes not only by Irish Americans, but by all Americans. They were able to overcome Irish stereotypes, even as some of them reinforced the stereotypes, as they helped to define this young nation. These men were able to promote themselves as well as their culture, giving Irish Americans an identity during their difficult transition to this new world.

The Great Famine was tragic for all those who suffered horrendously or lost their lives. Those who made their way to America had a great impact on our culture and society. The Famine was horrific in every meaning of the word, but that tragedy helped to shape America and its culture, entertainment, politics, and sport. The Great Famine led directly to John L. Sullivan, Jim Corbett, and Mike Kelly making their mark in American history. While some (at the time, and possibly even today) might argue that the immigration of millions of Irish Catholics was a disaster for the United States, the evidence contained in this study, I would contend, demonstrates conclusively that the strength, skills, drive, and imagination that the immigrant Irish brought to America certainly changed the face of sport in America, and that Irish Americans did as much as any group to create the massive sports culture that exists in America today. In sports, as with every aspect of American society, after the Famine Irish arrived the country would never be the same again.



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