

### Boxers of the 1940s

In this program, we will explore the charismatic world of boxing in the 1940s. Read about the top fighters of the era, their rivalries, and key bouts, and discuss the history and cultural significance of the sport.

#### Preparation & How-To's

- Print [photos of boxers of the 1940s](#) for participants to view or [display them on a TV screen](#).
- Print a [large-print copy of this discussion](#) activity for participants to follow along with and take with them for further study.
- Read the article aloud and encourage participants to ask questions.
- Use Discussion Starters to encourage conversation about this topic.
- Read the [Boxing Trivia Q & A](#) and solicit answers from participants.



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#### Introduction

The 1940s were a unique heyday for the sport of boxing, with some iconic boxing greats, momentous bouts, charismatic rivalries, and the introduction of televised matches. There was also a slowdown in boxing during this time due to the effects of World War II.

#### History

Humans have fought each other with their fists since the dawn of time, and boxing as a sport has been around nearly as long. Boxing, where two people participate in hand-to-hand combat for sport, began at least several thousand years ago in the ancient Near East.

A relief from Sumeria (present-day Iraq) from the third millennium BC shows two facing figures with fists striking each other's jaws. This is the earliest known depiction of boxing. Similar reliefs and paintings have also been found from the third and second millennium onward elsewhere in the ancient Middle East and Egypt. There are also depictions of boxing in the artwork of ancient India and Greece, including figures using kicks and knee strikes as well as their fists.

The first recorded boxing rules come from ancient Greece, where boxing was established as an Olympic Sport in 688 BC. Beginning in the 16th century, prizefighting became popular—particularly in Great Britain, where the basis for modern boxing rules were established.

These rules include the London Prize Ring Rules, first published in 1838, which outlawed such tactics as butting, scratching, kicking, and holding the ropes. The Queensbury Rules, established in 1867, included 12 basic tenets, with the underlying premise that each fight should be a “fair and stand-up boxing match” of three-minute rounds, followed by one-minute rest periods, in a 24-square-foot ring. The 10-second count for a knockout was also created.

## Discussion Starters

- Are you a fan of boxing? What do you like or dislike about the sport?
- What are your experiences with live boxing matches? If you have attended one, what was the experience like? If not, would you be interested in going to one?

## Boxing in the 1940s

In the 1940s, professional boxing was popular. However, as with other sports such as baseball, there was significant disruption to the regular boxing schedule due to World War II. Many prominent boxers were drafted or enlisted in the military, which meant they were overseas fighting for their country rather than in the ring.

Some fighters, such as World Heavyweight Champion Joe Louis, made propaganda films and posters promoting the war effort. Due to the absence of many top fighters, some championship matches had to be postponed several years until the war was over. Still, there were many compelling boxing personalities, intense rivalries, and historic matches during this decade.

In fact, the introduction of televised fights brought more viewers and more pageantry to the world of boxing. Some of the most memorable fights of the decade include those between boxing greats Sugar Ray Robinson and Jake LaMotta, as well as matches between Rocky Graziano and Tony Zale.

## Discussion Starters

- What are your memories of sports during your youth? What influence did the outside world have on your favorite sports?
- Boxing was a popular diversion during the war. When things are stressful for you, what diversions or activities do you enjoy?

## Prominent Boxers of the 1940s

There were many influential boxers during the 1940s. Below we highlight several of the brightest stars.

**Beau Jack** (1921–2000), who grew up in Georgia, was an American two-time World Lightweight Champion during the 1940s. He is the record holder for the fighter to headline the most fights at Madison Square Garden, with 21 bouts. His most famous contest, the “War Bonds Fight” against fellow boxer Bob Montgomery (both of whom served in the U.S. Army), took place in Montgomery, Alabama, on August 4, 1944. The fight raised millions for the war effort. Jack is considered by many to be one of the greatest lightweight boxers ever.

**Billy Conn** (1917–1993) was an Irish American Light Heavyweight Champion who was known as “the Pittsburgh Kid.” He is best remembered for his epic fights with fellow champion Joe Louis. Conn ended his career with 63 wins and 14 wins by knockout and was inducted in the Boxing Hall of Fame in 1965. Known for his agile, lightning-fast hands and feet, he also starred in the 1941 boxing film *The Pittsburgh Kid*.

**Bob Montgomery** (1919–1998) was an American World Lightweight Champion whose nickname was “the Bobcat.” He got his start boxing at Philadelphia’s Slaughterhouse Gym and went undefeated in his first 21 matches. Famous for his exhibition “War Bonds Fight” with Beau Jack, Montgomery won 75 of his 97 contests, including a whopping 37 by knockout. After retiring from the ring, Montgomery became a fight promoter and was inducted into the Boxing Hall of Fame in 1995.

**Jake LaMotta** (1922–2017) was a World Middleweight Champion from New York City. The tough fighter, who utilized stalking and brawling techniques rather than knockout punches, often left his opponents with brutal beatings. This earned him his monikers “the Bronx Bull” and “the Raging Bull.” He is also known for being able to withstand incredible beatings from his rivals—and remain standing. Outside of the ring, he was also a stand-up comedian. His life was portrayed by Robert De Niro in the 1980 movie *Raging Bull*.

**Joe Louis** (1914–1981), born Joseph Louis Barrow, was a Heavyweight Champion active between 1934 and 1951. The International Boxing Research Organization has ranked Louis as the greatest heavyweight boxer of all time. In addition, Louis, also known as “Brown Bomber,” was honored as the best puncher by *The Ring* magazine. His legendary championship reign survived 26 title defenses, lasting over 11 and a half years (between 1937 and 1949). He’s the only man in history to hold the title for an entire decade. In addition to his huge impact on the world of boxing, champion Joe Louis, who was Black, transcended racism to become a well-respected hero to the entire nation, one of the first Black Americans to do so. He also helped to integrate the game of golf.

**Max Schmeling** (1905–2005) was a German Heavyweight Champion in the 1930s. He had two influential bouts with Joe Louis, in 1936 and 1938, which captivated the world. In the first fight, Schmeling knocked out Louis. In the rematch two years later, Louis knocked out Schmeling in one round. Later in life, the two boxing greats became friends.

**Rocky Graziano** (1919–1990), born Thomas Rocco Barbella, was an Italian American boxer and World Middleweight title holder. His powerful punches were much feared, as he was known to knock out his rivals with one punch. His 1955 autobiography, *Somebody Up There Likes Me*, became an Oscar-winning film starring Paul Newman. In later life, Graziano became an actor, appearing in such TV shows as *Miami Undercover* and *Naked City*. He also started a pizza franchise in New York called Rocky Graziano’s Pizza Ring.

**Sugar Ray Robinson** (1921–1989), born Walker Smith Jr., was an American boxer who won 173 of his 200 fights between 1940 and 1965. He was twice named Fighter of the Year, in 1942 and 1951. Robinson was the first boxer to win a divisional title five times. The flamboyant World Welterweight and World Middleweight Champion is credited with establishing the celebrity entourage tradition, as he was often accompanied by a group of his supporters. In 2006, his image was put on a U.S. postage stamp. In 1999, the Associated Press called him “the fighter of the century.”

**Tony Zale** (1913–1997) was a World Middleweight Champion from Gary, Indiana. He was known as the “Man of Steel,” both because he grew up in a steel town and due to the fact that he could take punch after punch and keep on fighting, often rallying to win. He won 67 out of 87 matches, with 45 knockouts. Zale and Rocky Graziano had a compelling rivalry for middleweight glory that played out over three brutal fights—with the title passing first to Zale, then Graziano, and finally back to Zale—between 1946 and 1948. In 1991, Zale was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

## Discussion Starters

- Rocky Graziano and Tony Zale starred in what boxing critics have often called one of the fiercest rivalries in boxing history. Sugar Ray Robinson and Jake LaMotta began their series of famous bouts toward the middle of the decade. Do you feel that athletic rivalry makes sports more or less exciting?
- Some boxers went on to have careers in show business. Do you think there are similarities between boxing and the entertainment industry?

## Legacy

The lasting legacy of the legends of 1940s boxing can still be felt today. Over the centuries, the sport has gone in and out of favor. It is too brutal for some, while others see it as the purest contest, stripped of pretense—just two men and their fists. During World War II, it made sense that this sport, with its high-stakes, raw display of power, strength, bravado, and guts, would resonate with fans.

The novelty of watching boxing matches on television also helped popularize the sport and grow the fame of the competitors, many of whom became national celebrities. Today, boxing matches remain big draws and popular with audiences who cheer and groan with each punch, remarking on how the raw power of human strength keeps them coming back.

## Discussion Starters

- What do you see as the legacy of boxing? What do you feel that the appeal of boxing is for people?
- Do you think boxing has become more or less influential since the 1940s? Why? What do you think its cultural impact is today?
- What is your experience with boxing? Have you fought in the ring, either as a professional or an amateur?
- What, if any, sports have you played? What makes a sport enjoyable for you, either as a player or a viewer?

## Boxing Trivia Q & A

1. What is a pugilist?

**Answer:** A boxer

2. When were modern boxing gloves invented?

- A. 1612
- B. 892
- C. 1743

**Answer:** C

3. Who is known as the best and last bare-knuckles boxing champion?

- A. John L. Sullivan
- B. Sugar Ray Leonard
- C. Muhammad Ali

**Answer:** A. Sullivan's last fight was a 75-round bout in 1889.

4. Where was boxer Joe Louis born?

- A. Texas
- B. Alabama
- C. Florida

**Answer:** B

5. True or false: sometimes boxers of the 1940s were paid to throw fights.

**Answer:** True

6. What Greek god was believed to be the inventor and patron of boxing?

- A. Athena
- B. Apollo
- C. Zeus

**Answer:** B

7. What is something Muhammad Ali would always do?

- A. Take photos with fans
- B. Avoid talking to fans
- C. Sign autographs for fans

**Answer:** C

8. What boxing legend of the 1940s refused to give Muhammad Ali an autograph when he was a boy?

- A. Sugar Ray Robinson
- B. Max Schmeling
- C. Joe Louis

**Answer:** A. Robinson was Ali's childhood hero, and his refusal to sign an autograph was Ali's inspiration for always honoring a fan's request for his signature.

### **Additional Activities**

1. Watch an [informational video](#) about the history of boxing.
  2. Watch the film [The Quiet Man](#), which is about a retired boxer who returns to his home in Ireland and must fight to have a peaceful life.
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