

# MAGNIFICO!

A Book Review/Interview by Roger Zotti

Primo Carnera's a nice chap, and he's got lots of heart, a lot more than I thought he had. I pleaded with [referee] Donovan to stop the fight.

Max Baer

1

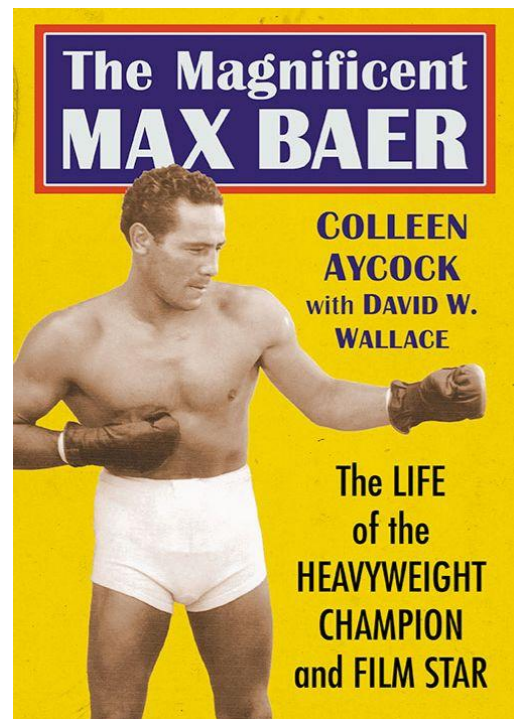
Colleen Aycock's latest book conclusively shatters the negative stereotype of Max Baer as he was depicted in *Cinderella Man* and many of his other movies. Perhaps someday a movie about the real Baer, the one Colleen so convincingly describes in *The Magnificent Max Baer: The Life of the Heavyweight Champion and Film Star*, will be made.

Compellingly written with David W. Wallace and exhaustively researched, Colleen's latest book is a terrific account of an intriguing and unforgettable prizefighter's life inside and outside the ring. A must-read for boxing fans, boxing historians, and lovers of biography.

In an interview with Aycock, the first question I asked her was *What Made Max Baer, well, Max Baer?* "Max was seen as a clown, but he was a clever clown, much smarter than given credit for," she said. "He tried to make the sport nicer, and the crowds loved his laughter, his stories, and his charisma, not to mention his powerful fist and unpredictable behavior. And he always stood strong for children and the just."

Next question: *Why has Max been portrayed in films, such as The Harder They Fall and Cinderella Man, as "a villain?"* "Hollywood is Hollywood," Aycock replied, "and to make a good film you need a hero and a villain."

She continued: "Because early in his boxing career Max had killed a man in the ring, Frankie Campbell, the story gave Max a 'killer' image and that's what Hollywood came looking for: a good-looking man (he was beautiful) who could pass a screen test



and who had a reputation as a killer, though in reality he was the opposite. Unfortunately, that 'killer image' was usually virtually in all of the films he made, or that were made about him, even in western comedies."

(After Campbell's death, Aycock writes, Baer "was an emotional wreck. It was a personal battle he would fight for the rest of his life" . . . *New York Mirror* columnist Dan Parker added, "Had it not been for the tragedy, his killer instinct would have made Baer [the] greatest.")

Asked *How Baer would do against today's heavyweights?* Colleen said, "In boxing skill, Max was a slugger with a good chin—in the chronological line between Dempsey and Louis. The question is like asking 'How would Joe Louis fare against the moderns?' We have to remember that Louis in his prime beat Max.

"In entertainment value, Max would win hands down. I would love to see Max in the ring today—it would be entertaining as hell, and the millions of dollars he would draw would be difficult to predict."

## 2

Colleen's book contains eighteen chapters, among them "The Screwball Championship Fight, Galento, 1940" and "Glamour Boy in Hollywood, 1933 to 1958." In the Baer-Galento chapter I recall seeing highlights of it on "Greatest Fights of the Century," which aired from 1948 to 1954, with Jim Stevenson as narrator. I knew what to expect.

Before the Galento fight Baer spoke with Lou Nova, a victim of "Two Ton" Tony's tactics in their 9/15/39 battle. For some reason the referee allowed Galento to repeatedly thumb Nova in the right eye. (Watch it on YouTube. It's definitely cringe-worthy!)

Baer told Nova, who was stopped in the 14<sup>th</sup> round and later hospitalized, he had fought Galento incorrectly, that the way to fight him was, Colleen quotes Baer as saying, "'at long range and go directly to the head . . . [Galento] couldn't be beaten in a clean fight because he was one of the dirtiest . . .'"

Before Max left Nova's hospital room, Lou looked at him and said, "'You're the man who can beat Tony Galento.'"

Colleen writes, "It was a fight of head butts, slashes with laces, thumbs, and gouges." (No surprise, eh!) Also, she quotes reporter Gayle Talbot of the *Asbury Park Press* as writing: "'The fat old tavern keeper was sitting on his stool, blowing blood like a harpooned whale, when the bell rang to start the eighth round. His handlers wouldn't

let him go out.' The only thing the fight proved was that 'there isn't a heavyweight in the world today worthy of challenging Joe Louis for the championship.'"

While he was still active in the ring, Baer began his acting career. And why not? He had looks and was a natural ham.

His first film was 1933's *The Prize Fighter and the Lady*," co-starring Myrna Loy, probably best known today as the wife of private detective Nick Charles in those great *Thin Man* movies of the thirties and forties. *Prizefighter* was a success and so was Baer. Aycock quotes the movie poster: "Watch your pulse, Girls! A curly haired man is coming into your life. Resist him if you can. Handsome, strong, and alive! Hollywood calls him the male Mae West with a streamline chassis."

Appearing in the film was then heavyweight champion Primo Carnera, who played a character named Primo. He and Max's character, Steve Morgan, do battle. Reality intervened seven months after the movie's release when Carnera and Max fought, in New York's Madison Square Garden, for the former's heavyweight title.

During his long career, Max appeared in mostly corny but enjoyable movie comedies, with such actors as William Bendix, Patsy Kelly, Brian Donlevy, and Walter Brennan, among others.

In 1945, he teamed with former light-heavyweight champion "Slapsie" Maxie Rosenbloom in a vaudeville revue. "It was said that the boxers gave up clout for corn," Colleen writes, "but it was very successful corn . . ."

She quotes reporter Alan Ward of the *Oakland Tribune* as writing, ". . . unlike other fighters and champions who became broke and bewildered after their ring careers, 'it is gratifying to realize that here are two who not only are doing well financially but are right up there with chips.'"

In the last decade of his life, Max appeared as a guest in numerous television shows, such as "The Milton Berle Show," "The Perry Como Show," and "So This Is Hollywood."

Baer had an important role in Humphrey Bogart's last movie, 1956's *The Harder They Fall*. Tautly directed by Mark Robson and adapted from Budd Schulberg's memorable novel, the movie co-starred Rod Steiger, Jan Sterling, and Mike Lane. Lane played a Primo Carnera-like character—he was called Toro Moreno—and Max portrayed heavyweight champion Buddy Brannen, a thinly disguised copy of himself.

"When the movie opened in 1956," Aycock writes, "Primo Carnera sued Columbia Pictures and the book's author . . . for \$1.5 million, charging that both

products were an invasion of privacy causing him scorn and ridicule and the loss of respect.”

*The Harder They Fall* is a movie that digs deeply into the corrupt side of boxing; and its star, Humphrey Bogart, Colleen says, “fearlessly commented on the social impact of the film, saying he realized ‘a lot of fans are as interested as I am in seeing the bad elements in boxing cleaned up.’”

Colleen rightly believes the portrayal of Max, in 2005’s *Cinderella Man*, directed by Ron Howard and starring Russell Crowe as James J. Braddock, was a “character assassination.” Craig Bierko, a fine actor, plays Max, who’s wrongly portrayed as a big mouth womanizer unremorseful about his tragic fight with Frankie Campbell.

### 3

Aycock said *The Magnificent Max Baer* is her “heart book [because] it represents my connection to boxing through my father, a professional boxer during the Great Depression.” Abandoned as a teenager in South Texas, her father, Ike, “tried continuing his high school education while working in a dairy for room and board . . . There was a time in the 30s when a town’s entertainment was a make-shift boxing ring city center where men could throw pennies and nickels on the canvas to encourage a challenge. My father stepped into the ring as a young man so he could buy a pair of shoes.

“He always told me, ‘Don’t feel sorry for me, the black boxers had it worse.’ Coming from Mississippi, I admired his feelings for the black boxers at a time when society was still drawing the social color line and racial division was at a boiling point. He told me pointedly, ‘Everyone is equal in the ring.’ It was an early, visible lesson for me in equal rights.”

When Baer advertised for sparring partners in 1934, Colleen writes, “my father took the train to California” to help the big heavyweight prepare for future fights. “He loved Max as many did during that bleak economic times. So I always dreamed of writing a book about Max Baer.”

**A regular contributor to the IBRO Journal, Roger Zotti has written two books about boxing, *Friday Night World* and *The Proper Pugilist*. Contact him at [rogerzotti@aol.com](mailto:rogerzotti@aol.com) for more information about them.**