

Michael Marley's Boxing Odyssey

Written by Robert Mladinich
Monday, 28 November 2005 19:00

Mike Marley, who has worn many hats in the sweet science, has squeezed an awful lot of living into his 55 years. His love affair with boxing first blossomed in 1963, when at the age of 13 he started the Cassius Clay Fan Club, which soon evolved into the Muhammad Ali Fan Club when the heavyweight champion changed his name to reflect his newfound Muslim beliefs.

Clay, who had won a gold medal at the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome, was in the early days of his long and illustrious reign as The Greatest. "For \$5 a year you got a membership card and a newsletter called the *Louisville Lip*," said the high-octane Marley, who was born and raised in the Boston area. "I had about 200 members. There were a lot of bylines by guys with names like Joe Shadyac and Manuel Labor."

The creative Marley also began making up unofficial programs for colorful New England promoter Sam Silverman, who often ran five shows a week throughout Massachusetts and as far north as Portland, Maine. "Subway Sam Silverman was one of the greatest characters I ever met in boxing," said Marley.

"He used to build these phenomenal records for local white guys, all of whom would eventually get beat when they went on the road. Sam used to bring envelopes to the newspaper guys when boxing was still popular enough for the newspaper guys to take the envelopes."

Shortly before Ali's first fight with Sonny Liston in February 1964, Marley wrote to the future heavyweight champion at his training facility in Miami Beach. "It was so long ago," jokes Marley, "they didn't even have zip codes back then." Although The Greatest didn't answer the letter, it would play a big part later on when Ali developed an avuncular relationship with Marley.

"I was sitting in the second balcony of the Boston Garden watching the first Ali-Liston fight," said Marley. "But for the rematch, I got even luckier."

The rematch was originally slated for Boston, and Ali was staying locally at the Statler Hilton hotel. One day Marley called him there, told him he was the one who wrote to him, and asked if he would sign the cover of his "I am The Greatest" record album.

"Ali asked me if I was a white boy or if I was colored," said Marley. "After I told him the truth, I asked if I could go to the press conference but he said I couldn't. I asked him why and he said because Liston eats little kids."

Undeterred, Marley waited for Ali at the hotel and finally met the man he worshipped. Ali took a liking to the cheeky youngster, and immediately took him under his wing.

"In and of itself, that was amazing," marvels Marley. "But at the time Ali was always in the company of Malcolm X and Minister Louis Farrakhan. When Ali said I could work in his camp, I was around these people all the time."

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Among the others in the camp were the aging black actor Stepin Fetchit, heavyweight contender and chief sparring partner Jimmy Ellis, and Rahman Ali, Muhammad's boxing brother who Marley says "couldn't fight a lick." The awestruck Marley was more of a gofer than anything else, and he would most often fetch water or tea for Ali after a workout.

The Boston rematch wound up being cancelled because Ali suffered an attack of appendicitis. When Marley visited Ali at the hospital, the champion was surrounded by a squad of bodyguards from the Nation of Islam. He was too young to realize he was in the midst of such strong social history.

"The champ told them to let me in, and I visited him every day for three weeks," said Marley. "Later, at a press conference he called me to the podium and told everyone I was his biggest fan. A reporter asked me why I admired him.

"I said, 'Number one: his fighting ability; number two: his personality; and number three: his humility.' With that, Ali grabbed his face in [feigned] surprise. The photo went over the wire with me in it. It said: *Clay fan would rather fight than switch.*"

When the Liston rematch was rescheduled for Lewiston, Maine in May 1965, Ali's trainer, Angelo Dundee, forbade Marley from attending. He was afraid of the violence that might occur because of the immense anti-Muslim sentiment.

Marley was left crying in a Boston hotel lobby when "Diamond" Jim Reilly, a local pimp and casual acquaintance of Ali, whose motto was *All I do is rest and dress, read the funnies, and count my moneys,* happened along.

He took pity on the young Marley, told him to hop into the back seat of his Cadillac and, accompanied by three busty members of his vast stable, headed north to Lewiston with Marley in tow.

As soon as they encountered a furious Dundee, the always calm and cool Diamond Jim placated the trainer by utilizing his best Barry White. "Don't say anything Angelo, he's my guest." Dundee never uttered another word about Marley being there.

Somehow, Diamond Jim forgot about Marley after the fight, and the youngster found himself stranded far from home, short on cash, but never short on guile or the good fortune that always seemed to come his way.

He wound up hitching a ride with heavyweight contender George Chuvalo and a fellow named Teddy McWhorter, who were heading back to Beantown to catch a flight home to Canada.

En route they stopped at a Holiday Inn where Chuvalo told Marley he wanted him to meet someone in the lobby. Minutes later, he was being introduced to the enormously popular former heavyweight champion Rocky Marciano.

"I was amazed at how muscular but small he was," said Marley. "But it was a thrilling moment.

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Hours earlier I had seen my one idol knock out Liston, and now I was meeting Marciano. For a kid from New England, meeting Marciano was like meeting God."

Years later Marley attended the University of Nevada at Reno, where he competed on the school's boxing team. Although he had about 12 bouts with mixed success, it was one bout he didn't have that stands out the most.

"We were going to fight a team from the 12th Naval District, which was based out of Vallejo, California," said Marley. "I was ruled ineligible to box because I was only a freshman and they were a very experienced team. It's a good thing, because my opponent would have been [current top-flight trainer] Jesse Reid, who was knocking everyone out. He later won a lot of fights as a pro."

Reid, who competed professionally as a super middleweight from 1969-71, actually amassed a record of 5-1-1 (2 KOs).

After graduation, Marley worked as a producer for Howard Cosell at ABC television in New York and as a longtime boxing reporter for the *New York Post*. In 1990, while employed at the *Post*

, he engaged in a three-round charity exhibition in Atlantic City with Tommy Hearns. All in all, jokes Marley, his boxing career can be summed up with his own version of an Ali catch phrase: Ali:

Float Like a Butterfly, sting like a moth.

Marley eventually traveled the world as the head publicity flack for Don King. In many ways he and King are very similar. Both have unlimited energy, tremendous egos and chutzpah, and don't know the meaning of the words "no" or "can't."

While in his late forties, Marley earned a law degree and is now a practicing criminal defense attorney in New York. He also works as an adviser to the San Diego-based Suycan Tribe of the Kumeyaay Nation, who are quickly establishing a big name in boxing promotion with marquee attractions like Jorge Paez Jr., Joan Guzman, Julio Diaz, and Israel Vasquez.

He also works for Team Palle, the Denmark-based promotional outfit that handles WBA super middleweight champion Mikkel Kessler. He and Team Palle recently made what Marley considers a very generous offer to the camp of IBF champion Jeff Lacy to engage in a unification bout, either in Denmark or in Lacy's home state of Florida.

"On a regular basis I'm juggling 20 to 25 criminal cases at a time," said Marley. "But I could never get out of boxing completely. No rehab center or 12-step program has been invented that could keep me out of the game. Even if there was, the way I am I'd probably need a 15-step program. And that probably wouldn't work either."