

LONSDALE'S BELT

**Boxing's Most
Coveted Prize**



John Harding
Foreword by Mike Costello

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Lord Lonsdale (left) and Jimmy Wilde.

Introduction

IN November 2011, British lightweight champion Anthony Crolla arrived at the press conference for his title fight with Willie Limond carrying the Lonsdale Belt in a small, square silver case. He laid it out on the table. Light glinted off the golden surfaces. ‘I’m not touching it,’ said Willie, shaking his head. Yet he walked towards the table cautiously. ‘I’ll take a look at it though. It’s the most prestigious belt, just look at it,’ he whispered. ‘Being in its presence... and British champion, that sounds good.’

Limond’s show of respect for the belt (which he would eventually wear in 2014) was not an act. Like every other professional, Limond fights for money and there are plenty more lucrative alternatives to British titles available to boxers these days. With four recognised sanctioning bodies – the WBA, WBC, IBF, and WBO – and 17 divisions, there are potentially 68 world title belts, creating opportunities for smart match-making. As Barry Hearn has said, ‘As a promoter, it’s always nice to have a belt of some sort on the line in a televised fight. Also, fighters want to be fighting for a belt of some kind.’ However, as Limond’s reactions suggest, there are belts – and then there is the Lonsdale Belt.

Now over 100 years old, Lord Lonsdale’s trophy stands equal to all the other icons of excellence in British sport such as golf’s Claret Jug, cricket’s Ashes urn, football’s FA Cup, tennis’s Rosewater Dish, and rugby union’s Calcutta Cup, among many others.

To wear the belt is to link oneself with some of the greatest names in the history of the fight game. To win one outright is to possess a tangible piece of sporting history, a guarantee of sporting immortality

The Origins of the Boxing Belt

'And she loosed from her breast that inlaid belt of hers, in which all manner of seductions lurk, Love, Desire, and dalliance, persuasiveness that robs even the wise of sense. Placing it in Hera's hands, she said, "Take this inlaid belt, of curious fashioning, and keep it at your breast. Whatever your heart desires, you will return successful."

Homer: The Iliad Book XIV

PRECISELY when a belt became the symbol of a champion where the sport of boxing was concerned is impossible to determine although there's evidence to suggest that the relationship between a belt and waging war was a long-established one.

Boxing's earliest historians such as *Pugilistica's* Henry Downes Miles like to trace the sport itself back to the Greeks and the Romans when belts of various kinds were significant items of military equipment. To a ranking Roman soldier, for instance, a war skirt was a stylish addition to his armour and an extra piece of protection to keep him safe in battle. Gladiators, too, wore sizeable leather belts for protection.

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Where Anglo-Saxon warriors were concerned, a sword belt was often an elaborate piece of metalwork sporting gold fittings and panels inlaid with precious stones such as garnets.

When prize-fighting in Britain first became an established pursuit regulated by Broughton's rules in the mid-18th century, the prime purpose of each contest was money – the purse along with substantial bets placed by fighters' backers and onlookers. However, almost from the beginning, a tangible prize in the form of a belt appears as an emblem of victory to be held by the champion and handed on to his successors.

The first mention of such a belt comes in the pages of *Puglistica*, 'When Jem Belcher had reached the zenith of his fame he cast his eyes towards Bristol for a successor and the early reputation of Pearce pointed him out as a likely holder of the belt of championship on behalf of his own native city.'

Belcher went on to wage two heroic fights with Tom Cribb; the first in 1807 and the second in 1809 in answer to a challenge for 'the belt' and 200 guineas. Belcher was defeated after which the belt disappears. It's said that King George III presented Cribb with a belt in 1810 when Cribb controversially defeated the American Tom Molineaux, the first black man ever to fight for the British heavyweight boxing title. In fact, his supporters clubbed together in 1811 to present him with a silver cup suitably engraved with a crest, a British lion, a crestfallen beaver (emblematic of the USA) and a coal barge, the latter illustrative of Cribb's trade.

It would be a decade later in 1821 when, having held the championship for nearly ten years without receiving a challenge and not expected to fight any more, he was presented at the 'Fives Court' in St Martins Lane with a belt consisting of lion skin adorned with a pair of silver plaques engraved with a list of his 'hard fought' contests and a silver clasp in the form of a pair of lion's paws.

In 1865 the then bare-knuckle champion Tom Sayers died and to pay off his debts his belongings were sold off. Amongst his effects was Tom Cribb's lion skin belt which was sold for just £18 10s. The silver trophy made £35. Cribb's belt survives to this day, albeit in concrete form. In the parish church of St Mary Magdalene at Woolwich beside the Thames there is a large monument of a lion of dolorous aspect marking Cribb's last resting place. Resting beneath its paw atop a small urn is a prize-fighter's belt.

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The next mention of a champion's belt comes in 1825 following the fight between Jem Ward and Tom Cannon, the winner being awarded 'a [non-transferable] belt, consisting of blue and crimson colours, the clasp or buckle made of highly polished steel encircled with emblematical designs and in the middle of the clasp a heart worked in gold on which was engraved, "This belt was presented to Jem Ward at the Fives Court, St Martins Street, Leicester Fields on 22 July in commemoration of the scientific and manly conquest of Thomas Cannon at Stanfield Park, Warwick on 19 July 1825 entitling him to the high and distinguished appellation of the British Champion."'

Ward is reported to have commented, 'I have got it and I mean to keep it.' However, in 1832 Ward earned a second belt following victory over Simon Byrne, 'The Emerald Gem', and this time he handed the belt over to the editor of the journal *Bell's Life* to await a challenge. Seven years on, William Abednego Thompson ('Bendigo') defeated James 'Deaf' Burke and was handed the belt by Ward. Once again, it disappeared.

In 1841, however, something significant happened. Prior to the title fight between Nick Ward and Ben Caunt, it was declared by Cicero Holt, ('the well-known orator of the ring and second to Nick Ward') that the belt he was holding up for all to see was for the victor to retain, 'so long as he was enabled to maintain the high and distinguished title of Champion of England, his duty being to transfer it to his successor'.

It was to be finally presented, he said, when complete, at a dinner to be given at Jem Burns's hostelry (The Queens Head, Queens Head Court, Windmill Street, Haymarket, London) where the subscription originated on 'Monday 31st inst.'

'The belt was exhibited to the gaze of the curious; it was composed of purple velvet and lined with leather; in the centre are a pair of clasped hands surrounded by a wreath of the Rose, the Thistle and the Shamrock, entwined in embossed silver; on each side of this are three shields of bright silver at present without inscription but on these are to be engraved the names of all the Champions of England which the records of the Fancy preserve to conclude with the name of the conqueror on the present occasion. The clasps in front are formed of two hands encased in sparring gloves...beautifully executed. Its inspection afforded general pleasure and the oration of "Cicero" was received with loud cheers.'

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Caunt took the belt in his hands and said to Ward, 'This is mine, Nick,' to which Ward replied, 'I hope the best man may win it and wear it.'

Like all previous belts, however, it disappeared to be replaced by others. In 1855 a proposition was set on foot by a number of 'patrons of the Ring' to raise by subscription a sum of money to purchase a belt of greater intrinsic value than anything previously presented, in lieu of the belt which had 'gone astray' during the squabbles between Bendigo, Caunt and William 'the Tipton Slasher' Perry.

Some £100 was collected and a Mr C.P. Hancock of New Bond Street manufactured a trophy, 'an elegant badge of the highest fistic honour'. This time, specific conditions were laid down: To possess and hold it for three years without defeat meant one could possess it for good. In the meantime one had to meet anyone *of any weight* who challenged for a £200 side bet within six months of the challenge, £200 being the minimum. The belt was to be given up before each challenge plus security given to hold the belt. Thus the belt began its perambulations.

Between 1855 and 1867, this or various replacement belts were fought for, lost and won again but by the 1870s the bare-knuckle boxing game was in decline and the lineal sequence of champions fell into abeyance.

None of the belts from this early period survived except the one awarded to Jem Mace after his victory over Sam Hurst in 1861. For many years it was displayed as part of Nat Fleischer's Ring Museum at Madison Square Garden, New York but in 2005, collector Tommy Mellis bought it at auction and brought it back to Britain.

Twelve inches in diameter, 38in in circumference and made of leather-backed sterling silver, it consists of four large, jointed panels on one of which is engraved, 'Presented To James Mace. In The Year 1860 by his backers and friends as a small token of respect. For his manly and straightforward conduct in and out of the ring. And also on June 18th 1861, defeated Sam Hurst for the Championship of England.'



Discredited because of its inherent rowdyism and sharp practices, for nearly 20 years between the 1860s and 1880s the Prize Ring was forced

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underground. Prospective combatants in a prize-fight were liable to be arrested and bound over to keep the peace and if caught actually fighting were often sentenced to hard labour or fined. It became a secretive activity that excluded the majority of the population, existing almost entirely for the purpose of betting. The few remaining professional prize-fighters earned a pittance giving displays in boxing booths at funfairs while the basic skills of the fight game were kept alive in small, hide-away gymnasia such as the Lambeth School of Arms off Paradise Street, London, a cramped, mud-floored, low-roofed shed with a boarded patch in the middle upon which rested a 16-foot ring surrounded by tiers of rough wooden seating.

Gradually, however, a reformed version of boxing emerged in the 1890s epitomised by the famous bout between John L. Sullivan and James J. Corbett in New Orleans in September 1892. This was the first heavyweight championship bout to be contested using gloves, and thus an important moment in the universal acceptance of the Marquess of Queensberry Rules. It was also organised by an athletic club – the New Orleans Olympic Club – in a city which had recently legalised fights under certain conditions including standard weight categories, a limited number of rounds, and increased powers for referees. What's more, the audience included 'middle-class businessmen and their wives'.

In Great Britain, another private club had already played a significant role in providing boxing with a quasi-legitimate basis. In November 1889 a gloved contest at London's Pelican Club between the heavyweight champions of England and Australia had been considered by the Attorney and Solicitor General to be 'of an illegal character' and those involved taken to court. However, an absence of corroborating police evidence led to the case being dropped. Prominent in the defence of the Club on that occasion would be Hugh Cecil Lowther, 5th Earl of Lonsdale. It would not be the last time his influence would be felt.

The Pelican Club in King Street, Covent Garden, opened in 1887 and replaced Evans Song and Supper Rooms, an early music hall. It assumed some of the latter's rowdy characteristics, although catering mainly for the sporting aristocracy and gentry. Its membership was a mix of flamboyant, sometimes reckless 'bohemians' including journalists, businessmen, even moneylenders along with various dukes, lords and squires including, significantly, the Marquess of Queensberry and

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thweste Earl of Lonsdale. The Pelican Club existed for just a few rowdy, profligate years before collapsing into bankruptcy but its boxing committee, under the chairmanship of Lonsdale, took significant steps towards cleaning up the boxing profession. A new club was soon formed by John Fleming, the Pelican's boxing manager, 'a fairly disreputable character with no particularly endearing qualities' who had previously managed various public houses in the city.

Fleming sought out solid, reliable middle-class men of property and integrity who wanted to enjoy themselves in a dignified manner, unlike the champagne-bottle-throwing bohemians of the old Pelican. The National Sporting Club, as it was renamed, would also be devoted more entirely to boxing than had been the Pelican and the man who became Fleming's partner and initial financier in the undertaking – A.F. Bettinson – was perfectly suited to achieve that ambition.

'Peggy' Bettinson had been an outstanding swimmer, a fine cricketer and good at rugby union but it was boxing that interested him most having won England's amateur lightweight championship in 1882. Bettinson helped Fleming assemble a membership of wealthy and influential people: stockbrokers, merchants, manufacturers, high-class shopkeepers, with a sprinkling of professional men. It wasn't a traditional West End club on a par with the Carlton, the Reform, or the Garrick; nor was it a bohemian 'spoofery' like the Pelican. It would, however, rapidly become the only place in London where one could watch boxing in comfort.

Dress code was informal as the majority of members came straight from their offices in the City or their West End shops. The Club's



Ted White: Middleweight champion of England 1893–96 wearing his belt

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grill-room served a good, plain dinner of chops or steaks, with chips, and cheese for one shilling and four-pence, with a pot of beer thrown in, although most of the management's profit came from the copious drinking before, during, and after the contests.

The Club was not founded, however, on the basis of 'sport for sport's sake'. Professional boxing was still principally a pretext for betting, and the fighters served in place of horses on the racecourse. Each man had a 'backer', who would take bets at his own odds. The backers were usually



Jack Wolff: East End promoter of the 1890s

substantial men of property, mainly peers and large land-owners to start with, but later they could be stockbrokers, bankers, merchants, or even tradesmen and publicans who happened to have a hefty errand boy or pot man and were willing to match his strength and fistic skill against another man's. It was a hobby that might prove profitable, though of course it involved a certain risk. Thousand-pound bets were not uncommon.

The Club provided the most up-to-date organisation for anybody who wanted to back a fighter. All that the prospective backer had to do was to join the Club and Fleming and Bettinson would furnish the best professional advice as to the boxer's character and capabilities; they would make arrangements for the man's training quarters and see to it that he was fit and in prime condition when he entered the ring; match him with a suitable opponent; and generally take every worry and trouble off the backer's shoulders. The Club's eminence, of course, eliminated the possibility of police interference, except of course in the case of fatal accidents.

There were no bare-fisted contests and this fact removed some of the social stigma that had attached to boxing. What's more, due to

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club President Lord Lonsdale's financial and personal interventions, both the Club and the sport of boxing survived following a number of fatalities in the NSC ring between 1898 and 1901. Lonsdale appeared regularly in defence of NSC officials at various high-profile inquests and court cases. He also used his influence to see that the best lawyers were employed to argue the Club's case. In each instance, the defendants were acquitted of manslaughter. While boxing was never legalised, Lonsdale saw to it that the law would henceforth keep its distance – so long as the sport remained tightly controlled. Fleming and Bettinson would thus enforce the Club's rules and regulations with an iron discipline.



There is a great deal of mythology attached to the reputation of Lord Lonsdale, much of it of his own creation. Although he inherited a title that brought with it vast tracts of land and buildings (including Lowther Castle) he had no access to the wealth such estates represented. The terms of his inheritance were designed (sensibly, as it turned out) to prevent any particular earl from impoverishing his successors by running up crippling debts that could only be paid off by mortgaging or selling land.

Lonsdale was thus paid a pension (never less than £80,000 per annum) by the estate trustees and expected to get along as best he could. Nevertheless, he pursued a life of luxury in which the pursuit of sport and ostentatious living were the principal goals.

He was, to quote his biographer Lionel Dawson, 'over-exuberant all his life but he was also naive, single-minded and extravagant, and had always spent beyond his means'.

Throughout his life he was in constant financial difficulties – not surprising since he kept a personal entourage of over one hundred and when he moved between his houses a special train was allocated to the party. On an overnight journey a special sleeper was reserved for himself and another for his dogs.

As a young man – although married – he had scandalised Victorian society by having a series of affairs with prominent actresses. 'Almost an emperor, not quite a gentleman' was King Edward VII's verdict on him. Both dallied with the celebrated beauty Lillie Langtry while

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(Australia).

Mr. A. F. BETTINSON
(England).

Mr. G. L. ("TEX") RICKARD
(America).

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Lonsdale's affair with Violet Cameron (whose opera company he paid to appear in New York) resulted in at least one illegitimate child. It all culminated in 1888 in a court case in which an aggrieved husband had sued him for adultery – and won. Lonsdale went abroad for a year to allow the scandal to die down. He travelled to the Arctic to collect various specimens of flora and fauna for a naturalist society, and later claimed to have discovered gold, to have begun the Klondike Gold Rush and actually to have reached the North Pole.

However, despite the exaggerations, the debts and the scandal, not to mention the increasingly anachronistic lifestyle, Lonsdale's love of boxing was genuine and his knowledge extensive. Boxers, he declared in his autobiography, were the salt of the earth and he enjoyed following the sport so much because, 'I like the company of real men who have made their way through the world with their fists.' Moreover, 'Boxing is, I think, one of the sports that must always remain dear to an Englishman's heart – simply because it is such a purely personal matter for the man concerned.'

He was taught to box by Jem Mace, the last bare-knuckle champion of England and widely acknowledged as the 'father of boxing' in its 20th-century form. During the period when boxing was still not a respectable sport, Lonsdale was one of the few wealthy aristocrats determined to change its image by ensuring that contests took place under properly constituted rules. His name thus became associated with 'fair play' and his presidency of the NSC lasted for 38 years.

In many ways, the NSC suited Lonsdale himself – he was a large fish in a smaller pool. Within the Club he reigned supreme, 'An inflexion of his voice, a twitch of his bushy eyebrows and boxers, officials and members leaped to do his bidding. As if to preserve the remoteness of his eminence he never arrived at the ringside with any guests or companions. He always arrived punctual to the minute, immaculately dressed and alone to take his seat of honour at the ringside.'

Throughout the 1890s the NSC possessed an almost absolute monopoly of professional boxing in Britain. It operated what was termed 'a patriarchal kind of totalitarianism' and the boxers it favoured and employed regularly were well treated, earning a comfortable but not extravagant living.

During almost two decades from its foundation in 1891, the Club paraded a series of champions and great fighters who swiftly took on

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almost immortal status: Frank Slavin, Peter Jackson, Pedlar Palmer, Digger Stanley, the 'Coffee Cooler' Frank Craig, Dick Burge, Tommy Burns, Sam Langford – the romance of such names, amplified by the purple prose chronicling their various titanic battles, helped confirm the NSC as the country's premier boxing venue and boxing as an acceptable, legal sport.

But nothing lasts forever. With boxing now 'semi-legalised' the first decade of the new century saw the arrival of big promoters culminating in the grand entry of Australian Hugh D. ('Huge Deal') McIntosh who'd already organised, and personally refereed, the biggest contest ever fought outside America – the world's heavyweight title bout between the Canadian Tommy Burns and the American negro Jack Johnson in 1908 at the Sydney Stadium.

McIntosh set up camp at Olympia and there, in February 1911, promoted the sensational fight between the Australian Bill Lang and the black American Sam Langford. McIntosh's promotions were completely the opposite of those staged at the NSC. A century before Barry Hearn thought it a good idea, McIntosh had pretty girls selling programmes, old boxers on ringside guard wearing dinner jackets, bands playing and banners flying. Smoking, drinking, even talking were permitted! Even lady spectators were allowed at ringside.

British promoters such as C.B. Cochran and the Hulls family also began to present large-scale tournaments at about this time. In halls that could accommodate thousands of spectators, the top-class boxers involved commanded much higher purses than at the National Sporting Club. A new era of boxing had set in.

It wasn't just large arenas that were now offering employment to professional boxers. Between 1893 and 1913 it has been estimated that there were at least 14 venues used annually for boxing contests in London alone such as Wonderland on Whitechapel Road, East End's Premierland, and the Ring, Blackfriars. The number of shows staged at London's venues was high, at 87 in 1893, and staying above this figure in each year, reaching a peak of 145 during the sport's worldwide boom in 1913.

By 1908, the National Sporting Club was in the doldrums. Its proprietors were failing to move with the times. In fact, they were dead set against the times. The writer Bohun Lynch, a club member and chronicler, wrote, 'Boxing is a sport and a sport only... first and

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foremost it is an amusement – good fun.’ Bettinson himself, though not so starry-eyed, certainly remained ambivalent towards the purely commercial side of pro-boxing. He had, he declared, no objection to men making all the money they could out of the game, ‘but for goodness sake, gentlemen, let us have honest sport first and foremost’. In 1909, his outlook on the boxing scene in general – and on commercial promoters in particular – was decidedly jaundiced. He was quoted in *Boxing* as saying, ‘The boxing promoter is, I suppose, necessary in most cases but this does not prevent him often being an evil.’

Bettinson was worried that the rapid changes then occurring in the professional game due to its dramatic commercial ‘take-off’ were threatening to undermine the ‘sport’. His comments on the increasing use of film to record contests illustrate this. While he welcomed the extra revenue film companies brought in, he saw dangers, ‘I would never allow the pictures to come first. When they are placed in that position you can generally rest satisfied that the contests will go some distance. Pictures don’t prove so extra profitable if a fight only goes a short journey... Now if you want real genuine sport you can’t carry on boxing on these lines.’

Unfortunately for Bettinson and the NSC, the men at the heart of the sport, the boxers themselves, thought differently. When the National Sporting Club was at its height, all Fleming and Bettinson had to do was to whistle and the boxers lined up cap in hand for their orders. The Club fixed the prices and sat in judgement over the boxers; there was no appeal from its decisions and no other comparable market for them in the country, the general attitude of the Club towards the men being of a take-it-or-leave-it philosophy. However, with more and more lucrative offers appearing elsewhere, not to mention the emergence of the boxing manager, the Club found the once-subservient fighters demanding more than was being offered.

The prestige that an engagement at the National Sporting Club in the 1990s had once bestowed was no longer a lure. Something else had to be invented to serve as a substitute for the big sums of money that outside promoters were offering; something that would attract boxers of the highest class; and yet something within the means of a club that had to rely on the takings of a moderately sized boxing theatre. The answer would be the institution of the Lord Lonsdale Championship Challenge Belts.