

## The Third Man Eddie Cotton

Written by Robert Ecksel  
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To movie buffs "The Third Man" is a flick by Orson Welles. To fight fans The Third Man is the ref. The referee is the ultimate noncombatant, optimally the invisible man. He stays out of the action while controlling the action. His job is to make sure no one gets seriously hurt.

When referees become stars in their own right, it's usually for the wrong reasons.

One referee whose work I admire is Eddie Cotton. He's a quiet ref, an unobtrusive ref, a ref with a light touch. Sometimes he has no choice and needs to disentangle grapplers, but Cotton tries to be a shadowy presence.

Eddie Cotton was born in Los Angeles in 1947 and moved to Paterson, New Jersey when he was three. Cotton told me "I followed the sport when I was a kid, The Gillette Cavalcade of Sports, everything. I got to watch Ike Williams, Archie Moore, Sugar Ray Robinson. I went to East Side High in Paterson: Joe Clark's 'Lean on Me' movie. I played baseball and ran cross-country." After graduation, Cotton went to St. Paul's College in Lawrenceville, West Virginia for two years.

Then fate intervened, as it usually does, in unexpected ways.

"I got drafted," explained Cotton. "I was in the service from 1968 to 1971 and I was overseas for 2½ years. While I was in Germany a couple of people said 'Look, in order to get a little extra money or a little extra duty off, you should officiate some sports.' So I started officiating football, basketball and some softball. When I came home from the service I didn't do too much officiating. And in 1980 when I was sworn into the City Council, they had a July 4 outdoor show at Hinchcliffe Stadium - he was governor of New Jersey at one time or something - so I asked Eddie Johnson, who was also a pro referee, 'Can I do one of those amateur bouts?'" Cotton smiled. "I always wanted to be in the ring and do one of those amateur bouts."

It was an auspicious beginning to an auspicious career in the least auspicious of sports.

Cotton continued: "He brought an application for me to join the USA/ABF - United States Association of Amateur Boxing Federation - and I got a pair of white pants, a pair of boxing shoes, a white shirt, a patch. And the first bout I had was a 3-round, 1-minute round Junior Olympic bout. The kids were 65 pounds. And that's how I started."

After twelve years working the amateurs, Cotton turned pro in 1992 and has been at it ever since.

One of the main controversies that swirl around refs and refereeing is the question of early stoppages. I asked Eddie Cotton how he determines when and if a fight should be stopped, and how that might be better determined.

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“The main focus is that you’re supposed to make sure that the fighters are safe,” he said. “Your main concern is the safety of the fighters. That’s number one. Yet they’re engaged in a very dangerous, violent sport. That’s why I have always been in favor of the standing 8-count. It’s been outlawed and many people are not in favor of it. When I was a fan I was not in favor of it, because I didn’t understand it. But as an experienced referee going on 26 years now, I really would hope that sooner or later we understand that you need it. And you can use it only one time to make an assessment and then make a decision on what you want to do - because without having a standing 8-count, now it’s created a little controversy in certain fights. I would prefer to have the standing 8-count, that opportunity to step in, to make an assessment, and to judge whether this fight should continue, or whether the fighter has a chance to win.”

So what are the criteria for stopping a fight before the final bell?

“There’s a bunch of different criteria that most good referees use,” replied Cotton. “I think all of us have a scorecard in the back of our heads. Even though we don’t score, remember that at one time the referee used to score. So if a bout starts to get lopsided and the guy has lost his punching power, has very little chance to win, and he starts taking some punches, then the fight should be terminated. So you start looking at them and asking: Are they coherent?”

Coherence is a relative term, so I asked Cotton to elaborate.

“There are certain things I have learned from some of the finest referees: Larry Hazzard, Arthur Mercante Sr., Joe Cortez, Richard Steele. I don’t ask fighters during the course of the fight, ‘Are you okay? Are you all right? Do you want to continue?’ because most of the time, even if they’re hurt and they’re in bad condition, they’ll say yes. I’ll try to ask them some other things like, ‘Do you know where you are? What round is this? What’s your last name?’ Something that will let me know: if they can’t respond to that, they’re finished.”

I asked Eddie Cotton if he could recall an example of a fighter stumped by those simple questions.

“I had a bout as an amateur in Jersey City,” Cotton said. “A heavyweight, a big heavyweight, a black kid, and something just told me to watch him. He was fighting a Spanish guy from New York, and he fainted and *boom!* - hit this black kid right on the chin. He fell like his feet were tied together, like a sack of potatoes. He barely got up. I had nine in his face and he was slumped against the ropes. So I asked him, ‘What’s your name?’ No response. I said ‘Where are you?’ He said ‘Atlantic City,’ and I waved it off. Then his managers jumped in the ring and they wanted to know why I stopped the fight. I told them he didn’t know his name and where he was at. They asked, ‘What did he say?’ I said ‘Atlantic City.’ And his trainer said: ‘But that’s where he was born!’”

I asked Cotton about some of the biggest fights he ever reffed.

“I’ve had a total of 30 world title bouts and approximately 60 championship bouts,” he said. “I had Bowe-Golota 2 at the Garden. Three of Sugar Shane Mosley’s title fights. But number one was Tyson and Lennox Lewis.”

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What little controversy that has accrued to Eddie Cotton comes from that big bout at The Pyramid in Memphis. Some boxing writers and commentators, in regulation holier-than-thou mode, chastised Cotton for not letting Lennox fight his fight (whatever that might mean in context of a one-sided slaughter).

I asked Cotton to explain what went down.

“This was the first time in the history of any championship that instructions weren’t given in the ring before the opening bell. If you remember, they had a line of people separating the fighters. At the press conference they decided they would have separate weigh-ins, separate rules meetings, separate everything. I went into Tyson’s dressing room and he was a complete gentleman,” the ref remembered, “and I told him this: ‘We’re starting from scratch with a clean slate. All the stuff in the past is out the window. I expect you to abide by the rules of boxing, so I expect a good clean fight and obey my commands.’ He said, ‘Yes, sir. Thank you very much. Yes, sir.’”

That’s the Tyson I’ve always encountered. It seems he’s only a monster when there are monsters around him. Around civilized people, Mike’s downright civilized.

Cotton visited the dressing room of the champ: “Then we went into Lennox’s dressing room. He was sitting down on a sofa with sunglasses on. He did not stand up to shake my hand like you would normally do. Emanuel Steward said ‘Look, Eddie, we’re very happy you’re the referee. You’ve worked in other bouts where you’ve had to handle heavyweights and you’ve done a fine job. But we don’t want any clinches.’ I said ‘What do you mean you don’t want any clinches?’ ‘If there’s a clinch, we want you to break it up. We don’t want you to wait for any lull or anybody to punch out of there. We want you to break it up.’ I said ‘Fine, that’s not a problem.’”

It was Lewis vs. Tyson, after all. Everyone knew Tyson’s tank was on empty, even way back then. What was Team Lennox worried about?

“I think that they were worried about Mike getting in a clinch, tying up, and biting or doing something. That’s what I think and that’s what the commission thought too, because when we went outside, the commission said, ‘Well, Eddie, don’t let ‘em clinch. If they get tied up, break ‘em up right away.’ And Lennox is clenching for dear life the entire fight! And that’s what really kind of made it seem that I was on him, because he was holding, and he was pushing down. He was using his elbow. He was doing everything. Mike fought a clean fight. And when I read the comments later from Emanuel, he said I didn’t let him fight ‘a tall man’s fight.’ A tall man’s fight that is holding and clinching, hitting on the break, everything else? That’s what that whole thing was about. I didn’t let him fight? I broke up the clinches. What was I supposed to do? Let him clinch? He said break ‘em up.’”

Because games get played in boxing - the original f-you business according to some - I wondered if the whole business was a strategic move by Emanuel Steward.

“If you notice after the fourth round when I took that point from Lennox when he pushed Mike down - that was the second warning - he pushed Mike down and then swung across his back

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before he actually went to the canvas. And I'm glad he missed him, otherwise I'd be in all kinds of controversy," Cotton said. "After I took the point, from then on Lennox fought! So some people said I actually made Lennox fight the fight to win. Because initially when he came out, he looked to me like he was scared. And then after he saw that Mike didn't have anything - I can tell you that: he had nothing - Lennox started to fight. After that round I took that point, you could hear Emanuel in the corner. He was imploring. He said, 'Lennox, just fight like a little bitch.' Those were his exact words. I got it on tape. He says, 'You're gonna f-around and get hit with something. This guy's a dead man. You better fight.' So Lennox didn't tie up that much and boxed and finally knocked Mike out. And that was that."

And that was that.

Ten and out.