

40 Years Ago He Shook Up The World

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Tuesday, 24 February 2004 18:00

This Wednesday marks the 40th anniversary that a 7-1 underdog named Cassius Clay upset World Heavyweight Champion Sonny Liston in Miami Beach Florida. *You're 40 years old if a day, and don't belong in the ring with Cassius Clay* The title changed hands when Liston refused to get up off his stool for the seventh round, claiming and injured left shoulder. This was no doubt the introduction and coming out party for the man who changed Boxing and Sports forever. Who knew at the time of Clay's upset over Liston that he would go onto become one of the most recognized people in the history of the world?

On Tuesday night February 25th 1964, Clay was viewed as nothing more than a colorful glib kid who won a Gold Medal in the 1960 Rome Olympics as a light heavyweight. Clay was known for his fast hands and feet, and his unorthodox way of pulling back and away from punches. *If you'd like to lose your money, be a fool and bet on Sonny* Although his unique skill was obvious to all, no one in the Boxing Universe thought he was anything special. The thought that he could beat Liston was non-existent.

In the Month's and Week's leading up to the Liston-Clay bout, many writer's and Boxing historian's were comparing Liston to his good pal Joe Louis. In fact it was even thought by some that Liston was better than Louis and possibly the greatest heavyweight champ of all time. *I'm A bad man* Back in the early 60's, Liston was the most feared fighter on the planet. Sonny was the baddest man on the planet years before Jimmy Kirkpatrick met Mike Tyson's mother. The only difference was Sonny truly believed it.

Sonny Liston had been denied a title shot for years before he finally got it in September of 1962. Cus D'Amato, the manager and trainer of Heavyweight Champ Floyd Patterson sat on the title for more than four years. Cus knew Patterson had nothing for Liston. *I shook up he world, I shook up the World* While Cus played keep away, Liston demolished all the top contenders that the Patterson-D'Amato team avoided. After years of being accused of being afraid of Liston, Patterson went against the wishes of Cus and accepted a fight with him. On the night of September 25th 1962, Patterson defended the title against Liston. Two minutes after the bell for round one, Liston was the new undisputed champ.

By mid summer of 1963, Sonny Liston and Cassius Clay were on a collision course. In June Clay traveled to London to face British Champ Henry Cooper. Clay TKO'd Cooper in five rounds. However he was dropped by a beautiful Cooper left hook at the end of the fourth round, for the second time in his career. Clay beat the count but was in serious trouble as he went back to his corner. Clay's cunning trainer Angelo Dundee jacked around with his glove slightly delaying the start of the fifth round. Clay came out clear headed for the fifth round and reopened a cut over Cooper's eye causing the fight to be stopped. *To Prove I'm Great, he must go in eight*

One month later in July, Liston made the first defense of his title against the man he took it from, Floyd Patterson. The rematch turned out to be a rerun, and Liston TKO'd Patterson again

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in the first round paving the way for the Liston-Clay heavyweight title bout.

On November 6th 1963, Liston signed to defend his heavyweight title against the "Louisville Lip" better known as Cassius Clay. The fight was set for February 25th 1964 in Miami. Heading into their fight, Liston had no respect for Clay and thought he was nothing but a loudmouth with no heart. Liston truly believed that Clay would fold like a two-dollar suit in the big-spot. *If he wanna go to Heaven, I'll get'em in Seven*

Liston was feared, could punch with either hand, and was never off his feet. His only defeat was to Marty Marshall, a decision loss in his ninth fight when he suffered a broken jaw and lost a decision. Liston would defeat Marshall twice in subsequent fights before winning the title from Patterson. Sonny had a reach that measured between 82-84 inches. On top of that he was thought to have the strongest and best jab in heavyweight history. Something many still believe. Although Clay's jab was faster than Liston's, no one questioned whose' was better because it was a no brainer in favor of Liston.

Prior to fighting Liston, Clay had been down twice and was almost stopped by Cooper in his last fight. Cooper was a ranked contender when he fought Clay, but he was a lifetime behind Liston as a fighter. Most had predicted that Clay wouldn't make it out of the first round with Liston. In fact Liston himself led the charge o pinning that Clay won't make it out of the first round. *He'll be in a worse a fix if I cut it to Six* Most felt Clay wasn't as good or as experienced as Patterson. If Patterson can't make it past the first round with Liston, how can this kid with less than 20 fights do any better?

On the morning of February 25th, Liston and Clay weighed in at the Miami Beach Convention Center. When Liston came into's Clay's view, Clay went crazy taunting and shouting what he was going to do to him that night in the ring. Liston just glared back at Clay holding up two fingers signaling Clay's demise in the second round. Clay's conduct was so outrageous that he was fined 2500\$. *If he keeps talkin Jive, I'll end it in five* The fight was almost called off when Clay's blood pressure was taken and it was off the charts. Many thought Clay was petrified of Liston and wanted out of the fight. Later when his blood pressure was taken it was normal and the fight was on.

On fight night when Liston and Clay were standing at ring center during the referee's instructions, Clay glared back at Liston and looked down at him. Something that was a new experience for Sonny. Once the bell rang for round one and the fight started, Clay's speed and boxing ability stood out. *If he keeps talkin like Moore, he'll go in Four* Over the first three rounds Clay had is way with Liston beating him to the punch and cutting him up. During the fifth round Clay was having trouble with his eyes and was blinking. Somehow the monsil solution that was used on Liston's cuts mysteriously got onto his gloves which then got into Clay's eyes. This was something other Liston opponents also claimed.

Once Clay's eye's cleared up, it was target practice. At the end of the sixth round, Liston went slowly back to his corner a beaten fighter. Liston told his trainer Willie Reddish that he couldn't lift his left arm and couldn't continue. When it was apparent Liston was done for the night, referee Barney Felix went over to Clay's corner and raised his hand signaling the new champ,

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Cassius Clay. *Yes the crowd did not dream when they put down their money, that they would see a total eclipse of the Sonny*

The next day Clay announced that he was a member of the Nation of Islam, and wanted to be referred to as Cassius X. Two weeks later Elijah Muhammad would re-name him Muhammad Ali. Down the road there would be a rematch with Liston, Vietnam, a fight with the Government, an exile, a comeback, Frazier, and Foreman among others. There would also be Parkinson's disease and the lighting of the Olympic Torch to open the 1996 Olympic Games. *The crowd is getting Frantic, but our Radar stations have picked him up, he is somewhere over the Atlantic* He would come full circle from being one of the most hated men on the planet, to being one of the most loved. February 25th 1964 was the start of it all. It was the night that Clay upset Liston and Shook up the World!!