



Name: Joe Beckett

Career Record:

http://boxrec.com/list_bouts.php?human_id=032006&cat=boxer

Nationality: British

Birthplace: Wickham, England

Hometown: Southhampton

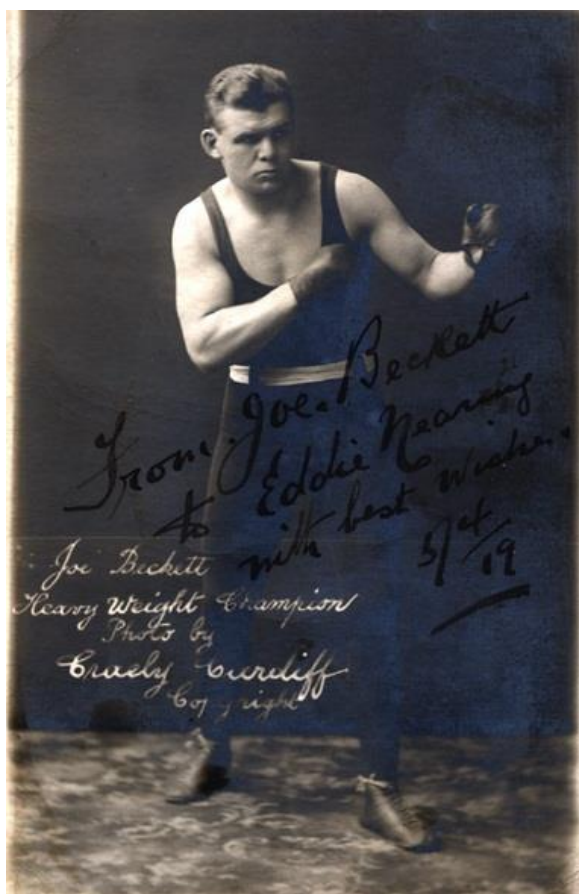
Born: 1892-04-04

Died: 1965-03-12

Age at Death: 72

Height: 5' 9"

Reach: 71.5"



**KNUCKLES AND GLOVES
BY
BOHUN LYNCH .**

**WITH A PREFACE BY
SIR THEODORE COOK**

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**CHAPTER VI
TOMMY BURNS AND JOE BECKETT**

IN order to dispose of Tommy Burns so far as this book is concerned, it is necessary to break the chronological order of contests and jump twelve years. Between his defeat by Johnson and the encounter to be described now, the records tell us that he engaged in five matches, none of the first

importance. Then, in July of 1920, an affair was arranged with Joe Beckett, the Heavy-weight Champion of England. This took place at the Albert Hall, and should be regarded rather as an event than as an athletic contest.

As already suggested, the interest in many widely-advertised glove-fights is spurious: a passion of sensationalism stimulated by the Press. The fight between Beckett and Burns hardly comes under that head, because there is always a genuine interest in watching the return of a veteran, whether that veteran be boxer or prima donna. Burns had been in the hey-day of his fame when Joe Beckett was a young lad. He had been execrated by sportsmen for his trick of "mouth-fighting," for trying to intimidate his antagonists by heaping insult upon injury during the course of a battle; and also for his rank commercialism. He had been one of the first "business boxers" to be seen in England, and we had been rather appalled by the phenomena. Since those days we have grasped the fact that there is a practically negligible correlation between professional sport and sportsmanship, so far at least as boxing goes especially now that men like Jim Driscoll and Pat O'Keefe (both of whom appeared as seconds in Beckett's and Burns's corners respectively) have retired. It was from Burns that we first learned the dodge of demanding a fixed fee for a contest so much down, whatever happened. And Burns, having through his Press agents arranged to be famous and to be a certain attraction to the multitude, could get pretty well what he asked.

To set against this unpleasing but no doubt justifiable business acumen, Burns was gloriously plucky. And in his fight with Beckett he displayed that merit undiminished. People remember these things; they remember the fame (never in Burns's case entirely undeserved) and the good points quite as readily as the notoriety and the bad ones: so that Burns had a great following at the Albert Hall, and, in despite of his age and condition, his chances against the younger and stronger man were considered good. I had seen Burns watching several fights during that year, and his appearance did not suggest the hardened pugilist. Even in the ring after training he was much too fat, and he did not box like a young man. He was thirty-nine and looked a good deal more. Yet he remembered a good deal of his boxing. His footwork was still excellent, though he wasted his height by keeping his feet too far apart. His blows, however, were not really hard, except when he made a special effort to knock Beckett out. For punishment the English champion's hitting was much more level and dangerous. But Beckett looked singularly foolish on several occasions: he hooked and he swung and he led, and over and over again his opponent simply wasn't there. Burns's defence was good, and it was youth and strength that beat him. But he deserved to be beaten if only for continued holding and "lying on" his man. "Lying on" consists of resting your head on your antagonist's chest or shoulder, making some pretence at infighting, but all the while throwing your weight forward so that you get a good rest, and your opponent holds you up and loses energy in so doing. In a long contest between heavyweights it is extremely important to save all the strength you can and to make your man do the more work.

Taken as a whole, this contest was full of bad boxing. The referee was continually having to separate the men, and the fault was nearly always Burns's.

The first two very cautious rounds were Beckett's. In the third Beckett too, held a little: for Burns landed a right high up on the jaw hard enough to make him careful. That round made many people believe that Burns was going to win. In the next round, which was dull and tedious from much holding and clinching, Beckett showed himself most respectful, and covered himself, if not

with glory, at all events with his arms. It was soon seen that Burns was beginning to flag, though now and again he made a spurt with what looked like renewed vigour. In the sixth round he was virtually beaten, but he continued to keep his head out of danger and fought on with commendable courage. After about a minute of the seventh round Beckett knocked his man down with a hard right on the point of the jaw. Burns was badly dazed and only rose at the ninth second. He dashed at Beckett and made a despairing effort to knock him out, but he had no strength and no sense of direction. Beckett easily avoided his blows. Burns was really beaten now, and, after he had risen from another knock-down blow, his seconds very wisely threw the towel into the ring as a token of surrender much to their principal's indignation. The seconds were fully justified, for unnecessary punishment to a man of Burns's age and condition may be more serious than it looks.

The public, who make contests of this kind possible, do not sufficiently realise in what way they directly affect the future of boxing in England. The majority of onlookers at a big show have only the haziest notion of what good boxing is. They are bored by too much clinching, but, determined to get some of their money's worth, they would be still more bored, if, after due warning, the referee disqualified a man, or, the fault being equal, ordered both men out of the ring. A strong referee, with the best interests of the sport at heart, does this. It seldom pays the promoters of big show contests to appoint strong referees.

This fight between Burns and Beckett was clean in comparison with many others, and is described here because it was between two very well-known men and because it typifies the futility of the return to active service of long retired veterans who are not in good condition. Also it was typical of the modern show boxing of which, since the war, there has been so much.

The only thought in the mind of either man was a knock-out. Men who stand up and hit straight with exceptional skill (like Jem Driscoll) also think of a knock-out, but only as a fortunate termination to a well-laid scheme and lengthy preparation. They wear their men down by real boxing and then seize an opportunity. Men like Joe Beckett, on the other hand, not being really good boxers, aim for a knock-out all the time, and hit straight once in a blue moon. It is true that in fighting Burns, Beckett wore his man down until he failed to stop a finishing blow, but it was the finishing blow that he was trying for all the time. Burns, on the other hand, in persistently trying for a knock-out, was perfectly right; because, though a better boxer than Beckett, he hadn't the strength to meet a young man on his own ground. He must have known that he couldn't last very long, and that he must dedicate his superior skill to the landing of a knock-out blow before he was too tired. His superior skill was not enough, and so when he got into danger he helped himself and hindered Beckett (though not for long) by holding. In doing that he was breaking a cardinal rule.

But it is the sentimental or dramatic element in boxing quite a real one which draws the closest attention of the crowd. So long as a fight is comparatively fair and one of the men is well-remembered as having caused much excitement ten years or more ago, what more can be needed ? The veteran wins, or the veteran is beaten. In either case he is under the white glare of light put up on behalf of the cinematograph operators. The crowd, unless its money is upon the issue, don't much mind what happens, who wins, provided they get their money's worth of excitement.

CHAPTER IX JOE BECKETT AND BOMBARDIER WELLS

AT the time of writing this chapter, Joe Beckett is the Heavy-weight Champion of England, and has been ever since the contest described below when, on February 27th, 1919, he first met Bombardier Wells. He is not a very good champion. His skill is not of the first order, and he has neither the height nor weight to supply his deficiencies. Carpentier disposed of him in a round, because Carpentier is incomparably the better boxer. Wells is also a better boxer so far as skill one might almost say "mere" skill goes, but as some one said of him once, "He's too bally refined," which is a better description of the Bombardier than most loose generalisations. He is too bally (and I might dare also to add "blinking") refined, both in his style of boxing and in his appearance. The old-time pug-faced bruiser is dying out, not only because men no longer fight with their bare knuckles, but because their skill is so much greater in defence than it used to be, that a broken nose is a comparatively rare accident; and modern surgery can make a job of the worst battered faces. Your opponent aims chiefly for those places which are most susceptible to temporary but overwhelming effect the jaw and the mark. The most terrific blows on either spot do not produce disfigurement. What is known as a "thick ear" is common enough still many amateurs have it: but Wells has managed to avoid even that. His profile might easily be called Greek at all events by someone who had once seen a photograph of Praxiteles' Hermes and had rather forgotten it. Even Carpentier, whose personal appearance is discussed much as a good-looking actor's, and by the same sort of people, looks, at close quarters, more of a bruiser than does Wells.

Punch chose to be amusing on this subject not long before the war, satirising the old and new methods of the manner in which celebrities of the ring were photographed. In one drawing you see the old bruiser, a doughty ruffian, stripped to the waist, with a flattened nose, beetle-browed, with a long aggressive chin, piggy eyes and short-cropped hair; in the other you have a smiling young man dressed in the last palpitating extremity of fashion, with longish hair brushed back from a somewhat noble brow, whilst beside him a beautiful young woman smiles into a baby's cot. The source of Mr. Punch's inspiration was not far to seek. In the old days a boxer was portrayed at his job just as actors and actresses were, because his job it was that interested people. And like actors and actresses he is still photographed at his job. But to-day just as you will see in the illustrated papers photographs of theatrical people playing quite irrelevant games of golf or making hay which has nothing to do with the point, so you will see photographs of feather-weight champions dandling purely inapposite infants. It is an age when people like to assure themselves (for some inscrutable reason) that show-people are just exactly like people who are not on show.

For good or for ill, boxing has become more and more a matter of exact science in which the quick use of brains has, to some extent, superseded purely physical qualities. And a new type of professional boxer has therefore been evolved. Nevertheless, it is worth observing here that the

most important quality of all for success in the ring remains unchanged from the very dawn of fist-fighting, a quality possessed by Tom Johnson, by Jem Belcher, by Tom Spring, Sayers, Fitzsimmons, Carpentier what we call "character." Now Joe Beckett (to continue for a moment this unseemly discussion of other men's personal appearance) is in the old tradition of English champions. He "looks a bruiser." This is largely due, no doubt, to much rough and tumble fighting in his youth, when he travelled with a booth, which is still (as it has been in the past) a first-rate school for a hardy young bruiser. In this way he won a great many contests, which have never been recorded, and then began a regular career of no particular distinction in 1914. In the following year he retired after fighting Pat O'Keefe for eight rounds. In 1917 he was knocked out also in eight rounds by Frank Goddard, on whom, however, he had his revenge in two rounds two years later. He lost on points to Dick Smith, who was once a policeman and amateur champion, after a contest of twenty rounds. Indeed the people who beat Beckett were better known and better boxers than the people whom he beat. But all this time he was improving as a boxer and getting fitter and stronger.

When he entered the ring at the Holborn Stadium with Bombardier Wells he was, as they say, a picture. He was in perfect, buoyant health; a mass of loose, easy, supple muscle slid and rolled under his bronzed and shining skin, he was obviously eager and ready for a good fight.

Wells led off with his academic straight left, and landed lightly. Joe Beckett dodged the next blow, came close in and sent in a hot right-hander with a bent and vigorous arm to the body. Wells doubled up and went down. On his rising Beckett went for him again, put another right on the body and followed it quickly with a severe punch rather high on the jaw which knocked Wells down again for a count of nine. Beckett ought to have beaten him then, but Wells boxed with great pluck and covered himself with care. During the rest of that round he never took another blow, and, after a rest, came up for the second fully recovered. Beckett rushed at him clumsily, trying to get close, and Wells used his long reach with much skill and promptitude, propping him off, hitting him with his clean and sure straight left, moving quickly on his feet, so that, try as he would, Beckett failed to come to close quarters. Just at the end of the round Wells gave his man a really hard blow on the chin which made Beckett exceedingly glad to hear the bell which announced time. And in the third round, too, Wells kept his opponent at a distance, boxing brilliantly, and adding up points in his own favour.

In the fourth Wells was really happy. He had suppressed Beckett, he thought; and sent a hard right-hander to the jaw which would have staggered less hard a man. But Beckett is very strong, and replied with a couple of body-blows, without, however, doing any damage to speak of. Again it was Wells's round. He had quite forgotten the beginning of the fight and how nearly he had been beaten then. He was acutely conscious of being the better boxer, and consequently underrated Beckett's strength and persistence. At the start of the fifth round he was not prepared for the rush with which his antagonist came for him, so that Beckett got quite close to him before he could think about propping him away. Right and left came Beckett's gloves with a will into Wells's slim body, and then a short jolting blow went upwards to his jaw, and Wells went down. He was up again very quickly, not seriously hurt, and Beckett darted in again. This time Wells was ready and did his utmost to use his long reach. But Beckett's greater strength and his willingness to run a little risk told in his favour. He was fighting hard, but not wildly or foolishly; he ducked under the long arm and began to punish Wells severely about the body. Another blow

on the head sent Wells to the ground for nine seconds. Wells rose feeling dazed and helpless, he tried to cover his jaw, but Beckett darted in and sent in a hard right over his shoulder to the point, and Wells was knocked out. And the Championship of England again changed hands.

A return match was arranged a year later, and on May 20th, 1920, this pair fought again for the Championship at Olympia. Beckett in the meantime had been summarily knocked out by Carpentier, but had himself knocked out Frank Goddard in two rounds, Eddie McGoorty in seventeen, and Dick Smith in five. He had become more confident, more adept. He was not a great boxer, is not now, and is never likely to be. But he had improved. Nor had Wells been idle. He had knocked out Jack Curphey in two rounds, Harry Reeves in four, Paul Journee, the Frenchman, in thirteen, and Eddie McGoorty in sixteen. This last was a terrific fight, but McGoorty was quite out of training. Wells had also beaten Arthur Townley, who retired at the end of the ninth round.

What I might call the cochransation of boxing has now for some time past enabled vast crowds of people to watch, in comfort, altogether too great a number of championship fights. The popular excitement about these contests, or the majority of them, is largely artificial almost as artificial as the reputations of the "champions" themselves, the result, that is to say, of purely commercial advertisement. Of course, the case of Bombardier Wells is singular. Long ago, before the war, he had his hold upon the popular imagination (if such a thing exists), because he was tall, and good-looking, and "temperamental."

As for his methods, a friend of mine who used to judge Army Competitions in India, and who saw the All India Championship of 1909, used to say that he never knew a boxer who so persistently stuck to the plan of campaign that he had previously thought out as did Bombardier Wells. Perhaps that is the secret of his mercurial career : perhaps he always has a plan of campaign and sticks to it successfully or not, according to the plan of his antagonist. Wells's antagonists have a disconcerting way of doing something fresh and unexpected, and the plan is liable to be a hindrance. The most crafty boxer may have a plan which he prefers, but he is able at an instant's notice to substitute an alternative scheme suited especially to the caprice of the man he desires to beat. Carpentier does that. Wells, as already said, likes scientific boxing just as other people like golf, and he is apt to be disconcerted by fierce sloggers just as a golfer would be disconcerted (I imagine) by some one who invented and employed some explosive device for driving little white balls much farther away than can be done with the implements at present in use. Circumstances or the advice of friends pushed Wells in the first instance possibly without any special desire of his own into the professional ring. And people still flock to see him there, or at all events they did so in 1920, chiefly because the ring was, for him, so strikingly inappropriate a setting. Beckett, on the other hand, takes naturally to fighting. He is not nearly such a "good boxer," his style is not so finished as Wells's, his footwork, though variable, is not so adept. But he knows how to smash people, and I should say (intending no libel upon a gallant as well as a successful bruiser) likes doing it.

The majority of people who came to Olympia to watch the second fight between those men probably wanted Wells to win, for the inadequate reason that he looked so much less like a boxer than his adversary. They were disappointed. Wells began better than usual, for he seemed ready to fight: but his own science was at fault in that he accepted Beckett's invitation to bouts of in-

fighting, when he ought to have done his utmost to keep his man at long range. Beckett accepted the situation comfortably, and sent in some hard punches to the body and a left swing to the head. During the last minute of the round Wells did succeed in keeping him away and landed a succession of fine straight lefts; but these were not hard blows, nor did Wells attempt to follow them up. Joe Beckett was imperturbable and dogged, but very cautious too. He kept his left shoulder well up to protect his jaw from Wells's right, and when he did hit he hit hard. There was no sting, no spring, no potency in Wells's hitting. And he was careless. He gave Beckett an excellent opening in the second round, which the new champion used admirably with a hooked left, sending Wells down for seven seconds. And he kept on pushing his way in for the rest of that round, once leaving himself unguarded in his turn and inviting the blow with which Wells, if he had put his weight into it, might well have knocked him out. But the blow was too high and not hard enough. The third round was the last. Beckett gave his man a hard left, and Wells broke ground, somewhat staggered. They came together and for half a minute or more there was a really fine rally, Beckett hit the harder all the time, and presently with a swinging left to the body and a beautifully clean and true right hook to the jaw he knocked Wells out.