

For sixteen years, Russell Sullivan's biography of Rocky Marciano stood alone at the top of the list of books about the Brockton heavyweight. But in 2018, Unbeaten by Mike Stanton earned equal billing.

Unbeaten: Rocky Marciano

The story of Rocky Marciano has been told so many times for so many years that it's hard to find something new. Mike Stanton, in an excellent biography entitled *Unbeaten* (Henry Holt and Company) has found something new.

Rocco Marchegiano spent the closing months of World War II, not in battle, not ferrying supplies to Allied troops in Normandy as was widely reported in later years, but in a military stockade in England. He was imprisoned after being arrested, court-martialed, and found guilty of robbery and assault. While an investigation of the incident was underway, Marchegiano's commanding officer, Major Richard L. Powell, told investigators that Marchegiano was an "untrustworthy, unreliable and unsatisfactory soldier" and that "his derelictions have been consistent and numerous." Powell concluded that Marchegiano was "of no value to the Army."

Marchegiano was imprisoned for 22 months.

Rocky Marciano grew up poor in Brockton, Massachusetts. He got into more than his share of street fights as an adolescent and became one of the most storied boxers of all time. When he announced his retirement from the ring on April 27, 1956, his record was an unblemished 49 wins in 49 fights with 43 knockouts.

Marciano, Stanton writes, "was an unlikely champion. He didn't start boxing seriously until age 24 and was often overmatched in size and skill. He was five-foot-ten and weighed 185 pounds with short stubby arms, clumsy feet, and a bulldozer style that opened him up to fierce punishment."

Charley Goldman, the trainer who oversaw Marciano's transformation from crude street fighter to boxer, told his charge what lay ahead before they started working together.

“It isn’t easy,” Goldman cautioned. “It’s rough. It takes a lot of work, a lot of sacrificing, a lot of bats in the nose. But I think you might be able to do okay. You’re a strong kid. That’s about all I can say for you right now. You’re strong and you’re willing. And I can tell that you like it. You gotta like it. Otherwise you just don’t belong in it.”

Thereafter, Goldman said of Marciano, “I got a guy who’s short, stoop shouldered, and balding with two left feet. They all look better than he does as far as the moves are concerned, but they don’t look so good on the canvas. God, how he can punch!”

Marciano overcame chronic hand problems that plagued him from his amateur days until the end of his ring career. He was the beneficiary of questionable decisions in fights against Ted Lowry and Roland LaStarza before legitimately prevailing in rematches against each man. He frequently fouled opponents, hitting below the belt, throwing punches after a round had ended, landing blows to the back of the head, and committing other infractions which he said were the unintentional result of his crude brawling style.

The key to his success was what Stanton calls his “indomitable will to win.”

Marciano trained relentlessly, and always entered the ring in peak physical condition. “If you were there looking at Rocky’s training and the way he lived,” Goldman observed, “it was hard to believe that a man could sacrifice so much.”

After Marciano reached the bigtime, the weeks leading up to his fights were spent training in the Catskill Mountains. Recounting Marciano’s preparation at Grossinger’s for his first championship bout against Jersey Joe Walcott, Stanton writes, “Rocky stayed far from the hotel and its glittering nightlife, living in a Spartan secluded cabin high up on the mountain. He shut himself off from the outside world and embraced the wilderness solitude of the Catskills. His opponent’s name was never mentioned in his presence unless by an inquisitive sportswriter. In the weeks before the fight, he read no mail and took no phone calls, not even from his wife. The final week, he wouldn’t even shake hands, ride in a car, or eat any new foods. He wasn’t allowed to read anything about the fight. He didn’t allow himself to think ahead to the morning after the fight when he would be freed from this hermetic existence.”

“You’ve got to make boxing a kind of religion,” Marciano explained. “You believe in yourself and you believe in the things you got to do. You never forget them for a minute.”

As for the fights, Stanton writes of “a relentless style impervious to pain,” and says of Marciano, “He had an indomitable heart that enabled him to withstand savage beatings. And he had a punch that was like a near-death experience. He trudged into the ring like a factory worker punching a timeclock and started pounding on the wall in front of him until it crumbled.”

Archie Moore, who Marciano knocked out in the final fight of his storied 49–0 ring career, later said of his conqueror, “Rocky didn’t know enough boxing to know what a feint was. He never tried to outguess you. He just kept trying to knock your brains out. If he missed you with one punch, he just threw another.”

Marciano fit nicely into the culture of the 1950s. A symbol of American optimism, he was perceived, in Stanton’s words, as “an All-American postcard from a simpler, more innocent age . . . Immigrant son, strong but soft-spoken . . . Humble and polite and devoted to his family . . . A patriot who had learned to box in the Army while serving his country during the war.” *Time Magazine* hailed him with the accolade, “He stands for the comforting notion not that might makes right but that might and right are somehow synonymous.”

Marciano, in turn, felt an obligation to boxing to present himself as a worthy heavyweight champion outside the ring as well as in it. And a compliant media played along. A profile of Marciano written for *Sport* magazine by Ed Fitzgerald in 1952 after Marciano dethroned Walcott was typical of its time.

“Rocky,” Fitzgerald wrote, “is a neighborhood kid who married a neighborhood girl and thinks the old hometown is the greatest place in the world. His social activities are confined largely to entertaining friends and relatives at home or making the rounds of their houses and the Ward Two Club and the Seville Council, Knights of Columbus. The priests and nuns of St. Colman’s parish where he worships call on him again and again to serve as a model for their lectures to the neighborhood kids.”

But the truth was more complicated than that. By all accounts, Marciano loved his parents and siblings. But he was an absentee husband

and often ignored his daughter (who was born ten weeks after Marciano dethroned Walcott). He had a penchant for prostitutes and other available woman. In 1968, he and his wife adopted a baby boy who, Marciano later told his brother, Peter, was his own biological child.

Also, Marciano was inextricably tied to the mob. Manager Al Weill took fifty percent of Marciano's purses pursuant to their contract and stole more from him on the side. Weill then shared his take with Frankie Carbo, a high-ranking member of the Lucchese crime family and the most powerful man in boxing at that time.

Marciano socialized with mobsters during his ring career and, after his retirement from boxing, did business with them. Carbo was a guest for Sunday dinner in his parents' home. When Vito Genovese (known as "the boss of all bosses") was dying in prison, he let it be known that he wanted Marciano to visit him. Not only did Marciano visit, he brought fight films to show Genovese.

But these relationships were largely out of public view. When Marciano was killed in the crash of a small plane on August 31, 1969—thirteen years after his retirement from boxing and one day shy of his forty-sixth birthday—the world mourned.

Marciano's improbable rise to the heavyweight championship of the world is a remarkable story, and Stanton tells it well. He conducted an enormous amount of research and has woven his findings into an engaging narrative rather than simply throw information at readers. He recreates places and events in impressive detail and brings them to life. This is particularly true of his description of the environment that Marciano grew up in.

Unbeaten paints an honest portrait of Marciano, who comes across in some ways as a decent man and in other respects as a thug. The trajectory of his ring career is well-told as Stanton takes often-told stories and tells them in a way that makes them feel fresh and new.

People who are just names in history books come alive as vividly-drawn characters. This is particularly true of Weill—Marciano's obnoxious, crude, abrasive, overbearing, very smart, very dishonest, bullying, mob-connected manager.

There's also an informative and moving chapter on the life-altering brain damage suffered by Carmine Vingo in his sixth-round knockout loss to Marciano in 1949 and a dramatic recounting of the fight itself that elevates Vingo to more than just a name on Marciano's ring ledger.

Also, as previously noted, Stanton does what a good biographer is supposed to do. He breaks new ground. That's hard to accomplish with a biographical subject who has been dead for five decades and written about as often as Marciano. But Stanton does it with his recounting of Marciano's military service during World War II.

While stationed in England, Marciano and a fellow soldier named James Murphy robbed two Englishmen, beating them up in the process. They were court-martialed and convicted, after which Marciano was dishonorably discharged from the Army and sentenced to three years in prison. He was released after 22 months and then allowed to rejoin the military for the duration of 1946 in order to receive an honorable discharge.

Unbeaten is such a good book that I'm reluctant to cast a shadow on any part of it. But there's one flaw that has to be mentioned. From time to time, there are factual errors in the narrative.

Stanton writes that Sugar Ray Robinson's "St. Valentine's Day Massacre" of Jake LaMotta in 1951 brought him the world welterweight championship. But it was the middleweight crown. Stanton incorrectly states that, one day after dethroning Sonny Liston, Cassius Clay announced that he was changing his name to Muhammad Ali. But it wasn't until March 6, 1964, ten days after the Liston bout, that Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad bestowed that name upon him. More egregiously, Stanton writes that Ali "screamed 'what's my name?' over and over as he pummeled [Floyd] Patterson before knocking him out in 1965." But it wasn't Floyd Patterson in 1965. It was Ernie Terrell in 1967.

Mistakes like this take some of the glow away from a superb book because they lead a reader to wonder what other errors might lurk beneath the surface. That said; *Unbeaten* is a superb book.

And Another Biography of Marciano

John Jarrett has been writing about boxing since 1951 when his first article, a piece about Rocky Marciano, was published in *Boxing News*. Since then, he has been involved with the sweet science in myriad ways including ongoing service as Northern Area Secretary for the British Boxing Board of Control for forty years. During that time, he has written nine books, the most recent of which (*Rocky Marciano* published by Pitch Publishing) brings Jarrett back to his creative roots.

Rocco Francis Marchegiano was born into a struggling working-class family in Brockton, Massachusetts. The first time that he auditioned in the gym for trainer Charlie Goldman (who would ultimately sculpt the rough-hewn block of marble into greatness) Goldman told him, "If you done anything right, I didn't see it."

Shirley Povich of the *Washington Post* later quoted an unnamed observer of the boxing scene as saying, "Rocky Marciano can't box a lick. His footwork is what you'd expect from two left feet. He throws his right hand in a clumsy circle and knows nothing of orderly retreat. All he can do is blast the breath from your lungs or knock your head off."

No fighter trained harder than Marciano. That was one of the keys to his success. Asked to elaborate on his training regimen, Rocky noted, "After a while, you get to hate all the guys around you. You get to hate the sight of their faces and the sound of their voices."

Marciano lost four of the twelve amateur fights that he engaged in. Three decades later, Bob Girard (one of the men who beat him) reminisced, "I beat him because it was three rounds. There were a hundred guys who might have stayed three rounds with Rocco. But no man in the world was gonna beat Rocco in fifteen rounds."

Jarrett offers a particularly good retelling of the September 23, 1952, fight between Marciano and Jersey Joe Walcott when Marciano, trailing on all three scorecards at the start of round thirteen, seized the heavy-weight throne with a highlight-reel knockout.

But as is often the case in this book, the most compelling writing with regard to Marciano-Walcott I comes from Jarrett's choice of quotes from others rather than his own prose. Here, the choice verbiage originated with Peter Wilson of the *Daily Express*, who wrote, "Then, like the car you never see on the dark road, the shell which you never hear, shocking, irrevocable, came that tremendous horrifying right. It left Walcott looking down his own spine with eyes that could not see. He crumpled forward, clutching for a rope, knees grayed by the resin dust. A brown paper bag burst by a thoughtless child. A headless, thoughtless, sightless, senseless, paralyzed man. Style, skill, pacing of the fight and good punching, all had availed nothing."

In his dressing room after the fight, Walcott was asked about the knockout punch and acknowledged, "I don't remember anything. He

caught me open and that was it. I don't know if it was a right or left. I just don't remember anything."

Jarrett has done considerable research regarding Marciano's fights. But there's no new scholarship in his book, nor does he do much to place Marciano in the political and social context of his times. Also, when it comes to Marciano's personal life, Jarrett tends to view him through rose-colored glasses, painting the portrait of a man who felt ambiguous about boxing because "he hated the time it took away from his family in Brockton."

In truth, the historical record developed by Russell Sullivan, Mike Stanton, William Nack, and others suggests that Marciano was more interested in whoring around than in being a good husband and father.

That said; Jarrett's writing flows nicely and he's passionate about his subject. Fans of Rocky Marciano will enjoy the book.