

## Do You Remember?

By Anne Homan  
Livermore City Historian



### Max and Buddy Baer

Max Baer Park was named for the Livermore resident who won the World's Heavyweight Boxing Championship by defeating Primo Carnera on 14 June 1934. The *Herald* described that evening: "Before fifty thousand berserk fans in the Long Island bowl, the lad who started his career on a Livermore hog ranch pounded the largest man in fistiana's history to a helpless, staggering hulk—so badly beaten that Referee Arthur Donavan had to stop the slaughter at the end of the eleventh round." Baer's grand-nephew wrote: "Legend has it that on the night Max won the heavyweight title, all of Livermore descended on his sister Frances's house ... and celebrated. According to family stories, the celebration actually lasted two days until Frances [Santucci] shut off the lights to her house and shooed away the celebrating townsfolk."

Frances Baer Santucci herself told of the event in an interview for the Livermore Heritage Guild in 1982: "I'm telling you, it was something that you've never seen in your life.

The day he won that championship. You couldn't get for a mile around this place here—the cars, the people, the Livermore band—Frank Higuera, he led them and they came up and the Eagles—they marched up and they had a parade up here. I've never seen so many—you ask me today who all was here, I couldn't have told you. ... You've never seen anything like it—they just went wild!" Frances finally went upstairs to put her children to bed; when she came down, she found that someone had rolled up all the rugs, and people were dancing in her living room. Someone brought a keg of beer from town, and the party continued.

Baer lost his title the following year, but he continued boxing until his retirement in 1941. During World War II, both Max and his younger brother, Buddy, also a boxer by then, entertained the soldiers with boxing exhibits and song and dance acts. Max couldn't pass the army physical because of old boxing injuries, but he objected so vociferously and so publicly that he was allowed to join.

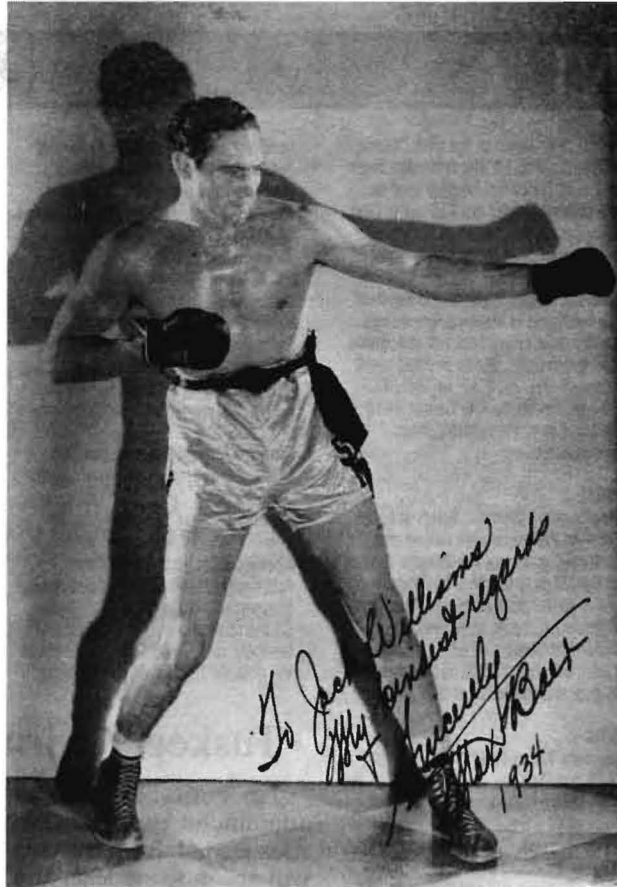


Photo of Max Baer courtesy of Jacquie Williams-Courtright

Jack Sher wrote in *Sport* magazine, "How could they keep me out," he demanded. "Why I started the damn thing, getting Hitler all riled up by beating Schmeling and then getting Mussolini against us by what I did to poor old Primo!" Baer was inducted into the Boxing Hall of Fame in 1995. Having perhaps the most powerful right hand in heavyweight history, Max Baer wise-cracked and clowned

his way through his career. Although he never fully realized his potential, Baer won the heavyweight title, and he entertained an America rocked by the Depression. The Hall of Fame record shows that he won 72 bouts, with 53 knockouts, and lost 12.

The Baer family moved to Livermore after Max finished the eighth grade. In their teens, Max and Buddy lived at Twin Oaks Ranch, located near the

soccer fields in what is now Independence Park near the end of Holmes Street. Buddy remembered those early days: "We ran between 2,400-2,500 hogs at Twin Oaks. Max and I would come into town to collect the garbage and feed the pigs and then we'd clean the pens. You could smell us before you could see us coming."

At age 20 Max left the farm to train in Oakland at Jimmy Duffy's gym and had his first professional fight on 16 May 1929. He won 22 of his first 24 fights, nine with first-round knockouts. Although cleared of criminal charges in the death of Frank Campbell after a Baer knockout in 1930, Baer was much affected by the circumstances. For several months he refused to fight, and when he did return to the ring, for a while he lost bouts because of his reluctance to be aggressive. His older son, Max Baer Jr., objected to his father's portrayal in the 2005 film *Cinderella Man*: "It is a lie that my father boasted about killing two fighters in the ring. He cried about what happened and had nightmares over it. He helped put Frankie Campbell's children through college."

With some of his early winnings, Max bought his mother and father a comfortable home in Oakland. His marriage to a movie star ended in divorce, but his later marriage to waitress Mary Ellen Sullivan

in 1934 survived, and they had three children. Max starred in the movie *The Prizefighter and the Lady*, which debuted in November 1933. Also a Hollywood celebrity, Max Baer Jr. acted the role of Jethro Bodine on the *Beverly Hillbillies* for nine years.

Buddy too became a heavyweight fighter, known for his mild temperament and size by the nickname "Gentle Giant." He was 6 feet 6½ inches tall and weighed 250 pounds; big brother Max was only 6 feet 4 inches. Buddy started boxing professionally in 1934 just as Max hit the highlight of his career, and although Buddy compiled a 48 win-7 loss record, he never won a national title. Both brothers were defeated by Joe Louis, and they later joked that they had tried to get a rematch with Joe, but the boxing commission wouldn't let them both in the ring with him at the same time.

The Fraternal Order of Eagles named their heart fund for Max after his early death of a heart attack, and Buddy made countless personal appearances as a singer around the country to raise money for the fund. After surviving a heart attack in 1962, Buddy felt an added incentive to continue his work for the Max Baer Heart Fund. He appeared in 15 Hollywood films, including some with Abbott and Costello.

(Readers can reach me at [am50homan@yahoo.com](mailto:am50homan@yahoo.com).)