

## Winky Wright Career Facts

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### ***First Undisputed 154-Pound World Champion in 29 Years***

***Born Nov. 26, 1971, in Washington, D.C., now living in St. Petersburg, Fla.***

***Height: 5' 10½" Weight: Middleweight (160)***

***Record: 48-3, 25 KOs***

On July 30, 1992, Ronald Wright, an undefeated junior middleweight out of St. Petersburg, Florida, knocked out one Carlos Santana in the second round of a scheduled eight-rounder at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in nearby Tampa. For that, his 16th victory, he earned \$800, which was \$200 short of his largest purse. The ring announcer called him Winky Wright.

Five months and three days later, after several months of negotiations with the Don Kings of France, the Arcaries brothers, Michel and Louis, Wright knocked out one Darryl Lattimore in one round in Differdange, Luxembourg. Little changed. Wright was still undefeated and underpaid. Sure, the language was different. The pay was in francs, but they still only added up to a couple of thousand dollars. And the ring announcer called him Roland, a first name that would stick for the all-world junior middleweight champion's International Period, a 5 1/2-year span of 20 fights in seven countries and three continents.

The bridge from Tampa to Europe for Wright was erected by Dan Birmingham, who, except for a street fight with another teenager in Youngstown, Ohio, might never have wound up in St. Pete teaching young men how to throw and block a hook. "All I will say about that fight," said Birmingham, "is that I did not win it. I decided if I was going to fight, I had better learn how."

After moving to Florida in 1977 to operate a construction business, Birmingham opened his now famous gym in St. Petersburg, a higher institution of milling that, besides Wright, has produced Jeff Lacy, the undefeated IBF super middleweight champion. Wright walked into Birmingham's gym when he was 16; he's never left.

Birmingham's method of training is simple: it's hands on, no-frills, discipline and execution. "I'm not some rah-rah guy looking for the spotlight. When they walk in the door for the first time I tell them what I will do and what I expect, and that is what they get. No sugar coating, no empty promises."

After Wright had knocked out Santana for his 16th victory, Birmingham knew he had an undefeated slick 5' 10 1/2" tall southpaw that was flying under every major promoter's radar screen. He called Don King. He called Bob Arum. He called Lou Duva. He called every major player he could think of. He called all of them twice, some of them three and four times. Nobody called him back. Then he got lucky.

He called Art Mayorga, who had trained him as an amateur back in Ohio. Mayorga said he knew some people in France and would he and Wink consider talking with them. A few weeks later, Wright and Birmingham were on a plane to France to meet with the Arcaries brothers. A

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deal was struck; for his European debut, Wright would exchange the warm climate of Florida for the cold wintry season of Luxembourg.

The first trip was a bitterly frigid nightmare. Birmingham and Wright flew to France, then rode a hard-benched train for six hours to Luxembourg. From there, it was another hour by car through the mountains in a snow storm to reach their lodgings in Differdange. Their rooms were inexpensive and Spartan. That's where they spent Christmas and New Year's Eve. A few days before the Lattimore fight, Wright came down with the flu.

The late Arye Fain, who had signed on as Wright's agent, suggested a remembered remedy of honey and onions.

"You take a whole cup of honey and a whole onion and you leave the onion in the honey for a whole day," said Birmingham. "An hour before the fight you remove the onion and drink all of the honey. I'll tell you, it really works. It only lasts for an hour or an hour and a half, but while it is working, it dries up and makes you feel great."

Wright dropped Lattimore three times, stopped him in the first round. It was better than onions and honey.

Still fighting six- and eight-rounders, Wright went on a tear, ripping off eight straight victories in places like Levallois, France; Philipshalle, Dusseldorf, Germany; and a sporting club in Monte Carlo; with a brief stop (KO 1) in Punta Gorda, Florida. He was undefeated in 25 fights; his highest purse had been \$5,000. There still were no calls from King, Arum or Duva.

Looking back, Wright has to laugh. "I was fighting in places I had never heard of; that I could not even pronounce."

Then the Acaries brothers offered him \$50,000 to fight WBA super welterweight champion Julio Cesar Vasquez on Aug. 21, 1994, in another place Wright could not pronounce, Saint-Jean-de-Luz, France. The undefeated Wright had yet to fight a main event, had not gone more than eight rounds, and that far only twice. He had never even been in a scheduled 10-rounder. Vasquez was 50-1 and had fought just five less championship rounds (74) than Wright had fought in his whole career. "Where do we sign?" asked Wright.

"In France they do not have screens for the windows," said Birmingham. "It was hot and the mosquitoes feasted on Winky. The food was bad; the training facility was terrible. I kept wondering what else could go wrong."

Vasquez knocked Winky down in the second, seventh, ninth and twice in the last round, or so claimed Enzo Montero, one of the WBA's more-favored referees.

"The first three were slips," said Birmingham. "Winky was wearing new shoes and he was slipping all over the place."

"The first knockdown in the last round was legitimate," added Wright. "He caught me good. The

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last knockdown was a push; I was so tired my daughter could have pushed me down.”

Despite the controversial knockdowns, Vasquez won by just three points on one card (Marcial Vargas 113-110), by four on one (Ove Ovesen 114-110) and by five on the third (Marcos A. Torres 115-110).

Undaunted, Wright went back into some of boxing's more unheralded trenches: Tucuman, Argentina; Beziers, France; thrice to Levallois, France; St. Jean de Luz, France; Le Cannet, France. with brief appearances in the States in Inglewood and Norfolk. All were victories, raising his record to 34-1.

His 35th fight, against Andrew Council in Norfolk in March of 1996, was on the USA Network's Tuesday Night Fights. Six months earlier, Council had gained prominence with a decisive victory over former WBC welterweight champion Buddy McGirt. That was McGirt, this was Wright; Council (25-3-3) had no chance; Wright barely broke a sweat as he swept all three cards 118-109, 116-111, 116-112 in his second defense of the NABF super welterweight title. (His first two North American Boxing Federation championship happened in France. He took the title from Tony Marshall in February of 1995 in Beziers, and defended it against Anthony Ivory three months later in Levallois, a mere three metro stops from Paris.)

The door that Wright had been banging on for so long opened slightly for him after the Council fight. April of 1996 found him in Monroe, Michigan, the hometown of newly crowned WBO junior middleweight champion Bronco McKart, where he picked up \$50,000 and McKart's title with a split decision in an ESPN Friday Night Fights telecast.

“Well, at least I could pronounce Monroe,” Wright joked.

King, Arum and Duva failed to return calls. The Acaries brothers switched Wright's base of operations to England, where he earned a small but welcome fortune defending his WBO title against a trio of Brits - Ensley Bingham (Manchester,W12), Steve Foster (Manchester,TKO6) and Adrian Dodson (London.TKO6). For the three fights, he made approximately \$300,000, which was about what most American champions were taking down as expense money.

With his contract with the Acaries running out, Wright agreed to defend his title against South African Harry Simon for \$300,000 at the Carousel Casino in Hammanskraal, South Africa in August of 1998.

“Do they have mosquitoes in South Africa?” Wright asked Birmingham.

“They have screens,” responded the trainer.

“How do you pronounce this place?” asked Wright.

“South Africa,” said the trainer.

They both laughed.

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South Africa to the WBO is what the government calls a "Favored Nation." It is a natural phenomenon of the place, like the Kapama Private Game Preserve and the Vrdefort Dome, that controversial decisions never go to the guy with a passport in his back pocket. Now when Wright fought him, Simon, a Nambian by birth, was 16 and 0, if you want to count the victories over such folks as Kasi Kaihau and Petros Twala and Thabiso Diamini and Tandi Boyane. Wright was only Simon's second 10-round (plus) bout. In his first, he knocked out someone named Kasi Kaihau in Sheffield, England.

No matter. When it was over, and Wright had played professor to Simon's unwilling student, the three WBO judges decided that it was a majority draw, which meant that Wright had retained his title. A few minutes later, while Wright was sitting in his dressing room unwrapping his hands, an official came in to tell him that there had been an error in the scoring, he had lost by a majority decision.

Boom!

Then they released the new scoring: Aubrey Erasmus 117-113 for Simon. Julie Lederman 115-113 for Simon. Manuel Oliver Palomo 114-114. No one explained how there had to be at least a three-point swing in one of the judge's scoring to change the decision.

There is an old South African proverb: "The three-toed blue-horned frog watches cautiously from the lily pad."

His contract with the Acaries expired, Wright returned home, to St. Petersburg, where he lives with his high school sweetheart, Tammye Ryan, and their two children, Raven, 12, and Roemello, 9. When not training, he plays golf (shoots in the 90s, but has dipped into the high 80s), bowls (a 180 average) and plays basketball in all the charity tournaments in Florida.

"We were not unhappy with the Acaries," Birmingham said. "Far from it. They did everything they said they would do and more. Winky was just tired of all the travel. They understood and wished us well. In fact, I speak with them even today."

Once resettled, Wright began Phase Three of his career, "Winky Does the United States."

He opened by knocking out Derrick Graham in three in Miami in March of 1999. In December of that year, he stepped out of character and went toe-to-toe with ferocious Fernando Vargas, the undefeated IBF junior middleweight champion, only to be saddled with another controversial loss by majority decision. One judge scored it a draw, the other two leaned to Vargas, though the media and fans at ringside thought Winky had won.

Undaunted - "People keep waiting for me go away; it ain't gonna happen" - Wright scored his second decision over McKart for the NABF and USBA titles. Three months later, he successfully defended his USBA title, this time against former world champion Keith Mullings.

When Felix Trinidad moved up to middleweight, he left an opening at the top of the IBF junior middleweight division. Wright, the mandatory challenger, stepped in and filled the void in

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October of 2001 by scoring a unanimous decision over highly regarded Robert Frazier. The judges said it was no contest. Pat Russell scored it 119-108. Judge Jose Cobian scored it 119-108. Judge Lou Moret thought Wright pitched a shutout 120-107.

In his first defense, Wright stopped Jason Papillion in the 5th round. That out of the way, he then turned to his old friend and mandatory challenger, Bronco McKart, for a second rematch, this one for the championship.

They fought on Sept 7, 2002 at the Rose Garden Arena in Portland, Oregon. On his way to his third loss to Wright, McKart's frustration boiled over. After referee Michael Fischer had penalized him five points for low blows, he was disqualified in the 8th round. "One more low blow and I would have auditioned for *The Sopranos*," cracked Wright at the post-fight press conference.

After all the years of fighting in places like Lincoln City, Nebraska and Beziere, France, the lights of Las Vegas finally blinked welcome to Winky Wright. In his Vegas debut, he was a little tight in scoring a decision over Juan Carlos Candelo. That was in March of 2003. When he signed to fight Angel Hernandez in Vegas eight months later, he promised a better performance. "This time I will be a little bit more adapted and give the fans more of what they like," Wright said at the signing. "The first time it was awkward."

Hernandez was a blowout: Judge Valerie Dorsett scored it 119-109. Judge Adalaide Byrd scored it 118-110. Judge Chuck Giampa had it 117-111 for Winky Wright.

Then to Wright's astonishment and delight, up stepped Sugar Shane Mosley, whose management problems kept him out in the cold much of his early career. Mosley owned two victories over Oscar De La Hoya, but was having trouble nailing down a big money fight. With a \$10 million dollar fight with Trinidad in the wings, Mosley offered a junior middleweight unification fight to Wright.

He did not want another fight with De La Hoya. He also liked that Wright agreed to take only \$750,000 out of the purse. That left \$2.1 million for Mosley. Using a jab honed in faraway places, Wright stayed on top of the bemused champion all night, never allowing him to use his speed. Mosley rallied in a furious final three minute burst, but it was too little, too late against a guy who had found the brass ring and was not going to let go. Wright won 117-111 on two cards, 116-112 on the third, becoming the division's first undisputed champion in 29 years, and the first man to ever hold all three major belts simultaneously.

"I've chased the big guys my whole career. Shane is the only one who would step up. We will do this again," Wright said. "Just show me the money."

They showed him \$1.6 million and he said "yes." They did it again on November 11, 2004. It was a better fight, with Mosley spurred by the memory of that first loss. As in many of the really good fights, the last round - one that truly ebbed and flowed - decided it. One judge called it a draw. Two others scored it for Wright, 115-113.

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Later that night, an exhausted Wright said: "If it wasn't for Shane, I'd still be fighting on ESPN, probably in West Virginia somewhere."