

Revisiting LaMotta vs. Fox: One of Boxing's Most Notorious Fights

By Arne Lang

On Friday, Nov. 14, 1947, when boxing was in full bloom as a spectator sport (as opposed to a TV sport), a near-capacity crowd of 18,340 crammed into Madison Square Garden for the weekly boxing show. The main event pitted Jake LaMotta against Billy Fox.

This was a compelling match-up: “LaMotta, the rugged individual from the Bronx who has never been knocked off his feet, and Fox, the flashy Negro from Philadelphia who has starched 49 out of 50 opponents in his meteoric career,” wrote the correspondent for the Associated Press who told his readers the 10-round contest would be “violent and spectacular.”



The oddsmakers could not pick a winner and made the opening line “6/5 pick-‘em.”

The case for Billy Fox, nicknamed Blackjack Billy, rested on two factors: (1) his won-loss record as it appeared in the press; and (2) the fact that he was the bigger man. LaMotta, who tipped the scale at 167 at the weigh-in, would be giving up seven pounds.

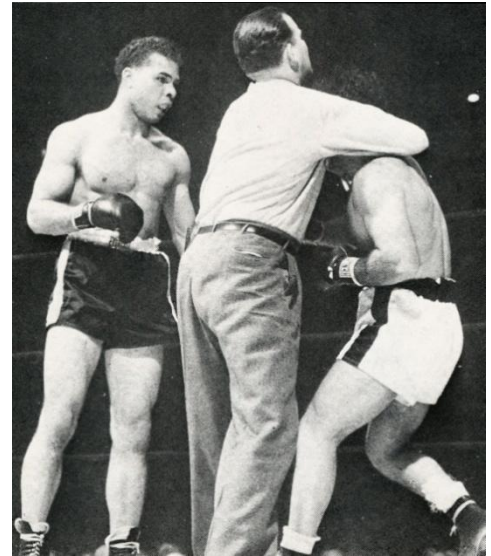
The case for Lake LaMotta rested largely on his greater experience. Five years older than Fox at age 27, the Bronx Bull was a 78-fight veteran who had tangled with a lot of rough customers including the incomparable Sugar Ray Robinson who he had defeated in their second of what would be six meetings. LaMotta’s record was then scarred by 11 losses, but among his prominent white contemporaries only Joey Maxim had been thrust against as many treacherous black opponents.

Jake won the opening round handily, “battering Fox about the ribs and mid-section with powerful left hooks and vicious right digs at close quarters,” wrote James P. Dawson, the ringside scribe for the New York Times. But LaMotta slowed down in the second round, grimacing as he returned to his corner with his arms at his side.

Jake started fast in round three, but quickly assumed a defensive posture. In round four, Fox assumed command. Backing LaMotta into a neutral corner,

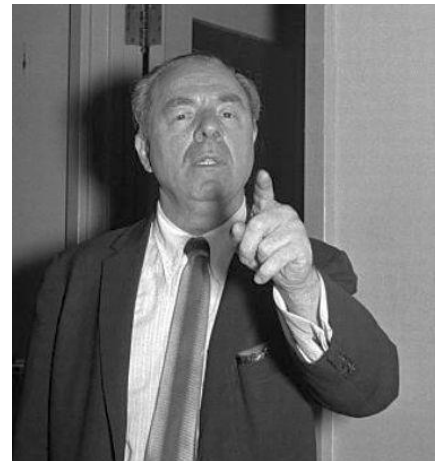
Blackjack Billy flailed away. His punches, wrote Dawson, were indiscriminate, without accurate direction, but with nothing coming back from LaMotta the referee stepped between them and waived the fight off.

Several pre-fight reports in the tabloid press hinted that the fight wouldn't be on the up-and-up. The tone of the fight was consistent with the scuttlebutt and with the betting (the late money was all on Fox) and the New York State Athletic Commission held up the purses of LaMotta and Fox pending an investigation.



The commission found no evidence that LaMotta had taken a dive but fined him \$1,000 and suspended him for seven months for failing to disclose an injury. He had hurt his spleen in sparring and acknowledged that he had taken the fight against the advice of his physician.

Flash forward 13 years to June 14, 1960. Appearing in Washington D.C. before a U.S. Senate subcommittee charged with investigating alleged mob influence in boxing, Jake LaMotta testified under oath that he consented to a \$100,000 bribe plus a promise that he would be given a crack at the middleweight title in return for losing to Billy Fox. LaMotta said the bribe came from Fox's manager, Philadelphia numbers baron Frank "Blinky" Palermo and Palermo's associate "Honest" Bill Daly, and was funneled through his brother Joey LaMotta, his de facto manager. (Joey was also interrogated but invoked the fifth amendment to every question.) **(Photo: Frank "Blinky" Palermo)**



LaMotta's confession, wrote Atlanta Constitution sports editor Jesse Outler, confirmed what the wiseguys had known for years. And in the pages of history, Jake's 1960 about-face would be accepted as the final word on the subject, the gospel truth.

Case closed? Not so fast.

Almost all fixed fights attract what bookmakers call unnatural money and plenty of it showed on Nov. 14, 1947. Billy Fox was steamed up to a 3/1 favorite before the bookies took the fight off the board. At Madison Square Garden, the bet-

takers working surreptitiously in the lobby reportedly closed up shop before the first preliminary bout which was highly unusual. However, Jake LaMotta was damaged goods and if this information was passed along the grapevine, that could well explain the one-sided action.

Jake LaMotta did get a crack at the world middleweight title. On June 16, 1949, he wrested the title from Marcel Cerdan, stopping the Frenchman in the ninth round. It seems odd, however, that the alleged evil-doers waited so long to give LaMotta the opportunity that they had allegedly promised him. LaMotta had nine fights between his bouts with Fox and Cerdan, winning eight, and the powers-that-be could scarcely deny him the opportunity to fight for the title after he TKOed rugged Joey DeJohn (58-3-2 heading in) on DeJohn's turf in Syracuse.

The Jake LaMotta that emerges in Martin Scorsese's dark 1980 LaMotta biopic "Raging Bull" is a sociopath, by definition someone for whom truth and fiction get all twisted. Ergo, nothing that came out of Jake's mouth, not even a confession made under oath, should be automatically accepted as gospel. (One is reminded of Mark Kriegel's wry observation, "Boxers lie even when they are telling the truth.")

Postscript 1: The Senate subcommittee that quizzed Jake LaMotta chose not to subpoena Billy Fox upon learning that Fox was then a ward in a Long Island mental hospital. In retirement, Blackjack Billy worked for a time as a bowling alley pinsetter, returning to a job that he had worked at as young teenager in Richmond, Virginia.

About that 49-1 record: It was inflated by six phantom fights, first-round knockouts that never happened. Fox was 5-8-1 after fighting LaMotta and was stopped five times.

Postscript 2: In "Raging Bull," Billy Fox was portrayed by Eddie Mustafa Muhammad who would capture the WBA world light heavyweight title before the movie was released. Mustafa Muhammad hadn't yet formally adopted his Muslim name and was credited under his birth name, Ed Gregory.

Arne K. Lang is editor-in-chief of "The Sweet Science," an online boxing magazine. An earlier version of this story appeared at that web site. Arne's latest book, titled "George Dixon, Terry McGovern and the Culture of Boxing in America, 1890-1910," rolled off the press in September of last year. Published by McFarland, the book can be ordered directly from the publisher (<https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/clash-of-the-little-giants>) or via Amazon.