

GEORGE “BUDGE” BYERS

The Forgotten Champion

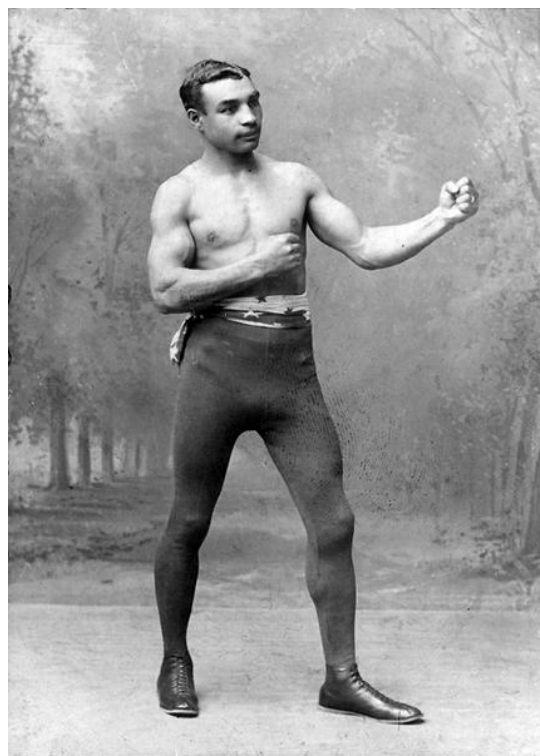
By Lou Eisen

George "Budge" Frederick Byers was born in the summer of 1872, on June 25th, in Charlottetown, Queens, Prince Edward Island, Canada. He grew up in a slum known as, "The Bog." George's mother was Charlotte Ellen (Goodwin) Byers. She was born sometime in 1828, in Yorkshire County, England. She emigrated with her brother to Prince Edward Island in 1851. She married her husband, William Byers III, around 1852 in a place known as Kings County, Prince Edward Island, Canada.

William Byers III returned to Yorkshire, England to live in 1859, after a family scandal. He returned to Charlottetown at various times, and fathered more children by his wife, Charlotte Byers, who died in Prince Edward Island in 1877.

William and Charlotte Byers had eight children, four boys and four girls. Their eldest child was Charlotte Ann Byers Brown, born on April 16, 1854, in Charlottetown, Queens, Prince Edward Island. Their youngest child was a son, James Edward Byers, born around 1877, in Charlottetown, Queens, Prince Edward Island. George Frederick "Budge" Byers was their second youngest child.

"The Bog," where the Byers family resided, was a crime ridden, disease-infested slum, plagued by rampant drug use, alcoholism and constant, often deadly violence. Living in "The Bog" not only limited the inhabitant's prospects for personal growth and career advancement, it also significantly shortened their lives. Suffice it to say, the people living there did not do so by choice. They were forced into "The Bog" either by desperate financial circumstances or family history. Illiterate, unskilled whites populated "The Bog" along with poorly paid, illiterate, and viciously abused African Canadians. For whites, "The Bog" was a living hell draped in the daily drudgery of a life going nowhere.



George “Budge” Byers understood inherently that in order for him to achieve any kind of career success or advancement, he needed to leave “The Bog” and move to the United States. This had been done before by many other African Canadians with varying degrees of success. At the very least, leaving such an intemperate area would allow Byers to determine his own fate, which is basically all he really asked for. Byers was smart, handsome (with movie star good looks) and confident enough in his own abilities and intelligence that he would one day make something of himself.

Byers future mentor and trainer, and boxing predecessor, George Godfrey, also from “The Bog,” had left Charlottetown to move to Boston years earlier which helped him achieve success in the prize ring, which came with financial wealth and security. George Godfrey was one of boxing’s rare success stories. It is believed that around 1888, at the tender young age of 16, Byers set out for Boston. He lived and worked as a hobo on his way to Massachusetts, subsisting on odd jobs and any food he could scrounge up. It was not a pleasant existence by any means but at least he had an ultimate goal in mind and the satisfaction of knowing he was working his way towards it.

Byers arrived in Boston in approximately 1890, where he put his strength and wits to good use by obtaining immediate employment on the rough Boston waterfront docks loading and unloading cargo and acting as a security guard at the storage depot. The job was physically grueling and consisted of long hours with little pay and no job security. Working on the docks helped Byers develop his incredible physique, and unlimited stamina, marveled at by both fans and peers alike. Stamina, strength and skill proved to be hallmarks of his stellar prizefighting career. Byers was known for being a gentleman at all times, with impeccable manners and was considered a genuine ladies’ man. In the parlance of the day, he was viewed as a very good catch. He dressed exquisitely and was always exceedingly well groomed. Being a gentleman was something he took very seriously, both in and out of the ring.

Byers rarely weighed more than 155 pounds for most of his ring career and he was very solid. He had virtually no fat on him. He exercised daily, watched his calories and entered the prize ring in outstanding physical condition, thereby, always giving himself the best opportunity to emerge victorious in battle. Byers was an innately smart man but even more so in the ring. He was always able to think several steps ahead of his opponents and never went into battle without a solid game plan. Byers was also a master of balance and leverage which served him well in the ring.

Byers had a brief wrestling career before he took up boxing. Back in those early days, pro wrestling was real and consisted of shoot matches. Byers all around physical skill made him a natural at the sport. He only had three or four pro wrestling matches but he won them all, with a few trophies and some pocket watches to show for his efforts. Byers knew that a man could not subsist off trophies and cheap pocket watches. Such trinkets did not pay the rent or buy food or clothing. He felt strongly that his path to career success and financial independence lay in the squared circle.

It was at this very moment in his life that fate and luck intervened to help Byers develop into a world boxing champion. Byers made the acquaintance of another transplanted Prince Edward Islander and former Bog resident, the aforementioned George "Old Chocolate" Godfrey. Godfrey was the former undisputed "Colored" world heavyweight champion as well as the former heavyweight champion of America. Godfrey took an instant liking to Byers and saw tremendous potential in him as a boxer. Godfrey believed that Byers possessed the ability and temperament to become a world champion, and, as history showed, he was right.

Godfrey spent two years training Byers in the finer points of the sweet science. That would be unheard of today where every manager is in a hurry to make as much money as quickly as possible while neglecting the development of their fighters. Godfrey knew that if Byers was in excellent shape, and displayed perfect balance and proper leverage as well as a good defense then the money would come in time. Byers soaked up all of the boxing knowledge imparted to him by the old master, Godfrey. After two years of continuous, arduous training, Godfrey felt Byers was now ready for the pro ranks.

Byers had everything necessary to become a sports superstar in his or any era. He was very good looking, charismatic, well spoken, funny, and possessed tremendous boxing skills. Byers had a concussive jab, which he used as both an offensive and defensive weapon. His body attack was simply devastating, softening up his opponents for the kill in the later rounds. Byers carried crushing knockout power in both hands. His arsenal contained fight ending uppercuts, right hooks and right crosses and he always put his punches together in combinations.

Byers had excellent field of vision in the ring, great powers of anticipation and was a master at feinting his opponents into position to get hit. Byers was always moving in the ring, feinting and slipping shots. He was a very frustrating fighter to go up against and an exceedingly difficult pugilist on which to land a flush shot. Byers also had seemingly inexhaustible energy.

This limitless supply of vigor allowed him to fight all out for three minutes of every round, regardless of whether it was the first or the twentieth round.

One question often asked about Byers is, how did he acquire the nickname “Budge”? Most successful fighters in boxing history sported colorful and intimidating nicknames such as, Jack Dempsey’s “The Manassa Mauler,” Joe Louis’ “The Brown Bomber,” Stanley Ketchel’s “The Michigan Assassin”, Vitali Klitschko’s “Dr. Steelhammer,” and Roberto Duran’s “Hands of Stone.” Suffice it to say, “Budge” is not an intimidating nickname although Byers came by it honestly. Byers was so sure and steady on his feet (due to his flawless balance) that his opponents, regardless of their weight advantages and ability, could never budge him in the ring. Byers was truly the immovable object in the squared circle, thus his accurate but less than scintillating ring nickname.

Unfortunately, Byers held no sway over perhaps the most salient element in many of his fights, which was the implacable racism of his era. During Byers pugilistic era, in order to get worthwhile fights against white opponents (thereby guaranteeing a bigger payday), many talented African American and African Canadian fighters had to agree beforehand to allow their white opponents to go at least seven or eight rounds before they could display the full depth of their enormous boxing skills. African American and African Canadian fighters who did not go along with wearing these metaphorical “handcuffs,” found fights very hard to come by. If they did agree but then decided otherwise during the fight, such fighters risked being lynched, beaten or at the very least, loss of their pay. Actually, very few if any of these brilliant fighters of African descent rarely ever got the purses agreed to in their contracts.

To compound this vile subjugation agreement, was the fact that their opponents’ seconds and fans often attacked the legs of these talented African American and African Canadian fighters by striking them with clubs, bats, pipes and knives anytime they came near the ropes. This is why so many African American and African Canadian fighters from those years perfected the art of fighting in ring center rather than risk having their legs whacked by those racists in attendance waiting along the ropes for even the slightest chance to attack.

Necessity is indeed the birth mother of invention. This is why outstanding African American and African Canadian fighters, such as George Godfrey, Byers, Sam Langford, George Dixon, Barbados Joe Walcott, Joe Gans and Jack Johnson, just to name a few, relied on lateral movement as an element of success, and were equally as brilliant defensively as they were devastating offensively.

Godfrey trained Byers very well. Byers took everything he learned from Godfrey and put it to very good use in the ring. In just the first four years of his career, Byers never lost a single match, and, even at that, he barely lost a single round. His hand speed, educated feet and accurate punching were big factors in his success. Historians believe that Byers had many more than the 125 prizefights listed on his ledger during his career. Even though fighters by then were fighting under the Marquis of Queensbury rules, it was still a brutal sport and it was exceedingly rare for any fighter to emerge from a bout unscathed. They used a minimal amount of tape on a fighter's hands and usually fought with skin tight gloves of no more than 2-4 ounces.

Byers turned pro in the year 1895 and fought until the year 1904. It is often asked why Byers only fought professionally for just nine years. He retired from the prize ring in what would have been his prime fighting years. There is no doubt that during his time, Byers was the best middleweight boxer in the world. The problem of course, was that the recognized world middleweight champion was Tommy Ryan, a white man, who drew the color line when it came to Byers. Ryan fought other African American and African Canadian fighters but steadfastly refused to give Byers a shot at the title. Byers retired because he believed, and rightfully so, there was no good reason to continue fighting if a world title shot would never happen.

That is not to say that Byers did not engage in some historic fights with some truly great fighters. Quite the opposite is true. In 1897, Byers knocked out Californian Harry Peppers to win the "Colored" Middleweight World Title. He then went on to win the "Colored" Heavyweight Title against Frank Childs, in a 20-round decision, while weighing only 158 pounds, which was beneath even the middleweight limit.

It is worth noting that unless you saw his physique, Byers did not have the hallmark physical traits of a prizefighter. He did not have a flattened nose nor did he possess cauliflower ears. He was admired for his appearance and elegant style. He was also considered somewhat of a fashion plate. During his time, which was known as "The Gilded Age," he was widely considered to be one of the smartest and most advanced ring technicians in the world. That is a tremendous compliment considering the racism endemic to that era and the fact that he fought in every weight division from welterweight to heavyweight.

It was his superb ring skills and technique that helped Byers overcome the superior strength, height and weight advantages of his various ring opponents. Byers faced such all-time ring

greats as Tom Sharkey, Jack Johnson, Bob Fitzsimmons and Philadelphia Jack O'Brien. Byers faced the much bigger O'Brien in 1902 in Bangor, Maine and held him to a six-round draw.

There are some boxing historians that believe fighters such as Tommy Ryan and John L. Sullivan, at best, should be considered as really "White" world champions rather than universally recognized world champions, as these white fighters drew the color line, deliberately avoiding fighting the best African American and African Canadian fighters in their respective divisions. There is much merit to that line of reasoning.

Ironically, Byers most notable fight was a private affair, not open to the public. In May of 1899, Byers fought future world welterweight champion and Hall of Famer, Barbados Joe Walcott at George Godfrey's gym in Massachusetts. Walcott stood barely over five feet tall (5'2") and weighed between 135 and 140 pounds. Byers had at least six inches in height on Walcott and outweighed him by as much as 25 pounds. It is no surprise that Byers pummeled Walcott, leaving him bleeding, bruised and badly beaten. Walcott's corner conceded defeat after four one-sided rounds. It is worth noting that Byers had immense respect and genuine affection for Walcott, and, as such, never bragged or even mentioned his noteworthy demolition of Walcott years later.

After he retired from the ring as an active fighter, Byers went on to a very successful career as a boxing trainer. His most famous and successful student was another Canadian fighter from Canada's East Coast, the all-time ring immortal, Sam Langford. Langford has long been considered the greatest fighter never to win a world title. Langford claimed he first met Byers when Byers saved Langford from an angry mob after he had easily knocked out a hapless white opponent very early in a fight. This story seems to be apocryphal as there is no evidence to corroborate that it happened and it was only mentioned once in one of the bios on Byers.

In truth, Byers approached Langford after Sam had scored an upset 15 round win over Joe Gans at the Criterion Athletic Club in Boston on December 8, 1903. Byers told him he won purely because Gans had already fought the night before in Philadelphia, which was true. Gans had beaten Dave Holly by a newspaper decision on December 7th. Byers told Langford that he lacked all but the most rudimentary boxing skills. Langford then did a very smart thing. He asked Byers to train him. Langford was just 17 years old at that time. Byers was committed and loyal to Langford. As well as being Langford's trainer, Byers was also his

closest friend, sparring partner and traveling companion. Langford always credited Byers with teaching him the finer points of the Manly Art of Self-Defense.

It was Byers who taught Langford how to get extraordinary leverage on each of his punches. It was Byers who showed Langford how to lure his opponents into traps. It was precisely because of Byers expert tutoring that Langford maintained perfect balance in the ring and devastating knockout power. Byers showed Langford how to switch from defense to offense in the blink of an eye. Byers smartly advised Langford to watch his future opponents fights as often as possible so as to recognize their flaws, weaknesses and tell signs, in order to take full advantage of them when they eventually met in the squared circle. Byers always emphasized to Langford that his most dangerous and powerful weapon was his brain.

After the almost constant traveling became too much for Byers, he settled down in his adopted hometown of Boston, where he continued to train and educate countless fighters successfully in the various boxing gyms in and around Boston. For Byers, being a gentleman outside of the ring was just as important as mastering the finer techniques of prizefighting inside the ropes. Byers added to his income by working for the B and M railroad for just over two decades.

Sadly, George "Budge" Byers died at Boston City Hospital in 1937, when he contracted pneumonia after suffering a heart attack. Today, his many descendants live in Toronto, Montreal and Boston. By any definition, Byers is an all-time boxing master and ring immortal.

Courtesy of Lou Eisen @ loueisen@substack.com, *Once Upon a Time In The Prize Ring*.