

Eddie Mustafa Muhammad ... The Life

Written by Robert Mladinich
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As a former two-time New York City Golden Gloves champion, 1972 Olympic alternate, and the WBA light heavyweight champion from 1980-81, Eddie Mustafa Muhammad has a lot to say about boxing.

Although he is now a top-flight Las Vegas-based trainer, he never strays far from his New York roots even though he has established roots all over the world. As President of the Joint Association of Boxers (JAB), a boxing union under the Teamster's umbrella, he is working toward establishing pension plans for fighters that are not much different from those available to ballplayers.

"My vision is at the end of the day the majority of boxers who retire will still keep their dignity," said the 53-year-old Muhammad as we flew from JFK Airport in New York to Las Vegas in early September. "This organization has been taking me all over the world, and there is interest from boxers in Europe and Africa. I want retired boxers to be able say, 'I'm a member of Local 202 and I've got a pension and health benefits.'"

If for some reason JAB doesn't turn out as planned, it won't be for lack of trying. Teamsters President Jimmy Hoffa, union attorney Walter Kane, Local 202 President Danny Kane, and Muhammad have been cutting a formidable swath through the boxing establishment.

For Muhammad, as well as the others, it is all about doing the right thing for the athletes who are continually exploited, then put out to pasture like old horses when their best days are behind them. Muhammad, for one, has too much love in his heart and for the sport to allow that to keep happening.

Growing up on the streets of Brownsville, Brooklyn, he was known as Eddie "The Flame" Gregory, the son of Willie the housing cop and Arlene. It was obvious early on that boxing was his game.

He was so good at it, he didn't have to work very hard in the beginning, which resulted in him developing some bad habits that hurt him down the stretch. He beat future world middleweight champion Vito Antuofermo in the 1971 New York City Golden Gloves and then followed up the next year with a win over the very tough "Irish" Pat Maloney. He was then selected as the alternate for 1972 Olympian Marvin Johnson, who won a bronze, at that year's Munich Games.

Turning pro later that year, Muhammad would eventually fight a veritable who's who of boxing elite from the seventies and eighties. Included among them were Bennie Briscoe (L 10), Matthew Saad Muhammad (W 10), Victor Galindez (L 15), Jesse Burnett (W 10), James Scott (L 12), Marvin Johnson (TKO 11), and Michael Spinks (L 15).

Even having squared off with such a formidable array of talent, Muhammad remembers his toughest opponent being unheralded Mario Rosa, who knocked him down in the sixth and

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seventh rounds before being stopped by Gregory in the eighth round of a slugfest at Madison Square Garden's Felt Forum in November 1974. (While Rosa was Muhammad's toughest opponent, Muhammad says his hardest hitting opponent was Matthew Saad Muhammad. He said Saad hit him so hard, he split his trunks).

"I was up and coming, he was the first southpaw I fought, and was he tough," said Muhammad. "He had already beaten all the Latinos at the Forum, and also beat good black fighters like Tom Bethea and Leon Washington. He made me dig deep and work hard for the win. He made me a better fighter."

Three years later, in Torino, Italy, Muhammad was out-pointed by WBA light heavyweight champion Victor Galindez. "I thought I beat him fair and square, but it was his [adopted] country and the judges had their say," said Muhammad.

Muhammad rebounded with the impressive stoppage of the always tough Burnett, fought back into contention in and around the New York area, and then went off to win the same title from Marvin Johnson in Knoxville, Tennessee, in March 1980, as the prelim to the John Tate-Mike Weaver heavyweight title fight. Muhammad hit Johnson with a body shot that nearly cut him in half.

"That was the happiest moment of my career," said Muhammad. "But not for the reasons you might think. I came from Brownsville, the birthplace of Murder Inc., and a lot of those old Jewish gangsters were still around back then. By winning that title I showed my mother and father that I made something of myself. I realized then and there that that was always my goal. Making money was secondary to making my parents proud. Growing up where I did, things could have turned out a lot different. Boxing saved me and brought my family so much happiness. That's why I'm still so committed to it."

Muhammad would defend the title twice, against Jerry Martin and Rudi Koopmans, and then make the mistake of adding 25 pounds to challenge heavyweight contender Renaldo Snipes in May 1981. After being soundly beaten by decision, he dropped back down to defend his light heavyweight title against Michael Spinks, but lost much of his natural strength. He was still trying to drop weight on the morning of the fight and wound up losing a unanimous decision. Four years later he would have one more shot at a title, but was beaten by Slobodan Kacar of Yugoslavia for the vacant IBF title. Muhammad, whose career lasted from 1972-88, retired with a record of 50-8-1 (38 KOs).

"I did what I did and I did it well," said Muhammad. "I made a lot of mistakes, but learned from all of them. I think that's what made me such a good trainer. I understand everything a fighter is feeling and thinking, sometimes before they even realize it."

At the urging of Bob Arum, Muhammad moved his wife, son and three daughters to Las Vegas in the early eighties, began training fighters at the Top Rank Gym, and has never looked back. Over the years, he has trained, among many others, Iran Barkley, Ricky Meyers, Carl Daniels, Joey Spina, Paul Vaden and Michael Benntt.

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While he still trains fighters as often as he can, his duties at JAB have made him more of a goodwill ambassador to the sport than anything else. At any given time he has well over 200,000 frequent flier miles on his credit card. Over the course of just a few days in September, he was in Rhode Island working with Spina, meeting with Jack Johnson's relatives in New York to plan strategy on having his criminal record expunged and getting him inducted into the Harlem Hall of Fame, and visiting Pottsville, Pennsylvania, where he worked with a group of young amateurs and pros.

Muhammad loved every minute of it and, as tired as he was on the plane, was more than happy to talk about it.

"Boxing not only brought me a title and a lot of money, it brought me to Capitol Hill where I sit in on Senate hearings all the time," he said. "Every time a fighter gets a bad decision, I get a call. Or I'm out fundraising or hanging banners at boxing shows, trying to drum up support. We have meetings every quarter and are supported by promoters like Lou DiBella and Cedric Kushner. I have the opportunity to make boxing better. I have the greatest job in the world. I wouldn't change it for anything. I wouldn't change my life for anything."