

# Boston:

## A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

When UFC president Dana White announced Boston as the host city for UFC 118, the fight world did their best interpretation of a community in agreement.

BY T.R. FOLEY

Something about Boston felt right—a brew of culture and history that had been absent in venues like Sacramento or Columbus. Now, the most important mixed-martial arts promotion is finally ready to introduce it's sport to a city rich with fighting heritage.

Like it or not, every city has popular reputation: New York is rude and over-compensated finance guys chasing the skirts of clueless fashionistas; Chicago is men cursing the hapless Cubs while drinking cases of beer with Ditka-loving women; Los Angeles is sipping strawberry daiquiri's in sex rehab while recalling the character developments from Season Five of *The Hills*. You get the idea.

Boston has its image too, one characterized by short-tempered South Siders with broad A's and dropped R's who pick bar fights and drink "wicked ahmounts of bee-yuh." More than most cities, Bostonians are caricaturized by their culture—a tradition of provocation, intellectual bravado, and violence. In *Good Will Hunting*, Matt Damon's character appeared to be just an epic metaphor for a city with equal parts intellectualism and physicality—the genius solving calculus problems at MIT during the day, while drinking and fighting at night. Call it movie making, the city's attitude is derived from something historical rooted in more than screenplays and reality television.

### Bloody Bahston

The first Bostonians weren't 4-oz-gloves-and-a-cage scrappers, nor were they bullies. The Shawmut Peninsula's original settlers were ornery, holier-than-thou English Puritans who were determined to domesticate the wild lands—and people—surrounding Boston. They utilized their work ethic to create a city that would stand in their hardy, self-reliant image for the centuries of growth that would follow. Within three generations of their arrival, the do-gooders had established commerce and trade independent of the Crown. They also grew tired of foreign rule and that prickly Puritan nature incumbent in their culture initiated a struggle that would ultimately lead to a region determined to establish free rule.

A brief synopsis of the American Revolution: men wearing powdered wigs took umbrage to a tax on tea (to be fair, it'd be akin to an extra tax on beer in Milwaukee or hair gel in New Jersey). They then dumped some tea in the harbor, which irked King George, who responded by shuddering Boston Harbor and occupying the city with "Lobsterbacks." Parched for drinkable tea, Bostonians led a Colonies-wide rebellion against

the King with pamphleteering and those famous first musket shots at Lexington and Concord.

There were intellectual guardians in and around Boston, as well. Heading the class of thinkers toward rebellion was future U.S. President John Adam—a pathetically short man who came to power through a combination of wit and cage-rattling temper. He was more complicated than a one-sentence descriptor, but his sharp tongue stood at the influential forefront of American independence. Thomas Jefferson, his sometimes-seditious Vice President, once described his boss as be-





Historic Boston harbor

ing “vain, irritable, [and] stubborn.” By 1775, it was apparent that Adams was America’s First Masshole.

### The Boxer Revolution

With the port cleared of Redcoats, more than one million immigrants coursed through Boston Harbor to find prosperity in America. Among those unloading in Boston were the Irish parents of John L. Sullivan, who was to become the first international boxing superstar.

According to Boston boxing historian Kevin Smith, “The Boston Strong Boy” wasn’t just popular sea-to-shining-sea. He

was the world’s first athletic megastar, a man synonymous with inflicting apple-carts full of rottenness on opponents while making truckloads of cash (he was the first U.S. athlete to make \$1 million). Sullivan was considered the best athlete in the world in the sport with the grittiest test of masculinity. Locally, he was a hero on par with those who won independence and the right to drink cheap tea.

“Most people basically saw Sullivan as the baddest guy on the planet, and, yeah, he was from Boston. That meant that every kid in Boston wanted to become just like the champ.” Smith says. “That does

a lot for your city, especially if it’s poor.”

Sullivan, who held the heavyweight title for 10 years, became for Boston boxing what American Top Team has done for mixed-martial arts in Florida. “At the turn of the century, kids were boxing in every event they could find,” says Smith. “They thought they could make money, get out of Boston, and see the world.”

Boston became the epicenter of boxing. Police leagues and boys clubs were established to fund youth boxing programs and keep kids off the street. Fighting wasn’t regionalized by precinct or do-gooders—much of the fight game in



*“Fighting is athleticism stripped down to its core. Me versus You.”*



**John L. Sullivan. 1898**  
PHOTO: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Boston was ethnocentric. You may remember Tom Cruise’s character in *Far and Away* wan an Irish immigrant who was pressured to fight on behalf of Ireland against the Italians. Not an uncommon scene. Smith says ethnic and racial motivations were common among fight promotions.

Premier among the idyllic brawlers of mid-century Boston was Rocky Marciano, an Italian street kid from down the road in Brockton, Mass. In time, he’d transcend the sport—from an intellectual and wild-swinging Italian-American fighter to arguable the greatest fighter, but not boxer (legendary boxing analyst Bert Sugar once called Marciano the “toughest son of a bitch to ever wear gloves”). His professional record was unblemished: 46 wins and 43 KO’s. For her part, the city of Boston tried to sequester Marciano’s popularity and accomplishments. And why not? This was a city suffering through the Red Sox, and almost second-city mentality that leashed them to a New York inferiority. The media’s cartographical impulses took foot and changed their reality. Marciano’s championship held glamour for decades.

Marciano wasn’t without controversy. Writers criticized him for fighting older opponents (his title-defense opponents averaged in their 40’s) but lauded the champ’s massive hands and an

iron will, even if it lacked the finesse of technique. Joe Liebling wrote this for *The New Yorker*: “[Rocky] has an intellectual appreciation of the anxieties of a champion, but he has a hard time forgetting how strong he is; while he remembers that, he can’t worry as much as he knows a champion should.”

Marciano’s popularity and dominance only increased Sullivan’s 19th century cultural progress, but it waned at the tail end of the 20th century. The champ took the idea of Boston boxing and recertified its legitimacy as an inseparable pairing for sport and geography. Yet the regional affection for pugilism was dying. Nothing—not intellectualism, stardom, or the combination of city and sport—could stifle the growing popularity appeal and profitability of MMA. Not Marciano, not Boston.

**Boxed Out**

Peter Welch says he saw the MMA craze start as lingering gym rats who were looking for a new challenge. Like iron sharpeners, the TUF 1 and 2 boxing coach saw his clients mature from slap boxers into professional technicians. Their goals and motivations went from wide-eyed attention grabbing spectacle to earning some of the biggest paydays in the Northeast (even as the sport was illegal within the city limits). Welch had only been teaching kids the basics and refining the work of his professionals. Now, with MMA guys in his gym, he was catering to older students who wanted to know how to throw a correct jab and duck a haymaker.

“The city ratified [MMA] despite the objections of the older boxing crowd,” Welch says. “It was odd because at the last Bellator fight, I didn’t know any of the commissioners. They weren’t boxing people anymore. They were fight people.”

Welch isn’t backing down from MMA. He’s the boxing coach for Kenny Florian and Brock Lesnar, and the city has other top striking coaches in Marc Della Grotti and the Florian camp. Still, Welch knows Boston is a town of uppercuts, sucker punches, and black eyes. “It’s a right of passage for the kids in the community,” says Welch. “It’s something I’ve pass on to my sons and that we pass on to the sons of the community. Fighting is athleticism stripped down to its core. Me versus You. What drives a fighter to see another human being and decide to challenge him to a fight? This whole fighting thing is about the test of toughness—doesn’t matter if it’s boxing or MMA.”

That’s Boston: tough guys from tough neighborhoods, fighting for a way to improve their lives. Come fight night at the Garden, you know that the locals won’t just be watching the fight inside the cage—they’ll probably be starting a few of their own, hopped up on bee-yuh and 300 years of Puritanical scrapping tradition. 📍