

## Boxing Debuts, Auspicious and Otherwise

Written by Ed Schuyler

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There is nothing like starting at the top in boxing. Getting on top is a different matter.

In 1975, Rafael Lovera of Paraguay got knocked out in the fourth round by 37-year-old Luis Estaba of Venezuela in a bid for the vacant WBC light flyweight title at Caracas. It reportedly was discovered later that Lovera was making his pro debut. Obviously, it was another top job by the WBC rankings committee. I could find no other fights for Lovera before or after he fought Estaba, who did not turn pro until he was 28. He was 28-7-2 when he became champion.

Pete Rademacher went after boxing's biggest prize in 1957 when the 1956 Olympic champion made his pro debut in a challenge to world champion Floyd Patterson in Sick's Stadium at Seattle. Rademacher knocked down Patterson in the second round, then got knocked down six times before getting knocked out in the seventh round.

"The experts, of course, were predicting that this lopsided match couldn't go more than the first punch or the first round – two at the most," Patterson wrote (with Milton Gross) in his 1962 autobiography "Victory Over Myself." "I got hit with a right hand in the second and I did go down. It wasn't a slip, but I was more embarrassed that hurt by the knockdown. They tell me I grinned on the canvas. I didn't know that. All I knew was an amateur had knocked me down and I had better start putting a stop to the foolishness."

Rademacher fought until 1962 and posted a 15-7-1 record, with eight knockouts. In his first fight after Patterson, he was knocked out in the fourth round by Zora Foley. In his last bout, he scored a 10-round decision over former middleweight champion Bobo Olson, who had puffed himself up to 181 pounds.

Patterson, the 1952 Olympic middleweight champion, made a less ballyhooed pro debut than Rademacher. Weighing 164½ pounds, the 17-year-old Patterson knocked out Eddie Godbold (3-12-1) in the fourth round of scheduled six-round preliminary bout in 1952 at St. Nicholas Arena in New York City.

At least Patterson's debut drew the attention of the New York-based media. Four other great fighters turned pro in virtual obscurity.

In 1935, 19-year-old Archie Moore knocked out Billy Sims in the second round at a Civilian Conservation Corps camp at Poplar Bluff, Ark. I found this fight listed only on Boxrec.com, and it was noted it probably was a semi-pro match. Moore's official pro debut was second-round knockout of Poco Kid (record unavailable), a six-round KO of Murray Allen (0-3-0) or a six-round decision over Allen in 1936, depending on what record you look at. On Dec. 17, 1951, Moore would win the light heavyweight championship on 15-round decision over Joey Maxin in his 170th pro fight..

Al Iovino evened his record at 1-1-0 with a third-round knockout over 18-year-old Henry

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Armstrong, making his pro debut, in scheduled four-round featherweight bout on a show in the Meyers Bowl at North Braddock, Pa., in 1931. Six years and 90 fights later, Armstrong would knock out featherweight champion Petey Sarron and win the first of three world titles he would hold simultaneously.

In 1947, heavyweight Lee Epperson, who had a good amateur career and was considered a solid prospect, made his pro debut in a scheduled four-round bout against a wild-swinging opponent, also turning pro, in the Valley Arena at Holyoke, Mass.. In the third round Epperson was knocked out by Rocco Marchegiano, fighting as Rocky Mack to protect his amateur status. The victory was the first of 49 in 49 fights for the man who would reap fame as Rocky Marciano. Marciano's first purse was \$35. He also used the name Rocky Mack because it sounded vaguely Irish and the fight was St. Patrick's Day. He could have fought as Rocky O'Brien and he would have fooled no one into thinking he was Irish.

Larry Holmes was 23 when he rode to Scranton, Pa., with Ernie Butler, who had trained him an amateur, for his pro debut –a four-round heavyweight bout against Rodell Dupree (2-2-0) in 1973 in the Catholic Youth Center. Holmes won a decision, collected \$69, and to celebrate he went home with one of the two busloads of fans from Easton. Holmes would become a sparring partner for Muhammad Ali, Ken Norton and Joe Frazier before beginning a seven-year reign as a heavyweight champion in 1978...

Three amateur stars who would have gotten national attention for their pro debuts if there had been television were Joe Louis, Willie Pep and Sugar Ray Robinson.

Louis was 19 when he knocked out Jack Kracken (10-8-0) in the first round of a scheduled six-round bout at Bacon Casino on Chicago's South Side. The purse was \$59 for the man, who would make 25 successful defenses of the heavyweight championship before he retired.

Pep was 17 when he scored a four-round decision over James McGovern in 1940 at Hartford, Conn. He would outpoint Chalky Wright for the featherweight title in his 54th fight in 1942.

McGovern apparently also was making his pro debut.

The last paragraph of the New York Times' account of Fritzie Zivic's decision upset of Henry Armstrong for the welterweight title in 1940 read: "Ray Robinson, 134½, Harlem Negro, who won the Golden Gloves lightweight crown last Spring, made his professional debut in the opening four-rounder and stopped Joe Echevarria, 132, Puerto Rican, in 51 seconds of the second frame." Robinson, who was 19, would win the welterweight championship in his 76th fight on a decision over Tommy Bell in 1946. He also would win the middleweight title five times. Echevarria's record was 3-15-4.

A Sugar Ray who got a televised sendoff as a pro in 1977 was Ray Leonard, the 1976 Olympic light welterweight champion. On a card in which Ralph Palladin outpointed Angel Robinson Garcia in 10 rounds, the 20-year-old Leonard got \$40,000 for scoring a six-round decision over Luis Vega (8-11-2) in the Civic Arena at Baltimore. Leonard would win titles in five weight classes

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Another Olympic champion who made his pro debut on a televised show was George Foreman, who won the heavyweight title at the 1968 games in Mexico City. The 20-year-old Foreman stopped Don Waldheim (5-4-2) in the third-round of a scheduled six-round match on a card featuring Joe Frazier's seventh-round knockout of Jerry Quarry in 1969 at Madison Square Garden. Foreman would win the heavyweight title twice, the second time becoming at age 45 the oldest man ever to win the championship.

Television treatment also was given to the pro debuts of six members of the U.S. boxing team that dominated the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, which were boycotted by Cuba, the Soviet Union and most of the Eastern Bloc nations. Winning scheduled six-round bouts in Madison Square Garden in 1984 were welterweight Mark Breland, lightweights Meldrick Taylor and Pernell Whitaker, heavyweight Tyrell Biggs, middleweight Virgil Hill and light heavyweight Evander Holyfield. All but Biggs became world champions.

National media attention was focused on Freedom Hall at Louisville, Ky., on Oct. 29, 1960, as Cassius Clay, who won the Olympic light heavyweight title at Rome earlier in the year, turned pro as a heavyweight in the six-round main event. The 18-year-old Clay won a decision over Tunney Hunsaker (13-9-0). "I'm honored, highly honored, to have been the first person Muhammad Ali fought in his professional career . . . The kids here (Fayetteville, W.Va., where he was police chief) know who Muhammad Ali is, so they know who I am too," Hunsaker said in "Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times," a 1991 book by Thomas Hauser. Ali would become a three-time champion.

Fans who turned up at Convention Hall in Philadelphia for Stanley "Kitten" Hayward's majority 10-round decision over Rodolfo Marshal on Aug. 16, 1965, also got a brief glimpse at Joe Frazier, making his pro debut one year after winning the heavyweight title at 1964 Olympics. The 21-year-old Frazier needed 102 seconds to stop Woody Gross (2-2), a substitute for a substitute.

Frazier must have wondered if winning a gold medal was worth the effort. "The deal went like this: The promoter gave us a number of tickets to sell and said: 'Whatever you sell, you keep.' That was how Olympic gold medalist Joe Frazier got paid for his pro debut," Frazier said in "Smokin' Joe: The Autobiography (with Phil Berger)," published in 1996. Frazier said his cut was \$125. Frazier would gain recognition on undisputed champion by beating Ali in 1971.