

A Thumbnail Sketch of the Development of Boxing Strategies, Styles and Techniques During the Gloved Era to Present – 2004

By Michael Hunnicut

Throughout the history of gloved boxing styles, techniques and strategies have changed to varying degrees. Ring conditions, promoter demands, teaching techniques, and the influence of successful boxers are some of the reasons styles and strategies have fluctuated.

One reason why research in this area is complex is because boxing itself is a complex endeavor where no person is psychologically, mentally, or physiologically exact. No era had strange holds on particular styles of boxing. Prevailing techniques of one era overlap into prevailing styles of another as well as coming full circle around.

Stylistic exceptions to an era's prevailing style have always existed, sometimes to a marked degree. A second reason why research is hindered is due to the comparative lack of film footage prior to the 1920's. Here existing films as well teaching guides and other written material will be applied, but it will not be nearly as complete as later era observations. I will give a brief overview of a particular era and give some examples of an era's particular strategy as well as exceptions.

From the beginning of the gloved era to the late 1910's one of the most prevalent stances from the welterweight division on up was the stand up British style of boxing held over from the bareknuckle era. Boxers tended to stand erect, hands held low at long distance, often but not always, brought up higher as range shifted, weight often but certainly not always, more on the rear leg. With exceptions such as Corbett, O'Brien, others, lateral movement was infrequently employed. Balance, foot placement, feinting, drawing leads, counterpunching, tying up and mixing it with body shots along with 1, 2's, were prevalent. Two to four punch combinations along with flurries were utilized, but not at a sustained rate nor of common usage. Straight punching was used and used well, with good execution but short, compact punching was not well executed with hooks tending to be wide not tight. With technical exceptions such as Corbett and his use of lateral movement, Fitz with his short punches, Jeffries with his couch and compact punching, Johnson with his great balance, body positioning and great defensive skills, and boxer-puncher Langford who came up from the lighter weight classes; boxing remained elemental in both technique and strategy until the late 1910's; in the welter and above weight classes.

There are some reasons why strategies and styles were developed by the boxers of these weight classes prior to the late 1910's. Boxing with gloves was comparatively new and skills were still in the maturing stage, but evolving rapidly. Those boxers who did help move this along were in the lighter weight divisions where techniques have greater importance. Before 1905, boxers tended to have less professional fights than in some later eras, with limited amateur experience, and with much more scheduled 20 round bouts (or more) than later generations. (Champions who won their titles from 1900-1910 approximated 87 career bouts with at the very least 12 twenty round scheduled bouts as some ended early and not recorded to be 20 rounds; champions from 1910-20 approximated 155 bouts per career with 2.6 20 round bouts or more.) Boxers of this period did tend to be most highly regarded for their toughness, gameness, ability to "stand the gaff" to go at a fast, grueling 25 rounds or more. Power was important, skill less so; guts, steel like toughness, and endurance essential. Skill training was used less for these boxers whereas conditioning was strongly emphasized. As the heavier weight class boxers gained more experience, light weight skills came up, and the abolishment of 45 round bouts, more complex skills then began to be taught and assimilated, very quickly.

In almost stark contrast, many boxers from circa 1905 through the late 1910's in the lightweight or below divisions often demonstrated performances of exceptional skill, as well as toughness. Stances varied from

stand-up to a low crouch and everything in between. Hand placement tended to be low, but almost always brought up as needed. Lateral movement, when used, was used effectively but generally not nearly as often by circa 1920; due to length of the bouts that were filmed at that time. More lateral movement was used for scheduled 10 round bouts. One-two's, combinations were used often with excellent execution, and then as in later eras, tended to be in the 2 and 3 punch series. Combinations and one-twos were sustained but the combinations lacked the versatility of the 1920's and later eras. Four or more punch combinations were employed, but very infrequently. Feinting, sidestepping, cutting off the ring, body punching and flurrying were all well developed. Slipping, ducking, stopping of blows while countering with 2 or more blows were skills extremely well utilized by most of these boxers. Due to a relative lack of footwork combined with the toughness that the ring conditions demanded as well as boxing often from a short middle range, incessant trading of blows as well as the evasion of them necessitated excellent balance, body and foot positioning and proper head movement. In all these respects, as well as hard, fast, short counters to the opponents body and head with great smoothness of execution; these performances were as advanced as any in the ability to "stand on a handkerchief" to hit and not get hit too much so, as well as to withstand the punishment that came their way: round after round. As the long distance bouts faded away, so did some of the short middle "within range" boxing, lessening in its necessity and usage.

Famous boxing figure Charley Rose explained the art of in-fighting practiced in the gyms on a daily basis in the early 1910's. "Fighters back then fought two and three times a week and couldn't afford to get busted up. So every day they practiced how to fight on the inside – how to move in and out of clinches." He stated, "Every fighter was taught how to edge their left or front foot towards the right, or edge their right foot forward and over to the left, while simultaneously sloping their head towards the right or left so that if the two fighters hit heads, they would come in contact with the side of the skull from the ear up which is pretty solid. Even if the skin did break, it wouldn't affect anything as vital as eyesight. Every fighter practiced these maneuvers in the gym daily until it became habit." This practice led to better defensive fighters that were less likely to get cut.

The great Charley Goldman stated that fighters from his era had tougher skin for two reasons: (1) they didn't use headgear, and (2) they'd bathe their face in brine. He said, "It doesn't make sense to train with headgear if you fight without them. I never wore headgear and I must have had 300 fights. I don't remember getting cut but once." "It's simple," he said, "you cover something up, you protect it, it becomes tender, that's what happens to the skin around a fighter's eyes. His second point, "The use of brine was prevalent. Fighters such as Terry McGovern would bathe their face with brine before and after every workout. Their skin got to be real leathery. It had to be or those fellows never would have been able to fight 25 and 30 rounds." Dr Vincent Nardiello stated, "others used a solution of water and rock salt." Dr Nardiello also commented on headgear stating his own personal reflection when he boxed under the name of Jimmy Sheppard to earn his way through medical school. "Speaking from my own experience, when I started, there were a few times when I butted heads in the gym, and because I didn't have a headguard, I felt it plenty. As a result, I made darn sure of my technique the next time I moved so it wouldn't happen again. It stands to reason, that a fighter would learn the proper technique if they didn't go in there wearing football helmets "

By the late 1910's, all that remained in boxing techniques to be further explored or polished were lateral movement, combination punching, and hand placement. Defense, ring generalship, feinting, counterpunching, slipping and countering, rolling, blocking, body punching, infighting, etc. already had been mastered.

By the late 1910's, all the weight classes had these techniques and fighters were able to spend more time skill training and were no longer required to be quite so tough or conditioned, generically. By the late 1920's combination punching or as phrased at the time, "combination fighters, " had been further developed in both variation and an increased usage of 4 punch combinations. The final added touch of 5

or more combinations were effectively completed by 1940, as Robinson turned pro. Lateral movement was immediately employed more often by the late 1910's, as 10-15 rounds were the limit and this tactic has not shown any overall increase in usage since that time perhaps until the mid 1980's. Compact hand placement became more normative by the late 1930's, that is, keeping the hands high during the entire course of a bout, rather than lowering and bringing up as in range as previously employed. The looser style, with right hand in blocking position, left held lower is also still widely used to facilitate foot, body, head movement, drawing and feinting – strategically and technically from the lighter weight classes of 1905 to circa 1985, there was a mixture of aggression, counterpunching, fighting, parrying, body punching, infighting, flurrying, combinations and toe to toe exchanges. Great emphasis was placed on balancing the fluidity of offense and defense, thinking, wearing down, out smarting and/or out fighting an opponent. Many fighters tended to be well-rounded performers.

Starting in the 1960's, but only reaching saturation by the mid to late 1980's, there came a different shift in strategy and technique.

From the mid 1950's until the 1960's, many professional fight club venues began to close. Boxers began to get more experience in the amateur ranks and turn professional at later age. Often acquiring 100 amateur bouts, most boxers received most of their experience as well as skills, in the amateurs. Combination punching, headhunting, lateral movement became increasingly emphasized while infighting, body punching, short and short middle range techniques, compact punching and a mixture of fighting and boxing began to erode. What was once fluidity and adaptation in bouts in overall offense and defensive skills had become predictable and rigid. Head shots with combinations tended to be the main course of action as one opponent would throw his combination and then his opponent his. This comparative lack of style and technical versatility remains today, as while there are many great exceptions to this strategy, there is no doubt in objective observation that prevailing "amateur" style has produced less well rounded performers and performances.

The research for this article comprised mostly of film analysis of hundreds of fights and fighters from circa 1905 to 2004. For those readers who may like to do research in this area, I have some suggestions. When possible do try to take the color out of the film by transferring film to video and then delete the color, as even color can divert attention. Sound should also be taken off. This provides much more clarity in movement, punches and overall kinetic viewing. Review all films in both slow motion study and normal speed as they both reveal insights but only a combination of the two yield satisfactory results. To do any research at all, one must constantly be reminded to simply analyze what the performers are doing and/or not doing.

The late Ray Arcel has always been my guiding light on knowledge and expertise. Further articles will be forth coming, detailing more of an individual and era's contributions to boxing technique, style and strategy.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Dan Cuoco for his valuable insight and critique of this article.



The Development of Boxing Strategies, Styles and Techniques During the Gloved Era to Present--Part 2: The Era 1900-1915

By: Michael Hunnicut



Previously I had written, **“The Development of Boxing Strategies, Styles and Techniques During the Gloved Era Part 1.”** This brief article is an addendum to the earlier article and it is suggested by the author to be used in conjunction with the previous article.

In the lighter weight classes, from Circa 1900 to Circa 1915, some of the most readily apparent techniques that were involved were the all around ability to box exceedingly well at middle range, but especially so at short-middle and short range without reliance on lateral movement; rather extreme focus was placed on balance, pivoting, body positioning, head movement, pacing and proper delivery of punches.



Boxers were expected to be as proficient as they could be at both evading and delivering punishment without unnecessary movement. These skills were especially prevalent in the scheduled 25-45 round bouts. Jab rates in these bouts tended to be much lower than in the scheduled 20 round bouts of that time period whereas combination punching was actually higher. The combinations tended to be in the 2 and 3 punch series and very frequent. For example in the 1910 Battling Nelson-Ad Wolgast lightweight championship bout, the punch rate was approximately 85 per round for 39 rounds with upwards to 25 combinations of the 2,3 occasional 4 or more per opponent per round. In 1913, the scheduled 20 round lightweight championship bout between Willie Ritchie and Joe Rivers averaged a whopping 95 punches per opponent per round, with 15 combinations per round with an increase of jabs and 3-6 punch combinations.

The higher rate of 2 to 3 punch combinations with high total punch rates is apparent in almost all of the 25-45 round bouts filmed. The 20 round bouts filmed also display an increase in jabs as well as 3-6 punch combinations as demonstrated in the bouts of Jim Driscoll, Freddie Welsh, Willie Ritchie, Jimmy Wilde, Joe Symonds, Ted “Kid” Lewis and others.



Slip and duck rates in the 25-45 round bouts were also slightly higher as opposed to 20 round bouts and many 15 round bouts in later years. The reason for this is that both opponents tended to be in hitting range more frequently and had more opportunities to slip and duck punches. Indeed this skill was necessary for the success and longevity of the boxer.

What can be perhaps inferred from the general observation of these and

other bouts of the same era is that as soon as it was tactically and strategically feasible, more foot movement and longer range boxing were employed more frequently in order to “free up” and help relieve the intense mental and physical pressure of being in range almost constantly for 25 or more rounds. Still the skills most highly prized, whether for 10 rounds or 40, were the techniques needed to “stand on a handkerchief” and box successfully along those lines. A boxer who can make an opponent miss at close range can adjust to any length of rounds.

Boxers needed to adapt to 10 round main events as well as the longer distance 25-45 round championship bouts as efficiently as possible. From a purely technical standpoint, once the 25 or more rounds were no longer scheduled, some of the short and short-middle range skills needed to be successful in these bouts began to become less important.

After the period Circa 1900-1915 boxers became less proficient in the execution of continuous and instantaneous short, hard fast counters to the body and head and the evasion of them, as well as overall infighting competence. Conversely, once the 10, 12, and 15 round distances fully settled in, middle to long range skills had added importance and such techniques as jabbing, lateral movement, and 3-6 punch combinations began to be further sharpened while preserving very good countering and very good infighting techniques.

The reason for the author’s focus of the 1900 to 1915 era in this article is because much of what could be done in boxing had already been developed in the lighter weight classes in the period 1900-1915. Jabs, combination punching, lateral movement, head and elbow placement were to be further polished, but in many ways had already been mastered. What was needed most was to “bring up” the advanced techniques of the lighter weight divisions into the middle, light heavy and heavyweight divisions. This was starting to occur with some fighters at this time period, and very quickly rose to the heavyweight division by the late 1910’s.

Because of proper teaching techniques, the large number of professional fighters, busier fighter schedules (hence more experience), boxing’s technical and competitive era was perhaps from circa 1900-1960. The largest pool of professional fighters reached its peak in the 1920’s. Since that time there has been a slightly continuous lessening in the number of fighters. This reached a drop off point by around 1960 as there became a perceptible decrease in the number of boxing shows and the amount of professional fights boxers were likely to have. While they were certainly more than enough boxers and teachers to produce great boxers and effective techniques, there was a general lack of depth in some of the divisions. The lessening of excellent teachers, fights, fighters, experience, and a rise of less effective amateur techniques transferable into the professional ranks by the 1980’s has continued to present. Nevertheless, great boxers with great techniques and strategy will always exist but at a probable lesser rate than at some other times previously.

Further articles delineating defensive and offensive techniques by successful fighters will be forthcoming.

I would like to thank Dan Cuoco for his critique of this article.

Photos courtesy of Monte Cox