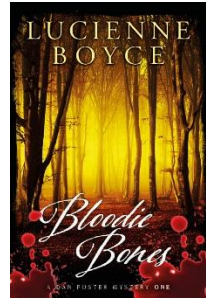


# Lucienne Boyce

## DAN FOSTER AND THE PUGILISTS

Find out about the pugilists Dan encounters in *Bloodie Bones*...



**Belcher, James  
(Jem)** (1781-1811)

Jem Belcher, nicknamed the Napoleon of the Ring, was born in Bristol into a boxing family. His maternal grandfather was Jack Slack, and his brother-in-law was Bob Watson. Jem's younger brother Tom was also a pugilist, as was his elder brother, Ned, who had to abandon his ambitions following an injury to his right hand. It was also said that one of Jem's sisters was a pugilist. Jem worked as a butcher, and began boxing at local fairs.

In 1798 Jem moved to London, where Bill Ward invited him to his house for a private sparring match, wearing gloves, which left Ward convinced that Belcher was champion material. When Belcher admitted he hadn't hit as hard as he could out of respect for his host, Ward insisted they fight again with the gloves off – and was floored several times. The two men remained friends however.

Belcher was a handsome, well-mannered and popular fighter, and his career soon took off. In 1800, following the retirement of champion John Jackson, Belcher challenged Daniel Mendoza for the vacant championship. The magistrates received information about the planned fight, and after Mendoza was arrested and bailed, the match had to be called off. In December that year Belcher defeated Irish champion Andrew Gamble in nine minutes, becoming champion of England. In 1801 he defeated Joe Berks (or Bourke). After the fight both fighters and their seconds were imprisoned. The two men met again in 1802, when Belcher was victorious. After fighting John Firby, the Young Ruffian, in 1802, Belcher was again charged with rioting and fighting.



Belcher's glory days came to an abrupt end when he lost an eye during a rackets match in 1803. He took over the Jolly Brewers pub in Wardour Street, London, but unwisely re-entered the ring against Hen Pearce, the Game Chicken, in 1805. By then his health had deteriorated and he was defeated. He made further attempts to regain his status when he took on Bristol boxer Tom Cribb in 1807 and 1809, but was defeated both times, and did not fight again.

In 1804 Belcher's former patron Thomas Pitt, the second Lord Camelford, died and left Belcher his famous fighting bulldog Trusty. Otherwise Belcher was abandoned by the Fancy. He became increasingly morose and depressed. He moved to another pub, the Coach and Horses in Frith Street, Soho, where he died, possibly of cirrhosis of the liver, on 30 July 1811.

**Best-known tactic:** speed. It was said his punches came so fast you could not see them delivered.

**Interesting fact:** Belcher became a sporting and fashion icon. His habit of wearing his colours around his waist when he fought – a handkerchief in royal blue dotted with large white spots with a smaller blue spot in the centre – or as a necktie started a fashion trend. Soon everyone was wearing the Belcher Handkerchief around their necks – and tying it in the same style as their hero too.

**Belcher, Thomas**  
**(Tom)** (1783–1854)

Tom Belcher was Jem Belcher's younger brother and also a pugilist. Out of twelve prize fights, he won eight and drew one. He defeated Jack Warr junior and Bill Ryan in 1804, and inflicted another defeat on Ryan in a rematch in 1806. In 1806 and 1807 he fought Jewish fighter Dutch Sam – Samuel Elias (1775–1816) – three times, losing the first and third matches and drawing the second. He later took on pupils and also toured the country giving demonstrations of self-defence.

**Best known tactic:** fast hitter with his left hand, but his hits were said to be more like taps than hits.

**Interesting fact:** Tom Belcher was one of eighteen boxers chosen to guard the entrance to Westminster Abbey at the coronation of George IV on 19 July 1821.

**Jack Broughton**  
(c.1703–1789)



A Thames waterman who made his living rowing wherries (water taxis), Broughton shot to fame in 1720 when he won the Thames watermen's annual rowing race. He went on to a successful boxing career, and when he retired from the ring in 1743 set up a London boxing academy for gentlemen. It was here that Broughton formulated the first set of rules for the sport (See "Broughton's Rules" in the *Bloodie Bones* glossary). Broughton came out of retirement in 1750 to fight Jack Slack, who defeated the former champion in fourteen minutes.

**Best-known tactic:** frequent changes of tactic!

**Interesting fact:** Broughton's physique was so admired that he was used by sculptor John Michael Rysbrack as the model for his statue of Hercules.

**Elisha Crabbe** (d 1809)

Crabbe was renowned for defeating Stephen Oliver at Blackheath on 17 April 1788. Oliver was known as Death, and a formidable rival. When Crabbe retired from boxing he ran a public house in Duke's Place, London and was a "city officer", though what exactly his office was is not known.

**Jack Firby or Fearby, The Young Ruffian**

Jack Firby won his title when he defeated well-known pugilist Symonds, The Old Ruffian. He was defeated in his turn by Jem Belcher in 1803.

**Interesting fact:** when magistrates tried to prevent the Belcher v Firby fight, the arrangements for the match just outside the village of Linton near Newmarket were kept secret – and when the locals saw the crowds descending on their village they thought it was a French invasion!

**Bill Hooper, The Tinman**

Another Bristol boxer, he was a man of small stature but a confident fighter. He moved to London where he ran a tin manufactory in Tottenham Court Road (although another source describes him as an itinerant salesman in the west country) before taking up professional boxing. Following a victorious fight at Lord Barrymore's seat, Wargrave, in 1789, he won the Earl's patronage. His fame as a boxer spread and at one time he was even put forward as a match for Mendoza, who declined to fight him.

Hooper's relationship with the rakish seventh earl of Barrymore, Richard Barry, (1769–1793) proved to be his undoing. Barrymore was a friend of George IV's (then Prince of Wales, or as many satirists had it, Prince of Whales), who nicknamed him Hellgate. The Earl was something of a practical joker, but many of his stunts were violent and destructive – including kidnapping young women and leaving coffins outside their houses – and Hooper was employed to fight off anyone who objected. Barrymore also had a penchant for visiting slum districts, where a bodyguard came in useful.



Hooper fell out of the Earl's favour and was dismissed. He took to heavy drinking and was reduced to poverty. He was discovered drunk on a London door step and taken to the local workhouse, where he died.

**Interesting fact:** Hooper fought Bristol boxer Ben Brain (1753–1794) in 1790 in a fight that lasted *one hundred and eighty* rounds.

**George Ingleston,  
The Brewer**

George the Brewer was best known for defeating England champion John Jackson in 1789, a battle which he won more by accident than design when Jackson slipped on the wet stage and dislocated his ankle.

**Best-known tactic:** a slow but strong fighter, he never dodged blows but took them full on.

**Interesting fact:** after his fall, Jackson offered to fight the Brewer sitting down and tied to a chair – an offer which Ingleston refused.

**John Jackson  
(Gentleman  
Jackson) (1769–  
1845)**

London-born Jackson fought only three fights, but became England champion after the last of these in 1795 when he defeated Daniel Mendoza. The victory was controversial, based as it was on Jackson grabbing Mendoza's hair and beating him to the floor. The umpires ruled in Jackson's favour and the fight continued, but Mendoza was unable to recover from the beating. Jackson retired from the ring unchallenged and was succeeded by Jem Belcher.

After leaving the ring, Jackson founded a boxing school patronised by the nobility and moved in the highest social circles.

**Best-known tactic:** it's tempting to suggest that Jackson's best known tactic was not fighting! Despite the brevity of his boxing career he was held in the highest esteem and became so respectable that he was known as "Gentleman Jackson".

**Interesting fact:** Lord Byron was one of Jackson's pupils and memorialised him in his *Hints from Horace*: "And men unpractised in exchanging knocks/Must go to Jackson ere they dare to box".

**Johnson, Tom  
(c.1750–1797)**

Tom Johnson's real name was Thomas Jackling. He was born in Derby, but had moved to London where he worked as a porter by the time he fought his first professional bout with the defeat of veteran Stephen Oliver. He went on to defeat Bill Ward in 1787, his victory establishing him as the champion. Johnson made good money from his fighting – he was said to have been paid £1,000 for his sixty-two round battle with strong-man Isaac Perrins of Birmingham, on top of which he earned £500 door money. His backer, however, made £20,000 from the betting.



Johnson was unable to hang onto his title or his money. His reign as champion ended when he was defeated by Bristol fighter Ben Brain in 1791. He then ran a London pub with a dubious reputation, The Grapes in Duke Street, eventually losing his licence. He moved to Ireland but failed to make money there and ran up gambling debts. He died in poverty in Cork, blaming his death on the injuries he had received from Ben Brain.

**Best-known tactic:** targetting his opponent's head.

**Interesting fact:** when working as a porter, Johnson would demonstrate his strength by holding a sack of corn in one hand and swinging it around his head. It was said he once did this trick only an hour after a fight.

**Mendoza, Daniel**  
(1765?–1836)

Jewish boxer Daniel Mendoza was born in Aldgate, London. His first important victory was at Barnet in 1787 against Sam Martin, the Bath Butcher. The 1788 Humphreys v Mendoza fight referred to in *Bloodie Bones* took place in Hampshire, when Mendoza lost to Richard Humphreys; he won their next context the following year, and defeated Humphreys again in 1790. In 1792 he defeated Bristolian Bill Ward at Croydon. In 1795 he was defeated by John Jackson, known as Gentleman Jackson, at Hornchurch in Essex when Jackson held him by his long hair while hitting him. A furious Mendoza later accused him in the press of “unmanly conduct, by laying hold of my hair”.

Mendoza become landlord of The Admiral Nelson in Whitechapel. He also taught boxing from his academy in Bartholomew Lane, and in 1789 he published his manual, *The Art of Boxing*. A challenge from Jem Belcher in 1801 came to nothing as Mendoza said he would only return to the ring to fight Jackson. However, in 1806 he fought Harry Lee, following an acrimonious dispute between the two men about the terms of the bail Mendoza had arranged when Lee was imprisoned for debt. Their match lasted for fifty three rounds. Mendoza’s final fight was his defeat by Tom Owen in 1820.

Mendoza took over a public house in Kennington, by which time he and his wife had eleven children. However, his financial affairs did not prosper. He had several stays in debtors’ prison, and died in poverty at his home in Petticoat Lane on 3 September 1836. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery at Mile End.

**Best-known tactic:** more agile than strong, Mendoza was a fast hitter with superior defensive skills.



**Interesting fact:** Mendoza had to contend with a great deal of anti-Semitism in the course of his boxing career, but it was said that his boxing success inspired other young Jews to learn self-defence – resulting in a reduction in the number of assaults on the Jewish community.

**Oliver, Stephen** (?–?)

A favourite of Broughton's and a well-known fighter in the 1770s, Oliver is said to have fought more times than any other English boxer. In spite of advancing age, he continued competing, but suffered a series of defeats. One was at the hands of the future champion Tom Johnson in 1781 – the match that Dan Foster saw as a boy – and he was later defeated by Elisha Crabbe in 1788.

**Best-known tactic:** an agile rather than a strong fighter.

**Interesting fact:** nicknamed Death because of his pale complexion.

**Hen Pearce, The Game Chicken**  
(1777–1809)

Henry Pearce, known as The Game Chicken because he shortened his name to "Hen", was born in Bristol. He was apprenticed to a butcher, and started boxing as a boy. He was a friend of the British champion, fellow-Bristolian Jem Belcher, who encouraged him to move to London to pursue a boxing career. By 1805 Hen was the Champion of England. Hen's victories caused a rift between him and Belcher which culminated in a match on 6 December 1805 when Belcher, handicapped by the loss of one eye, was defeated by his former friend.

Unfortunately, Pearce, like so many young boxers, let his fame and fortune go to his head. Heavy drinking and fast living took its toll and he returned to Bristol in 1807. His marriage broke up and after a period making a living giving boxing exhibitions his health too broke down. He died of tuberculosis in London in 1809.

**Best-known tactic:** the disabling blow to his opponent's jugular vein.

**Interesting fact:** in Bristol in 1807 Hen climbed onto the roof of a neighbouring building to rescue a servant girl from a fire. Always a popular figure, this courageous act inspired many eulogies in prose and verse.

**Jack Slack** (1721–1768)



Norfolk-born Jack or John Slack was, like many pugilists, a butcher by trade. He had notched up several victories before his surprise win over Jack Broughton in 1750 in a little over fourteen minutes. Slack fought a number of notable fights, some in and around Bristol, but finally lost the championship to William Stevens the Nailer in less than four minutes in June 1760 in London. Following this he ran a butcher's business in London before moving to Bristol where he set up a boxing school. Jem and Tom Belcher were his grandsons.

**Best-known tactic:** the chopper - a back-hander to the face (and the blow he used to blind Broughton in their 1750 match).

**Interesting fact:** an unpopular fighter, Slack's standing with the Fancy plummeted after he fixed a protégé's fight with bribery.



**George Stevenson,  
The Coachman**  
(c 1720–1741)

A Yorkshireman and former coachman to a family near Hull, Stevenson is remembered for his forty-minute fight with champion Jack Broughton in 1741, which took place in a fair booth in Tottenham Court Road. Stevenson never recovered from injuries sustained in the fight and died a month later. Broughton was devastated. It was Stevenson's death which prompted him to devise Broughton's Rules.

**Best-known tactic:** a fast hitter.

**Interesting fact:** George was promoted to head coachman after he saved his employer's wife, Mrs Sykes, from highwaymen when driving her home from a ball. He was dismissed by her husband not long after, however, for which the usual explanation given is a tedious innuendo about how Mrs Sykes showed her gratitude to George.

**Bill Ward (William  
Warr) (?– ?)**

In 1787 when reigning champion Tom Johnson was looking for someone who might be able to stand up to him, Bristol boxer Bill Ward was put forward. They fought in January 1788, when Ward was defeated. This is the fight Dan refers to in *Bloodie Bones*.

In May 1788 Ward was on his way to see the Humphreys v Mendoza fight. When his coach stopped at the Black Horse in Enfield, Ward got into an altercation with a blacksmith called Edwin Swaine, who supported Mendoza. The two men fought, and Swaine was killed. In 1789 Ward was convicted of manslaughter, fined one shilling and sentenced to three months in Newgate.

Ward himself fought Mendoza in 1792 and 1794, and was defeated both times. Ward acted as Humphrey's second for his rematch with Mendoza at Doncaster in 1790. Bill Ward was one of the first boxers to test Jem Belcher's mettle at the start of the future champion's career when Belcher bested him in a private sparring match in London in 1798.

Ward died of consumption and was buried in St Giles's Churchyard.

**Best-known tactic:** a shifty fighter! When Ward fought Tom Johnson in January 1788, he annoyed the Fancy by dropping to his knees and claiming to be down whenever Johnson tried to punch him. After his defeat, he was booed off the field.

**Interesting fact:** Bill Ward and Hen Pearce were such good friends that when Hen died in 1809, he was buried in St Giles's Churchyard next to Bill Ward at his own request.



## Bob Watson

Watson's first big fight was in 1788 when he defeated the Jewish fighter Elisha Crabbe, who had defeated Steevy Oliver (known as Death). When Watson retired from the ring, he set up as a butcher in Bristol. He was Jem Belcher's trainer and married one of Jem's sisters.

**Interesting fact:** Bob Watson also had a spell upon the stage, performing in a pantomime at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden, when the fighting nearly became real after his sparring partner – boxer Bill Ward – accidentally knocked out one of Watson's teeth.



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