

BOXING'S GOLDEN OLDIE IS STILL A TRUE GEM

A PROVERB reads: "You can't shake a log." But Harry Waters told me a story about an encounter he had had with a former heavyweight champion named Jim Braddock.

Waters, the late boxing sage of Newsday, had been engaged in barroom conversation with Braddock about a young whipper-snapper who called himself Muhammad Ali but whom Braddock had insisted on referring to as "Clay."

Braddock's main objection to Ali/Clay was that the brilliant young heavyweight champion had the habit of not "trowing" his jab, as Braddock pronounced it, but flicking it with an open glove.

In order to better make his point, Braddock then jabbed — and believe me, he didn't flick it, he t'row it — Waters in the shoulder, knocking him right off the bar stool to the floor, where he did not expect to wind up until much later.

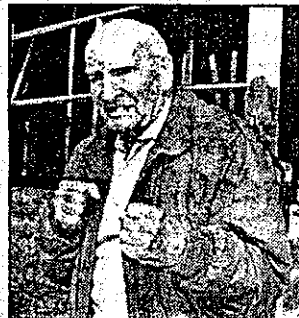
"That's how ya t'row a jab," Braddock said.

Since Braddock had been hit by Joe Louis, who had been hit by King Levinsky, who had been hit by Jack Dempsey, who had been hit by Jess Willard, who had been hit by Jack Johnson, who had been hit by Jim Jeffries, who had been hit by Gentleman Jim Corbett who had been hit by the great John L. himself, Waters logically concluded that he, too, could claim to have been on the business end of a punch that started at the dawn of the modern boxing era.



HARRY HODGES
At age 24.

Harry Hodges did more than just shake Braddock's hand, he helped shake up the world of boxing 62 years ago . . .



HARRY HODGES
Today at 94.

don't you?" Hodges asked with a smirk, and Gus Leanevich, the former light-heavyweight champ, and Braddock, who was born three years after Hodges but never made it out of 1974.

Six months ago, Harry Hodges was walking by the Jerome Park Reservoir a few blocks from his apartment when two teenaged punks came up to him, thinking they had found an easy mark.

"I hit one of them with a right hand that went from here to here," he said, holding his knobby hands six inches apart. "The other one ran like hell."

I believe Harry because after he shook my hand, I thought for a moment I might have to dictate this column.

Believe me, I would have been happy to do it because, even though the name Harry Hodges will never be found in a boxing encyclopedia or among the annals of famous New Yorkers, he is a link to a sport, a city and an era that is rapidly vanishing.

Born outside London and orphaned as a child, Harry Hodges came to New York as a teenager, fought in two World Wars, became a boxing instructor when kids still were willing to be instructed and a window-washer in the days when they worked without a net. Or a safety belt.

He trained Lou Ambers and Joey Archibald and helped Jim Braddock forever escape the bread line, where he had spent much of the year before his win over Baer.

He was married for five weeks back in the '30s and called off another marriage after a buddy tipped him off that his bride-to-be was "a wino." Harry followed her that night and sure enough, caught her going into a liquor store. By herself.

"Played the field ever since," he said.

He is a genuine New York character in an age in which everyone seems pretty much the same, and a treasure-trove of experience in a culture that has forgotten that to throw away its history is to compromise its future.

"Back in my day, we had hustlers in boxing just like you do today," he said. "Al Weill, he was a hustler like that guy we got now, (Don) King. But he wasn't a crook like King. King's so crooked, when he dies they'll have to screw him into the ground."

He has about as much respect for today's fighters.

"Holyfield's the best heavyweight of a bad lot," he said. "And that kid [Oscar] De La Hoya, he's about the best all-around boxer. But that other guy, Tyson, he was a club fighter back in the '30s."

Last night, his plans did not include watching a pseudo-senior citizen, George Foreman, fight a comparative infant named Shannon Briggs.

"Foreman, he's too slow," Harry Hodges said. "It's ridiculous. A man his age shouldn't even be allowed to do that."

I'm not sure whether he meant Foreman was too old to box, or too young and it doesn't matter. Either way, he's right.



WALLACE MATTHEWS

I had a similar experience the other day when shaking hands with one Harry Hodges, who had shaken the hand of James J. Braddock.

Since Braddock had shaken hands with Louis, etc., etc., etc., I now feel that when offering my mitt to someone who can appreciate such things, I can honestly say, "Shake the hand that shook the hand of John L. Sullivan."

Harry Hodges did more than just shake Braddock's hand, he helped shake up the world of boxing 62 years ago when he taught the former longshoreman how to neutralize the best and only weapon of Max Baer, then the heavyweight champion, prior to their title fight at the Long Island City Bowl.

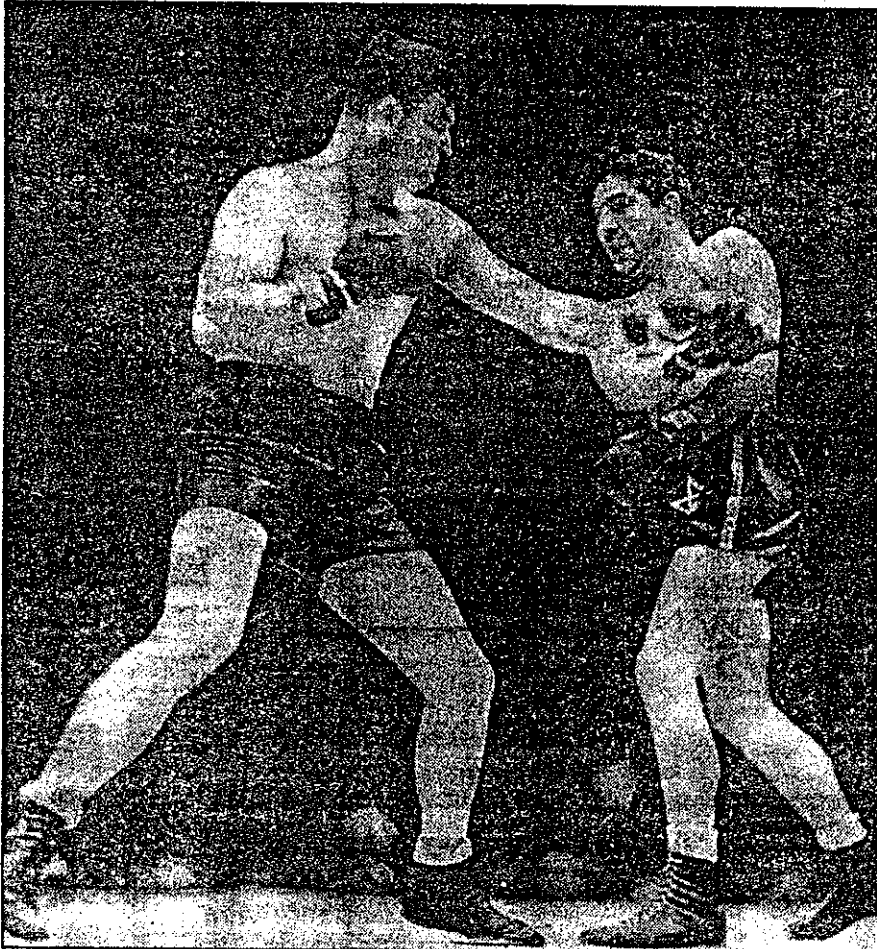
"I'm going to show you how to tell Max Baer to stick that right hand up his behind," Hodges told Braddock.

The lesson was a simple one, consisting merely of having Braddock use his jab — the same jab that later would knock Bob Waters off a bar stool — to hit Baer in the right shoulder, thereby throwing off the punch.

Braddock followed instructions and 15 rounds later, had pulled off the greatest boxing upset in history until Buster Douglas went him one better against a guy named Tyson in 1990.

They called Braddock "The Cinderella Man" after that one, but Cinderella outgrew his glass slipper two years later when he finally got around to defending his title against a kid named Louis.

Harry Hodges wasn't called in for that one, because, he says, Braddock wasn't really worried about Louis' right hand.



TEACHER KNOWS BEST: Jim Braddock (left) was able to take heavyweight title from Max Baer (right) 62 years ago in a shocking upset with some help from boxing instructor Harry Hodges.

New York Post

ager, Joe Gould, knew that against Louis, not even Harry Houdini would have been much help to Braddock. Louis knocked Braddock out in eight but had to get off the deck to do it.

"The difference between boxers then and boxers now," Harry Hodges said, "is in the teaching. Back then, boxers learned footwork and timing and how to tie

an opponent up. Nobody does that anymore."

He got up to demonstrate. The lesson took place in a back booth at the Riverdale Diner, where he eats three square a day and where, two days earlier, Harry Hodges had celebrated his 94th birthday.

"Had a cup of coffee to celebrate," he said. "A little milk in

it, and a little water. Been drinking it like that my whole life."

And eating scrambled eggs and toast with butter and all those other things his doctors told him not to.

His doctors are all dead now, as are most of his friends, like Nelson Rockefeller, who was born the same year. "But you know what happened to him,