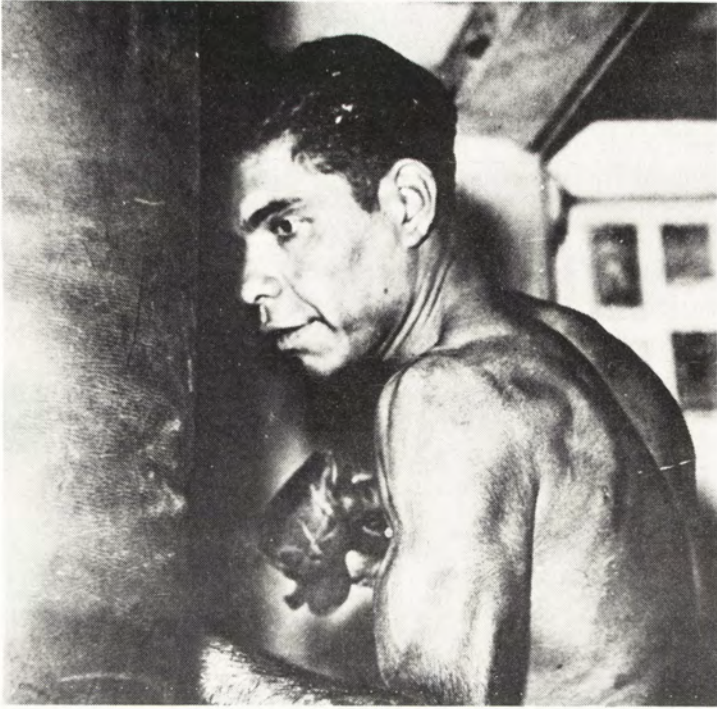


ABORIGINAL HISTORY 4:1



Top: Freddie Clay of Palm Island sweats on the bag, about 1950.
Photograph courtesy of Alick Jackomos.

Bottom: Jimmy Sharman's tent, Sydney Show, about 1950. Sharman (holding hat) is flanked by boxer Dave Sands, and his son Jimmy Sharman Jnr.
Photograph courtesy of Jimmy Sharman Jnr.

PROFESSIONAL ABORIGINAL BOXERS IN EASTERN AUSTRALIA 1930-1979*

Richard Broome

At first glance the money and prestige available to Aborigines through the sport of professional boxing suggest that boxing might have allowed Aborigines to escape the usual subordinate and outcast condition assigned to them by European-dominated Australian society. This paper attempts to examine the truth of this popular conception of boxing. It also seeks to retrieve the Aboriginal experience of the fight game, for of all sports, only football has rivalled the importance of boxing in Aboriginal community and sporting life and Aboriginal folklore. The examination of the Aboriginal experience in the world of boxing should increase our understanding of race relations in Australia.

Professional boxing is a distinctive sport because fighters are in the business of inflicting bodily injury for money in potentially tough physical encounters. The professionals are even distinguished from amateur boxers, because the 'lily-whites' are protected from injury by rigid rules and very strict refereeing. It is this fact of institutionalized violence which is at the core of the tight-knit nature of this sporting subculture, centred as it is around inner city gymnasiums where the faithful gather to talk their own jargon and watch the hopefuls go through the rituals of shadow boxing, skipping, bag punching and sparring. Boxers see themselves as different from other people; and

* I would like to thank the many members of the boxing fraternity who willingly gave of their time to talk boxing with me. The late Merv Williams, long-time boxing editor of the *Sporting Globe*, gave me much advice and access to his newspaper cuttings file. The newspaper files of George Bracken and Max Richards were also made available to me. I am indebted to Alick Jackomos for the use of photographs from his collection. Special thanks must go to Inga Clendinnen of LaTrobe University and my wife Margaret Donnan for their exhaustive comments on this paper. Lastly, I must thank John Hirst, June Phillip and others at LaTrobe University for their help, and the participants in the Sport in History Conference at the University of New South Wales in June 1979 for their suggestions.

My research included tape-recording interviews, each of about an hour's duration, in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Cherbourg and Warrnambool. The tapes and transcriptions are currently held by the author. I am grateful for the cooperation of the following Aboriginal boxers: George Bracken, Pastor Don Brady, Banjo (Henry) Clarke, Muscles (Ray) Clarke, Dudley Collins, Henry Collins, Graham Dicker, Geoff Dynevor, Jack Hassen, Dave Landers, Stan Lowe, Tony Mundine, Neil Patel, Jackie Ryan and Bobby Sinn (Wills) (possibly of Maori descent), Freddy Saunders, Hector Thompson, Buster Weir. The reminiscences of Amy Lowe and Mayberry Ford (née Richards) were also recorded.

Taped interviews were also conducted with non-Aboriginal boxers, trainers and commentators: I must thank Ray Hartge, Alan Moore, Billy Primmer and Wave Geikie; Snowy Hill, Ern McQuillan, Jim Peoples, Jimmy Sharman (II), Leo White; Eddie Gibbons, Ray Mitchell and Merv Williams.

those outside the sport see it as less than respectable. Indeed, many outsiders are ambivalent not only about the violence they associate with the sport, but about its traditional role as a vehicle for working class and ethnic upward mobility. In the past century, world championship boxing has been dominated by successive waves of impoverished ethnic groups, notably the Polish, Irish, Jews, Italians, Negroes and, recently, the Latin Americans.

The subculture of professional boxing is also a highly stratified world. At the bottom are the novices or 'prelim boys' and above them a hierarchy of boxers, ranked by their ring performances. Further up the scale are the trainers, managers, journalists and promoters, all of whom manipulate and control the boxing world and the boxer. The handlers control the destiny of boxers, few of whom are ever allowed — or able — to conduct their own affairs in the slippery world of match-making and promotion. As two students of boxing have noted:

Generally, the specialized trainer or trainer manager represents the authority-figure to the boxer, transmits boxing skills to him, and becomes his anchor point of emotional security. The trainer's relationship with the boxer becomes crucial to his development.¹

Confidence, which is the all important ethos in this world of man-to-man contests, further ensnares the boxer. He becomes dependent on other's perceptions of his abilities and their assurances, especially those of his handlers and journalists. American Negro and ex-boxer Nathan Hare commented on the power relationship between the boxer and his manager: 'In the exploitation of the boxer by his handlers, it is necessary to exercise intensive control and constraint over the fighter's thinking and behaviour, to dominate the fighter and his total mood'.² This dominance is exercised by men generally interested in money first and the boxer's welfare second, within a professional sport notorious for its lack of regulations to protect participants.

Boxing has largely been a sport of ill-fortune for those who played it. Indeed, the word 'play' is generally not associated with professional boxing as it is with other sports, perhaps due to the injury rate. Virtually all fighters emerge with scarring, and one estimate is that 60 per cent of boxers are left mildly punch-drunk and 5 per cent markedly so.³ Most commentators agree that few boxers end up with much money. Life-long trainer Ern McQuillan stated that only 10 per cent of boxers saved their winnings.⁴ The manager's 25 per cent, living expenses, taxes, women, friends, cars, liquor and gambling usually account for the rest. Fight money comes too fast for young boxers

1 Weinberg and Arond 1952:466.

2 Hare 1974:374.

3 Steinhaus quoted in Weinberg and Arond 1952:468.

4 Interviewed in Sydney, 1978.

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from poor backgrounds to hold onto. Again, a boxing career usually interferes with the development of other occupational skills and thus at the end of his career, the boxer is left occupationally unprepared to face the world. Added to this is the depression which results from loss of sporting prestige and income upon retirement at the early age of twenty-five or thirty. Unlike many other sports, the fringe and somewhat 'unrespectable' nature of boxing and boxers means that few commercial firms offer fighters lucrative jobs once their careers end.

Most Aborigines who fought in the rings of eastern Australia where the boxing subculture flourished, were recruited from rural areas and all 28 Aborigines who have held Australian titles came from the three mainland eastern states. Aborigines raised in these areas between the 1930s and the 1950s lived in a variety of situations: the majority on government reserves and mission stations or in depressingly poor and unhygienic fringe camps on riverbanks or the edge of towns. A small minority resided in standard housing in country towns or inner city suburbs of the capital cities.

The conditions in which Aborigines lived were also very varied. Though a number of anthropologists and sociologists who worked among rural and town Aborigines at this period have left detailed accounts it is difficult to generalize from their findings.⁵ However, most communities experienced unemployment or low wages, inadequate education and housing, poor diet and ill health as well as general racial prejudice.⁶ It could be argued that the Aborigines experienced the classic cultural disorientation and confusion of a colonized people as outlined by Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon.⁷

It also could be argued that by the 1940s the lifestyle of most Aborigines in eastern Australia was not traditional and simply reflected the 'culture of poverty' as elaborated by Oscar Lewis.⁸ Certainly most southern Aborigines by this time had both European and Aboriginal forebears, and many had been reared in circumstances similar to other poor working class Australians. Jeremy Beckett has argued that some Aborigines in rural eastern Australia have adopted the values and lifestyle of the nineteenth century white pastoral workers,⁹ immortalized as the 'nomad tribe' in Russel Ward's *The Australian legend* (1959). However, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the lives and culture of most Aborigines in the eastern states at this time was still distinctive, and that this different social milieu laid the foundations for a unique Aboriginal experience in boxing.

5 Kelly 1944; Reay and Sitlington 1948:181; Fink 1957; Calley 1956 etc.

6 Rowley 1971; Moodie 1973.

7 Memmi (1965) especially section 2; Fanon (1967) especially chapter 1.

8 Lewis 1965.

9 Beckett 1965:8.

Studies carried out among Aboriginal communities in eastern Australia from the 1940s to the 1960s, reveal that traditional values had not completely vanished, especially among the majority of Aborigines living on reserves or the fringe of country towns. This was most marked in Queensland yet kinship and community ties and terminology were still important in the inner suburbs of Melbourne.¹⁰ Residence was usually determined by kinship, though this was influenced in some areas by class and status considerations.¹¹ Jeremy Beckett described how kinship bonds shaped the movements of Aborigines in the far west of New South Wales in the 1960s: 'an Aboriginal may go 200 miles to a place where he is known, rather than 10 miles to a place where he is not. Usually, being *known* means having kinsfolk who will receive him and act as his sponsors in the local community'.¹² Kinship ties still determined marriages to a large degree.¹³ Above all, kinship reciprocity still operated among most Aborigines, and was much more than simply the sharing and borrowing Oscar Lewis noted among the poor. Indeed as Jeremy Beckett remarked of the Aboriginal custom of sharing among kin:

Today, ceremonial is defunct and the rules are forgotten, but the general principle still holds. The obligation to share food, clothes and — more doubtfully — money, with kinsfolk who are in need is loosely defined and frequently evaded, but it is nevertheless recognized in principle and is of great social importance.¹⁴

Others have noted its continued power and existence.¹⁵ Traditional religious ideas, magical and medicinal beliefs were still held by many of the older people and displayed daily to the young. Death rites of speeding the spirit correctly on its way, of smoking the body, of wailing and disposing of the possessions of the dead were still in evidence, despite the acceptance of Christian ideas and practices. Belief in spirits of the dead or *guwa*, was still widespread amongst all generations in certain areas.¹⁶

Besides the persistence of traditional ideas and modes, the background of the Aborigines differed from the general working class pattern because of the existence of a racial caste barrier to which Aborigines were subjected. The young Aboriginal boy growing up in or near the country towns where most boxers came from became aware that he was separated off from the rest of the community. If he went

10 Barwick 1962:21-23.

11 Reay and Sitlington 1948:180-185; Reay 1945:302-303.

12 Beckett 1965:9.

13 Kelly 1935:470-471; Reay 1945:301, 307-312; Beckett 1965:17-20.

14 Beckett 1965:18.

15 Fink 1957:107-108; Reay 1945:304; Bell 1965:401-406.

16 Reay 1945:316-323; Kelly 1944:148-153; Fink 1957:109-110.

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to the 'pictures' he had to sit in segregated seating, and he experienced similar barriers at the local dances. Frequently the town's swimming pool was barred to him. In Queensland and New South Wales he was often refused admission to the town's State or convent schools, and compelled to use the settlement school. Only low-status labouring jobs were open to him. As he grew older, the Aboriginal youth perhaps discovered he was not allowed to drink alcohol (unless he lived in Victoria), so he consumed it furtively on the riverbank, partly as a test of manhood, partly as an act of defiance against the law. Thus he learnt both shame and anger. Whatever his preferred lifestyle, the Europeans in the town inevitably classed him as Aboriginal, and usually added that he 'was like all the rest'.¹⁷ There was virtually no social mobility between the Aboriginal group and the general community in rural areas.

Thus, Aborigines were trapped by the pervasive racial caste barrier which was accompanied by a syndrome of derogatory stereotypes about Aborigines. Intermarriage with Europeans was seen by many as a way to avoid such stereotypes; as Fink has commented, 'it is only by ridding themselves of their aboriginal features that they can escape the stigma of the caste barrier.'¹⁸ However, in the 1950s this avenue for upward mobility across the caste barrier was really open only to Aboriginal women. Fink found that 'very few dark men marry white women, as there is tremendous feeling against such matches on the part of the white community'.¹⁹ The only way in which Aboriginal men could hope to cross the caste barrier was, they and others believed, through sport.

Aborigines have had a disproportionately high success rate in the boxing ring. Jerry Jerome from Dalby was the first Aboriginal to hold an Australian title, the middleweight crown in 1912 and 1913. After a lapse of twenty years a stream of Aboriginal titleholders began in 1933 with title wins by Ron Richards and Merv 'Darky' Blandon. From this time onwards, a racial group which comprised only one per cent of Australia's population, produced an astonishing thirty of the 225 champions (or 15 per cent) of the eight major Australian professional boxing divisions.²⁰ Aboriginal boxers have also held six British Commonwealth titles and the World bantamweight title won by Lionel Rose (1968-69). A further twenty-seven have made unsuccessful attempts for Australian titles since 1930, at times losing because of

17 Fink 1957:105. See also Reay and Sitlington 1948:185.

18 Fink 1957:101. See also Calley 1957; Rowley 1978:110-114.

19 Fink 1957:106.

20 Calculated from the files of *The Sporting Globe*, *The Australian Ring Digest*, and *Fighter*, and from Gibbons 1977:122-142.

hard luck or an off night. Three Aborigines (Thompson, Mundine and Rose) have had unsuccessful fights for world titles. Rose's unsuccessful title shot was during a comeback fight in the higher junior lightweight division against titleholder Numata in Japan in May 1971. The number of State titles held by Aborigines must be close to one hundred.

Nor have all the honours been confined to the professional ranks. Most of the 'pros' first made their mark in the 'lily-whites' where they carried off numerous titles. Aboriginal amateurs Adrian Blair, Eddie Barney (Eddie Gilbert's son), Geoff Dynevor, Robert Carney and Joey Donovan have all been Olympic or Commonwealth Games representatives. Indeed, bantamweight Geoff Dynevor — the first Aboriginal medallist — won a silver medal at the 1970 Rome Olympics and a gold at the 1962 Perth Commonwealth Games. Below the successful were an immense mass of second-raters, 'perhapsers' and 'preliminary boys'. Further down still were those who had only a few fights, for a lark or a quid. An unsung shearer, Freddy Saunders, said he fought 'Tiger' Parkes in Cairns in 1938 for £100. He had only three other fights.²¹

Aborigines — like all boxers — fought professionally primarily for the money that could be won. As Graham Dicker responded when asked did he want to fight for the cups or the money — 'give me the dough!'²² Aboriginal boxers generally came from materially deprived and distressed families, often affected by unemployment and ill-health.²³ Jack Hassen, lightweight champion of the 1950s, was orphaned at the age of two. The famous Sands brothers from Burnt Bridge reserve, near Kempsey, lost their father while still young, and many others came from struggling backgrounds. World bantamweight champion, Lionel Rose, who grew up in a camp near Drouin, Victoria, the eldest of the nine children of tent fighter Roy Rose, stated: 'Ever since I was 10 I've wanted to be a champion to make money!'²⁴ Like many other minority groups, Aborigines saw boxing as a way out. 'It was a chance for money and security' said Jack Hassen.²⁵ Some, like Adrian Blair and Michael Karpaney, drifted into boxing because it was a family tradition to seek this escape through sport.

While it was relatively simple for Aborigines to become boxers, it was much harder for them to become skilful practitioners because of the prevailing prejudice in Australian society. Many Aborigines told me that there are hundreds of Lionel Roses, if only they had the opportunity to develop. But settlements and especially fringe camps which lacked basic amenities and decent housing were unlikely to have

21 Interviewed in Brisbane, 1978.

22 Interviewed in Brisbane, 1978.

23 Rowley 1978:110-114.

24 *Sun News Pictorial*, 28 May 1966. See also Rose 1969:11-15.

25 *Sunday Herald*, 20 March 1949.

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Top: Lionel Rose (centre back row), at Jackson's Track, near Drouin, Victoria, about 1956.

Bottom: Manager Kid Young training boxers George Bracken (left) and Barney Walker (right), at Geelong, about 1955.

Photographs courtesy of Alick Jackomos.

gymnasiums and equipment. At Framlingham settlement near Warrnambool there were aspiring boxers, but no skipping ropes, punching bags or gloves. Banjo Clarke remembered that 'the only time we'd see a glove was when we would jump into the ring' in Warrnambool, bare-foot, and fight 'boys that were well trained, well conditioned to gloves and everything'.²⁶ The Framlingham boxers even had to walk the twelve miles to Warrnambool on the day they fought. Billy Primmer, a European boxer from the town confirmed all this.²⁷ He added that when his family fed and lodged Banjo before one big fight, he responded so much to the treatment that he won in the first round. At the other end of Australia, Geoff Dynevor, an Aboriginal gold medal winner, trained for much of the time at Cherbourg with gloves and a sugar-bag of sawdust.²⁸ Poor health, poor housing and nutrition, inadequate tuition and other factors obviously compounded the problem of equipment. Marie Reay commented that the typical diet of an Aboriginal living in a New South Wales riverbank camp in the 1940s was tea and damper three times a day. She added that 'many of the children suffer from bronchitis, pneumonia, general malnutrition, impetigo, sore eyes, and a number have had rickets. They have no resistance to colds and general epidemics'.²⁹

Many Aboriginal boxers launched their careers in the boxing tents and most never got any further. Although I have been told that tent fighting was largely faked, it was a tough life. Participants suffered physical damage. Tent fighters often boxed five times a day and despite the acting many punches were taken, at times from enthusiastic and far heavier strangers. After the day's show, the fighters had to pack up all the gear late at night and hit the road. The boxers, two-thirds of whom were Aborigines, slept in the tents and usually survived on soups, bread, saveloys and such. Billy Primmer described how one tent owner fed his men cold pies, which were thrown to them with the words 'Here catch', as if they were a pack of dogs.³⁰ Conditions were not always appalling nor the treatment callous, and most Aborigines remember the free, matey and prestigious life in the tents. Yet in the long run it was a debilitating life and scarcely the ideal place from which to launch a career in the ring.

Those Aborigines who showed promise in tents or country stadium fights were channelled by contacts into the boxing subcultures of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. The gymnasium, a world of rhythmic sounds of feet and gloves, of fight talk amongst old pugs, and smells

26 Interviewed in Warrnambool, 1978.

27 Interviewed in Warrnambool, 1978.

28 Interview with Geoff Dynevor at Cherbourg, 1979.

29 Reay 1945:305.

30 Interviewed in Warrnambool, 1978.

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of farts and sweat, was the centre of this subculture. Here many young Aborigines from the country felt secure and accepted. Here other Australians had a chance to become acquainted with Aborigines. Stan Lowe of western Victoria reminisced about the gym: 'There is something about it . . . boxers are close. They are interested in showing you what they know and you show them what you know . . . sort of talking things over . . . when you train there, you are just one of the boys, there is no special pet, you are all treated the same'.³¹ Dave Landers of Queensland agreed: 'We all used to get together, have a yarn, all the old timers, jockeys and other sportsmen would come in and yarn with you'.³²

This camaraderie among boxers, black and white, was also commented upon by those who travelled in the tents, although one suggested that the inter-racial mateship was most evident when trouble arose with outsiders. Again, the boxing which flourished in Warrnambool in the mid-1940s seemed to bring the two races together. Instead of being the usual twelve miles apart, the parents of the Framlingham settlement boxers sat beside those of the European Warrnambool and district boxers, and all had a pie together afterwards at Bill's cart outside the Palais. As Billy Primmer remarked: 'Boxing brought the people together — you respected each other'.³³

However, the world of urban professional boxing offered unique difficulties for Aboriginal as opposed to other Australian boxers. The special predicament of the Aboriginal boxer is that all big-time boxing is controlled by Europeans, from the training stage, right through to the promotion and media coverage of the sport. A number of Aboriginal boxers upon retirement have trained other fighters on a casual basis, but only one Aboriginal, Roy Carrol, has run a significant gymnasium. His Chippendale (Sydney) establishment which operated a few years ago is now defunct. The force of Weinberg, Arond and Hare's observations about the dominant-subservient nature of the manager-boxer relationship takes on a potentially more exploitative sense because of the addition of the racial factor. The black boxer-white manager relationship in many ways simply mirrored rather than challenged the control of white over black in Australian society.

This sporting relationship had a number of pertinent features. A considerable number of top-line Aboriginal boxers have lived with their managers, who encouraged this arrangement as it increased the dependence of the boxer, and also the surveillance capacities of the manager over his boxer's activities. If mates came around wanting a night on the grog they were often 'scooted off'. One boxer related how

31 Interviewed in Warrnambool, 1978.

32 Interviewed in Brisbane, 1978.

33 Interviewed in Warrnambool, 1978.

he was allowed to sleep on the gym floor, though he did add that he ate and relaxed with the manager's family and was generally well treated. He eventually built a cubicle, wardrobe and a bed in the corner of the gym from his own earnings.³⁴ Some trainers found their boxers jobs and lodgings through contacts. All this further increased the boxers' indebtedness to their trainers, and dependence on them. The ultimate in control (and a phenomenon which seems confined to Aboriginal boxers) is the fact that many managers handled their boxer's bank account. This was done either by a trust account needing a counter signature, or by actually holding onto the boxer's passbook. If the boxer resided in Queensland, as did Elley Bennett, the Queensland Department of Native Affairs controlled his winnings which were handed straight to the department by the manager.³⁵ The boxer never even sighted his purse!

Most boxers submitted to this control, and few voiced (at least to this researcher) complaints about their manager. One did point out the irony perceived by all boxers, that his manager took twenty-five per cent of the purse, but no punches.³⁶ He added that his particular manager, a car dealer, was never backward in selling cars to his boxers or convincing them to update when they had won a big fight.³⁷ Whether the relations were generally good or whether most boxers submitted because they had few other options and also saw their destiny as being in their manager's hands, is hard to tell. One thing is certain, the control exercised by managers did not help the independence or self-esteem of the boxer, nor did it in the long run aid the retention of his money.

However, some boxers and trainers had very close and amiable relations. Kid Young (Leo White) and George Bracken were like father and son for ten years until a personal 'bust up'. The Molloy's treated their boxers like one of the family and boarded them in their second house next door. Of course the most celebrated boxer-trainer relationship was that between Lionel Rose and the Rennies. Lionel, a fifteen year old with plenty of potential, landed on the Rennies' doorstep asking to be trained. He moved in shortly afterwards with the Rennies and their two sons, despite some financial strain on the family. While Jack taught him pugilism, Shirl Rennie taught Lionel Rose mathematics and how to manage in the world. They became mentors, parents and financial advisers and a measure of the trust in their relationship with Rose is the

34 Interview with George Bracken in Sydney, 1978.

35 Interview with Bennett's manager, Snowy Hill in Brisbane, 1978.

36 There have been claims (which need investigation) that a number of managers took 60 per cent and some took the lot, giving the boxer only his keep and pocket money.

37 Interview with Graham Dicker in Brisbane, 1978.

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fact that no boxing contract ever existed between them. With a mother's concern and not sounding like a manager, Shirl Rennie once remarked that her main concern for Lionel is that he 'ends up a person. He doesn't have to be wealthy . . . just someone who can hold his head up and be respected.'³⁸ Her purchase of a small sandwich shop in North Melbourne on behalf of Lionel, so that he could learn to manage money, was a concern all too rare among boxing handlers. Most managers viewed their Aboriginal protégés as fighters, not people.

While fighters slug it out to make money, the winning of purses presents the problem of how best to handle the sudden inflow of cash. This not unwelcome complication was greater for most Aboriginal boxers, many of whom were still on that perilous journey between two value systems.

Prominent Aboriginal boxers have earned small fortunes in their time, enough to set them up for life.³⁹ Champions Ron Richards, Dave Sands, Jack Hassen, Elley Bennett and George Bracken all earned in the vicinity of £20,000 gross during their approximate six-year stay at the top. More recently, titleholders such as Hector Thompson and Tony Mundine have earned far in excess of this. Lionel Rose grossed more than \$350,000 during his career. However, most of these boxers have not retained much of their money. Mundine appears to be the exception as he owns two units and has bought a house for his parents. Dave Sands, tragically killed in a motor accident at Dungog in August 1952 when on the eve of a world middleweight title challenge, left his wife Bessie with a £2,000 debt on their house and little in the bank. His brother Russell, former Australian featherweight titleholder, died in 1978 without even enough to pay for his funeral.⁴⁰ Obviously, taxation, the manager's 25 per cent, and living, travelling and training expenses all eat into the gross, leaving possibly less than a third of the winnings. Indeed, all professional boxers, no matter what their race, generally end up with little of their winnings left.

Certainly, Aboriginal boxers were like most fighters in their tendency to use money quickly rather than save it. However, this was accentuated for two reasons. First, most Aborigines came from very deprived situations which encouraged the immediate use of what money there was and provided little opportunity to learn to manage it. Second, most Aboriginal fighters emerged from backgrounds where traditional ideas of immediate consumption and kinship obligations were still very much in evidence as argued earlier. Therefore, traditional

³⁸ *Fighter*, April 1968. See also Rose 1969:50-56.

³⁹ Corris 1967 contains some interesting comments on boxers and their winnings. See also Corris 1980, which was not available when this paper was prepared.

⁴⁰ These financial estimates were compiled from fight reports, background articles and obituaries in the *Sporting Globe*, *Australian Ring Digest* and *Fighter*.

pressures combined with the usual ones to distinctively whittle away the resolve of many Aboriginal boxers to save. Most observers simply decided that this was due to their inability to handle money. The brothers of Ron Richards' wife helped Richards through his winnings.⁴¹ Dave Sands' five brothers were never broke while he had money and Merv Williams observed that 'there were always three or four coloured boys from the bush living at his [Sands'] place'.⁴² However when Dave Sands died Bill Larrigo, one of his Aboriginal protégés, gave part of his earnings to Sands' widow and children.⁴³ Such was the Aboriginal mode of reciprocity! Again, Richards, the Sands, Bracken and Mundine all bought a home for their parents as well as themselves. The money left over after fulfilling family and kin obligations was generally consumed and not saved – and usually consumed in a communal way. As Buster Weir, a double bill fighter from Queensland recalled:

I just wanted to fight for the money. I'd get the money and race out and get a carton of grog. I was the captain to everybody, my mates would be sitting in the bleachers there and at half past nine I'd get into the bloke and 'finish him quick, grab the money and pay off and I'd run straight up to the pub and get a carton and away to a party!⁴⁴

If you were only getting a pound a round, there was little to save, but enough for the moment.

Training and motivation as well as individual talent are essential in the arduous climb to the top in boxing. It is hard to tell whether Aborigines trained as hard as other boxers, especially given the preponderance of obviously racist and off-handed statements about their inborn laziness and inconsistency. What is certainly true is that Aborigines are not inherently lazy. The claim that they were lazy is a racist, unthinking generalization that does not stand up to scrutiny, yet it was made over and over again. The vigorous and disciplined nature of traditional initiation, the painstaking style of Aboriginal technology, and their intricate orally remembered religious ritual, are but some of the aspects of traditional Aboriginal culture which reveal great vigour and determination, not inherent laziness. Certain individuals must of course have been lazy, for Aborigines are only human. However, if the attitudes of some other Aboriginal boxers to the fight game were lax, this no doubt reflected the poor motivation and goal confusion which was produced by being torn between Aboriginal and European values, and the low self-esteem which resulted from being oppressed by a caste

41 Interview with Mayberry Ford, Ron Richards' sister, in Brisbane, 1978.

42 *Sporting Globe*, 23 August 1952. See also Mitchell 1965a:97.

43 *Sporting Globe*, 31 October 1952.

44 Interviewed in Brisbane, 1978.

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barrier. For instance, Charles Perkins, who clawed his way up through soccer, recalled his adolescent years in Adelaide:

I would think, "There must be something wrong with me that enables that bloke to call me a 'nigger', with so much feeling of hatred in his voice", I felt I was not good enough, an outsider, that I was not part of that school, I was not part of those people and I belonged to nothing.⁴⁵

Certainly, some Aborigines were less than the perfect boxer if the stories can be believed. Jerry Jerome at times secretly rode a tram rather than run to the destination of his roadwork; Elley Bennett was notoriously unfit for many of his fights; Bill Larrigo, who began a promising career with twenty-one straight knock-out wins, turned to 'the grog'; while Barney Walker, like a number of others, gave up a promising career allegedly to go 'walkabout'. However, Bennett was often unfit because he had no real opposition in Australia and Stadiums Ltd. brought too few imports to fight him. He only had the low number of forty-seven fights in nine years! Bill Larrigo may have had grave emotional problems or personal difficulties. Until we know it cannot be assumed that he was just another 'hopeless Aborigine'. Barney Walker was simply going home to see his family, like many other city-based Aboriginal fighters who became homesick and so went on so-called 'walkabouts'. Therefore, there were often good reasons for behaviour termed 'lazy' or 'inconsistent'. Kinship obligations and Aboriginal values often took precedence over success in Western terms.

On the other hand, some Aboriginal boxers showed even more determination than most other Australian boxers. Title contenders Michael Karpaney and Graham Dicker were just two who were noted for their dedication. The latter, who made five unsuccessful bids for Australian titles in a career spanning a decade, usually had two jobs as well as his fight career. Similarly, George Bracken showed great determination to regain his lightweight title and fight on for years while suffering from undiagnosed hepatitis. While generalizations are difficult it is clear that many Aboriginal boxers, like the people of the reserve and fringe communities from which they came, were ambivalent about the European values of the work ethic and individual success. As J.H. Bell observed of a New South Wales community: 'Their value system stresses co-operation and mutual aid among members, rather than competition and individual achievement'.⁴⁶ Certainly they appeared more alienated from these values than other boxers with working class backgrounds.

⁴⁵ Perkins 1975:31.

⁴⁶ Bell 1965:406; see also Fink 1957:106-107 and Reay and Sitlington 1948:199-200.

Unlike other Australians in the sport, many Aboriginal boxers have been faced with the awesome problem of identity.⁴⁷ Only by denying their Aboriginal past could some escape the caste barrier and the continued depreciation of Aboriginal culture by white Australians.⁴⁸ These pressures were increased by official 'assimilation' policies. Aboriginal boxer Jackie Ryan, a Queensland champion of the 1950s, used to pass himself off in the Sharman tent shows as Greek. When questioned last year about his heritage he stated that his parents were of Maori and French extraction though he did not discount vague Aboriginal connections. Yet his son Hiram Ryan, a Queensland University student, is proud of his Aboriginal heritage and refused to pass as Greek or whatever.⁴⁹ An Australian champion claimed at the height of his career in the 1950s and again last year that he was of Maori descent, yet his trainer and members of the Brisbane Aboriginal community alleged he was of Aboriginal ancestry. The problem of identity gnawed at the Aboriginal boxer in a white-controlled sport. Jack Hassen, who married a girl from Cherbourg mission and who currently sees himself as part of the Aboriginal community at La Perouse, was once reported, way back in 1949 when he was trying to move up in the world, as disliking the label Aboriginal.⁵⁰ Again, Merv Blandon, Australian champion in the 1930s, was only one-eighth Aboriginal and certainly considered himself European,⁵¹ but he was branded with the name 'Darky' by the fight fraternity. There was little guarantee that those who sought to escape the caste barrier would succeed.

Boxing helped encourage adoption of European values for those who aspired to them. For a start, the sport emphasized the work ethic, for to be a champion one had to train continuously and vigorously to keep fit and make weight. The dedicated boxer's life was disciplined by the clock. Up at five in the morning for road work; then off to either the gym or to work; to the gym for two hours at night, then early to bed. Boxing itself was dominated by bells and time limits — so many rounds at precisely three minutes. Life became regulated whereas both the traditional Aboriginal mode and transitional reserve life stressed less rigid rhythms. Again, Aboriginal values were centred on communal living and cooperative efforts, whereas the culture of boxing emphasized rampant individualism. You trained alone, fought alone. Only one man could be champion.

47 For instance see Beckett 1958 or the interviews in Gilbert 1977.

48 Fink 1957:109.

49 Jackie Ryan interviewed in Brisbane 1978 and Hiram Ryan in *The Sunday Mail*, 22 July 1979.

50 *Sun*, 20 March 1949.

51 Interview with his trainer Jim Peoples in Sydney, 1978.

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Also, Aboriginal boxers were suddenly confronted with the glitter and prestige of material possessions such as fast cars, snappy clothes and houses. Some of the successful took up these things. A few married white Australians for what mixture of love and social aspiration not even they might be able to fathom. Some of the successful boxers even became critical and distanced from those of their own people who had not adopted middle class morals and manners. Hector Thompson considered that his being sent from a one parent home to Kinchela Boys' Home, Kempsey, was the best thing that ever happened to him. He was educated to intermediate standard and 'learned to work, to be clean and eat the right way and the right food'.⁵² Even so, those who were at times critical of other Aborigines, still referred to them as 'my people' and to themselves as Aboriginal. They had refused to be absorbed because their experience of boxing was qualitatively different to other boxers and in ways was distinctly Aboriginal.

The Aboriginal boxer was partly forced into a distinctive experience because the boxing subculture in which he moved was permeated by the racist images of the wider society. While Tom Maguire's demand that the Sands brothers call him *Mister* Maguire might reflect the respect most managers required from their boxers, it also marked the views of a man who believed Aborigines were different because inferior. Maguire claimed they were difficult to handle and once remarked: 'It was useless trying to get them to do their best unless they were keen on the job. They just dig their toes in and leave you with the tickets'.⁵³ Other boxing handlers and commentators shared the racist belief that Aboriginal boxers as a group had certain inherent racial traits. Some even believed they were less intelligent than white boxers. Ern McQuillan spoke of his protégé, lightweight champion Jack Hassen, as he would of a clever animal: 'He is obedient, easy to handle, and quick to learn new points. He is inclined to take it easy sometimes, but he will always work hard when I drive him for extra effort'.⁵⁴

The Aboriginal 1 per cent of the Australian population has produced 15 per cent of the Australian boxing champions. If Aborigines were so 'inferior' why did they produce such a disproportionate percentage of titleholders? Much scholarship since the 1930s has rejected the racist notion that racial groups have inherent physical and intellectual attributes due to their racial characteristics. Recent scholars have further exploded the popular myth of the inherent physical superiority of Black American sportsmen, and instead have argued that they are so successful because they are more motivated to get on through sporting

52 Interviewed in Brisbane, 1978.

53 *Sporting Globe*, 16 August 1950.

54 *Sunday Herald*, 20 March 1949.

achievement.⁵⁵ Yet, white racist popular opinion which extends back in English writing to the sixteenth century has often argued that the black 'races' have superior physical capabilities and the white 'races' have superior mental attributes.⁵⁶

This wrongheaded mythology is evident too in popular Australian opinion about Aboriginal boxers. Their speed, reflexes and punching abilities were always admired. Typically, one journalist remarked that 'they seemed temperamentally fitted for boxing, possessing the natural abilities required, courage, a quick eye, strength, perseverance, speed, endurance, toughness, fighting brains, and modesty that makes them adept pupils'.⁵⁷ Others were not so lavish. Though praising many of their fighting talents, Ray Mitchell believed they lacked pride and heart,⁵⁸ while Beverley Will, the editor of *Fighter*, repeating old stereotypes, stated: 'Their remarkable quickness of eye appears to have miscast these people as boxers without taking into account their natural submission to aggression'.⁵⁹ The kindly, but patronising comment that they were 'a credit to their race' was often heard. Whenever an Aboriginal boxer performed, either well or poorly, his actions were generally explained by his Aboriginality — by his quick Aboriginal reflexes or lazy Aboriginal ways — not his traits as an individual.

Aboriginal boxers, caught in this racist image, often internalized it. Obviously the myth that Aborigines have inherent fighting abilities superior to Europeans was flattering to them. Thus, with a puff of pride Buster Weir remarked when interviewed: 'Aboriginals have been fighting since 1788 and before. It's natural for them to fight. You don't have to teach an Aboriginal to fight, you just put gloves on him and get him in that ring. He knows his business, he knows what he's there for'.⁶⁰ Obviously, they clung to this belief as a comfort in a depressing world.

There was a sense in which positive images aroused by Aboriginal champions softened the viciousness of racist stereotypes. Ron Richards was an Australian idol in the 1930s and described as 'one of the finest types of young Australian sportsmen'.⁶¹ A number of Aboriginal champions received civic recognition, the most famous being Lionel Rose's reception at the Melbourne Town Hall where 6,000 people cheered and yelled, 'Good on ya, Lionel!' Rose later received an M.B.E. and was made Australian of the Year (1968). When he lost his

55 Edwards 1974.

56 Jordan 1974: chapter 1; Smith 1960:70-72, 127; Broome 1979:352-357.

57 Comment found among George Bracken's newspaper cuttings.

58 *Adam*, July 1962.

59 *Fighter*, July 1970.

60 Interviewed in Brisbane, 1978. See also Perkins 1975:39.

61 *Australian Boxing Ring*, 5 October 1932.

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title eighteen months later the press saluted him with 'Lionel Rose — a man!'. The Melbourne *Herald* even placed him alongside the noble diggers by saying he revealed 'Aussie digger defiance against rare defeat'.⁶² A generation earlier Dave Sands, the triple Australian champion who was killed when on the verge of a world title, enjoyed similar adulation. Kids crowded the gym to see him spar and city buses stopped to watch him jog past. 'A great Australian and gentleman' are the words which grace his memorial in Glebe. Like Rose, he was one of us. Yet this has not lasted, at least in Rose's case. A growing ambivalence developed towards him during his decline and come-back in the lightweight division. In more recent years the press have taken to highlighting his alleged indiscretions.

The adulation came not only from winning titles, but because Aborigines were generally exciting boxers. This was not due to inherent genetic factors, but to a lack of early expert tuition and sometimes fitness. Thus, they relied more than other boxers on walk-up aggression and one punch for victory, and therefore were great favourites with the fans who liked plenty of action. Fans remember the eight hectic Richards-Henneberry wars and the battles featuring Aboriginal 'K.O. merchants' such as the Sands brothers, Hassen, Bennett, Mundine and many 'prelim boys'. Others like Richards, Bracken and Rose were tough counter-punchers. As one commentator stated: 'There is something exciting about the Aboriginal fighters. They stir crowds with their flashy style, hard punching, natural skill and unpredictable character'.⁶³ Fight fans could find themselves cheering madly for Aborigines in contests with European boxers, thus upsetting their usual opinions and creating some ambivalence towards Aborigines. However, white attitudes, whether favourable or not, rarely let the boxers escape the fact that they were Aboriginal.

Racial myths and strains were always there below the surface of the fight game. One important rule of thumb in professional boxing was that whenever possible a white and a black Australian should be matched. The prevailing belief among European handlers, promoters and commentators was that if two Aborigines were matched, they would not try hard. This was bad for business; 'fatal' in fact, said Merv Williams, *Sporting Globe* editor since 1940. When asked why, he added: 'Oh — they'd play . . . they wouldn't hurt each other . . . nine times out of ten they'd be talking to each other'.⁶⁴ Ern McQuillan, match-maker at the Sydney Stadium for years agreed, but added that 'plenty of fire'

⁶² *Sporting Globe*, 30 August 1969 and *Herald*, 23 August 1969, respectively.

⁶³ Michael Sutherland in *Fighter*, July 1970. See fights of Richards, Bennett, Hassen and Russell Sands described in Mitchell 1965b.

⁶⁴ Interviewed in Melbourne, 1977.

often emerged in an inter-racial match.⁶⁵ A country broadcaster, Eddie Gibbons summed it up: 'you never get a good game out of two niggers'.⁶⁶

However, there is a great deal of contrary evidence concerning many furious fights between Aborigines. George Bracken fought hectic battles to K.O. conclusions against Russell Sands and Gary Cowburn. More recently Hector Thompson and Laurie Austin have had three hard title fights. Dave Landers, always a tough customer, had battles royal in the early fifties with Alfie Clay and Gordon Meredith. Of the latter he recalled: 'It was a ding-dong fight. He knocked me down. I knocked him down . . . everybody loved it. They reckoned it was the best fight they had seen in the Brisbane Stadium for years'.⁶⁷ In the preliminaries there were quite a number of all-Aboriginal 'blood baths'. Sometimes if good friends fought they might hold back, but even this was not universal.

A more likely explanation of why black versus white was preferred, is that black-white encounters expressed the fascination of a society permeated by racist myths. As Banjo Clarke, a tent boxer from Framlingham settlement said: 'Aborigines were a big drawcard in the boxing tents. A lot of people would come to see the Aborigines fight . . . they thought that Aborigines were better fighters and they were wild looking blokes up there on the boardwalk'.⁶⁸ The (largely subconscious) fascination was created by the matching of 'dominant' against 'subordinate'; 'civilized' against 'wild'; the combat between 'different' races, and the antagonisms, confusions and excitement this raised in the fight fans. At fights in Victoria in the early 1960s observers heard cries of 'kill the black bastard'.⁶⁹ The promoters were more fascinated by the money that rolled in from the packed crowds. In a way, these inter-racial contests could be a safety valve, because here the onlookers and participants were playing with the fire of archetypal opposites in earnest conflict, and yet it was only a game. It was civilized, controlled racial violence in which both sides could act out their aggressions, and yet, being confined to the ring, it posed no real threat to the existing race relations. An enraged Banjo Clarke bloodied and knocked out an opponent in one round who had earlier called him a 'nigger'.⁷⁰ Henry Collins delighted in knocking out a policeman in a tent match at Casino — the very man who a week before had roughed up Collins when he dared to try and drink openly in a

65 Interviewed in Sydney, 1978.

66 Interviewed in Warrnambool, 1978.

67 Interviewed in Brisbane, 1978.

68 Interviewed in Warrnambool, 1978.

69 Diane Barwick, personal communication, 1979.

70 Interviewed in Warrnambool, 1978.

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hotel. Boxing as ritualized conflict provided a 'safe' outlet for these aggressions without overturning established relations. As Collins said with powerful understanding: 'I felt good when I knocked white blokes out. I felt good. I knew I was boss in the boxing ring. I showed my superiority', but he added 'they showed it outside'.⁷¹

Indeed, white Australians at times showed their superior power outside the ring all too dramatically. The Aboriginal who boxed was usually more assertive than his kin and certainly enjoyed a reputation which left him more open to punitive action by the police and other Europeans for being smart or 'uppity'. One Aboriginal ex-boxer, Banjo Clarke, related how a fellow Aboriginal boxer, Bobby King, was shot in the knee by police in the Shepparton area in the 1940s because, on a previous confrontation, he had not only refused to obey a command 'to move along you black bastard', but was unwise enough to flatten the police officer with one punch. After the shooting, Clarke said that King 'just went down hill like that, he just crashed'.⁷² Another boxer, Henry Collins, was gaoled and bashed in Coff's Harbour in the mid-1950s for refusing to move from the 'whites only' area in the town's picture theatre.⁷³ Other stories abound about Aboriginal boxers being 'tried out' by several police to see how good they were. Two or three allegedly hospitalized for six months Robert Cameron, a promising Grafton fighter. Jimmy Edwards, ex-Australian amateur champion is currently serving five years in Boggo Road gaol for brawling with police at the Ship Inn pub, South Brisbane. Popular champion George Bracken was pummelled for an hour at Innisfail police station after a fake arrest for car stealing in December 1957. As the detectives waded into Bracken with fists and rabbit-killers, one taunted him with: 'I've seen you fight in Brisbane and you couldn't fight for nuts. I'll leave you here, you fucking mug, with Jim who was an amateur champion'.⁷⁴ The successful Aboriginal had to be brought low and 'proved' inferior! Due to his 'questioning', Bracken was forced to miss two scheduled fights and lost £2,000 in earnings.

Although the world of boxing controlled Aborigines by racial stereotyping in much the same way as did the wider society, some positive experiences emerged in boxing for the development of individual Aborigines. As boxing is a culture of confidence, the training, fighting and winning experienced by Aboriginal boxers all developed their self-confidence. Travel (sometimes overseas), new environments and new

71 Interviewed at Cherbourg, 1979.

72 Interviewed in Warnambool, 1978.

73 Interviewed at Cherbourg, 1979.

74 Affidavit, personal papers and press cutting from *Truth*, 8 February 1958 in possession of George Bracken.

acquaintances also combined to increase their assurance. Tony Mundine remarked: 'I was a bush boy with a tendency to be shy. Being in Sydney and boxing opened me; I came out of my shell. I met people and saw how other people lived'.⁷⁵ With self-confidence and success came recognition and respect. Many Aboriginal boxers experienced the daily hellos from fans and liked it. Dave Landers commented that once people knew 'that you'd been a fighter, they would treat you pretty good and give you respect'.⁷⁶

Occasionally this self-confidence spilt over into other areas besides boxing. Bindi Jack, a shy Queenslander, was in no time at all after his arrival in Melbourne speaking at Christ Church, Fitzroy, under the guidance of Pastor (later Sir) Doug Nicholls, and accepting the Presidency of the Fitzroy Aboriginal Youth Club. George Bracken, who like most of his people heard the 'we don't serve niggers here' routine, occasionally spoke to school and church groups on Aboriginal matters. He gave statements to the press on race prejudice, the lack of Aboriginal education and welfare and criticised the dependency which settlement life created. Bracken could be constructive as well: he proposed an Aboriginal sports foundation to the then minister for Aboriginal Affairs, W.C. Wentworth, who took over the idea and initiated it.⁷⁷ Bracken only had the confidence and the opportunity to make these statements because this one-time Queensland drover became a successful professional boxer. Other boxers, like Bobby Liddle, Jack Hassen, Clarrie Grogan, Buster Weir, Henry Collins and Dick Blair, to name a few, have played active roles in Aboriginal community affairs. In this way boxing instilled confidence which in turn caused some Aborigines to challenge the conditions under which they lived.⁷⁸

'Above all, boxing provided needed heroes for a people attempting the difficult task of resisting cultural domination. If an Aboriginal triumphed in the ring, all his people felt like winners. Feasting allegedly occurred at Elley Bennett's birthplace, Boggimbah settlement, Frazer Island, every time Elley won a fight. It was said (in the contemporary vernacular) that 'all the lubras have his picture taken in various stances. The piccaninnies know his ring record off by heart'.⁷⁹ Tent promoter Jimmy Sharman continually met Aborigines who claimed to be related to one of the greats. The six Sands brothers not only produced large boxing families but were the inspiration for numerous Aboriginal boxers who took on some combination of their name. This was the general pattern — the successful produced hopeful successors. Bracken

75 Interviewed in Sydney, 1978.

76 Interviewed in Brisbane, 1978.

77 George Bracken interview 1978 and his personal press cuttings.

78 Corris 1975:9-10 also discusses this point.

79 *Sporting Globe*, 2 February 1949.

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wished to emulate Hassen; Rose sat in Bracken's corner from the age of twelve; since then dozens have aspired to be new Roses. Boxing has become part of current Aboriginal folklore. Many Aborigines feel pride and become vocal about boxing. In Queensland thirteen settlements subscribed to *Fighter* magazine in 1970; the Aurukun community alone ordered six copies.⁸⁰

Overall, boxing did not prove to be a way out for Aborigines. Few boxers achieved lasting financial gains or recognition from the sport. Since they boxed as a way out of their predicament it could be argued that boxing was in this sense a nascent protest against the social system, against the poverty and discrimination they all experienced as children and adolescents. However, their protest against external dominance was stillborn because boxing could not hope to change anything. It was a sport controlled by Europeans and their values and was thus an integral part of the system that had to be changed. The conditions of the Aboriginal communities remained unaltered despite the few individual boxing successes.

It is true that many Aboriginal boxers received applause from fans, but it was always ambivalent praise, given on Europeans' terms. They were always a 'credit to their race', still Aborigines, rarely individuals. Therefore, boxing reinforced the prevailing racial stereotypes rather than challenged them. As Paul Coe, Aboriginal footballer turned law-student has pointed out: to the European majority, Aboriginal sportsmen only have a body, not a mind.⁸¹ To allow (until recently) potential upward mobility to Aborigines only through sport, was to deny that Aborigines had any other skills and potentials than the physical. Boxing was an accomplice to this lie.

Upon retirement, most Aborigines have ended up back at square one or worse. Many Aboriginal boxers have returned to the settlements, though others have remained in the cities, not always with their own people. Quite a number lead stable, healthy (if not wealthy) lives. Others have fallen into distressed and alcoholic nightmares. The great Ron Richards was 'saved from the grog', vagrancy and hoodlums' fists by being packed off to Woorabinda and later Palm Island within two years of his retirement.⁸² Ritchie Sands, seemingly a victim of the punches he received in the tents for seventeen years, found himself gaoled in the mid-1960s for assault.⁸³ Boxing has done more to reinforce the basic oppression of Aborigines than to overcome it.

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80 *Fighter*, September 1970.

81 Coe 1975:109.

82 *Sporting Globe*, 7 May 1948, 26 October 1949, 12 April 1950.

83 *Daily Mirror*, 29 June 1966.

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