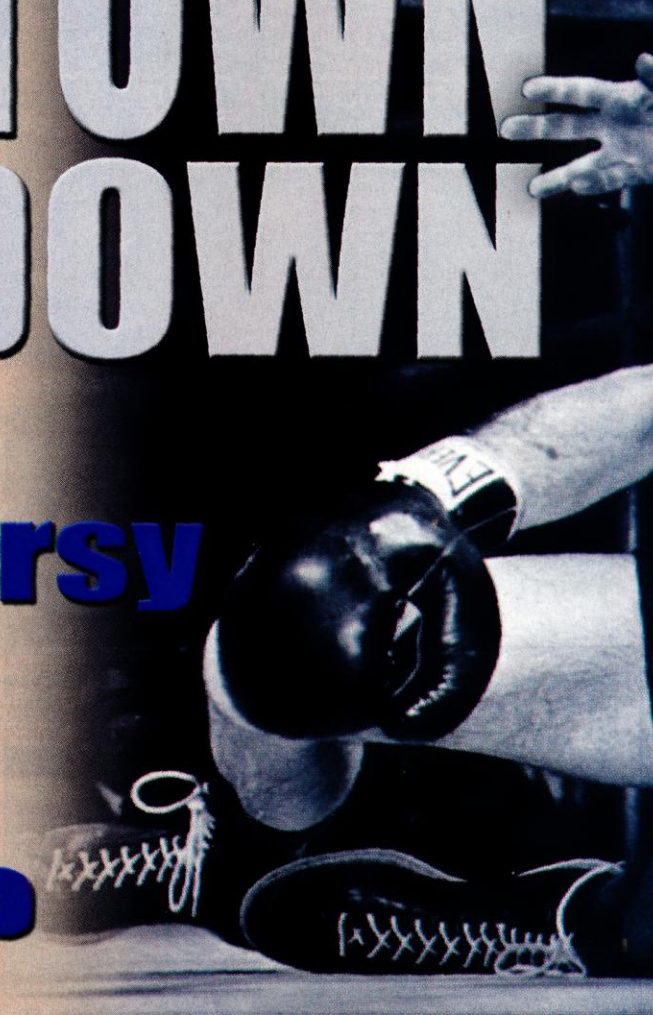


MEMORIES OF THE BEANTOWN BEATDOWN

Did The Controversy Die With Tommy Rawson?



By Pete Ehrmann

With the exception of one wild night that happened 50 years before his death on Septem-

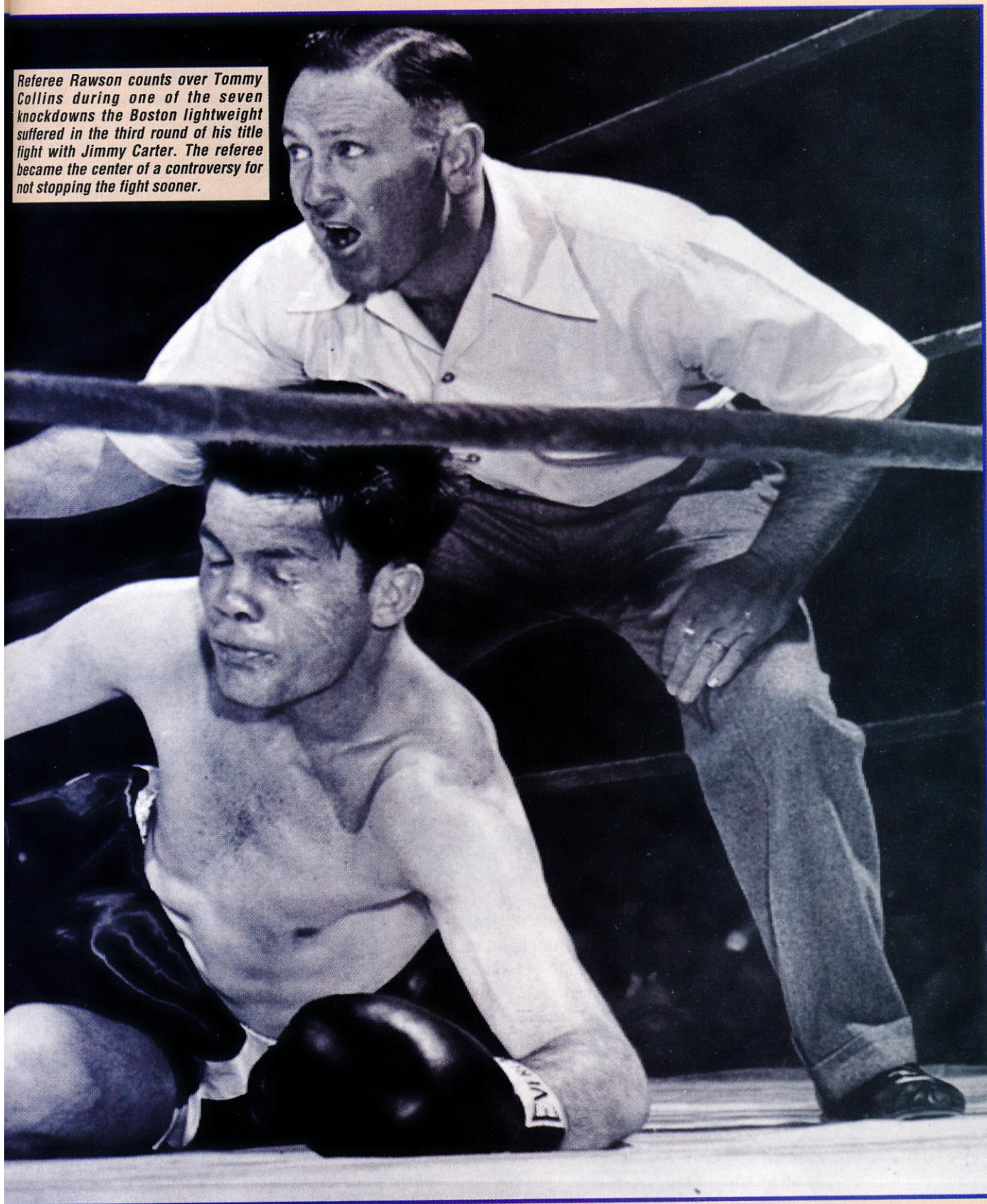
ber 16, 2003, Thomas R. Rawson Jr. was an admired and inspirational figure in New England boxing, thanks to his determination "to be on the level and do what's best" for the sport in which

he was involved for most of his 94 years.

The thousands of students to whom he taught the finer points of self-defense at the Harvard University Boxing Club for

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Referee Rawson counts over Tommy Collins during one of the seven knockdowns the Boston lightweight suffered in the third round of his title fight with Jimmy Carter. The referee became the center of a controversy for not stopping the fight sooner.



2½ hours every weekday afternoon from 1941 up to his retirement in 2002 knew him as “Coach Rawson,” a genteel, smiling, little man who demanded respect for the sport and wouldn’t stand for any

“funny business,” including the use of language not acceptable around the family dinner table.

Rawson’s service to boxing included an 18-year stint (1960-’78) as chairman of the

Massachusetts Boxing commission. The son of legendary New England featherweight Tommy Rawson Sr., Tommy Jr. won the junior national lightweight championship in 1929 and, after compiling a



Carter follows through with a right-hand swing that floors Collins again in the fourth round. All told, the challenger, who had a habit of coming off the floor to win, was knocked down 10 times before the bout was stopped at 2:28 of the fourth.

222-5 simon-pure log, followed his dad into the pros and had a noteworthy career that ended with a 1936 kayo loss to future lightweight champion Bob Montgomery.

After his retirement as a boxer, Rawson remained between the ropes as a referee, working, by his own count, more than 9,000 matches—one of which made him, at least temporarily, the most reviled man in the sport.

On April 24, 1953, Boston's Tommy Collins met champion Jimmy Carter in a lightweight title match at the Boston Garden. A rough-and-tumble slugger who'd done most of his fighting as a featherweight, Collins was knocked down 10 times in front of a national television audience in a fight *The New York Times* would call "one of the most reprehensible mis-

matches in modern ring history." After the fight, TV stations and newspaper sports departments all over the United States were deluged with calls from outraged viewers—some of them from boxing commissioners.

The object of their wrath was referee Rawson, whose handling of the bout, wrote Nat Fleischer, *THE RING's* editor and publisher, set boxing "back to the bare knuckle era of brutality."

"Battered down seven times in the third round, helpless, his eye closed and his face distorted, his pins so wobbly he couldn't

stand up straight, his senses gone so that he couldn't direct himself against his opponent, poor [Collins] had to submit to additional punishment that placed his life in danger," wrote Fleischer. "And all because Tommy Rawson, an old-time fighter, saw more fit to exhibit his skill in counting from one to eight—a baby's job—than the use of common sense, efficiency, and a human heart."

"Brutal Title Fight Shocks TV Viewers," was the front-page headline in *The New York Times* the day after the bout that finally ended at 2:28 of the fourth round after one of Collins' handlers climbed into the ring as his fighter was being counted over for the 10th time.

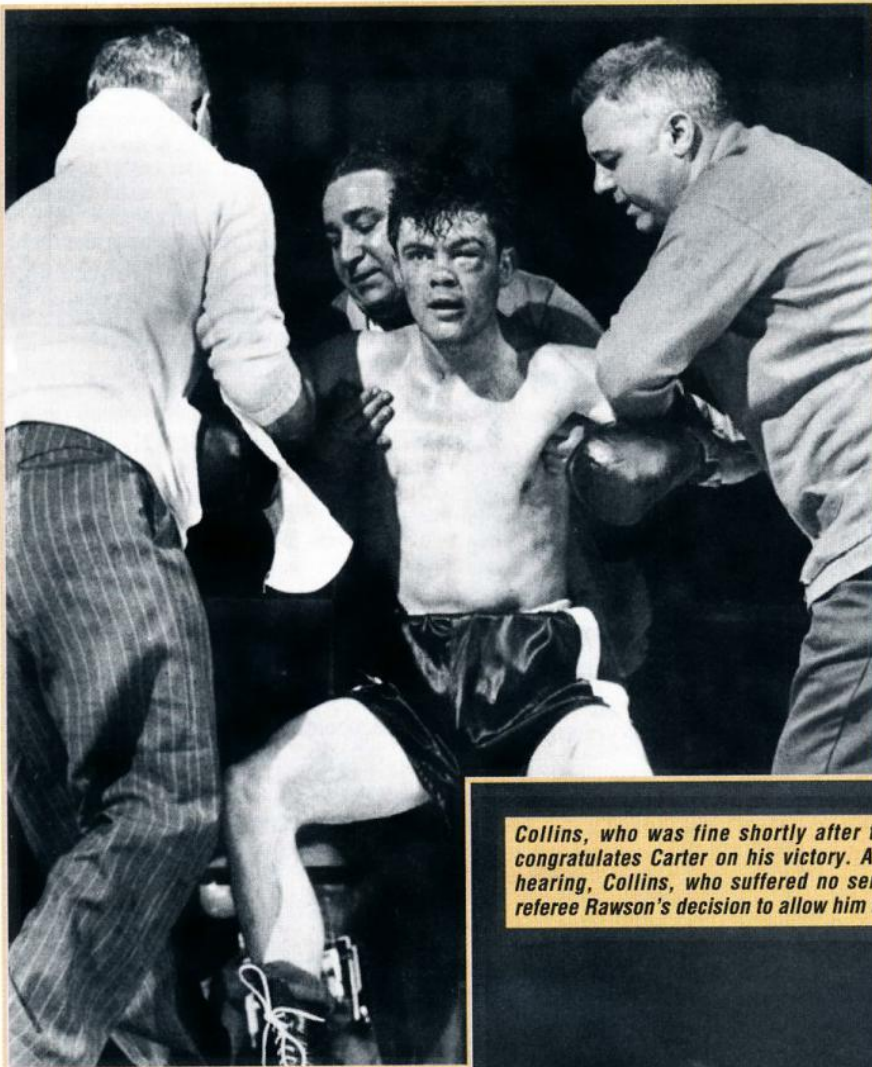
Viewer protest was so intense that the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* newspaper finally shut off the phones in its sports department rather than field any more calls.

A caller to the *San Francisco Examiner* said he had turned off his set because "my wife and kids were crying and I couldn't stand it anymore."



Collins gasps for air during his ninth trip to the canvas in front of 14,000 fans at the Boston Garden. He beat the count and was allowed to continue. But when Collins went down a 10th time, the fight was finally stopped.

One of the viewers who expressed his unhappiness in a call to the *Times* was Robert Christenberry, chairman of the New York State Athletic Commission,



Collins' handlers, who had swarmed the ring following the fighter's 10th knockdown, assist the stricken challenger to his stool. The brutally one-sided nature of the nationally televised fight caused a scandal.

who complained that "everything we've done to make [boxing] a clean, competitive sport, they've thrown to the winds ... Millions of people witnessed this black eye to boxing, and it will take boxing a long time to make up for it."

"The worst exhibition of boxing officiating I have seen in 50 years," declared Minnesota's George Barton, president of the National Boxing Association. "If [Rawson] was a referee in Minnesota, I'd take away his license."

That didn't go far enough for a Virginia viewer who telegraphed Boston police after the fight demanding that Rawson be charged with "attempted intentional homicide."

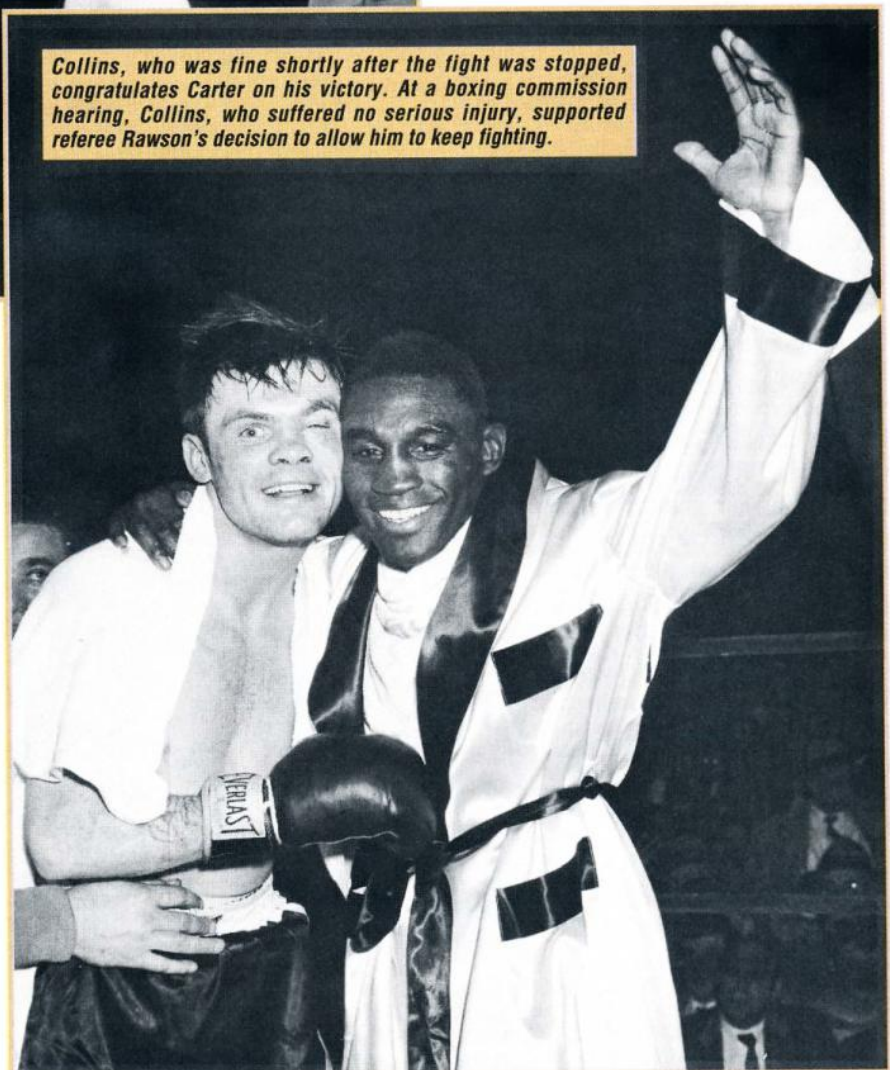
The alleged victim, however, testified for the defendant at a Massachusetts box-

ing commission hearing held the following day. Collins had not only survived his ordeal and left the ring smiling and under his own power, but stayed up late that night dancing with his wife.

"I feel fine," he told reporters at the hearing. "Haven't got an ache in my body."

Collins said Rawson had been right not to stop the fight, because to the very end "I was still swinging."

That was the story of the 24-year-old Beantown fighter's career. Going into the Carter fight, Collins was 57-10 (40). The New England featherweight titlist, Collins had been recognized the year before as NBA interim featherweight champion by beating Del Flanagan, while actual champion Sandy Saddler served in the U.S. Army. Among his knockout wins was a sixth-round stoppage of former featherweight champion Willie Pep on June 30, 1952, although ugly rumors about Pep's



Collins, who was fine shortly after the fight was stopped, congratulates Carter on his victory. At a boxing commission hearing, Collins, who suffered no serious injury, supported referee Rawson's decision to allow him to keep fighting.



Rawson (far left) examines photos of the Carter-Collins fight at a hearing held by the Massachusetts Boxing Commission. The commission members are Henry Lamar (center), Otis M. Whitney, and Tommy McFarkand (standing). Rawson was exonerated.

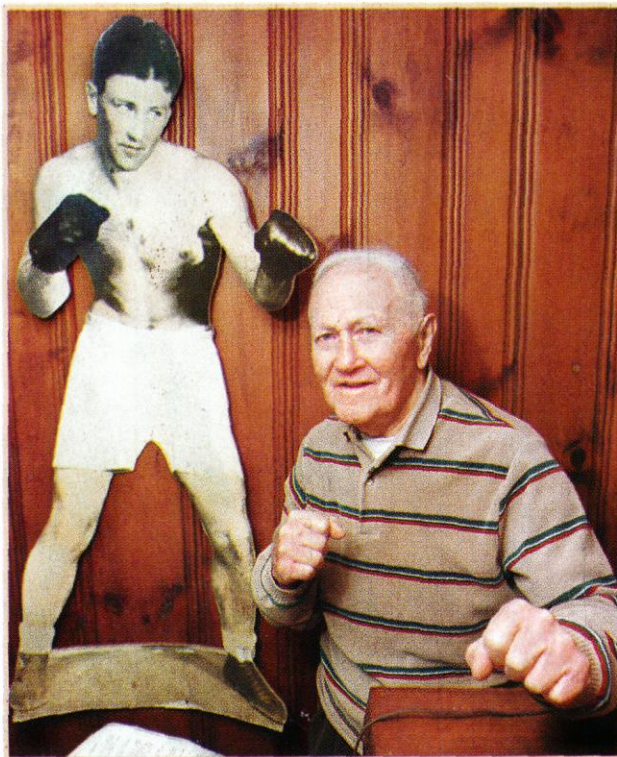
motivation in the ring cloud the result to this day.

But smiling Tommy had nothing against Carter, who was making the third defense of the 135-pound belt he'd won from Ike Williams in 1951. "Collins didn't even belong in the same ring with Carter," wrote disgusted columnist Arthur Daley after the fight. "The lad from Boston was a synthetic fighter who had become New England's biggest drawing card virtually overnight ... It's true, of course, that Collins has gotten off the deck on other occasions to win fights. He is a heavy hitter with a glass chin. But after the first three or four knockdowns, it was obvious to even the most distant televiewer that Boston Tommy was too far-gone to come back. From that point on it was clear that a savage beating was destined for him."

What savage beating?, wondered Rawson at the hearing, offering photos of the exuberant Collins after the fight as proof that, "I was right."

"Each time he was knocked down, I looked into his eyes.

They were clear, and I asked him if he was okay, and each time he assured me he was. He was relaxed at all times, not rigid. It was a championship fight, and I had to give him every chance," Rawson said.



A 92-year-old Rawson poses with a photo of himself during his fighting days. Besides refereeing more than 9,000 bouts, he was a member of the Massachusetts Boxing Commission and coached the Harvard University Boxing Club for 60 years.

After the commission absolved Rawson of any negligence in the matter, *THE RING*'s editor called it a "whitewashing on a par with Rawson's performance." There were the usual calls to "ban boxing or clean it up," but nothing happened and, boxing being boxing, new villains quickly surfaced to draw fire away from the unruffled Rawson. Collins, who lived until 1996, fought on for another year after the Carter bout, winning three of five.

In a 2001 interview, Rawson maintained that there had been nothing reprehensible in his conduct of the lightweight title fight.

"I had reffed Collins before, and he had been put down and came back to knock the other fellow out," he said. "When knocked down, he'd get right up and knock his opponent out. He was an unpredictable fighter. He could hit pretty good for a small fellow."

The bottom line, Rawson said, was "I always had to call 'em as I saw 'em." That had been the case on a night 10 years before the Collins-Carter fight, when another Beantown hero, Sal Bartolo, faced Willie Pep for the featherweight title in Boston. At the end of 15 tough rounds, referee Rawson joined the judges in awarding the fight to Pep, even though Rawson was a friend of the challenger.

"It took a lot of courage," said Pat Leonard Sr., a Massachusetts boxing writer and historian. "Tommy was criticized by Sal's buddies and some reporters, but he did what was the right thing."

He was still doing it into his 90s every afternoon at Harvard's Malkin Athletic Center, where Rawson demonstrated proper boxing techniques and stressed to his young disciples what poor Tommy Collins never figured out.

"I tell them they have to stay at it and learn how to box and not get hit," Rawson said. "You can't duck 'em all, of course, but you have to protect yourself by boxing and not go in there mixing it up. You mix it up at the right time, when it's to your advantage." ■

Pete Ehrmann is a freelance writer based in West Allis, Wisconsin, and a regular contributor to this magazine.

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