



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University

The Distance

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Source: *Transition*, No. 79 (1999), pp. 4-25

Published by: Indiana University Press on behalf of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2903184>

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THE DISTANCE

Carlo Rotella

When the ship bearing my grandmother, her husband, and their two sons arrived in America on Christmas Day, 1951, Sandy Saddler was featherweight champion of the world. The celebrated lightweight Beau Jack was already past his prime.

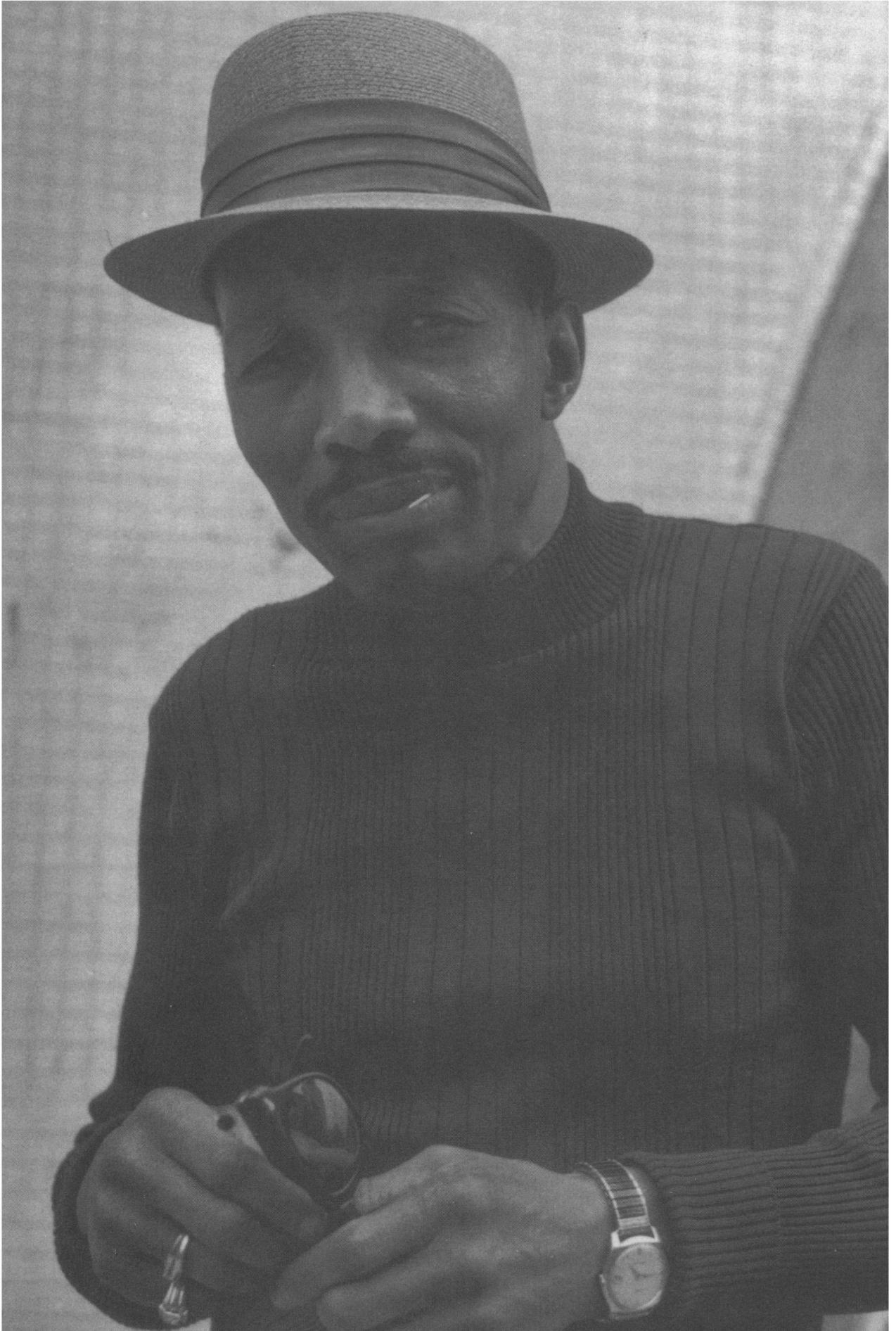
Saddler was no aesthete. He took too many hard blows and returned them in bushels. He and Willie Pep had already exchanged the title twice by the time Saddler beat Pep in September 1951 to regain it. Beau Jack (a.k.a. Sidney Walker, a.k.a. the Georgia Shoeshine Boy) was thirty years old in 1951: no longer one of the best in his weight class, he was still a man to be reckoned with. His free-swinging style had thrilled Madison Square Garden crowds, and he had been lightweight champion from 1943 to 1944, but he had been in the army and lost some fights since then. He was always formidable in the ring—unusually deep-chested and broad through the body for a little man, fast and fearless in pursuit of his reedier opponents—but

he could be beaten by a shrewd technician who did not make mistakes. I have seen films of Saddler and Beau Jack from the 1940s and 1950s, when each man was in his prime. When I watch these fights—especially the ones they lost—I see how strong, how capable, both men were. I see all the resilience that was in them, the force of body and character that sent them back to the gym to train for the next fight. A half-century later, when I saw Saddler and Beau Jack in the flesh, these virtues were still at work in them, despite—or perhaps because of—the beatings, hard lessons, and losses the years had visited on them.

It was charity night at the fights in October 1997. There was a raised ring in the center of a sea of well-appointed tables in the Washington Hilton ballroom. Some two thousand monied lawyers, real estate types, and other tuxedoed men of substance had spent up to \$5,000 a head for tickets in support of charities dedicated to poor children, and they were enjoying themselves accordingly. The

Sandy Saddler

© Arlene Schulman



**Sandy Saddler vs.
Willie Pep,
February 11, 1949**

*From An Illustrated
History of Boxing by
Nat Fleishcer and Sam
Andre, updated by Nigel
Collins (Secaucus, NJ:
Citadel Press)*



donors blew clouds of expensive cigar smoke across fresh-cut flowers and called for more drinks. They liked themselves best on this night of all nights. The sponsors had recruited a battalion of hostesses and cigarette girls from an escort service, ornamental figures—bold and teasing, hair piled fetchingly, necklines plunging—who went purposefully among the men. Everybody was playing at Sister Carrie and Babbitt with a kind of instinctive class expertise: even trim young men were acting like seasoned sugar daddies with rotarian stomachs to be poked, gently, by giggling beauties on the make. Feeling good about the money they had given, stuffed with banquet food, liquored up, hot and then bleary as the night wore on, the men in their tuxes eyed the hardworking bodies before them—those of the flirtatious escorts

and those of the fighters in action—with a heavy satisfaction undergirded by envy and disdain. If strippers—or even fetishists with whips—had come out at the end of the night to perform in the ring, the crowd would have received them with the same befogged, passive lustfulness. It was for a good cause, after all.

The organizers of the event had prepared a card of mismatches, insuring a rash of knockdowns—something to command the attention of people who never go to the fights. Most of the undercard events were simple affairs: a fighter with a winning record beat the tar out of one with a losing record. The main events were scarcely less one-sided.

One of the two headline fights featured the ultraheavyweight Eric “Butterbean” Esch, a barnstorming lout out

of Bay City, Michigan, whose crude skills, planetary girth, and good-natured showmanship evoked a dimly remembered order of potent fat men who traveled with carnies and fought all comers in the century before television changed the world. Butterbean's opponent, Ken Woods, had a thickly muscled body that impressed the spectators, but he had no chance. He did not know how to translate strength into leverage. He had trouble husbanding his wind and distributing his balance (he was knocked down in the fourth and final round by a punch that hit him in the forearm), and his status as a shapely punching bag was confirmed by the fact that one of the eight fights on his professional record was a loss by KO to Butterbean earlier in the year. Butterbean floored Woods repeatedly with majestically telegraphed left hooks a half-dozen competent heavyweights could have ducked in unison. Derrell "Too Sweet" Coley, the winner of the other headline bout, was a skillful and evasive welterweight in the mold of the infuriating cutie-pie genius Pernell Whitaker. Coley put on a fine display of footwork, defense, and judicious punching, winning almost every round from Romallis Ellis, a persistent scrapper out of Atlanta who could not catch him. Coley, a local fighter, showed himself adept enough to mix with a better class of welterweights, but he did not much move the crowd, perhaps because he did not knock Ellis down or cut him up.

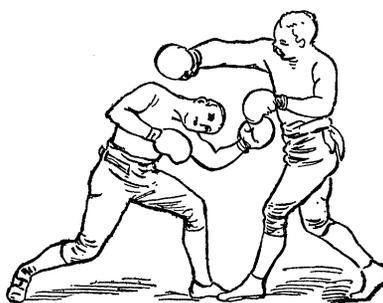
Of course, the boxing matches were not the evening's only entertainment: a variety of attractions and distractions had been arranged to supplement them. Jerry Lee Lewis played a couple of tunes on an electric piano in the ring. Sam Moore

sang the national anthem soulfully, blowing only one line, "and the rockets' red glare," which he rendered as "and the daybreak in air." (Something about boxing matches seems to addle singers. Once, at the fights in Allentown, I witnessed a guy named Mookie with a gorgeous Lou Rawlsian voice lose his way directly after "O say can you see." He paused, said, "Oh, God," paused again, and then free-associated through the rest

A hint of horse-and-wagon antiquity always drifts in the air at an exhibition of the manly art of self-defense.

of it.) Michael Buffer, a tower of unction who has managed to turn himself into a celebrity by mantric repetition of the phrase "Let's get ready to rumble," handled the emcee duties with his trademarked blend of bark and purr. The guests recognized him from TV; they were more excited about him than the fights.

The evening's other attraction, occupying a middle ground between boxing and showbiz, was a group of distinguished ex-champions collectively referred to as "the legends." The recently retired heavyweight Riddick Bowe was nattily suited and bearded, gigantically



DUCKING THE ROUND BLOW.
(Instantaneous Photograph.)

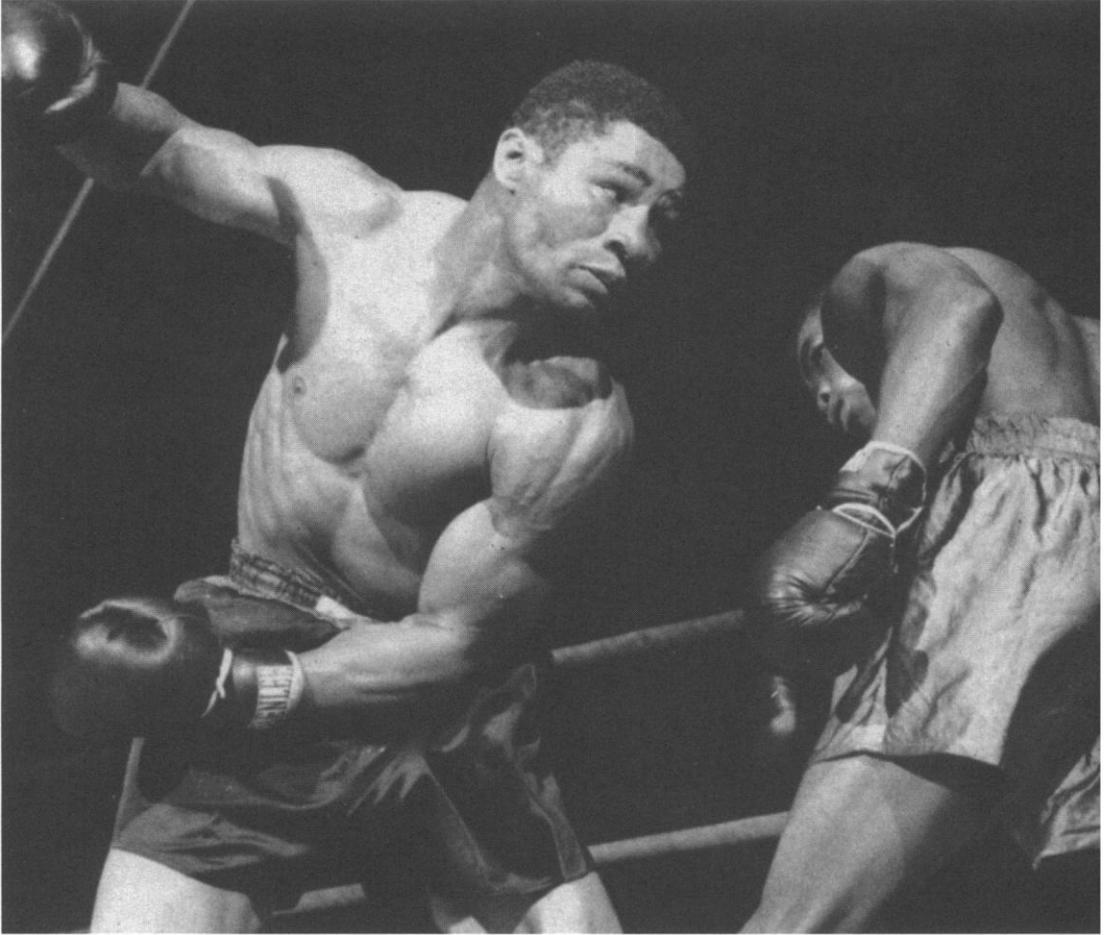
impassive; he wore little round glasses that seemed to say, “Don’t ask me about a comeback. I don’t get into fights anymore.” Despite having grown over the years from a welterweight into a light-heavyweight, Sugar Ray Leonard was still trim, with an active fighter’s sureness and ease of movement. The ex-heavyweight Ken Norton, imposing and prickly-looking in a dark suit and a black

Something about boxing matches seems to addle singers. Once, at the fights in Allentown, I witnessed a guy named Mookie with a gorgeous Lou Rawlsian voice lose his way directly after “O say can you see.”

Panama hat, still bore the marks of the steady hammering he took in his crab-like advances on Muhammad Ali and Larry Holmes. There was the once-svelte but never-spartan Ingemar Johansson, who relieved Floyd Patterson of the heavyweight title with a thunderous straight right in 1959 and then suffered multiple beatings in return bouts against him. Now, he peered out of several prosperous decades’ worth of extra battening like a man in a bulky space suit peering through its faceplate. The lumpy faces and banty carriage of Carmen Basilio, Gene Fullmer, and Jake La Motta told the story of their tenures in the late 1940s and 1950s as middleweight champion and their encounters with the late Sugar Ray Robinson, who beat and was beaten by all of them. Sandy Saddler and Beau Jack were the elder statesmen, heroes of the 1940s now in their seventies. Small and stooped, they walked with difficulty.

Except for Bowe and the photogenic Leonard, the legends were not exactly celebrities, since most people in attendance had only the vaguest conception of who they were. Rather, they were tradition incarnate, principal figures in the evening’s historical pageant. This aura of a bygone heroic era was reinforced by the barnstorming strongman Butterbean, the cigarette girls with their outthrust wooden trays and wheedling patter, the wives left home with the kids, the rolling clouds of cigar smoke, and the idea of strong drink in the company of one’s guildsmen. A hint of horse-and-wagon antiquity always drifts in the air at an exhibition of the manly art of self-defense. This is what it was like in the golden age, the evening conspired to suggest, when men gathered at smokers, carried off willing beauties after doing great feats of arms (or, if not arms, then finance), and could pick up huge rocks that even two strong men of today could not lift. “Look at the *noses* on them,” a well-oiled fellow with well-oiled hair muttered loudly to an associate as Fullmer and Basilio passed nearby. “Those fucking guys are old-school.” The time and damage tallied in the faces and postures of the retired fighters helped transport the crowd to a mythical era most of its members would be too young to remember.

After Lewis sang his numbers, before Moore sang the anthem, the legends were introduced one by one. The lights came down and the crowd grew quiet. Each man climbed into the ring in turn and stood waiting, a straight or a bent silhouette in the dimness, while Buffer listed impressive achievements and closed with a ringing flourish—something



along the lines of “and tha-REEE-time CHAM-pion of the WORRRLD . . .” When the name was finally announced, crisscrossing spotlights caught the man at the center of the ring, and he waved to the applauding crowd before heading to a neutral corner to make room in the center for the next hero.

I had been watching Sandy Saddler and Beau Jack with some concern since the round of cocktails that preceded the evening’s events. They both moved slowly, Beau Jack leaning on a thick cane and Saddler taking tiny steps, head down, always with a helper at his elbow. They

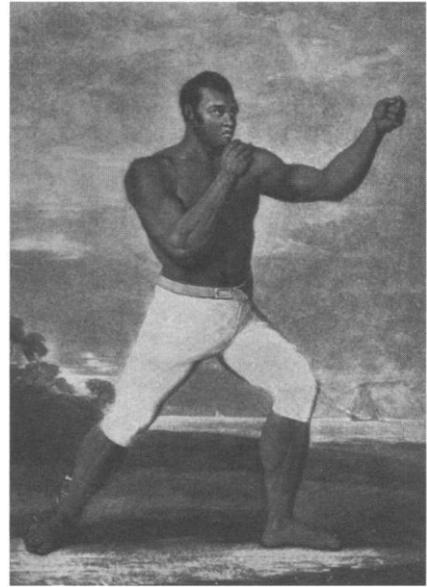
sat together during the parties while the others mixed and joked, and the pair showed signs of liveliness only when Sugar Ray Leonard came over to say hello. They reared back at his approach and smiled at him, making little noises of recognition and delight. Their suits gaped and hung off their necks and wrists, making the two men seem interchangeably frail. When they got up into the ring, though, I saw the difference between them.

Beau Jack mounted the steps to the ring apron unassisted. Even with someone obligingly holding the ropes apart, it

**Beau Jack vs.
Ike Williams,
July 12, 1948**

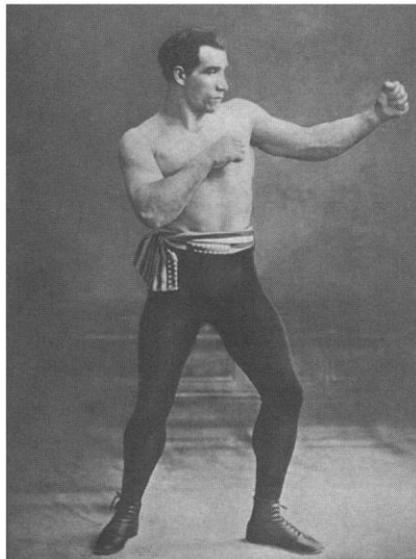
*From An Illustrated
History of Boxing by
Nat Fleisher and Sam
Andre, updated by Nigel
Collins (Secaucus, NJ:
Citadel Press)*

is difficult for an old man to bend and step cleanly into the ring, but Beau Jack levered himself between the ropes without faltering. When the spotlights hit him he grinned toothlessly, his mouth working, and raised both hands to the crowd in a gesture that was both gracious and exultant. He allowed the curved handle of his cane to slide down his forearm and catch in the crook of his bent elbow. It was the first time all evening I saw him standing without assistance. When he was done mitting the crowd he went carefully but with all possible speed to the ropes, like a fighter who has been hit and hurt. Once there he grabbed the top strand for a long moment to steady himself, then turned to put his back to the ropes, readjusted his cane, and stood among his peers. I realized that he had been saving himself all evening for the trial of this introduction, measuring and managing his energy so that he could acquit himself of his public responsibility. He had seen the evening whole from the outset, like a distance fighter, and he had



adjusted his expenditure of self accordingly.

Saddler, though, had much less in reserve, and he had to spend it all getting into the ring. He got up the steps to the apron with assistance from fellow legends and event functionaries, and somehow he got through the ropes. Once in the ring he stood—bent into a question mark, head deeply bowed, but standing alone—through Buffer's description of his exploits, but when the time came to cross the ring under the spotlights he could not move on his own. Eventually Ken Norton, who had already been introduced, went to him, took him by the arm, and helped him across the ring to his place with the others along the ropes. It took an excruciatingly long time for Norton and Saddler to cover the distance, long enough for the lights to go down and then up again as Riddick Bowe entered the ring, was introduced, and went to the ropes. The sight of Norton, not known for his gentleness, bend-



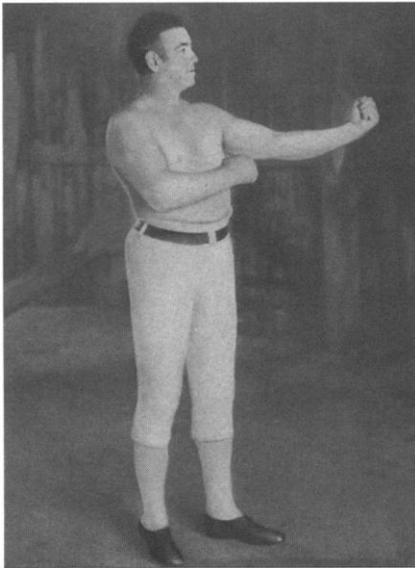
Tom Sharkey,
ca. 1892

Brown Brothers

Thomas Molineaux,
ca. 1810

ing solicitously and taking miniature steps to match Saddler's made the older man seem all the more diminished. Like Beau Jack before him, Saddler clutched the ropes when he got to them, but he could not master his balance sufficiently to stand unassisted. Someone passed a chair into the ring for him to sit on during the rest of the introductions and the national anthem. When it was time to leave the ring, the legends, Beau Jack included, filed out through the ropes and down the steps, but Saddler balked. The last man in the ring, he was convinced that he didn't have sufficient energy or control of his body to make it out and down the steps. He stood there facing the ropes, head down.

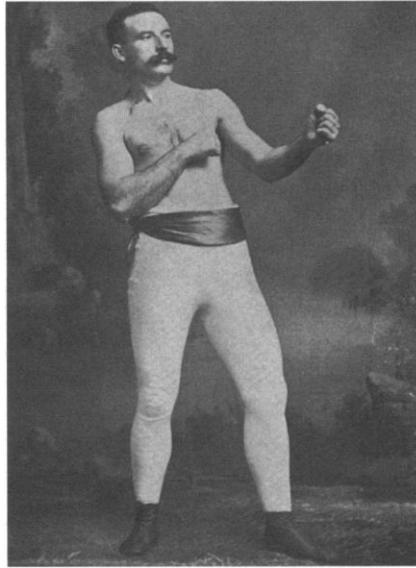
Saddler took hold of the top strand and hung on as legends and functionaries took turns leaning close and whispering anxious encouragement to him. It was a delicate moment. Ken Norton had climbed back into the ring and posted himself at Saddler's elbow, and now he exchanged a look with Riddick



John L. Sullivan,
ca. 1891

Jake Kilrain,
ca. 1890

Robert Foster



Bowe, who was standing on the floor along the ring apron, reaching up through the ropes to support Saddler's unsteady legs with his huge hands. It would have been easier to just pick him up and pass him over the ropes. But only unconscious or dying fighters leave the ring over the ropes, carried by others. As a champion, as a member of the fighters' fraternity, as a human being whose dignity was at stake, Saddler had to go out *through* the ropes, on his feet. Still, the gala evening was threatening to grind to a stop.

In order to get through the ropes, Saddler would have to give up his insistent grip on the top strand, and this became the focus of attention at ringside. A well-dressed younger woman, apparently a relative, joined the knot of men at ringside to plead with him. Having gotten nowhere, they began to pry his fingers one at a time off the rope. They did this carefully, even politely, apologizing with their faces as they exerted force to break

what was left of his strength. When they had loosened the one hand, however, they realized that Saddler, with the resourceful desperation of a wobbly fighter scheming to last out the round, had waited until they were almost done and then secured a grip with the other hand.

Only unconscious or dying fighters leave the ring over the ropes, carried by others. As a champion, as a member of the fighters' fraternity, as a human being whose dignity was at stake, Sandy Saddler had to go out through the ropes, on his feet.

They had to start over on the other hand while gently preventing him from getting the first one back on the top strand. Once they had both hands free they eased him through the ropes, protecting his head, like cops ushering a suspect into the back of a police cruiser. Saddler left the ring on his feet, supported and swiftly propelled by a dozen helping hands, and in that dreamlike floating state he passed almost without effort down the steps to his table. Nobody could blame him for doing what a fighter has to do when he has spent himself in the ring. He went to the ropes, clung to uprightness, lasted out the distance.

Before a fight the referee says, "Protect yourself at all times." It is a ritual instruction, but it is also a word to the wise.

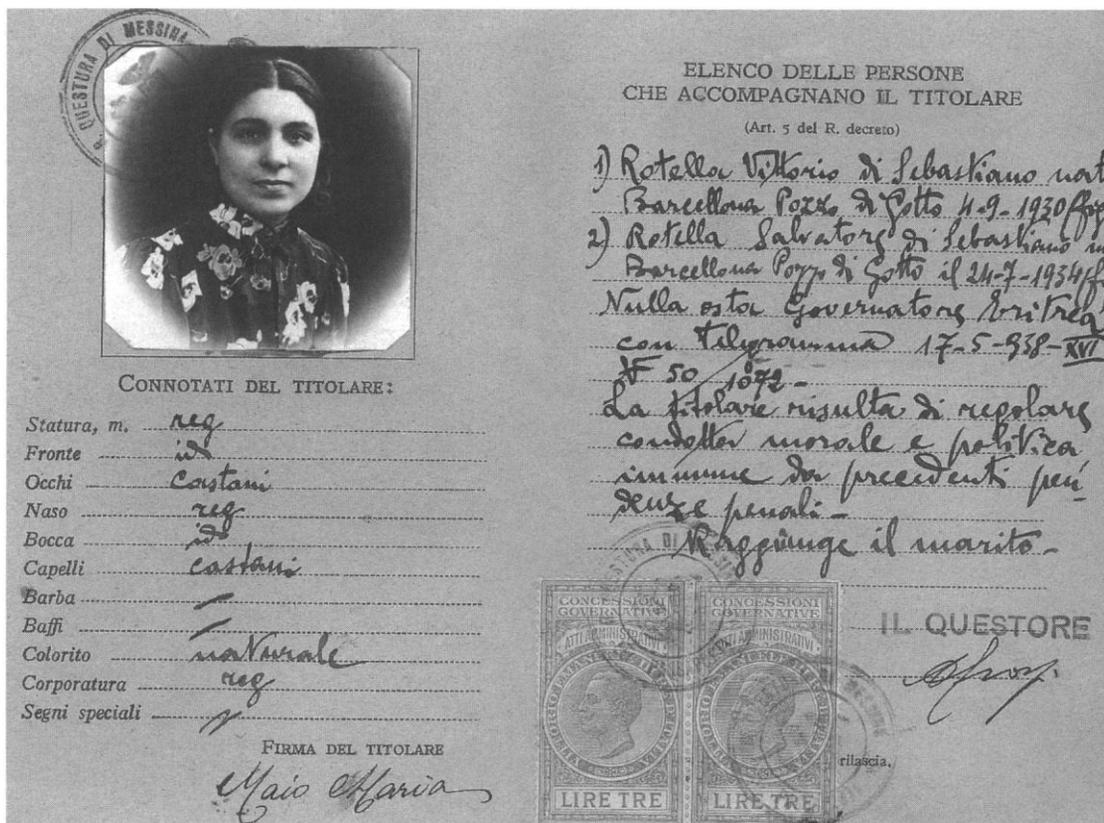
. . .

The expansive donors in their tuxedos had manliness on their minds. They saw their own virtue as providers in the two million dollars they had raised that night, money that would pay for unspecified

nurturant women to care for many poor, defenseless children. They saw the elements of an atavistic ideal of manhood in the fights and the pageantry surrounding them—in everything from the trophy women on display to the resonances of a violent domestic history in Jerry Lee Lewis's nickname, "The Killer," which they shouted appreciatively. They saw the legends as exemplars of male dignity, "old-school" champions who had given and taken their beatings like men. Taking in the scene from the intimate detachment of press row at ring-side, like a naturalist privileged to witness a ritual involving swell-chested hooting among male penguins, I couldn't help but think of my grandmother. I saw flashes of her in the older gentlemen's struggle to get through an important occasion in one piece.

I caught a startling glimpse of her in the champing motion of Beau Jack's mouth as he stood, excited and straining, at ring center. I could see her in the way Saddler's bony shoulders squared and then drooped under the dark fabric of his suit when he stalled in front of the ropes, out of gas but determined not to be rushed into a mistake. I could see the calculations of her old age in the way the young fighters paced themselves through their bouts, saving and expending themselves. Boxing is not just fighting; it is also training and living right and preparing to go the distance in the broadest sense of the phrase, a relentless managing of self that anyone who gets truly old understands.

When my grandmother died in 1995, she had every postcard and letter she had ever gotten from back home in Sicily and Africa; she had kept receipts for util-

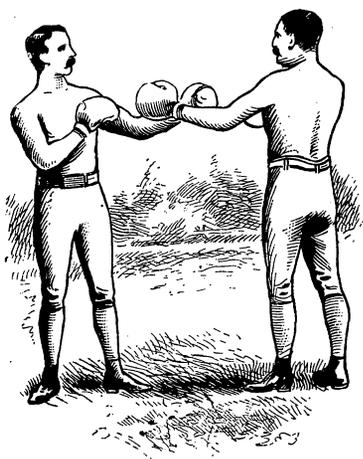


ity bills she paid in the 1950s; she had archived her family's passports, grade reports, photographs, union cards, and chest x-rays and affidavits that attested to their good health and character when they immigrated to the United States; she had stockpiled bibles, missalettes, laminated cards bearing prayers to various saints in Italian and English, parish newsletters, and letters of thanks from the orphanage in Sicily to which she had sent small donations over the years. Distributed throughout her small house in Flushing, Queens, were a dozen worn purses, each loaded for mass with a small bible, a prayer card or two, and a tiny change pouch with no more than seventy-five cents in it; when it was time

for church she could just grab the nearest purse and go. It took a crew composed of children, grandchildren, and nephews three days to clean out her house when we sold it. As I went through her belongings, separating them into piles destined for charity or the family or the dumpster, I set aside the Catholic buckshot for myself: all the little plastic and silver crosses, the statuettes of the Virgin Mary, rosaries made of wood or glow-in-the-dark plastic, medals and stickpins and earth and holy water acquired at sacred sites from Lourdes to Chicago. These cheap, homely items have the charge of a long, hardworking Christian life soaked into them.

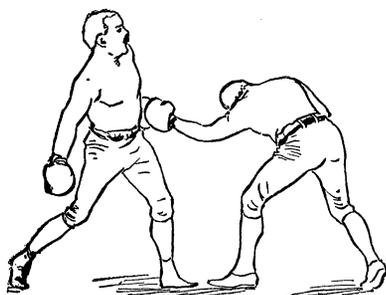
Perhaps I should introduce her the

**Maria Rotella,
1938**



SET-TO.

way Michael Buffer would: “This seamstress, born Maria Maio in 1905 in Barcellona, Sicily, married Sebastiano Rotella, a carpenter, in 1928. They moved to Asmara in Eritrea in 1938, and to New York City in 1951. They had two sons, Vittorio and Salvatore. After her husband’s death in 1966 she lived alone in their small and increasingly cluttered house in Flushing, Queens, until her own death at the age of 89 in 1995. Ladies and GEN-tlemen, the author’s late GRAND-mother, a CHURCH-going CHA-RISSS-tian woman, FIVE-time grandmother, and ONE-TIME GREAT-GA-RAND-MOTHERRR:

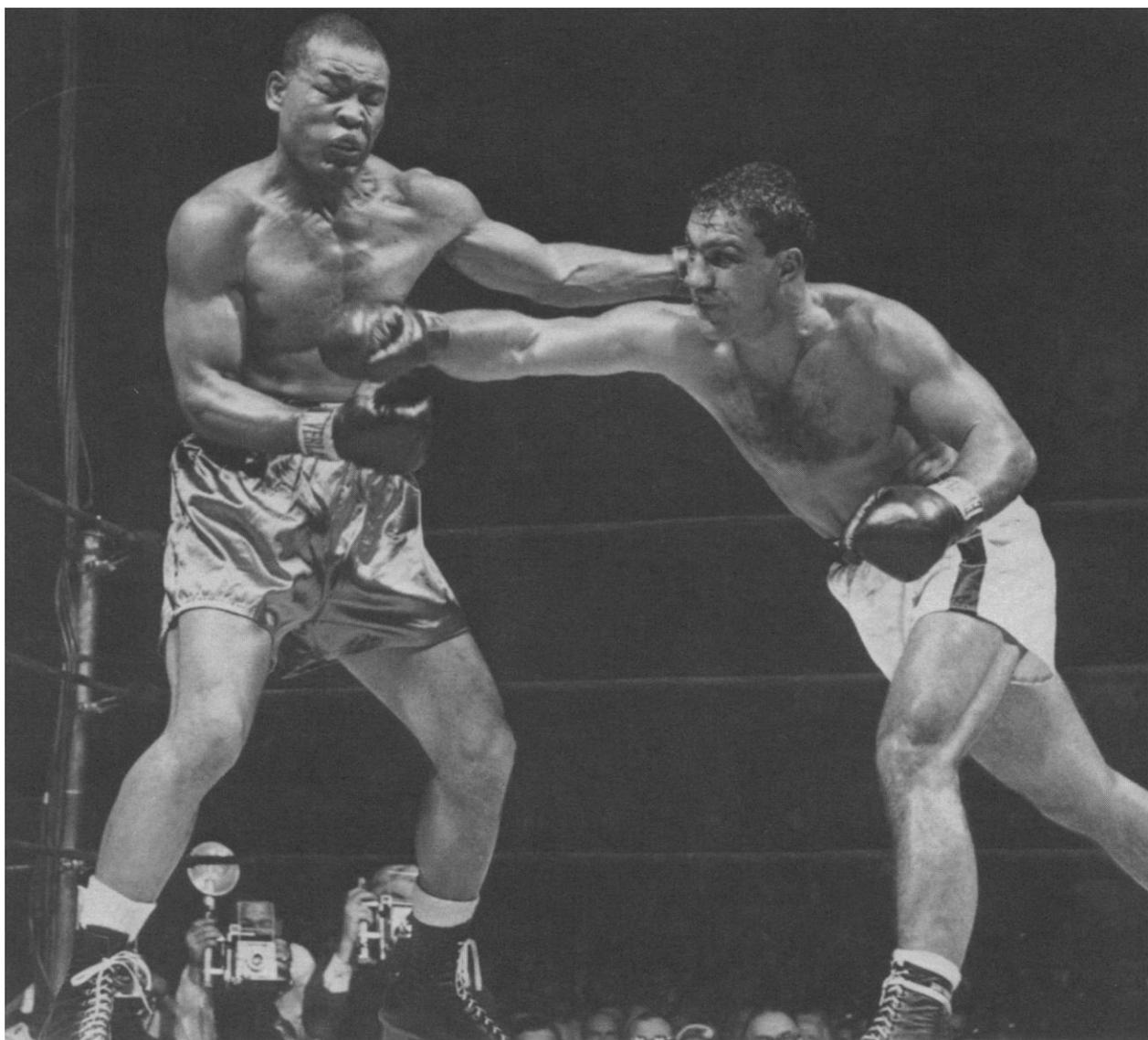


UPPER CUT, AS SULLIVAN STRIKES IT.
(Instantaneous Photograph.)

MARIA ROTELLA!” Picture her standing at ring center, bent but black-haired to her dying day, appreciative of the *rispetto* but finding the spotlights too harsh. She would have worn her ratty old fur coat for the occasion and made a sketchy wave to the crowd before saying “Okay, *basta*” and heading for the ropes.

In Barcellona, her Sicilian hometown, my grandmother came to be known in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s as a paragon of traditional virtues. She had not lived in the town since departing for Africa in 1938, but she had siblings, cousins, and in-laws in profusion. The town is thick with Rotellas and Maios. When my grandfather died in New York in 1966, she took his body back to Sicily to bury him. After his death, she came back to Barcellona every year in the fall and spent a month visiting his grave. She visited with the living in the evenings, but the point of the trip was her daily walk up the hill that led from the business-like, unpicturesque town to the sun-kissed cemetery, a place of surpassing Mediterranean loveliness. The cemetery is also thick with Rotellas and Maios, blocky men and hardhanded women looking forthrightly at the camera in the oval black-and-white photographs that adorn the tombs. In the necropolis of cool stone under spreading trees, a more compact and gentler version of the town, the dead are dignified and patient; down the hill, the living are always angling at one another and taking offense.

My grandmother bought the plot next to her husband’s, in a good location on the cemetery’s central pedestrian avenue, and she kept the property spruce and orderly during her visits. People in



town—Sicilians making their way into an Americanized age of divorce, heroin, and Nintendo—could direct one another's attention to the old woman, turned out in dark clothes of an outdated but stylish cut, climbing the hill to the cemetery. They could say to one another: See? She's going to put flowers on her husband's grave. She lives in America, but she's still old-school. Why aren't you like that? You behave like an animal and you're not even an American. What's the matter with you? (She finally came back for good in 1995: a loose column marched up the hill in the sun, past salut-

ing policemen. A band led the way, playing drunken-sounding dirges; she was buried next to her husband in their chosen spot.)

After her husband's death, my grandmother's annual trip to Sicily became the central event of her year. Once she got good and old, aging neck-and-neck with the century, the Sicilian journey took on the galvanic, all-absorbing character of a title fight. This was after her joints and arteries and eyes started giving her trouble; after she had to stop sewing professionally; after she broke her hip falling out of a tree she was pruning; after

**Joe Louis vs.
Rocky Marciano,
October 26, 1951**

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					Posti Fares	N o l o Amount	Posti Fares	N o l o Amount
ROPELLA Sebastiano	Ital	M		\$	1	175=		
" Maria	"	F			1	175=		
" Vittorio	"	M			1	175=		
" Salvatore	"	M			1	175=		
Totali Totals					4	700=		

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Amount collected (actual currencies)

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Amount

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il **27/9/51**
on the

Intermediario
Agent **Palermo**

Rilasciato a **11/12/51**
Date
Date

Importo totale passaggi Total passage money	B/C		
Tasse imbarco andata Embarkation taxes (outward)			
Tasse sbarco andata Landing taxes (outward)			
Tasse imbarco ritorno Embarkation Taxes (homeward)			
Tasse sbarco ritorno Landing taxes (homeward)			
TOTALI TOTALS			
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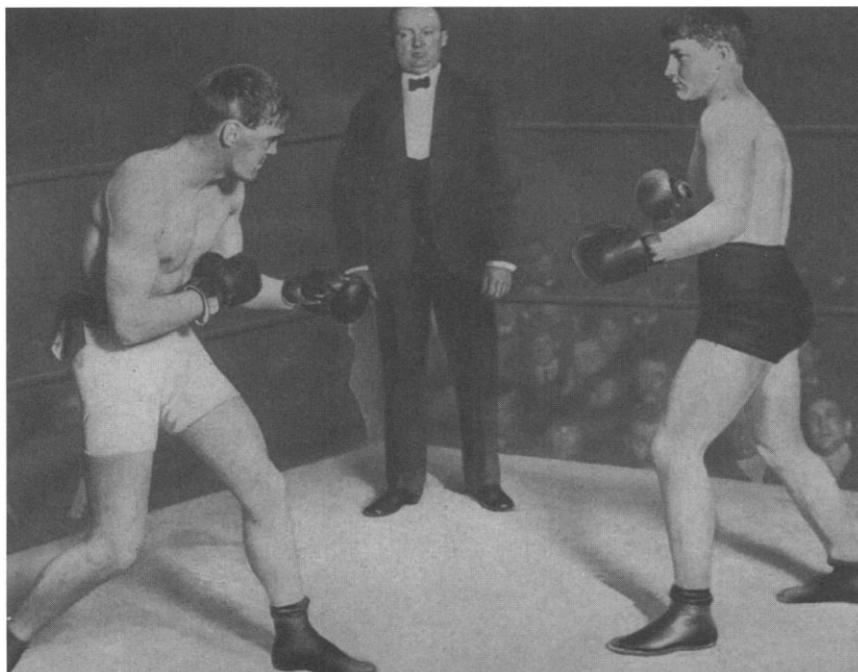
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**Terry McGovern
vs. Young Corbett,
November 28,
1901**

Brown Brothers

she was knocked down by a thief who burned himself into her memory by running off down the block with one of her mass-ready purses dangling from his arm and his platform shoes clacking, like a woman late for a bus. In her last years, she fell into the habit of answering my greeting of “*Nonna, come va?*” with a doleful little self-parody: “*Sono vecchia e piena di dolori,*” I am old and full of pain. Preparations for her yearly trip began early every September, just after the last blindingly hot days of the New York summer. She had to be at graveside in Barcellona on November 2, All Souls’ Day, and it took her the better part of two months to ready herself for the effort it would require to get there. She needed to store up the energy she would use in negotiating airports, train stations, taxis, and restaurants, eating food prepared by strangers, visiting with old

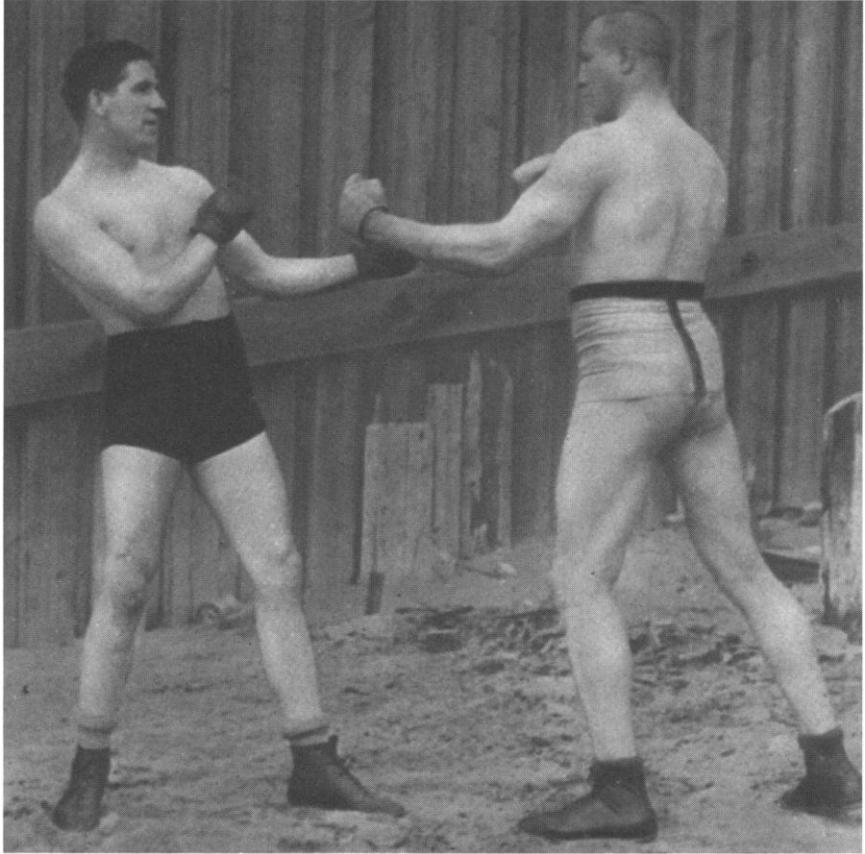
friends and relations—all the extra steps and necessary courtesies that ate up her reserves.

So every September she started cutting back on her movement through the already austere geography of her world. Usually she did most of the upkeep on her house herself, but in the fall she put things off or asked for more help from

Before a fight the referee says, “Protect yourself at all times.” It is a ritual instruction, but it is also a word to the wise.

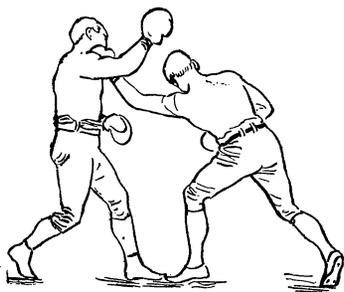
my uncle Vittorio, who lived nearby, and from nephews skilled in various trades. The season of intensive gardening was over by September, and she let the big flowering bushes in front and the tomato plants, hot peppers, and basil in back fend for themselves. She stocked up on pre-

**Jim Corbett and
Gus Ruhlin,
April 1900**



scriptions and food so she would have her pills for the trip and so she could stop making frequent trips to Key Food, the supermarket a few blocks away—she called it “*Kifu*,” infusing the dingy aisles and wobbly-wheeled shopping carts with the resonance of a Mediterranean island. Most important, she cut down on her attendance at church. St. Nicholas Tolentine was a few blocks from her house, requiring a walk up 164th Street to Union Turnpike and then over to Parsons Boulevard. These were the only streets whose names mattered to her; she called them “*Ahunnasixateefortastreet*,” “*Toinapika*,” and “*Aboulavard*,” waving her hand in a shooing motion to indicate distance

and effort when she invoked them. Going to church was like making the trip to Sicily in miniature—it was the central event of her week. But in September and especially in October she went to church only on major saints’ days; she said more prayers at her makeshift shrines at home. Anybody with eyes to see, God included, would know she had to save herself for the coming struggle. In December, when she was back from Sicily and staying with my parents for the holidays in Chicago (where, she said, the fruit lacked savor) or California (where the fruit was okay but the sun was “too white”), we would drive her to church, and she could go every day if she wanted to.

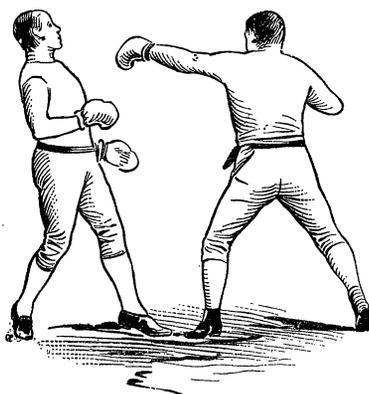


SPARRING.—A ROUND BLOW MISSED.
(Instantaneous Photograph.)

For most of the year, the weekly struggle to keep up the house and the garden, get to *Kifu*, and go to church was an important part of what kept her alive. She kept in shape for the business of living, using herself up so that she would remember how to make more of herself. But she also needed to rest, save, and ration herself, to recognize and work within her narrowing limits. The energy she stockpiled in September and October would get her to Barcellona and the cemetery. Once there, if she had correctly paced her training and traveling, she would have enough left to get up and down the hill every day. Those walks, combined with eggplant-intensive Sicilian cuisine, the grudgingly respectful ministrations of her extended family, and the not inconsiderable sense of doing the right thing, would nourish rather than destroy her. When she got back to America in December she would recuperate from her travels while visiting us for the holidays, looking out the window and growing progressively more bored without a full day's work to do. Come January she would be ready—perhaps eager—to return to the daily routine in Queens.

She used to drive me crazy with

her balancing act. The older she got, the more she avoided wasting energy standing in line or taking unnecessary risks occasioned by politeness. She went straight to the cashier at *Kifu* or the drugstore, ignoring a dozen customers waiting their turn. I smiled awkwardly at them and they made a universal shrugging, eye-rolling signal—What are you gonna do?—of impatience and understanding. When pedestrians passed near her on the sidewalk, or even when cars rolled up to the red light and stopped as she crossed *Aboulavard*, she would stick her hand out in a panicky gesture, as if to fend off the threat. At church she followed a certain path to a certain pew, and if other parishioners were in the way she just put her head down and shuffled at them. Especially when she wore her fur coat, which made her resemble a woodchuck no longer spry enough to steal vegetables from gardens, she was the archetypal little old Sicilian lady, perhaps the last one in the neighborhood. The stylish young immigrants from Asia and the Caribbean who had come to dominate the congregation stepped aside to let her pass with the extra solicitousness



HE "WASTES HIS FORCES ON THE WIND."
(Instantaneous Photograph.)



Maria Rotella,
ca. 1928

accorded a legend, an endangered species, a ghost.

My grandmother had most of her life arranged on a horizontal axis, eliminating confrontations with staircases and especially with escalators, but when she did encounter an escalator she usually stalled in front of it for a long minute or two. This happened at the airport twice a year, every year. A wedge of shrugging, eye-rolling, watch-checking travelers would collect behind her with their bags while she stood there, head down in concentration, gripping my shoulder and tentatively jabbing one foot at the

treacherously uneven moving surface. Even with my back turned to the crowd I could tell they wanted me to just pick her up and put her on the escalator. Eventually I settled on a procedure that entailed first putting her suitcase on the escalator (it would be sitting there when we got to the other end, but her departing belongings acted as a sort of mechanical rabbit to get her moving), then getting her firmly under the near elbow and around the far shoulder, timing her next jab-step, and taking most of her negligible weight when she rocked forward so that she sailed onto the moving stair and balanced, with my help, on one foot until she could get the other foot under her, too. We did something like that again at the other end. It would not do to suggest taking the elevator: once we had confronted the escalator, it was a matter of pride to deal with it. She had to conserve effort, but she also had to protect her dignity at all times. Even a minor indignity like being defeated by an escalator held within it the awful possibility of becoming someone else, the kind of person to whom such things must happen. Humiliation was as bad a waste of herself as chasing after a departing bus or making an unnecessary trip to the drugstore in mid-October.

I lived in or near New York for the last thirteen years of my grandmother's life, and I used to visit her once in a while. When I lived in Brooklyn I would take a long, elliptical subway ride into Manhattan and then out to the end of the Number 7 line in Queens. Having taken three trains and an hour or more to get out to Main Street, Flushing, I then took a bus to *Ahunnasixatefortastreet*. She would have the flame already going un-



der one of her fantastically battered pots, with pieces of sausage and rolled-up, string-trussed meat lolling in dark, oil-rich tomato sauce. I ate while she talked her way to her favorite subject: the peculiarly ideal climate, produce, and manners of Asmara as she remembered it. Work was plentiful there, unlike in Sicily, and they had a house on the edge of the city, where the hills began. She had made dresses for Italian and British women; her husband had built furniture, buildings, roads. Asmara, the most Italian of African cities, was a staging ground for Mussolini's assault on Ethiopia. If my grandparents were artisanal foot soldiers in a

colonial campaign, they were also small-town Sicilians who had a hard time imagining why empire, or even Italy, should matter. Like the voyage they would make to New York in 1951, their voyage to Asmara was a move to the big city from the hardscrabble sticks: they did it because they thought it would be good for the family.

Before I left my grandmother's house, she would give me a jar of sauce and a plastic tub of cooked pasta, the whole thing securely wrapped and tied up in several plastic bags. She would walk me to the front gate of her yard and stop there, a hunched figure in the gloom,

**Joe Louis vs.
Lee Savold,
June 15, 1951**

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while I went up *Ahunna sixateefortastreet* to the bus stop on the next block. It is a very wide avenue, lightly traveled and desolate at night. Her little grandmotherly house was on a corner; across the side street was some kind of satellite receiving station. Its giant dish-like structures tilted up to the heavens behind graffiti-splashed fences topped with razor wire. The juxtaposition made my grandmother in her front yard look impossibly tiny and alone in an increasingly

Sicilians in town could say to one another: See? She's going to put flowers on her husband's grave. She lives in America, but she's still old-school. Why aren't you like that?

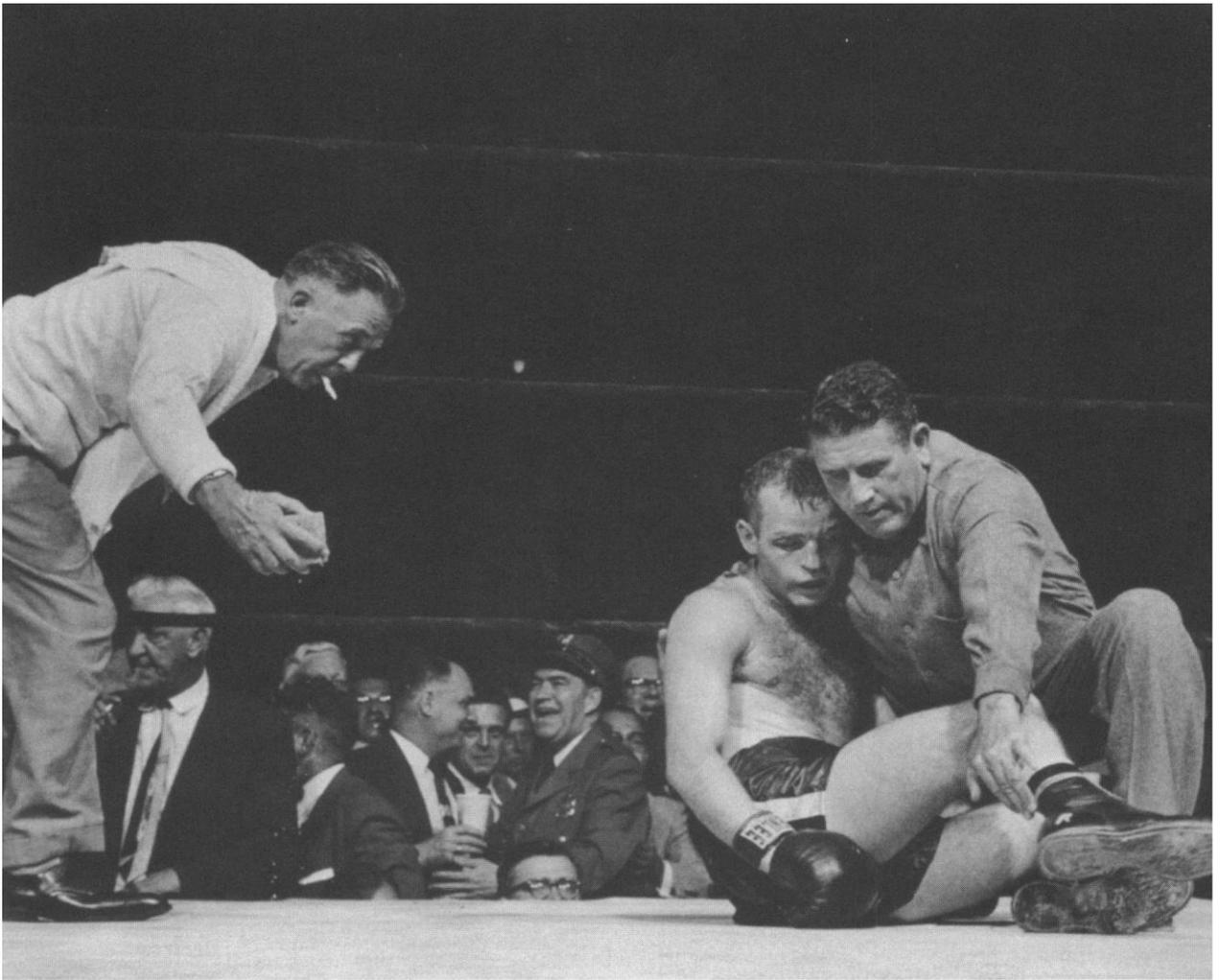
forbidding world. When I got on the bus I would take a seat on the right side so that she would see me when I passed by her house. She was holding tight to the top of the metal gate with one hand, wrapped up in something dark to protect herself from the chill, waiting to wave as I went by. The first few times I did this I felt silly waving back to her, since everybody on the bus was looking at me with my parcel of leftovers, but I got used to it eventually. I even got in the habit of

saying "Ciao, Nonna" to the window when I waved, then turning to my fellow passengers as if to say, "That's my grandmother, folks." A busload of people in Queens often includes a dozen nationalities and ethnic groups. All of them agree that respecting your grandmother is a high form of human endeavor. Sometimes I would catch strangers—say, a Filipina nurse and a West Indian woman with shopping bags—exchanging a look across the aisle: See? A nice boy visiting his grandmother. Look at all that food. Now *that's* an old-school grandmother.

. . .

I knew my grandmother was dying when she started letting me help clear the table. Before, she would not hear of it; it was important to her to do the extra work of shopping at *Kifu* for meat to feed me, preparing the meal and cleaning up herself, and seeing me to the front gate. These were ways she showed what mattered: family, in this case, and her continuing capacity to do for herself and for others. As when she walked to the cemetery in the fall to tend to her husband's gravesite, she was doing something eminently practical. But she was also pouring something vital of herself into the forms and usages of ritual. In doing these things she both used herself up and made more of herself—a woman with a family, a story, a place in the world—to expend next time. She did the same thing when she toiled the long blocks to church, expending herself for her God but also reinforcing her sense of herself as a Christian woman, with the duties and privileges appertaining to that status. She had a habit of stopping in front of one of the stations of the cross.





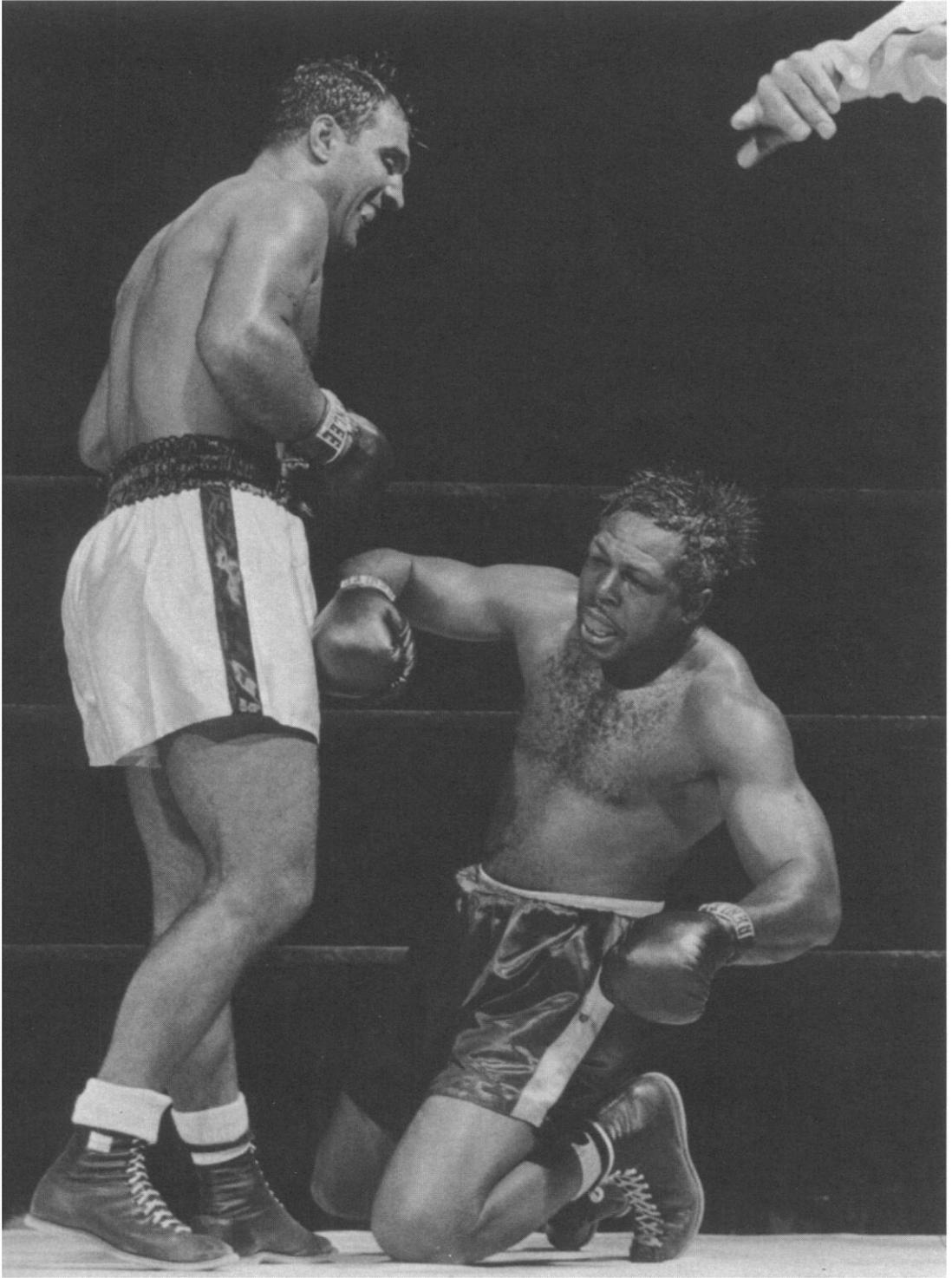
She would touch two fingers to her lips and reach high to touch them to Jesus, repeating the sequence three times. Getting to church and performing that rite entailed a struggle, but struggling for what mattered made her the kind of person who would have the wherewithal to get to church next time and perform it again.

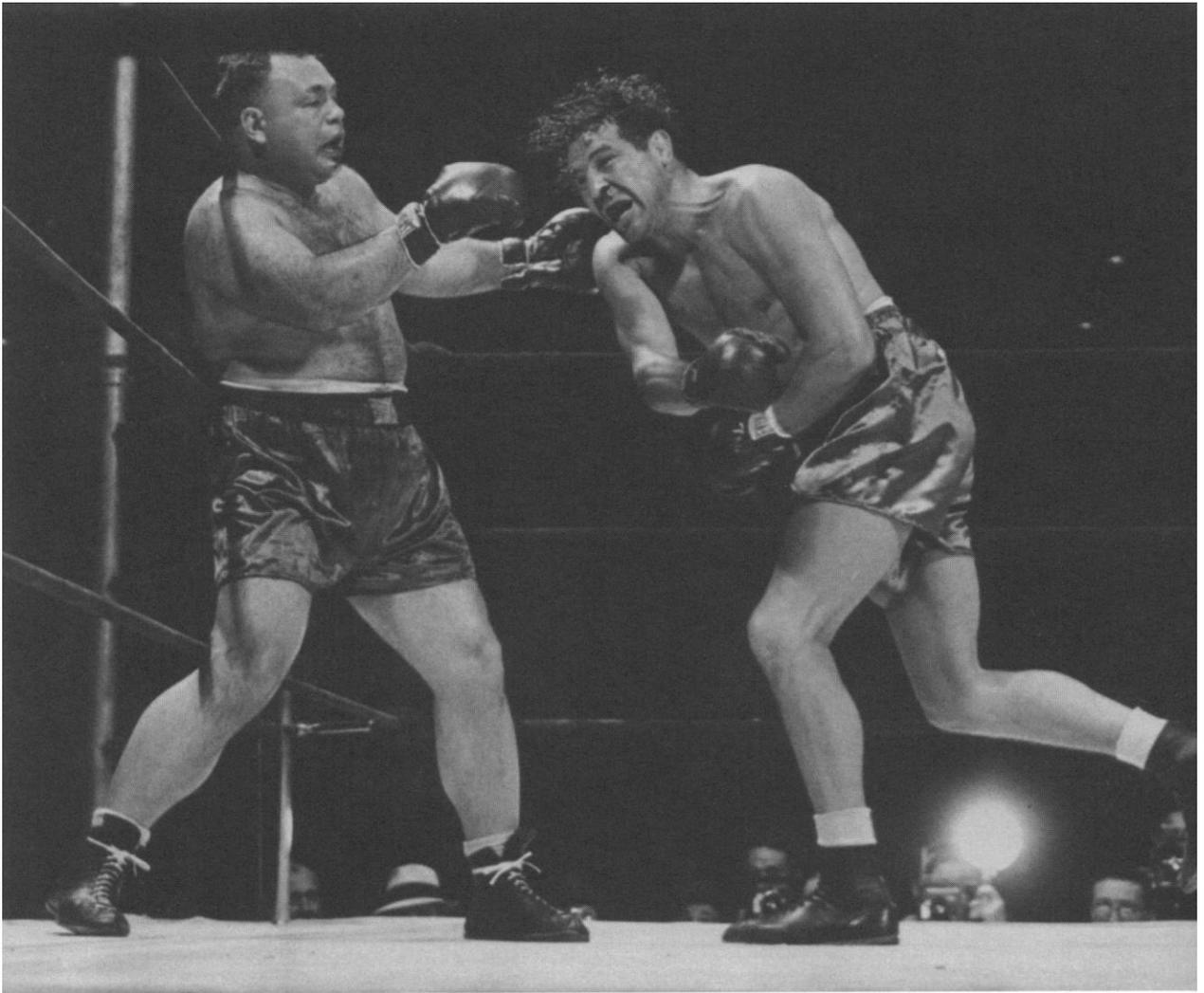
The flashes of my grandmother's gestures and habits that I saw in Beau Jack and Sandy Saddler made me wonder what those two old men were doing at charity night, and why they might have traveled so far to get up in the ring one more time, with nobody to fight and nothing, apparently, at stake. It was not just for the recognition, although surely the crowd's applause and Michael Buf-

fer's swooning tones reinforced their sense of who they were. It was not just for charity, although surely raising money for the good of children mattered to them—just as it mattered to the cigar-smoking emperor penguins, who (in their more detached and tax-deductible way) also poured something genuinely of themselves into fight night. Entering the ring is the central event of a boxer's life, the act that separates pugilist from gym dabbler, the moment when a boxer is poised between a lifetime of preparation and a world of hurt. The prefight ring walk, like my grandmother's walk to *Kifu* or to the church or to the cemetery, offers a compressed rendition of the fighter's path through the larger world. It suggests what might be at stake in the

**Ingemar
Johansson vs.
Floyd Patterson,
June 20, 1960**

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ring. That is why, during their ring walks, fighters surround themselves with flags, belts, costumes, slogans, music, friends, family—all the furnishings of a life story. Climbing through the ropes one more time, Beau Jack and Sandy Saddler were doing the same thing they had done in their immortal youth, when they trained tirelessly and fought great opponents now long dead. A half century later, the two old men were still choosing their battles, still balancing regeneration against exhaustion. Like my grandmother making her way steadily up the hill with the energy she had saved for the occasion, they were still showing themselves prepared to go the distance.

**Rocky Marciano
vs. Archie Moore,
September 21,
1955**

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**Tony Galento vs.
Max Baer, July 2,
1940**

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