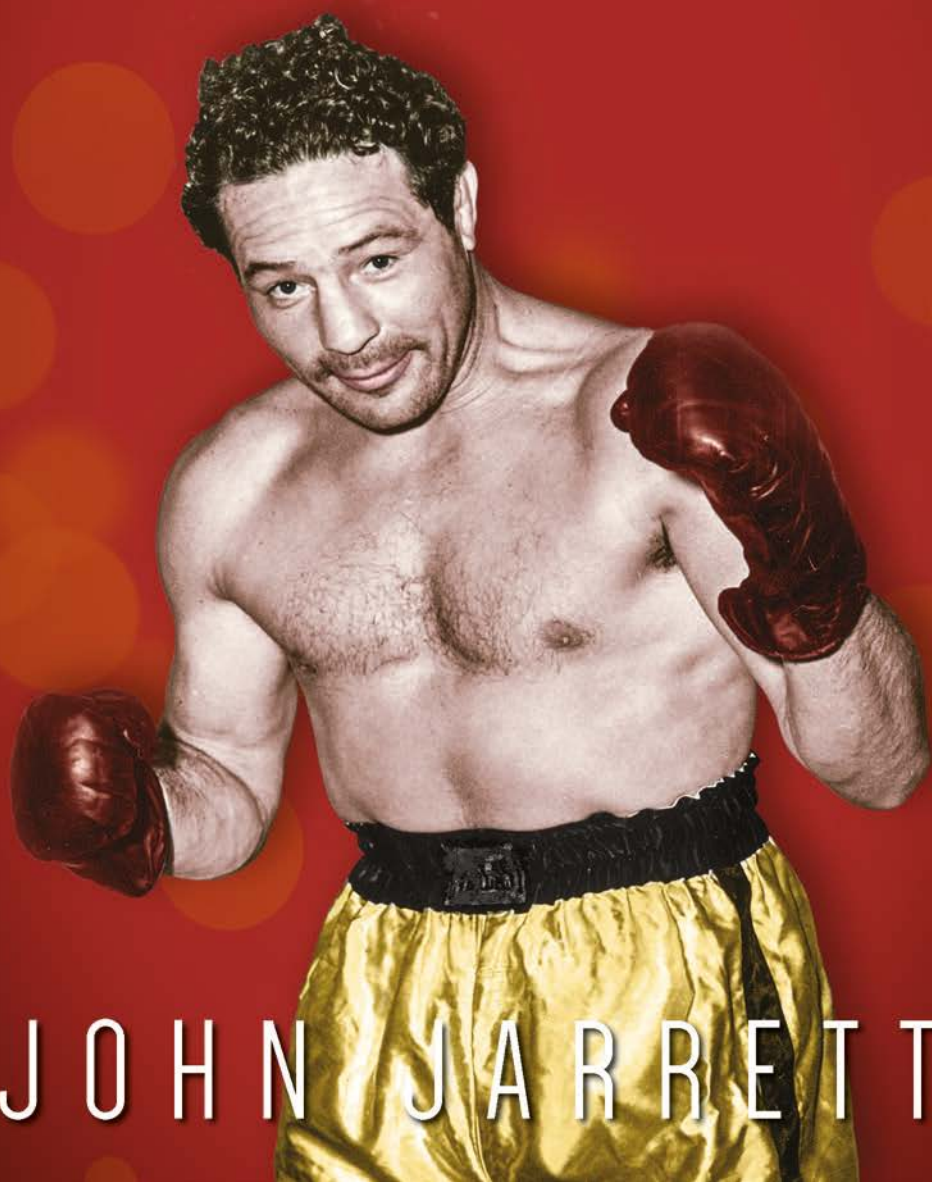


# MAX BAER

CLOWN PRINCE OF BOXING



JOHN JARRETT

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# 1

## A Baer Cub Grows Up

‘**M**Y MOTHER was peculiar for a woman,’ recalled Max Baer. ‘She loved boxing and wanted a heavyweight champion in the family. But it was my brother Buddy who was labelled as the future champ. Me, I was just going to be a cattle rancher like my father.’<sup>1</sup>

Dora Bales met Jacob Baer when he was employed by the Swift Meatpacking Company in South Omaha, Nebraska, where Dora’s father, John Bales, also worked. Jacob was of French and Jewish ancestry and came from a long line of butchers. His father, Aschill Baer, operated butcher shops in the frontier towns of Cheyenne in Wyoming Territory and in Red Jacket, Michigan, before settling his family in Denver, Colorado. Aschill and his wife, Frances, who was 21 years younger, raised a family of seven sons and two daughters. The sons were all named for the tribes of Israel and the children’s early education was in Jewish schools.

Jacob Baer was born in 1875. Dora, of German and Scots-Irish ancestry, was two years younger than Jacob when they celebrated Christmas 1904 by getting married. Frances May came along in the winter of 1905 with brother Max weighing in at a healthy 9½lb on 11 February 1909. Dora had been born in the Iowa town of Adel and she called her first son Maximilian Adelbert. A sister, Bernice Jeanette, joined the family in 1911, to be followed by Jacob Henry in 1915. He would be known as Buddy, and Dora was convinced she had her heavyweight champion.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Ring*, February 1960

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This was a heavyweight family! Sportswriter Alan Gould penned in a 1931 column, 'My San Francisco associate Russ Newland has bobbed up with some very startling statistics – Russ writes, "Max's father, Jacob Baer, weighs 246 pounds and was a fair amateur boxer. His mother weighs 230 pounds. One of her cousins weighs 395 pounds. On his father's side of the family, Max's grandmother weighed 300 pounds and his grandfather weighed a mere 280. Max's 15-year-old brother, Jacob Jnr. weighs 200 pounds and stands 6 feet 2 inches. The family is German-Jewish and all are six-footers."<sup>2</sup>

In the summer of 1909, when baby Max was just six months old, the Swift Company moved the Baer family to Denver, Colorado, where Jacob took up a managerial position. Bernice and Buddy were born there, before Papa Baer packed them all off to Kaylor in New Mexico in 1915, where he took charge of a meat-packing plant. But there were no schools in Kaylor, so Bernice was sent away to a boarding school in Denver. Dora wasn't happy at having the family split up, so they all, including adopted son August 'Augie' Baer, moved bag and baggage back to Denver, where they stayed until 1919.

Next stop was the Colorado town of Durango, where Jacob took a job with the Gradon Mercantile Company. But the harsh winters didn't suit Frances's rheumatic fever, nor did they help Jacob's high blood pressure, so in May of 1922 the Baers were on the move again, jammed into Jacob's new car, which was thoroughly tested over 1,000-odd miles of unpaved roads before they reached the West Coast, where Dora's sister lived in Alameda, California, across the bay from San Francisco.

Jacob's expertise as a butcher and cattle killer preceded him, and he received numerous job offers around the San Francisco Bay area. The family lived in the Northern California towns of Hayward, San Leandro and Galt before moving to Livermore in 1926. A couple of years later, Jacob was able to buy the Twin Oaks Ranch in Murray Township, where he raised over 2,000 hogs, working with Louis Santucci, husband of Frances. At 16, Max took a job as delivery boy for John Lee Wilbur, who ran a grocery store on B Street in Hayward and bought meat from Jacob. Max

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<sup>2</sup> *Evening Independent*, Massillon, Ohio, 31 January 1931

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was also going to school – not because he wanted to, but because his father thought it would be a good idea if he learned to read. For a year he went to high school, where he played tackle on the football team. He loved all sports and enjoyed putting the shot, throwing the discus and tossing the javelin. But one year in high school was enough for the youngster. He was too active to be confined to a schoolroom, so he joined his father's business full-time. It was a remarkable commentary on his career that in his boyhood he was interested in all sports except the one that finally brought the world's spotlight beaming down on his curly hair.<sup>3</sup>

'Max got a big kick out of telling that his ambition was to be a shortstop on a major league ball club,' wrote Eddie Murphy, 'but that he couldn't even make the minor grade.'<sup>4</sup>

Jacob Baer had wanted to be a fighter, but his mother, who abhorred all forms of physical violence in general and prizefighting in particular, shattered his dreams when she threw his boxing gloves down the well. Young Max shared his grandmother's views in that respect, for he positively did not like fighting.

'When he was twelve and moved to California, Max was like the kids portrayed in *The Grapes of Wrath*, good-looking, but in an emaciated way, with sunken cheeks and soulful eyes. He became the target for neighbourhood bullies, and instead of fighting he ran, always to his sister Frances. "I spent most of my time in those days running or trying to talk my way out of fights," Max recalled. "Time after time Frances picked my face out of the mud, then whaled the daylights out of some kid who had whaled the daylights out of me."<sup>5</sup>

Mama Baer didn't like her youngest boy always coming home with his clothes muddied and torn, his nose bloody. Watching him running home one day with another boy in hot pursuit, Dora ordered Mickey, as she always called Max, to go inside, change his shirt and come out and fight the other kid. Max took as long as he dared changing his shirt and finally emerged to happily find the other boy had gone home.

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3 Don Gardiner, *United Feature Syndicate Inc.*, 1934

4 Eddie Murphy, *Oakland Tribune*, 18 October 1932

5 *Boxing Pictorial*, December 1975

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Livermore was cowboy country, surrounded by tens of thousands of acres of rangeland, which supported great cattle herds that provided fresh meat for the local area. As a young man, Baer credited working as a butcher boy carrying heavy carcasses of meat, stunning cattle with one blow and working at a gravel pit for developing his powerful shoulders – although an article in the January 1939 issue of *The Family Circle* magazine reported that Baer also took the Charles Atlas exercise course.

‘He was a cattle killer, as had been his father. He spent from ten to fourteen hours a day swinging a big cleaver and the short meat axe that developed his right arm. “I’d bite clean through muscle, sinew and bone,” he’d say, “and this was the work that gave me my right hand punch. I loved it. The more gory the better ... I had the glorious feeling of sheer physical power.”’<sup>6</sup>

There are several stories as to how Max Baer used that physical power to change the course of his young life. ‘At one of the weekly dances, Max and four of his buddies made free with a demijohn of wine which had been cached in the back of a car by a big locomotive engineer. In a spirit of mischief, the gang drank up the stuff, and just as they had finished it, the rightful owner showed up. The railroad man asked for no explanations but rushed at the five miscreants, swinging right and left. Four of them scattered hurriedly and made a getaway. Max would have joined the speedy retreat ... but he was too late in starting. A full man-sized wallop caught him squarely on the jaw, staggering him. Max brought up against the wall, surprised, but, strange to say, not the least dazed by a blow that would have knocked out anyone not equipped with an extremely tough jowl.

‘He merely laughed. And then, as the would-be avenger rushed forward to hurl another sockdologer, he was cleanly beaten to the punch. Max let go a terrific right all the way from his hip. It went home, crashing savagely on the chin, and down went the recipient, out cold! In that big-thrill moment, a new Max Baer was born. For the first time he realised that he could punch hard enough to knock any man he landed on galley-west, and what is more, he enjoyed the sensation. The fighting instinct was awake, never to slumber again.’<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Nat Loubert, *The Ring*, February 1960

<sup>7</sup> Nat Fleischer, *Max Baer: The Glamour Boy of the Ring*, 1942

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There is another story about him 'walking his girl friend to the movies when a cowboy lounging in front of a drugstore made a remark to the girl. "Punch him, Maxie," she ordered. Maxie didn't fight in the street with anyone, but he was in a tough spot. Fight or lose his girl. He liked the girl, so he swung a right hander at the "big bruiser of a fellow, hard as a grubwagon biscuit." The guy went down in a heap and he didn't get up, at least not until Maxie and his beau had gone on their way. Young Baer felt like a king escorting his queen. There was an idea growing in his mind, if he could flatten a guy like that with one punch, why couldn't he be a prizefighter? So far as is known, the blow that Maxie delivered to the lady-offending cowhand was the only blow he ever struck outside the prize ring.<sup>8</sup>

In a 1953 profile of Baer, Stanley Weston wrote, 'Max was introduced to the fighting business purely through a fluke and a stroke of luck. It seems he was attending a Saturday night shin-dig with a couple of pals when the local smart-alec, a strapping 200-pounder, began to pick on one of his friends. In a rather timid tone of voice, Max asked the toughie to "Layoff." Much to Baer's amazement, he found himself the centre of the bully's attention. Max admits he was all set to run when he was grabbed by the front of his shirt and told to, "Keep his mouth shut."

'He was perfectly willing to take the advice, but when the aggressor kept pulling on his new shirt, the cloth gave way and Max found himself standing bare chested. He had just spent his last buck for that shirt and the sight of the front half hanging from his tormentor's hand, made Max see red. He was furious and for the first time in his life, the strapping youngster stood his ground. He threatened to punch the man's face in. The bully could do nothing but accept the challenge, after all, his reputation was at stake. Off came the stranger's coat and he proceeded to the attack. As he rushed close to Max, the latter brought up a terrific right swing that landed flush on the attacker's chin. Down he went. Completely unconscious.<sup>9</sup>

'Max knew now that he possessed a talent worthy of recognition. He could hit, and how! Yet he had no idea of becoming

8 Don Gardiner, *United Feature Syndicate Inc.*, 1934

9 Stanley Weston, *Boxing & Wrestling*, February 1953



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a boxer until Percy Madsen of Livermore suggested to Max that he could make money even in the amateur game.<sup>10</sup>

Working around the ranch with his father, Max had grown into a solid 200-pounder standing over 6ft by the time he was 20 years old. He started hanging around the local gym, where he caught the attention of an old Oakland middleweight named Ray Pelky. One night, Pelky asked the young lad to box a couple of rounds with him. Midway through the first round, Max caught the old-timer with a right cross and down he went. Pelky was impressed by the power behind Baer's right hand and told him to stick to his training. 'You're nuts, kid,' said Pelky before he left the gym. 'Either I've lost my punch in the last five minutes or you're a freak with a jaw of iron.'

'Max recalled, "While Ray Pelky left the vicinity without doing much for me, the word got around as to how I had managed to sample his best blows and then I was lucky to go to work for a fellow by the name of J. Hamilton Lorimer who was a fight nut and he got me started. I had a trainer by the name of Bob McAllister, though I didn't give the guy a chance to teach me too much. I mainly depended on this." He held up his big right hand.'<sup>11</sup>

Pelky's words stuck with Max. He knew he was a puncher and not a boxer. 'I can take it just as long as the other guy is handing it out,' he thought, 'but while he's handing it out, I just want to get one crack at him.'

With a mind to developing the punch God had given him, the lad from Livermore sent \$25 off to New York for a canvas punch bag. When it arrived, Max lost no time hanging it up and pounding the stuffing out of it. It was time to let his father know what he was thinking.

"I've decided I want to be a fighter," he blurted out one evening, "and I am going to start training and make some of the big money like Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney." Dad tried to talk Max out of it because he used to play about with the old timers in the days of Bob Fitzsimmons and knew how few became really great fighters. But Max had his mind made up, so Dad consented with the understanding that Max would come into

10 Nat Fleischer, *Max Baer: The Glamour Boy of the Ring*, 1942

11 Nat Loubert, *The Ring*, February 1960

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the Imperial Club at Oakland and take some instruction. And Max did that for his first step toward what probably will be the heavyweight championship of the world.<sup>12</sup>

Max Baer would take quite a few steps before reaching out for the big title. He stepped along to East Oakland to get himself a job at the Atlas Diesel plant, which was owned by J. Hamilton Lorimer's father. The son took an interest in the new man on the factory floor. Part of Max's work was to move car wheels from one part of the shop to another. Instead of rolling them, Max picked them up and carried them. When Lorimer saw this, he told the young man to be careful or he'd strain himself. Max laughed and went on carrying the wheels.

'One day, while Max was juggling 200-pound flywheels, Lorimer asked if he didn't need any help. "What for?" asked Max. "All I need is more flywheels." Ham Lorimer concluded that a boy with that strength was wasting his time as a labourer so he sent him to an Oakland gymnasium to become a fighter.<sup>13</sup>

In the *Salt Lake Tribune* of 16 January 1931, in a column under Jack Dempsey's byline, the former heavyweight champion wrote, 'J. Hamilton Lorimer of Oakland, who is the real manager of Max Baer, chants this tale about the Pacific Coast heavy: "After he quit the cowboy stuff and went to work in my father's machine factory in Oakland, I met up with Max, who promptly told me how good he was with his fists and that, if there was anyone I disliked, just to point out the fellow and he would give him a first class dusting. Max got to talking so much about how good he was that about every lad in the shop ached to have a chance in showing him up – but none dared. After a while I decided that the best way to get Maxie's mind off wanting to beat everybody up, was to lay a nice trap for him. I had some of the boys scout up one of the biggest bruisers around Oakland and I gave him a job in the shop. He was told to bait Max, get into an argument, then a fight and then knock all the wadding out of Max. The big boy picked a fight – it isn't easy to pick one with that Baer party at any time – and bang, they were at it. The fight lasted about 20 seconds. At the end of that time the big hero I had hired to beat up Max was down and very much out.'"

12 Eddie Murphy, *Oakland Tribune*, 18 October 1932

13 Bob Shand, *Oakland Tribune*, 25 August 1930

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Lorimer set up two more bigger and tougher ruffians, and had to pick both of them off the shop floor after Max gave them the right hand treatment. 'I decided at last that this Baer certainly was a grand prospect for ring honours, and this is how I came to have a little chat with him all of which ended up with Max deserting the machine shop and devoting his energies thereafter to ring warfare. I don't know how far he'll go – he is still a prospect – but he claims to have clairvoyant powers, for he tells me, "I'll be a champion – I'm a cinch to beat up the gang and grab the title."

Lorimer would later recall, 'Max was always talking fight. I listened and when he began to train in an amateur sort of way, he asked me to hold the watch for him. He was big and powerful, but I thought him too good-looking to go in for fighting. I wanted to cure him of this nonsense, so I matched him with Chief Caribou, an Indian heavyweight, at Stockton, the toughest fellow around.'<sup>14</sup>

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14 Nat Fleischer, *Max Baer: The Glamour Boy of the Ring*, 1942