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Book Review: 'Strong Boy' by Christopher Klein

John L. Sullivan ruled the ring during an era of bare-knuckle savagery and barbarous tactics.

By Edward Kosner

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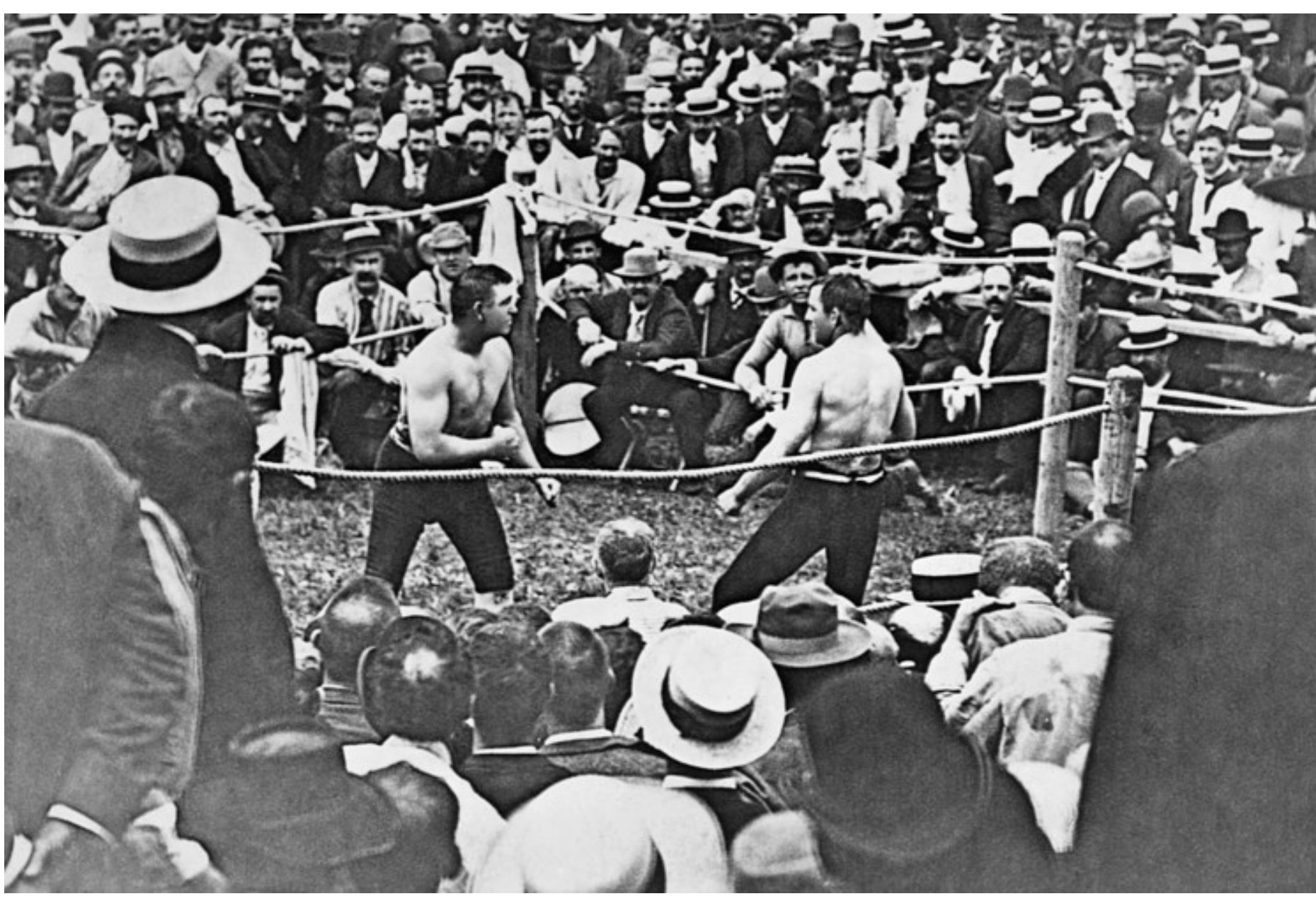
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John L. Sullivan stares out serenely from the dust jacket of this new biography. His hair is close-cropped to deny his opponent a grip, his undulant mustaches trained to twin points, the flesh of his ears only slightly waffled. He is 23 years old, stands just over 5 feet 10 inches tall, weighs 185 pounds—and is about to become the world heavyweight boxing champion and America's first superstar athlete.

STRONG BOY

By Christopher Klein

Lyons, 368 pages, \$26.95



Sullivan (left) takes on a challenger c. 1889. Three years later the champ would finally lose to 'Gentleman' Jim Corbett. CORBIS IMAGES

More than a century before Mike Tyson, Michael Jordan, A-Rod or Peyton Manning, the "Boston Strong Boy" pioneered many of the perquisites of modern sports celebrity; the entourage of hangers-on, the big-money barnstorming tour and, especially, substance abuse. Indeed, Sullivan was such a notorious drunk that his clear-eyed appearance before a big fight prompted the New York Times to headline a story "SULLIVAN IS SOBER." Reflecting the pecking order of fame, after the boxer visited Grover Cleveland at the White House, another paper splashed, "THE PRESIDENT MEETS SULLIVAN."

In this muscular, relentlessly detailed book, Christopher Klein not only tells Sullivan's story but also documents the evolution of boxing from illicit bare-knuckle savagery akin to today's steel-cage extravaganzas to the "sweet science" of legally sanctioned bouts between skillful gloved opponents.

Under the harum-scarum "London Prize-Ring Rules," fighters routinely gouged eyes, pulled hair, kicked with spiked shoes, wrestled their opponents to the dirt and whacked them in the back of the head. Either fighter could flop on the ground to avoid being pummeled and end a round. The Marquess of Queensberry rules, introduced in 1867, required gloves—which could be skintight and unpadded—and timed three-minute rounds and eliminated most of the barbarous tactics. Sullivan, whose motto was "come out fast, hit hard and first," routinely devastated his foes under whichever regime he fought.

Sullivan's epic reign in the ring began on Feb. 7, 1882, in the Gulf Coast hamlet of Mississippi City, where he demolished the heavyweight champion, Paddy Ryan of Troy, N.Y., in 11 punishing minutes. "When Sullivan struck me, I thought that a telegraph pole had been shoved against me endways," marveled the ex-champ afterward.

The victory was a great—and prophetic—moment in sports. "Newly laid railroad lines had permitted fans and reporters from across the country to witness the event in person, and brand-new telegraph lines instantly transmitted blow-by-blow accounts . . .," writes Mr. Klein. "The modern sports age had begun and it had found its first athletic god."

Seven years later, in another Mississippi hamlet, Richburg, the champ took on his likeliest challenger, Jake Kilrain, another son of Irish immigrants who grew up just 4 miles from Sullivan's home in Boston's South End. Once again, it was a bare-knuckle, last-man-standing bout, but this one lasted 75 rounds over two hours. At the end of the 23rd round, Sullivan leapt in the air and landed with both knees on his prostrate foe's head. Kilrain was reduced to a bloody pulp over the next 52 rounds before his seconds literally threw a sponge into the ring to signal surrender.

In between these two epic brawls and for years afterward, Sullivan barnstormed and caroused his way around the country and western Europe. He held countless sparring exhibitions and even bought an interest in a circus. His marriage collapsed, and he took up with an actress named Annie Livingston, who called herself Mrs. John L. Sullivan without benefit of a decree. He launched a new career as an actor in a melodrama written especially for him called "Honest Hearts and Willing Hands," netting the equivalent of \$2.5 million today. Drunk much of the time, he was so disorderly that he routinely had to sneak out of town to avoid arrest. Still, America's Irish immigrants and their progeny—and millions of other working stiff—lavished love on their errant hero.

Sullivan's last hurrah took place a decade after his first. He had avoided all title challengers in the 31 months since the Kilrain bout but could no longer dodge Gentleman Jim Corbett, the tall, pompadoured favorite of boxing's smart set. The smooth Corbett, a one-time bank clerk, was lace-curtain Irish, in conspicuous contrast to the roistering champ. Despite his diet of dissipation, Sullivan managed to pull himself together and entered the ring in sweltering New Orleans at 212 pounds. Corbett was a trim 178, barely a light heavyweight by today's standards.

Using the rope-a-dope tactics made famous in our time by Muhammad Ali, Corbett let Sullivan think he was driving the fight. But as the rounds piled up, the challenger floated like a butterfly and stung like a bee, and the champ flagged. In the 21st round, Corbett made his move. His combinations launched Sullivan into the ropes, and he knocked out the champ with a right to the jaw, Sullivan's signature punch. Years later, the great Grantland Rice called it "the most sensational single episode in the history of American sports."

The last chapter of Sullivan's life was, in its way, as remarkable as the earlier ones. He played Simon Legree in a production of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and followed up with a smash run as a monologist. At 46 and 273 pounds, he went back in the ring . . . and knocked out his opponent with a right to the jaw.

In March 1905, he woke up one morning in Terre Haute, Ind., and quit drinking forever. Five years later, he married a quiet, prim spinster named Kate Harkins and settled down to a happy life as a temperance crusader and farmer on 70 acres in Abington, 20 miles south of Boston, where he raised pigs, goats, rabbits, geese, pheasants, chickens, horses, turkeys and cows and harvested countless bushels of potatoes. His anti-alcohol lecture was called "From Glory to Gutter to God."

Over the course of his life, Sullivan had made and frittered away a fortune that would amount to \$250 million today. He was 59 when his heart finally gave out on Feb. 2, 1918. At his death, he had barely \$75,000 but enduring fame.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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