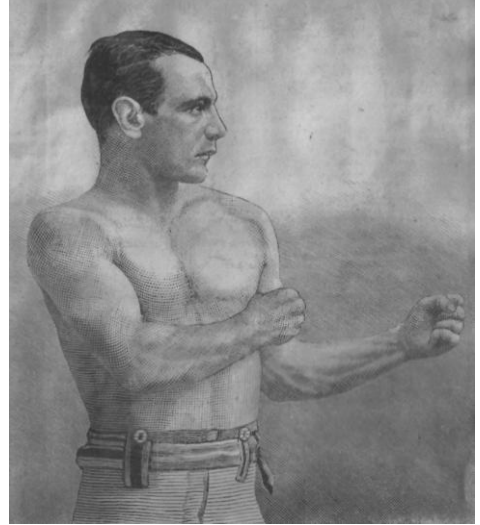


BRITISH BORN & CANADIAN MADE GEORGE FULLJAMES

*BY
LOU EISEN*

Although he is primarily remembered as a Canadian boxing champion (when remembered at all) George Fulljames was, in fact, born in London, England, on February 13th, 1852. Fulljames father owned a thriving saloon in England, known affectionately as the, “Old Horseshoe,” where, the young Fulljames and his kid brother Billy learned the finer points of the art of self-defence from some of boxing’s greatest ever practitioners. Presumably, Fulljames father and his patrons thought the name, like the object, brought them good luck.



Fulljames is probably best known for two specific events. Namely, he fought the original Jack Dempsey in the first ever bout for the world’s middleweight title. He is also, sadly, remembered for dying in the ring. More on that later.

In order to understand George Fulljames boxing achievements and ambitions clearly, we must first look at the era in which he came of age pugilistically and, as a young man. He was greatly influenced by his boxing peers as well as those fighters who preceded him.

The “Old Horseshoe” bar, owned by Fulljames father, was very popular amongst the boxing crowd. It was often frequented by such all-time boxing greats as, Tom Sayers, Jem Mace, John C. Heenan and many others.

Sayers fought American John C. Heenan to a 37 round draw on April 17, 1860 in one of boxing’s first international bouts. Sayers career record included 12 wins, 1 loss and 3 draws.

John C. Heenan, was a highly regarded American bare knuckle heavyweight, known as the Benicia Boy. He only had three pro fights – two losses and one draw (against Tom Sayers,) but influenced many fighters who followed him in a stylistic sense;

Tom King, was a successful British bare knuckle and gloved boxer known as, “The Fighting Sailor.” He was strong, tough and supremely skilled. He beat Heenan and

the magnificent, all-time great Jem Mace, among others. King was known as the undisputed Heavyweight Champion of Britain.

The immortal Jem Mace was truly an international star, known throughout the world for his boxing prowess, innovations, skills, tactics and strategies. "Gypsy" Jem Mace was the most successful and famous bare knuckle and gloved boxer of his time. Mace twice held the British World Heavyweight title. He fought successfully in Great Britain, the United States and is considered the father of Australian boxing, having discovered fellow heavyweight greats, Larry Foley, Peter Jackson, Bob Fitzsimmons and many others. He was also a huge influence on the immortal Sam Langford.



Mace did more to advance the popularity of, as well as respect for, boxing, than any other fighter of his time up to the introduction of The Boston Strong Boy, John L. Sullivan. He also demonstrated the high level of skill and training required of professional boxing more than any other man in the sport, not only before him, but long after his reign. His last recorded prize fight occurred in 1909 when he was a spry 78 years old. So don't be surprised if we see George Foreman in the ring again.

All of these boxing greats were innovators in the sport and had invaluable insights to offer any young man embarking on a pugilistic career, should they be so inclined to listen patiently and soak up all of this incredible knowledge. These all-time boxing immortals were always willing to pass on their vast knowledge of the intricacies of boxing to young up and comers.

Each of these fistic greats took time to carefully teach the young Fulljames brothers everything they had learned and utilized in the squared circle. Growing up in this lively college of boxing knowledge prepared the Fulljames brothers well for a career in professional pugilism. For Fulljames, this was akin to getting a doctorate in boxing knowledge and science.

These men imparted invaluable knowledge along with confidence to the Fulljames brothers. Even though George Fulljames was short, standing a mere 5'4" ½ inches tall and usually weighed no more than 122-156 pounds, these past greats impressed upon him that lack of size is only an impediment to victory if you allow it to be so. They advised him to turn his supposed disadvantages into strengths. That line of thinking, still exists in boxing today and has always proven to be successful.

George Fulljames moved to Toronto, Canada, along with his brother Billy, in 1869, to pursue a boxing career. He was all of 17 years old. Unknown to many boxing writers is the fact that Fulljames had three amateur fights, which result in a 1-1-1 record, one win, one draw and one fight stopped by the police.

He eventually ended up in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where his career flourished. As hard as it is to believe today, Winnipeg was considered a boxing hotspot in the world in the mid to late 1800's all the way up to the early 1930's. Many managers from all over the world, sent their fighters to Winnipeg to learn and improve their craft before bringing them to wider acclaim in the United States and Europe. There was a good reason why Winnipeg was an advantageous environment to so many young boxers.

That's because pro boxing was wide open in Winnipeg. There were no rules regarding where boxing matches could be staged, in Winnipeg. Any store or bar, regardless of the size, could put up a ring and hold a night of boxing and, that is what hundreds of them did. With so many good fights to be had each night, boxers often learned their craft quickly and well.

It was into this environment, in which the Fulljames brothers entered, and thrived as their skills began to improve. It is one thing to be taught various moves and tactics by the sport's all-time greats, but it is much more effective to be in the ring learning your craft on the job.

Fulljames developed into a gifted, clever, highly skilled, scientific prizefighter. He fought essentially as a lightweight and as a middleweight. Weight division restrictions were not as strictly enforced in the latter 1800's as they are today. Also, the victor was often the fighter who was generally more skilled than his willing foe. This is why we often hear of Joe Gans fighting Sam Langford to a draw as well as Barbados Joe Walcott, who stood no more than 5'1" and barely weighed more than 135 pounds, fighting and beating a true heavyweight pugilist.

During his career, Fulljames fought and emerged victorious over such gifted fighters as Sam Bittle, Mouse Olbright, Pat Gallagher and the very dirty (and fellow Torontonian) Billy Trotter.

By the year 1880, George Fulljames was widely considered to be, if not the best lightweight in Canada, the best lightweight in Eastern Canada. Other lightweights such as Billy Madden and Professor Wood had equally, if often dismissed, claims to the Canadian lightweight belt. Their claims were bolstered by the fact that they fought often and engaged in all-action slugfests with the best lightweights in the country.

Most fans back then, and even today, enjoy all action fights. George Fulljames was not much of a draw in his day as he had a reputation for not facing the best possible fighters in his weight class. He turned down a lot of fights, which sullied his reputation. He was considered a man of distinct inaction.

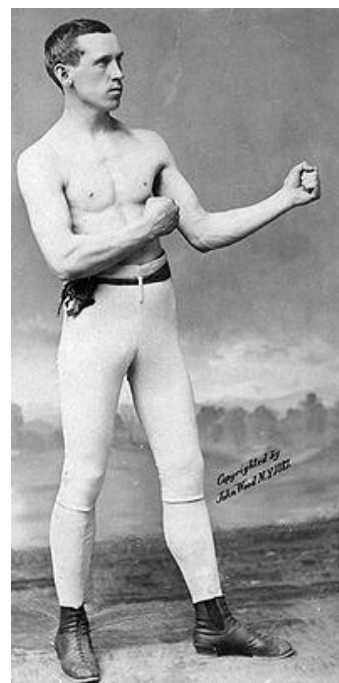
It was during the decade of the 1870's, in which Fulljames engaged two outstanding fighters in his adopted hometown of Toronto. His first big fight against a name opponent occurred when he encountered George Collins. He defeated Collins to give his career some much needed impetus.

Then, on the hot and humid summer day of June 29th, 1880, again in Toronto, he fought a scrap, with gloves, against the formidable Jack King, who hailed from Troy, New York. The fight was considered a modern classic, although it ultimately ended in an 18 round draw. By the way, the referee for this bout was the world famous boxer, Paddy Ryan, who had just recently won the Irish bare-knuckle heavyweight title.

Fulljames claim to the title was certainly not bolstered by the fact that at this time, he only had five fights (2-0-2 with a police stoppage) on his pro ledger. Boxing was still mostly illegal in Ontario, although the police, when paid off properly often turned a blind eye to such events. To be sure, Fulljames was clearly recognized as the only lightweight champion of Canada by 1880. He was also Canada's most well-known and highly regarded prizefighter. An interesting sidebar here is that Fulljames never referred to himself as a "champion," but rather, he used the more sober sobriquet of, "King of my castle."

At precisely this point in time, as fate would have it, there arrived in Toronto, a fighter from the nation's, capitol city of Ottawa. His name was Harry Gilmore and he was gunning for Fulljames and he was starting to be considered as the best lightweight in Canada. Unfortunately for Gilmore, he was unable to find any financial backing and thus, could not arrange a fight for the title with Fulljames.

It was Fulljames who turned down Gilmore's offer to fight for \$300 a side, insisting that he would not enter the ring for less than \$1000. Ironically, Fulljames then took a fight in New York against Frank White for the sum of \$300. However, Fulljames had received information to the effect that the police would arrest him and White if they went through with the contest. They tried again to stage the fight and, once again, were sternly warned by the police to cease and desist.

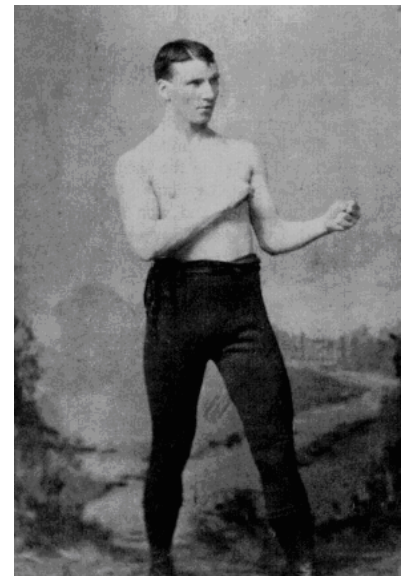


While this was going on, back in Toronto, Harry Gilmore was starting to earn a scintillating reputation for his boxing skills and victories. Most fans and newspapermen thought that Fulljames went to New York to deliberately avoid fighting Gilmore. There is some truth to that theory as Fulljames did duck a lot of fighters.

Eventually, Fulljames and Gilmore did face each other in the ring, initiating Canadian boxing's first rivalry during the summer of 1882. Gilmore won by TKO as Fulljames just missed beating the count, rising as the count of ten was declared by the referee. Almost a year later in May, 1883, Gilmore and Fulljames met again in what was then billed as a match for the Canadian Lightweight title. This was a bit disingenuous as by then Fulljames was living and operating a sports bar in New York.

Fulljames traveled back to Toronto for their gloved fight, which took place on September 17, 1883. Fulljames dominated the opening round and won it by drawing first blood. Gilmore rebounded ferociously in the second round to give Fulljames a truly terrible beating, battering him from pillar to post. The score was never settled because the local police entered the ring and arrested both combatants prior to the start of the next round. The promoter had neglected to pay off the police.

Fulljames' career was highlighted by many firsts. He participated in what is believed to have been the first ever universally recognized world middleweight title bout against the immortal Nonpareil Jack Dempsey. Dempsey is considered to be the first ever world middleweight titlist.



The two combatants entered the ring in a place known as Great Kills, Staten Island, New York on July 30, 1884 and engaged in a gloved bout that was administered according to the London Prize Ring Rules. They each received what was then a huge purse of \$2,000 (which amounts to about \$50,000 today).

The first round was basically a feeling out process, with both warriors checking out each other's fistic wares. Early on they traded some big shots with Dempsey catching Fulljames with a right hand to the head, and Fulljames retaliating with a left to Dempsey's chin. When they clinched, Dempsey resorted to some dirty tactics, such as elbowing and wrestling Fulljames.

Dempsey hurt Fulljames with a beautiful right and left salvo flush on Fulljames' chin. Fulljames weathered the storm and responded forcefully, shaking up

Dempsey with his own fusillade of hard punches. Dempsey scored the first knockdown of the match by dropping Fulljames with a powerful left hook to the point of the jaw.

The fight was Dempsey's from that moment on as Fulljames never fully recovered from Dempsey's left hook. Dempsey mercilessly pummeled Fulljames, who somehow managed to hang on even though he was taking a hideous beating. The fight continued on in this manner until Fulljames corner men finally stepped in and stopped the fight prior to the 21st round, saving their man from further sustained punishment.

Fulljames vehemently disagreed with his corner's correct decision to stop the fight. He felt he could fight as long as necessary to pull out a win. Fulljames had been merely a punching bag for Dempsey for over 15 rounds, and his corner absolutely did the humane thing by stopping the bout, which is rare in pro boxing. His financial backers agreed with the decision to halt the bout. In an act of kindness, Dempsey, now the undisputed world middleweight champion, gave Fulljames \$50 for his efforts and for his refusal to quit.

Like many pro boxers from that era, Fulljames boxing career and life, sadly, did not end well. On September 23, 1888, in Grand Forks, South Dakota, the 36 year-old Fulljames engaged in a contest against a fighter he knew very little about. In fact, his opponent fought under a variety of different names, which was not uncommon for the times. What we know for sure is that the fight cost Fulljames his life. Much of what happened during and after the contest is still shrouded in mystery and intentional obfuscation.

Those who watched the fight came from all stratospheres of society, from the rich and powerful to common day labourers. The other fact we know is that when Fulljames was fatally struck, everyone in attendance left in a hurry without offering him any medical assistance. The fight was not considered a legal bout fought under any specific set of rules. Fulljames needed the money. All Fulljames knew about his opponent for the evening was that he was supposedly from the North-East United States.

In a truly pathetic and painful ending, authorities did not find the horribly disfigured face and body of Fulljames until early the next morning on September 24, 1888. The police found out who had attended the fight and began to interview various witnesses, of whom, few if any were very forthcoming.

Through tapping various sources within the fight community, the police were able to arrest the man who was the other pugilist. His name was Tom Bannon, although he often fought under the names, Young Barrett and Boston Casey. Apparently, when the two men neared center ring to shake hands, Bannon

grabbed Fulljames hand and sucker punched him repeatedly in the face and did not let up until Fulljames slumped to the ground unconscious. The fight, in reality, never began, although it is incorrectly listed as a first round knockout victory for Bannon.

To attack a fighter before or after a fight is assault under the law. In effect, Bannon murdered Fulljames. In that strict sense, Fulljames death should not be considered a ring fatality as the fight had not yet begun. Officially, the murder of Fulljames was never resolved. It is theorized that a public official with a fair amount of standing in the community purposely ordered that Bannon be permitted to flee the jurisdiction the night of his arrest before Bannon could be conclusively identified.

In an interesting side note, the coroner ruled that Fulljames died from an object that was either shot or flung at his head rather than from more than 50-75 unanswered blows to the head. The coroner had been paid off well for his false report.

It came out later that local bettors (some of the state's most powerful men) had bet everything they had on Bannon to emerge victorious and had conspired with him to not allow Fulljames even a chance to defend himself. Fulljames had been the unwitting victim of a well-organized ambush. In a sadly ironic twist, Bannon, the perpetrator of this heinous crime, was himself murdered just under a week later. Apparently, Fulljames friends had sought and received their revenge.

The complete truth of Fulljames death will probably never be fully known. Why? Well there are several answers to this question, none of which suffice. There was a concerted cover-up after the fact and, as if matters weren't confusing enough, Bannon, who was said to have died exactly one week later, is listed in Box.rec under one of his ring aliases, Young Barrett, as fighting until 1904 with a career record of 7-2-1 with six KO's, and, with the Fulljames bout declared as Bannon's first bout!

Bannon used so many ring aliases it's almost impossible to find out the real truth behind the death of Fulljames to any degree of certainty. Bannon's next bout is listed as occurring some twelve years later in 1900. In that sense we will never know if Bannon truly was murdered one week later or continued fighting for another sixteen years.

The only thing we know for sure about what occurred after the fight and the autopsy (cover-up) is that Fulljames was transported back to Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada where he was finally laid to rest in the Brookside cemetery in Winnipeg.