

## Matt “Nutty” Curran, “the Foul Collector”

### By Patrick Myler

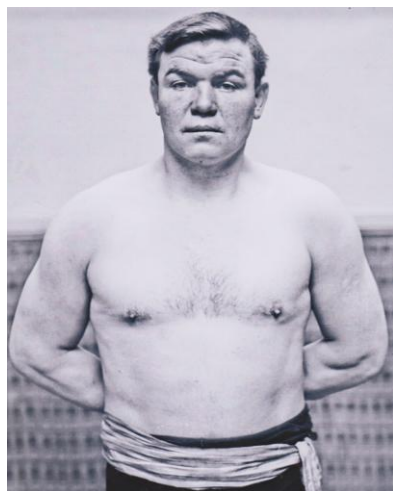
Nicknamed “Nutty” for his less than diligent regard for the Marquis of Queensberry rules, Matt Curran earned another unflattering tag, “the Foul Collector”.

In an 18-year career (1908-26), the England-based Irishman's reckless style led to him being disqualified for fouling no less than 12 times. Other times it was his opponent who lost his temper and caused the referee to raise Curran's hand as the winner on a foul. Then there was the five occasions when both “Nutty” and his opponent were shown the exit door and “no contest” was declared.

“If you fought Nutty, either he would foul you early on or he went so crazy that he railroaded you into fouling him, if only to get out of the ring as quickly as possible,” wrote Graeme Kent in *The Great White Hopes*.

This is not to say that Curran lacked the talent to win fights – when the mood took him. Of his 44 victories in 88 contests, just three of his victims lasted the distance. A tough, hard-hitter with a tearaway style, he could cause considerable damage if he got in close.

That was his big problem – he had such an abnormally short reach for a 6ft tall heavyweight that he felt the need to dive in regardless of consequences. Quite often it was his head that landed on target before his fist.



Rarely in top condition, Curran certainly seems to have been more attracted to the bar than the gym. Many a time he had to be hauled out of a drinking circle to fulfil his booking for a top-of-the-bill bout.

“Curran was an enigma.” wrote Clive Mumford in *Fighters of the Old Cosmo: a History of Plymouth Boxing 1907-24*. “On nights when his short, stubby arms managed to take him to close quarters, he could indeed look like a million dollars, on others a crude novice.

“When he could get to his man, he was always dangerous as he undisputedly carried a big punch. But when he was forced to stand off at long range, he was more often than not cut to pieces, proof of his reputed boast that he'd never met a man who could get past his face.”

Born Matthew Joseph Curran in Lisheen, near Kilkee in County Clare, Ireland, on November 1, 1882, he joined the British Royal Navy and attained the rank of petty officer, equal to a corporal of sergeant in other military branches. He was billed throughout his ring career as “P.O. Curran”.

Stationed in Plymouth, a port city in south-west England, he remained there throughout most of his fighting career. Most of Curran's bouts took place at the local Cosmopolitan Arena, a popular venue which featured regular fight bills, sometimes as many as every night of the week, including Sundays.



After building up a decent winning run, “Nutty” picked up the Irish heavyweight title by knocking out Jack Ripper (no relation to 19<sup>th</sup> century serial killer Jack the Ripper, presumably) in the first round. The title had been declared vacant following the retirement of Jem Roche. When Roche, sadly remembered for his 88 seconds dismissal by Tommy Burns in a world title fight in Dublin in 1908, announced his return to the ring and reclaimed his Irish crown, a showdown with Curran resulted in a sixth round KO win for “Nutty”.

A more prestigious prize was claimed by Curran after an impressive 15th round knockout win over William “Iron” Hague in a bout billed for the British heavyweight title. Although Hague was the reigning champion, the result was disregarded by the National Sporting Club, then the recognised boxing authority in Britain. Only fights that took place at the club's own London headquarters were recognised as title bouts. Curran's win was at the Cosmo Club in Plymouth.

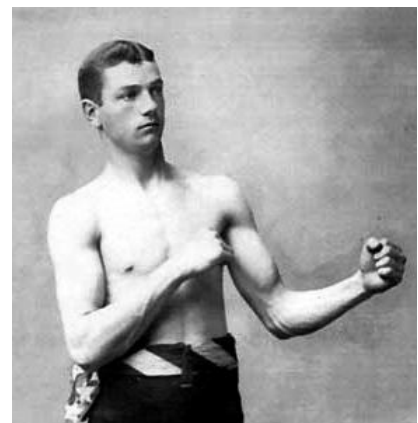
Defying the NSC's authority, Curran defended his synthetic title eight times before he faced the legitimate champion, Bombardier Billy Wells, in a showdown. The fact that the fight wasn't recognised by the NSC as a title fight because it took place in Plymouth proved immaterial. “Nutty” took a battering before he quit at the end of the fifth round.

Curran did earn recognition as heavyweight champion of the British Empire (forerunner of the Commonwealth) by defeating Australian Bill Lang, who was ruled out in the first round for striking his opponent while he was down. One month later, “Nutty” was an ex-champion. He was disqualified in the second round for “misuse of the head” against Irish-American Dan “Porky” Flynn.

Such was his erratic style of fighting that fans never knew what Matt Curran was going to turn up. His record is studded with results rendered by fed-up referees. It got to the stage when one official, J.T. Hulls Jr, declared after disqualifying Curran that he would never referee another bout that involved the Irishman.

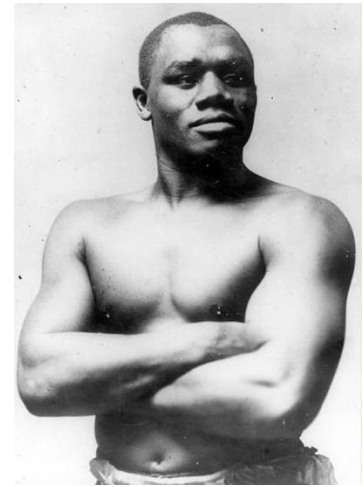
Curran did manage a rare display of self-control when he faced Kid McCoy at the Palais de la Jetee Promenade in Nice, France, on January 20, 1912. He took the former world middleweight champion the full 20 rounds, although a clear loser. McCoy, aged 40 and nearing the end of his colorful career, retained too many of his old tricks to let “Nutty” rough him up.

An amusing incident occurred during the 12<sup>th</sup> round when McCoy, noticing that the timekeeper had placed his glass of brandy and soda in front of him on the apron of the ring, “slipped” to the canvas in just the right spot where he could reach out and take a swig from the glass before the astonished timekeeper could react.



Two years later, Curran was back in France, this time at the Luna Park Arena in Paris, to face another ring legend in Sam Langford. Matt didn't get a chance to do any damage, lawful or otherwise. He was counted out inside half a minute of the opening round (BoxRec lists it as 30 seconds while another source claimed the bout lasted just 17 seconds, but this apparently did not include the ten count).

Author Clay Moyle, in *Sam Langford: Boxing's Greatest Uncrowned Champion*, wrote that the bout lasted less than 20 seconds. "At the sound of the opening bell Sam rushed forward and immediately stunned Curran with a powerful blow that landed flush on the jaw. Before Curran cleared his head, Sam followed up with another smash to the jaw, ending the short fight. The crowd, barely settled into their seats, were greatly disappointed and loudly voiced their displeasure toward Curran as he was guided from the hall."



The sore loser complained that Langford's manager, Joe Woodman, had arranged that the contestants would coast through a few rounds to give the fans value for money. Woodman angrily refuted the claim and rejected the Irishman's call for a return match.

Illogically, "Nuttty" was once lined up for a crack at Jack Johnson's world heavyweight title. It was in 1912, while Johnson was awaiting arrangements to defend his title against British champion Bombardier Billy Wells, that a warm-up bout against Curran was proposed for Celtic Park, Belfast, Northern Ireland. The purse would be £3,000 for the winner and £500 for the loser. Johnson was unhappy with the choice of venue and wanted the fight switched to Dublin, which didn't suit the promoters. The bout fell through, as did Johnson's planned clash with Wells. The British Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, feared a heavy Wells defeat would stir up racial tensions.

By 1921 Curran had settled in Australia, where he was paired with Colin Bell at the Hippodrome in Sydney. Showing how the years of hard fighting had taken their toll, he took a severe beating and accepted referee Joe Wallis' advice to retire at the end of the fifth round.

That was effectively the end of his ring career, although Matt Donnellon, in his recently published, impressively researched encyclopedia *The Irish Heavyweight Book, Vol 1 (1890-1925)* found that "Nuttty" entered the ring as late as September 26, 1926 in Australia. Curran, aged 44, was knocked out by Jim Hoffman in the fourth round.

After hanging up his gloves, he worked as a stevedore at the docks in Sydney while running a gym for amateur boxers. One of his sons, Jimmy, won an Australian amateur championship. Matt died at home from a blood clot on the brain in late April 1938 at the age of 56. He was buried in the Catholic cemetery, Field of Mars, in Ryde City, New South Wales.

**The author acknowledges the help of ring historians Matt Donnellon and Malcolm Meredith in compiling this article.**

**Patrick Myler is an author and boxing historian. A member of the International Boxing Research Organisation, he lives in Dublin, Ireland.**