

Two-Ton

By Joseph Monninger



A professional boxer's hand moves at a velocity of forty-six feet per second. A one and a half pound fist, small for a heavyweight boxer, delivers 2,800 newtons, (one newton is equal to the force exerted by the weight of an apple falling), sufficient energy to burst a concrete slab one and a half inch thick. To maximize impact, the punch should land at eighty percent extension, making the desired termination point of a punch somewhere in the opponent's mid-skull. Fortunately, bone can withstand forty times more force than concrete, and a cylindrical bone less than an inch in diameter and 2 1/3 inches

long can survive more than 25,000 newtons. Hands can withstand even more than that, because tendon, skin, blood, and gristle absorb some of the impact. A hand, by rough calculation, absorbs 2,000 times as much force as concrete before breaking. The gloved fist of a boxer contains the force of a pickup load of apples. To accommodate such blunt power, the brain must absorb the impact in its jelly sac.

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In 1939, at the time of the Louis vs. Galento fight, the New York Athletic Commission permitted heavyweight boxers twelve feet of soft bandage and ten feet of one and a half inch tape with which to bind their hands. Customarily, a fighter's manager supervised the taping of his opponent's hands to ensure the hand held nothing but fingers and skin. Enclosing a metal bar in the tape, or even painting the wrap with plaster of Paris, turned the fist into a cudgel. Taping a boxer's hands did nothing to protect the face or brain of either boxer. Tape guarded a man's hands. Tape kept the hands cupped like comas when they weren't curled into fists and made it possible to hit with the full force of a trained human being over and over again.

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A low blow, a punch to the balls, delivered a sizeable portion of the ten thousand pounds of force a heavyweight's hand manufactured in its arc to his opponent's scrotum. The wide athletic cup, the thick belt, could not entirely deflect so much energy. The balls crushed and flattened before restoring themselves to the proper shape. Men vomited from the pain.

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A contusion or black eye from a blow forced bleeding into the eyelids. Scrapes and cuts of the cornea, however, usually caused by the opponents hand pad or thumb, resulted in the need for surgery to

repair a detached retina. Likewise, a blow-out fracture, the shattering of the bony structure around the eye, or a depressed cheekbone, required restorative surgery.

The pressure of a fist against an exposed ear often ruptured an eardrum. A blow to the ear also caused bleeding in the outer ear. If it was not drained by a physician, the blood usually formed a hard mass, creating a boxer's most storied feature: a cauliflower ear.

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To make their faces coarser, more resistant to tears, the boxers of the 1930's soaked their faces in pickle brine. Boxers lathered their foreheads with grease and oil inside the ring, then cured their skin at night. In *The History of the Prize Ring*, a book perhaps wrongly attributed to William Dean Howells, (1881), John L. Sullivan's training regimen is described. In addition to walking ten miles in the morning and hitting a football suspended from a ceiling for rhythm, three times during the day his handlers sponged him down with sea water to increase his skin's resistance to tears. Lacking good skin, as Sullivan's coterie understood, turns sparring dangerous, cancels fights due to small cuts, ear-marks a pugilist as a bad investment for a big bout, because blood, even at a prizefight, makes customers edgy. Whether a fighter is hurt by the punches hardly matters. Boxers who bleed readily gain a reputation, are called "tomato cans," and must battle the failing of their own skin even as they fight assaults from their opponents.

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In the corner cut men employed the edge of a quarter to pop welts, gathering the ooze of the blood and pus into a wet sponge. Seconds fanned their boxers, standing above them with wicker paddles and scrambled the air around them. Sometimes the men pressed irons onto their fighter's skin, the small spade shape iron kept cold in ice and brought out to freeze the blood and muck beneath a sharp swelling.

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A blow to the solar plexus, the nerve center of the abdomen, may short circuit the system and bring about a knockout. The liver is under the rib cage and a blow to the right ribs can tear its surface. The spleen is on the left side and, as a soft organ, is prone to injury from a sharp striking blow. An uppercut to the left ribs might cause the spleen to bleed profusely.

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A knockout victory is declared when one participant is unable to rise from the canvas within a specified period of time. A referee can also declare a technical knockout (T.K.O.) in cases where a participant is sufficiently injured, unbalanced, or confused to be unable to continue the fight. A T.K.O. is satisfactory to no one. It permits the beaten boxer to believe he might have rallied and returned to action; fans grouse about not seeing the final blow, the great stunning climax they hoped to have for their admission; and for the Referee, a T.K.O. is a delicate balance, a tricky business, because the consequence of an instant decision can lose a man's life or end a bout prematurely. A technical knockout is a nod to civility and the attempt to license what is otherwise barbarous.

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In Cambodia, in other parts of Asia, boxers could agree to a match using snail shells on their fingers. The shells, bound to the fighter's fingers, raked the flesh of an opponent until blood turned the boxers' faces red, split eyes open, caused gunnels of flesh to fall to the mat. Fighters only employed the snail shells when the proposed match linked two boxers with antipathy toward one another, and when the understanding occurred that only quantities of blood could mend the hatred, or at least calm it temporarily. The fighters did not necessarily receive an increase in prize money for accepting such terms. The satisfaction of bringing out the blood of an opponent proved compensation enough.

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Like most fighters of his day, Two Ton Tony Galento fought without a mouth guard and against Jack Shaw, a tough heavyweight from Jersey, he caught an uppercut and bit his tongue in half. This was in 1929. His mouth pulsed with blood, but he continued to fight, spitting copious amounts of red saliva into the bucket between rounds. He out pointed Shaw but could not open his mouth to speak. At a nearby hospital Dr. Max Stern, then a sporting doctor who in his day had worked on Mickey Walker, Young Stribling, Gene Tunney, and Primo Carnera, sewed Tony's tongue together with twenty five stitches. He ordered Tony to rest in bed and to take several days of complete rest. An hour later, Tony went missing. He had disappeared when a nurse had been called away to another room, and Stern sent an orderly to the local taverns to see if they could find the patient. The orderly reported back that Tony had indeed wended his way to a pub and could be found sitting at the bar, a pint of beer in front of him. Dr. Stern followed the orderly and demanded Tony hold his tongue out for inspection. As Stern had suspected, the stitches had loosened. He ordered Galento back to the hospital, but Tony said nix.

"I ain't taking the count again, doc," he said. "Gimme a glass of beer and you can go to work on me right here."

"You're crazy," the doctor warned him, "This will be a very painful operation."

"Aw, nuts," Tony said. "Don't give me that stuff. You go ahead."

Tony sat without a murmur while Stern removed the bulging stitches and replaced them with new ones. Dr. Stern, a man accustomed to the extreme pain thresholds of boxers, claimed he had never seen a display to equal it.

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Before the 1920's a downed boxer was awarded no moment of neutrality to rise to his feet and collect his wits. The boxer who knocked his opponent to the canvas hovered over him, blocked only by the temporary obstruction posed by the referee, the fighter's body curled and ready for the instant his fallen

adversary gained his wobbly stance. Immediately – sometimes pushing the ref to the side with his free hand – the advantaged boxer rushed forward, hitting the rising opponent in the chin like a man finishing the downward stroke of a saw cut. In many instances, the fallen boxer resumed his knee, the only means to get a time out. Then the process repeated; rules held nothing to prevent a round from having a dozen knock downs. The referee, who carried on his shoulders a combination of the audience's conscience and the fan's feverish interest, rarely interceded.

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A concussion occurs when the head hits or is hit by an object, or when the brain is jarred against the skull, with sufficient force to cause temporary loss of function in the higher centers of the brain. The injured person may remain conscious or lose consciousness briefly, and is disoriented for some minutes after the blow. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 300,000 people sustain mild to moderate sports-related brain injuries each year, most of them young men between 16 and 25. While concussion usually resolves on its own without lasting effect, it can set the stage for a much more serious condition. "Second impact syndrome" occurs when a person with a concussion, even a very mild one, suffers a second blow before fully recovering from the first. The brain swelling and increased intracranial pressure that can result is potentially fatal. More than 20 such cases have been reported since the syndrome was first described in 1984.

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Symptoms of concussion include: headache, disorientation as to time, date, or place; confusion; vacant stare or confused expression; incoherent or incomprehensible speech; lack of coordination or weakness; amnesia for the events immediately preceding the blow; nausea or vomiting; double vision; ringing in the ears. These symptoms may last from several minutes to several hours. More severe or longer-lasting symptoms may indicate more severe brain injury. The person with a concussion may or may

not lose consciousness from the blow; if so, it will be for several minutes at the most. More prolonged unconsciousness indicates more severe brain injury.”

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Years later checking into a motel, Joe Louis, the Brown Bomber, routinely buttered the ceiling with mayonnaise to keep out poisonous gases, and often built a cardboard tent atop his bed to reflect any rays that might have bypassed the mayonnaise. He stuffed the vents of air-conditioners with paper wads and tucked towels under the hallway door. He believed people, government agents and the mafia, pursued him. Whenever he traveled, he changed itineraries several times to shake off his pursuers. On May 1, 1970, the Denver’s sheriff’s office took Louis from his home and delivered him to the Colorado Psychiatric Hospital. His third wife, Martha, had executed the order. Louis demanded to talk to the White House, to President Nixon specifically. Told he could not speak to Nixon, merely an aide, he called the Denver Post and Rocky Mountain News. “I want everyone to know what you are doing to me,” he declared. He remained three months in the hospital.

Medication eventually reversed many of the symptoms, but he remained somewhat lost, a man whose great purpose in life had accomplished by the time he entered middle age. In addition to his other mental symptoms, it is likely he suffered from *pugilistica dementia*, or punch drunkenness, a condition created by bleeding in the brain that leads to small areas of scarring. The condition is marked by slowness of speech, blurred vision, memory loss, and a boxer’s shuffling gait.

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Tony came to scratch first, crossing the middle of the ring, his body crouched, his hands at the sides of his head as if prepared to lock his thumbs in his ears like a pretend bull. His mouth, never closed during the fight, sagged open to reveal his mouthpiece. His fleshy lips pushed forward to take air, a camel's lips bent around thorns. Joe Louis, rising to meet him, extended his left and kept it out, his reach creating a string that established his arc around his opponent. For a moment they merely stood in front of each other. Then Tony, jumping and slashing with his left, swatted twice, his eagerness throwing him off balance. Louis danced to the side and away, slipping the first attack and taking an instant to regroup. His height put him at a slight disadvantage, because to punch at Tony made him shove down, like a man stuffing a dresser drawer too full. Neither man landed anything worthwhile. They resumed positions in front of one another. Twenty seconds of the fight was over.

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The crowd reacted to the opening exchange, but not overzealously. The notables – J. Edgar Hoover; Supreme Court Justice John McGeehan; Heavyweight Gene Tunney; John Hamilton, chairman of the Republican National Committee; Governor Bricker of Ohio; Governor Baldwin of Connecticut; Mayor LaGuardia; Governor A Harry Moore of New Jersey; Mayor Frank Hague of Jersey City; Postmaster General James A. Farley, Governor Herbert Lehman of New York; Bill Terry, Manager of the Giants, and Jack Benny, famous comedian – watched from ten feet away, their eyes at shin level to the fighters, the beauty and intimacy of the boxers' exchanges brilliant and pleasing and frightening. These were men who knew fights and like men who frequented sex shows and could no longer be easily titillated, they talked as they watched, smoked, relaxed and felt the pleasure of sitting front row at an event talked about for weeks and months. It did not do to appear too avid; to be a fan, yes, but to observe the fighters with undue passion suggested a fan lacked discretion and taste, a broader appreciation of past fights and thrilling matches. To gain their full attention, the bout must rise above an average exchange. These men, well known and followed by the press, waited to be shown. Before they had settled completely into full

knowledge that this occurred right now, in this moment in front of them, they watched as Two Ton Tony leaped forward and connected with a left hook that had half his life behind it.

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Think of a round, hard baseball connecting with the fibrous heart of an ash bat. Think of the ball's flesh sinking into itself for the barest instant, the bat yielding, the fibers in the wood, the same fibers that kept the tree erect in winds for twenty or thirty seasons, pulling apart and then returning the force of the ball. Think of the solid sweetness, the ultimate surprise of the forces exchanging and releasing, the simplicity of it after all, and the long arc of the ball speeding away. Think of Galento's ham-sized fist, 12 1/2 inches around, and the force traveling up his arm, the shoulder spreading and gaping with muscle, the wiggle of his belly as the power and energy transferred itself to his body, and the thrust of Louis' head going away from the fist as fast as his muscles allowed. Think of a strand of saliva escaping from Louis's mouth, the silver glimmer of it as it reflected cigarette smoke and lights and camera flashes, its liquid pull falling to the canvas, his mouthpiece, for the period of one breath, coming loose in his mouth and readjusting to his bite as the pain and surprise of the punch registered in his brain.

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Joe Louis staggered backward. Now, naturally, the crowd ignited. *Did you see that?* passed like a great hiss around the 40,000 spectators. People reached for one another, grabbing the nearest arm, eyes still on the ring. After all the ballyhoo, all the gaudy pre-fight promotion, Tony Galento had landed a full bore left hook on the tip of Joe Louis's chin and drove the champion to the ropes. Louis was visibly stunned. His knees hinged. The New Jersey fans pounded each other, and they screamed when Tony followed up with a right cross, hacking down at the champion as if letting his hand fall from a subway strap. But Louis, relying on training, had his gloves up and the punch glanced off harmlessly. In his hurry to follow up the massive left, Galento scattered his power. Louis, uncurled by the punch, slowly gained his posture again, his slight bend forward. He rubbed his shoulders on the top rope, flexed, and pushed away. He moved left,

away from the Galento's heavy hand, and maneuvered back to the center of the ring. His head rang. His feet slowly found the floor properly again. He fended off punches, landed two, landed another, moved.

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If the punch had landed five years before for Galento – before a nearly fatal case of pneumonia that required three blood transfusions the previous year, before the hundreds of punches received and given, before the toll of food and drink had done its damage – the punch might have finished Louis. If the punch had landed five years later for Louis, if he had not been in his prime, if he had not been in superb physical condition, the punch may have proven too much. But a fight is often an X for two men crossing in different directions, and the punch that staggered Louis was merely the rivet joining a pair of scissor blades.

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At some point a bout belongs only to the fighters inside the ring, and for a moment, Louis and Galento entered that phase. The crowd no longer mattered; the fuss and bother of getting to the ring had at last ended. Finally, even after Galento's big punch, they stood toe to toe, trading punches and testing each other's resolve. All the sparring, the rope skipping, the jogging, shrank to a small, silent point where the two men, not as names in the newspapers, but as human beings, looked at the shape and angle of one another's faces, saw the other man's chest, his arm hair, his bulging ear. They observed the imperfection of the other, and hoped to see signs of weakness there. Perhaps in some part of their memories they recalled another opponent who reminded them of the man in front of them now. Louis, naturally, had to face white men as a rule, so the turtle belly color of his opponent's skin, the pale luminescent under the lights, must have seemed not in the least unusual. For Galento, Louis may have appeared more exotic. Galento had fought black men before and fared poorly against them. He feared them as a curse on his career, their gliding skills antithetical to his bludgeoning technique. He had once nearly refused a proposed match at ringside when he stepped through the ropes and found what he believed to be an Irish name attached to a black man. Now he faced Louis, a light skinned black man, but a man whose hair appeared different from

his own, whose lips, and eyes, and brow ridge did not mirror him. Galento embraced the racist stereotypes of his day, and to him, certainly, Louis appeared a nigger, a *datsoon*, a darkie. But in that instant when the fight became theirs, Louis could at last insist on his humanity, on his equality, and as they blocked and traded punches, Galento felt forced to concede that much. It occurred to him, and perhaps to Louis, that despite their differences they had more in common, by virtue of their pairing in the ring, than most men share in a lifetime. Who else could they speak to about this night when it finished? Who would know it as they did? They turned and moved and reflected each other, their arms hacking viciously at one another's defense as if trying to climb inside the other man's ribs.

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The bell sounded to end round one as both men stood in the center of the ring. Referee Donovan stepped in and signaled the end, his white shirt already dotted with sweat and flecks of blood. Tony instantly dropped his arms and opened his mouth. Whether he spoke was impossible to tell in the crowd noise, but Louis turned away, immediately assuming his spot on his corner stool. Tony walked leisurely back to his handlers. Joe Jacobs and Jimmy Frain, and Whitey Bimstein – a long time trainer at Stillman's Gym who was described by A.J. Liebling as "a small, bald man with sidehair the color of an Easter chick," -- flamed up from their station and ringed around him. They could barely contain themselves. Every fight judge and expert in attendance awarded the first round to Galento. In six title defenses, no one had taken a round from Louis, and three fighters had not survived more than two minutes. Galento had landed the only telling blow of the fight so far. It was possible he had Louis' number; stranger things had happened. Someday, if he remained in the ring long enough, Louis would lose. That was a boxing certainty. And no one would know how it would happen until it did. Then it would appear plain and inevitable, an equation so comprehensible an imbecile would grasp it. Until then everything existed as a promise, and Galento, in that abstract sense, had as much claim as anyone.

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Around radios across the country, people turned and called to others nearby who had ignored the fight, or thought it would be lopsided, and informed them that Galento had given a good accounting. Forty million fans, their ears caught by the excitement in Don Dunphy's voice, called to friends and told them they really had to listen to this. Something had occurred. Louis was losing. Galento had buckled the champ's knees. The greatest upset of all time, maybe. That fat guy was winning, the one who smoked cigars and said he would *moida da bum*. The bartender. That guy. The crowd at the stadium could not dream of taking a seat. The horses outside the ballpark dozed, the mounted police stationed on them receiving reports from men who hurried in and out of the stadium, from the radios that carried the fight into the streets, until the noise of the contest proved inescapable, even if escape had been desired.

A few people remembered the morning column written by Joe Kiernan in The New York Times. Speculating on the fight and the lowered betting odds, he wrote "In short, what they (the fans and gamblers) viewed as an uproarious farce at long range they viewed as a serious fight as the hour of combat drew near. Now, even the most timid person must know that his chances of being struck by lightning are slim. He can be shown the figures on the total population of this country and the number of persons struck by lightning in the course of the year. It would be ridiculous to think that he was running much risk according to those figures. He snaps his fingers boldly at the sky.

"Then it clouds up. The air is sultry. Thunder is heard in the distance. A lightning storm is coming over. The wind rises with an ominous swish. The rain comes down in buckets. And the timid gent is out in the storm!

"Ah! Now he views his chance of being struck by lightning in a very different light. Crack! Boom! Never mind the figures now. All he knows is he might be hit. That's the thing that grips his mind as the moment."

Suddenly, after the thudding first round, the fight did not appear so preposterous. What had been a sure thing moments before, now appeared a coin toss. First blood went to Galento.