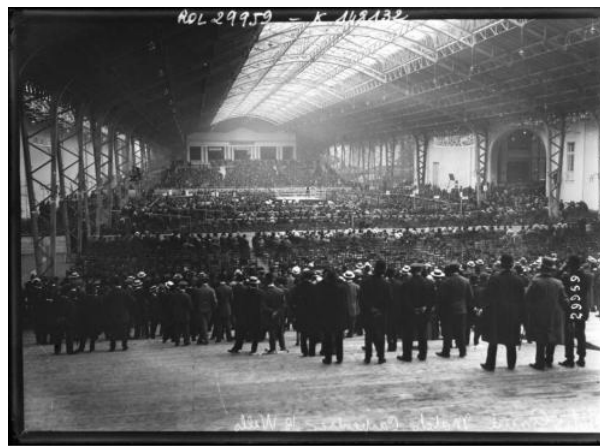


English Boxing, A European Spectacle Views of London and Paris before 1914

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ABSTRACT

Before 1914, English boxing matches were among France's major sporting events, creating a market with Paris and London as the main centers. However, pugilistic circulations between the two capitals were neither limited to Paris imitating London, nor to pure competition. While boxing came from England, French organizers appropriated some of its practices, and organized reciprocal exchanges. London and Paris subsequently increased their collaborations, and mutually reinforced their dynamism in sporting events. They represented a duopoly in organizing boxing events in Europe, with a market that could rival that of the United States.



Photograph of the European heavyweight championship between the Frenchman Georges Carpentier and the Englishman Billy Wells during the Ghent World Fair in 1913. Source : BnF/Gallica.

Before 1914, professional English boxing represented a substantial market for sporting events in Europe. Boxers usually fought one another for considerable sums in big venues before large audiences. London and Paris were the main centers for this market, with both cities competing to emerge as the leading location, and Paris seeking to outclass London, the birthplace of pugilism. Nevertheless, actors on both sides of the Channel engaged in exchange and collaboration, with both cities benefiting from the other's presence. Other European cities (such as

Liverpool, Dublin, Glasgow, Plymouth, and Brussels) took part in this boom, but London and Paris formed a duo spearheading the European circuit.

The Beginnings of English Boxing in France

At the very beginning of the twentieth century, professional English boxing, among other sports, was introduced in Paris by the Englishman Ashley C. Williams. At the time France was simply an extension of the English boxing space, with a few matches being organized through the press of both countries, and opposing English boxers in particular. However, young anglophiles from the Parisian elite, such as Frantz Reichel and Paul Rousseau, quickly joined the club created by Williams. As the founders of the French Boxing Federation, they strove to establish the “noble art”, advocating its moral and physical “values.” This practice grew in scope, for between 1904 and 1907, 37 matches were held involving English boxers, and 30 involving French.

The year 1907 was a turning point, as the number of matches surpassed 70, rising to approximately a hundred in 1908. This boom was due to a few particularly active Frenchmen, who spoke English and had close personal and professional ties with the United Kingdom. Their sporting event companies began to flourish in 1911, notably “Wonderland français” and “Premierland”.

The promotion of the English model was all the more effective as almost all of these organizers were journalists. For instance, Victor Breyer, who was the co-director of Wonderland français, reported on boxing news from England and the United States (notably for *L'Auto*). He published an *Annuaire du ring* (Ring Yearbook), like those existing in these two countries. In general, the sporting press increased its collaborations with the English press. This was especially true of *L'Auto* and *The Sporting Life*. The organization of boxing events was similar to that of London in a number of respects. This constant reference to the original model, in addition to the use of English resources (boxers, journalists, or referees), was presented as a guarantee of seriousness and quality.

Between London and Paris, the Construction of a European Market for Boxing Matches

The model for how the activity was structured was nevertheless specific to each country, as French organizers appropriated English contributions, and created an original space that was specifically Parisian. First, they hosted American boxers at a time when the London market was more restricted to British exchange, especially between Glasgow, Dublin, and Cardiff. They also favored black American boxers, notably heavyweights, who were the most esteemed. Skin color did not prevent them from boxing and did not lessen their renown, unlike in England, where for example a campaign in September 1911 prevented the match between Jack Johnson and the white English boxer Bombardier Wells. Paris also stood out by offering more remuneration. American and English boxers could thus be entitled to prize money unavailable elsewhere. This was all the more true as they could overestimate their sport value (for example by claiming to be the English champion), which was especially difficult to objectively assess in the absence of an international federation and the recognition of sporting titles. Finally, French organizers took advantage of foreign boxers by having them contend against Frenchmen, thereby heightening the rivalry between the two countries, and promoting the international recognition of French boxers. French victories rebalanced exchanges between Paris and London. While only three Frenchmen fought at least once in England before 1910, forty-two did so between 1910 and 1914. Collaborations and partnerships increased, laying the foundation for a European market for boxing events revolving around the two capitals.

By “internationalizing” matches, English and French organizers offered unprecedented scope to this market, as illustrated by the first match, in 1913, opposing the most famous French boxer of the time, Georges Carpentier, with the Englishman B. Wells. Interestingly, this match was held neither in London nor in Paris, but by mutual agreement in Ghent, Belgium. Special trains were arranged in order to reach the city, and ticket offices opened in Amsterdam, Antwerp, Brussels, Cologne, Ghent, Liège, Lille, London, Paris, and Roubaix. *L'Auto* and *The Sporting Life* collaborated closely, and an editor from the English newspaper helped referee the match. Finally, the film of

the match was screened in nine different theatres in Paris, and marketed in numerous other cities in France, England, and Wales.

In general, the audience for boxing grew, as promoters seeking to organize matches for an international audience connected stars with their audiences, and promoted trips between London and Paris. For example, during the fight between Carpentier and Gunboat Smith in 1914, *La Boxe et les boxeurs* (Boxing and Boxers) magazine organized a five-day “excursion to London” including visits to Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace, etc. The press—and henceforth the cinema—gave these events greater and greater resonance. Better yet, media outlets helped to organize events. Around 1910, organizers acquired the rights to screen films of matches held abroad, especially for publicity purposes. In 1911, for instance, a fight between Bill Lang and Sam Langford in London was screened three days before the match between Langford and Sam Mac Vea in Paris, in order to give a “foretaste” of the event.

The rivalry between London and Paris to become the boxing capital was coupled with the dramatization of the countries’ opposition in the form of two boxers facing off against one another. However, this competition should not overshadow the deep reciprocal exchanges that served to strengthen their mutual dynamism rather than weaken one of the two, such that it helped build a European circuit, and even a European market. The trajectory of American boxers is illuminating in this regard, as they appeared very rarely in just one European city, instead following a pre-established route across Europe. London and Paris thus formed a duo that counterbalanced American domination.

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