

# BARE-KNUCKLE BRUISERS

by

**Roy Case**

The first recorded bare-knuckle boxing match was held in England in 1681, and although such bouts were judged illegal, within a few years contests were frequently being fought in and around the city of London. Impoverished fighters would scrap for whatever purse they could agree, more often than not supplemented by the added incentive of side stakes, while eager crowds of spectators wagered substantial sums on the outcome.

Bare-knuckle pugilism reached its peak in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, some time before the Marquess of Queensberry Rules were adopted in 1867. Consequently, the rules applied to bare-knuckle bouts were simple and few in number.

- Fights were fought using bare fists.
- Kicking, biting, gouging, and elbowing was not allowed.
- Grappling and throws were allowed above the waist.
- A round was ended when one fighter was knocked down.
- Fighters were given 30 seconds to rest, before the next round began.
- There were no judges assigned to score the fight.
- The fight was ended when one of the fighters was knocked unconsciousness, or when a fighter conceded defeat.

There were no weight divisions, and as such only one recognised English champion, consequently heavier men enjoyed a distinct advantage. Although it was common practice for fights to continue until one of the fighters was unable to carry on, on rare occasions a fixed number of rounds was agreed.

The first bare-knuckle champion of England was a bull-necked brawler named James Figg [1684-1734]. Born in Thame in Oxfordshire, Figg won the title in 1719, before bare-knuckle boxing truly came into its own. He fought during an age when a fighter would incorporate amongst his defensive skills the use of foils, cudgels and quarter staffs, with bare-knuckle fighting just one speciality numbered amongst the rest.

Figg retained the title for 11 years until his eventual retirement in 1730. It is claimed he fought a grand total of 270 bouts, losing only once in 1727 when he came up against a Gravesend pipe-maker named Ned Sutton, who beat him to win the English title. The 6ft tall Figg immediately demanded a re-match which he won to re-claim the Championship.

Nicknamed 'the Gypsy', bare-knuckle boxer Jem Mace [1831-1910] had the longest professional career as a fighter, lasting more than 35 years, until he was well into his sixties, his last exhibition bout coming in 1909 at the age of 79.

According to 19 century historical boxing records, the African-American bare-knuckle fighter Thomas Molineaux was born into slavery in the State of Virginia in 1784. Where it is claimed he fought other slaves to provide entertainment for the plantation owners. He was seemingly granted his freedom, along with the generous sum of \$ 500, after winning a fight on which the son of a plantation owner had wagered the mind-boggling sum of \$ 100,000.

After obtaining his freedom Molineaux moved to New York, where he fought several bare-knuckle bouts, eventually progressing to become recognised as the '*Champion boxer of America*'. Provisionally financially secure, Tom took the decision to move to England, anticipating he would be able to earn a comfortable living there as a prize-fighter.

On arriving in London in 1809, he made contact with another former slave and ex-boxer, Bill Richmond [c1763-1829], who ran the *Horse and Dolphin* pub, just off Leicester Square. Born a slave in Cockhold's Town, Staten Island, New York, Richmond was the first African-American fighter to gain prominence in British bare-knuckle boxing.

Richmond started life badly. During his enslavement he endured all manner of unpleasant jobs, including that of an executioner. He moved to England in 1777, where he went through school thanks to the generosity of his benevolent employer Lord Hugh Percy, the Duke of Northumberland, an unusual gesture at a time when black man-servants were seen as a '*must have*' fashion accessory for English gentlemen. A general in the British forces in New York during the American War of Independence, Lord Percy took a shine to the youngster after he learned how Richmond had single-handedly flattened a group of English Redcoats in a tavern brawl and engaged him as a servant. No longer a slave, Lord Percy even arranged for Richmond to be apprenticed to a local cabinet-maker in York. And in 1791, Richmond married a local English woman in Wakefield, who bore him several children.

While residing in Yorkshire, Richmond fought and won 5 boxing matches, defeating '*The York Bully*' Frank Myers, George '*Dockey*' Moore, two unnamed soldiers, and an unknown blacksmith. It was the colour of Richmond's skin that rankled local brothel-keeper Frank Myers, who was angered when he saw Bill in the company of a white woman. Such were the ferocity of the insults that arose, the 200 lb blacksmith and the athletic Richmond agreed to settle their differences in a bare-knuckle bout. Although Richmond was 25 lb lighter in weight, he was the much more accomplished fighter, and the blacksmith was no match for the ex-slave and was well beaten.

In 1796, when on a visit to York races, a renowned local bruiser and fearsome brawler, '*Dockey*' Moore, also upset Richmond and an on-the-spot fight broke out. Outweighed by a good 40 pounds, Richmond comfortably thrashed Moore into submission. Bill's only reward being a few coins collected from the crowd, and the judicious attention of an aristocratic, rake and wastrel Thomas Pitt.

The stylish and well-read Richmond continued to suffer relentless racial abuse while living in York, and by 1795 he and his family had moved to London, where he became an employee and household member of the British peer Thomas Pitt, the 2nd Baron Camelford [1775-1804], whose attention he had attracted at York races.

A boxing enthusiast and prolific gambler, Pitt may well have received some boxing and gymnastic instruction from Richmond, and it is said the pair visited numerous prize fights together. Pitt saw the opportunity of basking in Bill's reflected glory, as well as the undoubted additional benefit to be accrued from some lucrative wagers. And since almost all aspiring early 19 century professional sportsmen needed a patron to invest in their talent, Bill readily accepted payment to meet the expense incurred in his fight to become a credible challenger for the title '*Champion of England*'.

Richmond lived the best part of his life in England, where he fought all 19 of his bare-knuckle contests. Losing only twice, his position as one of the greatest of English pugilists was assured. On two occasions he is known to have exhibited his skills for the pleasure of visiting European royalty. And as one of the most respected and admired of instructors, was honoured to be selected as an usher at the coronation of King George IV in 1821, following which he received a letter of thanks from Lord Gwydyr and the Home Secretary Lord Sidmouth.

Tom Molineaux learned a sort of English pugilism, in order to fight in the fierce bouts slave owners arranged between their slaves. He began his notable fighting career in Britain in 1810, and although he lost both fights against the widely viewed '*Champion of England*' the mighty Tom Cribb, it was these bouts that brought fame to the former slave.

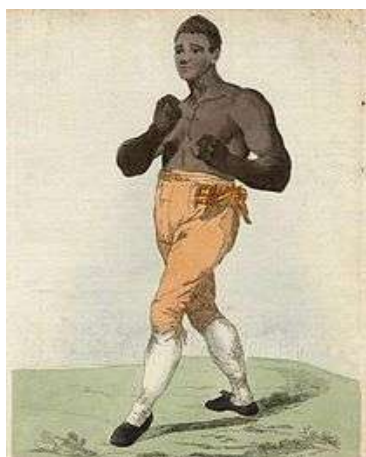
An extremely crude, yet very dangerous fighter, Molineaux's first fight in England took place at Tothill Fields, Westminster, and was preceded by a session of bull –baiting. With Bill Richmond acting as his trainer and second, Molineaux crushed 6ft tall Jack Burrows of Bristol, who was seconded by Tom Cribb, in just over an hour in front of a crowd of around 300 spectators.

Molineaux's second fight the following month was against '*Tough Tom*' Blake, at Epple Bay, near Margate. Blake was upwards of 40 years of age, and the principal challenger to Cribb's title, but he was no match for Molineaux who quickly dispensed with his valiant challenge, knocking him out in 8 rounds. With the subsequent fight report suggesting Molineaux had shown '*great improvement in the science of pugilism*'.

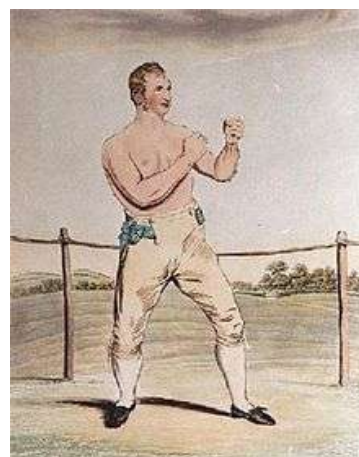
Having received intensive training from Bill Richmond, Molineaux weighed in at 198 lbs [90kgs] for his fight against Tom Cribb for the English title at Shenington Hollow, Oxfordshire in December 1810. Few people expected the fight to last very long, since it was widely anticipated Cribb would win comfortably within 10 rounds.



Bill Richmond



Tom Molineaux



Tom Cribb

However, the fight exceeded expectations, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> round the weary pugilists were locked in a hold from which neither could break free. As the referee stood by, the crowd pushed into the ring, and in the confusion Molineaux hurt his left hand so badly, it was thought it may have been broken. In the commotion which followed an argument developed as to whether Cribb had managed to *'toe the line'* before the requisite 30 seconds had elapsed. If he had not, Molineaux would have been declared the winner and awarded the fight and the title. However, the referee was unsure, and allowed the fight to go on. By round 34, the distressed Molineaux was clearly ready to concede, declaring *'me can fight no more'*. Yet his persuasive second encouraged him to carry on, and he suffered defeat in the next round.

Cribb, now in a state of semi-retirement, was looking forward to the quiet life, but this had to be put on hold, as all England was calling for Cribb to once again humble the American upstart in a return fight. People who had never before been interested in pugilism were suddenly enthralled by the possibility of a second encounter, as it became the subject of discussion in church sermons, social gatherings, and even in Parliament.

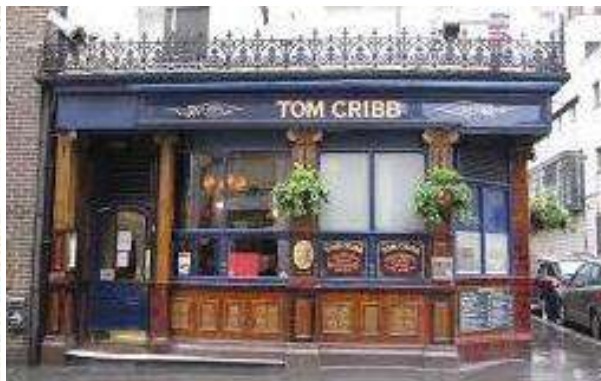
Strangely, the problem most British people had with Molineaux had nothing to do with extreme racism. They were quite willing to give him credit as an excellent pugilist, and even overlook his numerous affairs with white women. The greatest offense, in their eyes, was the fact that he was an American, and the notion that a foreigner might win England's most sacred boxing trophy was unthinkable.

Whatever the reason, Cribb couldn't dodge the vengeful Molineaux, and retirement had to wait. The return fight, with the only man thought tougher than Molineaux at the time, was held in September 1811, at Thistleton Gap in Rutland. With both fighters having shed more than 14 lbs since their first fight the previous year, Cribb prepared for the fight with extensive training under the guidance of Captain Robert Barclay [1779-1854], the celebrated Scottish walker, whose most famous feat was walking 1,000 miles in 1,000 hours for 1,000 guineas. Molineaux fought a brave battle, watched by around 15,000 enthusiastic fight fans,

but he was out-fought and knocked out cold in round 11 by the relentless Cribb, who to add insult to injury broke the American's jaw. Shortly after the fight Molineaux parted company with his faithful mentor Richmond, and fired him as his trainer.



Tom Cribb v Tom Molineaux



The Tom Cribb Pub

Molineaux fought several subsequent bouts before embarking upon a boxing tour in 1813, sparring in a series of exhibition bouts throughout Scotland and Ireland. His prize-fighting career came to an end a couple of years later in 1815.

In the latter stages of his life Molineaux became increasingly reliant upon alcohol, and suffered a spell in a debtors' prison. He died penniless in the band-room of the 77th Regiment in Galway in 1818, aged 34.

Tom Molineaux was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1997, and the Bare Knuckle Boxing Hall of Fame in 2010.

Molineaux's career record: 5 wins: 3 losses: 1 draw:

July, 1810	Jack Burrows	Win	Tothill Fields, Westminster	65 minutes
August, 1810	Tom Blake	Win	Epple Bay, Margate	8 rounds
Dec., 1810	Tom Cribb	Loss	Shenington Hollow, Oxford	35 rounds
May, 1811	William Rimmer	Win	Moulsley Hurst, Surrey	21 rounds
Sept, 1811	Tom Cribb	Loss	Thistleton Gap, Rutland	11 rounds
April, 1813	Jack Carter	Win	Remington, Gloucestershire	25 rounds
May, 1814	William Fuller	Draw	Bishopstorf, Paisley	4 rounds
May, 1814	William Fuller	Win	Auchineux, near Glasgow	2 rounds
March, 1815	George Cooper	Loss	Coreset Hill, Lanarkshire	14 rounds

In the years that followed Richmond became a close friend of Tom Cribb, and the two ex-pugilists could often be seen conversing late into the night at Cribb's pub, the Union Arms. It was there that Richmond spent his last evening, before he died aged 66 in December 1829.

Tom Cribb [1781–1848] was born near Bristol, and moved to London at the age of 13. After a spell working as a bell-hanger, he sought work as a coal porter in Wapping, before commencing his professional career as a fighter.

Standing at around 5ft 10inches tall, Cribb weighed in at about 200lbs, and although considered by some to be slow, he was awkwardly effective. He was a hard, accurate puncher, and a good wrestler, which was important in those days, and incredibly durable, refusing to quit in spite of suffering brutal beatings in many of his fights.

When he retired from the ring in 1812 aged 31, he resumed work as a coal merchant and boxing trainer. And later became a publican and ran the Union Arms in central London, which was later commemorated in his name in recognition of his career as a fighter.

Cribb died in 1848, aged 66, and is buried in the churchyard of St. Mary Magdalen's in Woolwich, where a monument is erected in his memory.

In 2014 Cribb's fights against Molineaux were referenced in the play *'Prize Fighters'* by the Bristolian theatre director Ed Viney.

In 1892 gloves were introduced, which would lead to the evolution of the sport with we are familiar with today.

Though it is now legal within the United Kingdom, bare-knuckle boxing has no official regulating body, and is not governed by the British Boxing Board of Control. Even so London's O2 Arena hosted 14 fights last year with an audience of 2,000 spectators.

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