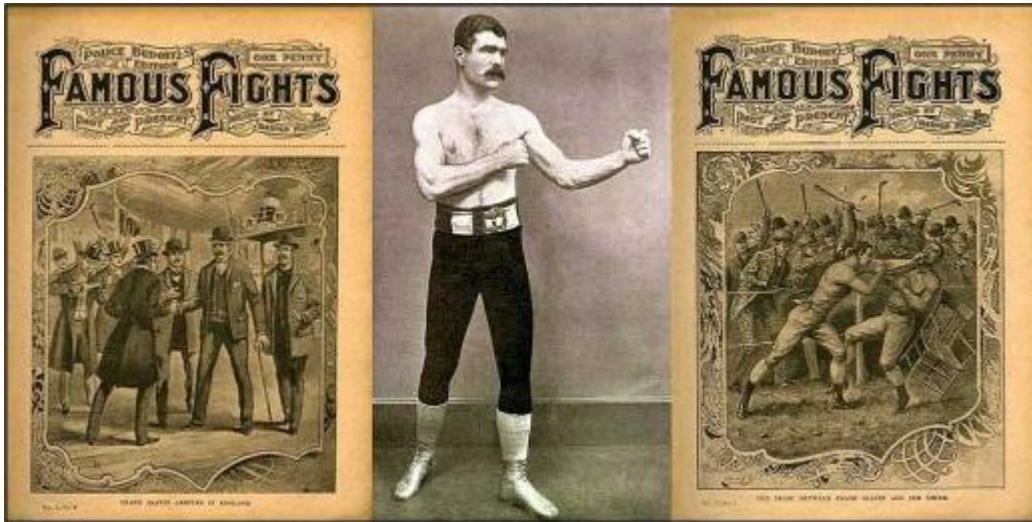


# Paddy Slavin—Pioneer of Prizefighting

## By Daniel Attias



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Prizefighting in Australia at the turn of the 19th century wasn't a sport for the faint of heart. The bare-knuckle brawls may have been replaced with gloved bouts but the style of fighting was still as wild as the gloveless days. Tough times call for tough men and "The Sydney Cornstalk," Frank "Paddy" Slavin, was as tough as they come.

Slavin began his fistic career in bare-knuckle fights around the minefields and timber camps of Northern New South Wales in the late 1870s and switched to glove fighting in the 1880s.

He would be trained, like so many of our best fighters of the time, under the great Larry Foley and it wasn't until he became a full-time Sydney fighter that Slavin's name became well known. He had toured previously with a boxing troupe in Queensland where his first recorded bouts occurred.

Slavin's first fight in Sydney was on New Years Day in 1887 against a young Bob Fitzsimmons, who would later go on to become the world's middleweight and heavyweight champion. The fight was a four-round affair, which appeared to be nothing more than an exhibition, which was common in Foley's Hall at the time. Sydney newspaper writer for The Referee, 'Major Boxer' saw a great deal of promise in the big man.

"Fitzsimmons and Slavin, the latter claiming the Queensland championship, closed proceedings with a friendly set-to. The latter is a remarkably fine young fellow, and when he gets a little 'Foley Polish' on him, will, if appearances and style, combined with his apparent ability, go for anything, hold his own with the first rank."

Slavin would more than gain that 'Foley Polish' over the next year as a fighter. He appeared often at Foley's Hall in Sydney, usually weekly or fortnightly throughout 1887 in a plethora of exhibitions and fights. Slavin was proving to be a big hitter whenever the fight was of a more serious nature and his numerous opponents more often than not ended up asleep on the canvas after Slavin had done his work.

After what could be considered his apprenticeship as a prizefighter in 1887, Slavin ventured to New Zealand where he faced the best heavyweights the Kiwi's had to offer. The tour culminated in a fight for the New Zealand heavyweight title against the then unbeaten Harry Laing.

The fight took place in the saddling paddock of Wanganui Racecourse in front of some 300 spectators who had paid their half sovereign admission to watch the bout. Laing was to be no match for Slavin and when the Australian landed a heavy blow to the left eye of Laing in the fifth round the fight was all but Slavin's. He would win the title late in the sixth and final round via a referee stoppage.

Slavin would go on to fight for the Australian Heavyweight title less than eight months later when he took on Mick Dooley, an ex-instructor at Foley's, on the 8th of December 1888. Slavin made easy work of the world-class Dooley, coming out with a newfound style but one that hadn't lessened in its aggressiveness as the Sydney Evening News reported.

"His style showed strong evidence of alteration, though with no abatement of his old vigor. His attitude reminded one strongly of Jack Burke, and his immense reach made this style of boxing look very dangerous."

It took mere minutes for Slavin to impose his will on Dooley and he knocked out him out for the full ten-count to win the title.

Slavin now held the Australian Heavyweight title but there were still many who refused to call him the best big man in the colony. While Slavin was winning the aforementioned title, there was another Australian heavyweight making a name for himself on the other side of the world in the United States, Peter Jackson.

Jackson was the son of a freed slave and was born in the Virgin Islands before migrating to Australia as a young boy. He too was trained under the watchful eye of Larry Foley and just months prior to Slavin's win over Dooley, he had won the world's 'colored' heavyweight title in a 19th round knockout over George Godfrey in San Francisco, California.

Slavin continued on his winning ways after beating Dooley. He traveled to England in 1889 and knocked out a slew of challengers before gaining a shot at England's champion Jem Smith. The fight was called a draw after supporters of the English champion became involved in a most despicable manner, repeatedly kicking Slavin in the legs and hitting him on the head and body with sticks and knuckle-dusters. The Brisbane Courier describes the end of the fight as such.

"The next round, the fourteenth, was the last. Slavin fought in a most determined fashion, and when he was punishing Smith heavily the latter caught the Australian round the waist and held him onto the ropes, whilst the ruffians standing around beat and kicked him in a most cowardly fashion amid cries of 'fair play'. He fell to the ground and on the men taking their corners the referee said that he would act no longer as it was perfectly clear that Slavin was not to have fair play."

The fight was one that Slavin most certainly had the better of and the crowd present was more than willing to proclaim him the victor despite the official decision of a draw.

Slavin racked up many more impressive victories in the motherland including a win over Joe McAuliffe for the Police Gazette belt before venturing to the United States in 1891.

Slavin's reputation as a tough, big hitting fighter had more than solidified by the time he arrived in New York and he easily defended his Police Gazette belt against the legendary Jake Kilrain on June 16, 1891.

On the 30th of May the following year, Slavin faced his bitter adversary Peter Jackson at the London Sporting Club in a bout that is remembered throughout the ages as one of the greatest heavyweight fights the world has seen.

The rivalry between these two men spanned many years. They were both pupils of Larry Foley, but despite their similar beginnings in the fight game they grew to hate one another. Slavin was an unabashed racist and the two of them often competed for their mentor's affections resulting in heated arguments. Adding to the bad blood between them was the fact they had both dated the same woman, Josie Leon. The two had fought on many occasions over the woman, who despite all the attention ended up marrying another man! The most notorious of these fights was a twenty-minute brawl that occurred in Foley's White Horse Saloon in 1883.

The London Sporting Club was filled with many a nobleman the day of the Jackson-Slavin bout and those that were present were more than treated to a fight of the highest caliber of skill, bravery and brutality.

Slavin, dressed in dark blue knee breeches, light blue stockings and russet shoes looked as strong as a bull whilst Jackson, dressed in white drawers, white socks, and dark leather shoes appeared as fit as he'd ever been and more than ready to show the world just who was the better man.

The fight began at a frenetic pace and both men had their moments in the first few rounds but as the fight wore on it was clear that Jackson, the more scientific fighter of the two, was gaining the upper hand. The fight thrilled the crowd on hand but it was to be Jackson who would be the victor this day as he defeated his foe Slavin in a tenth round knockout for the ages. Perhaps one quote that appeared in The Referee newspaper summed up the bout best—"The men fought with marvelous fairness, and their bravery was only excelled by their manliness."

The loss was one that Slavin never really recovered from. He went on to fight for many more years but he was never the same man. He began drinking excessively following the fight and despite the loss to Jackson being his first real defeat, lesser quality fighters often had Slavin's measure after the Jackson fight.

Slavin fought on in America and eventually Canada before trying his hand at gold mining during the great Yukon gold rush at the turn of the 19th century. Slavin is a member of the Australian Boxing Hall of Fame and is recognized as one of the pioneers of the sport of boxing in this country.

***(Special thanks to Australian Boxing Legends magazine.)***  
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