

Even after spending decades in the decadent boxing business, longtime promoter Butch Lewis is still doing what he does best: smiling that gargantuan million dollar smile of his. He says it is testament to his resilience, durability and unyielding belief that he has always done what was best for his fighters.

He is still best friends with Michael Spinks, who he took from being a 1976 Olympic gold medalist to the world light heavyweight championship. Under Lewis's tutelage, Spinks also became the first light heavyweight champion to win the heavyweight title.

Spinks, who compiled a 31-1 (21 KOS) record between 1977 and 1988, scored the biggest of upsets when he broke the undefeated streak of long established heavyweight champion Larry Holmes in September 1985.

Had Holmes won, he would have improved his record to 49-0, which would have tied the record of Rocky Marciano, the only heavyweight champion to retire with an undefeated record.

Lewis was also the man behind Leon Spinks, Michael's brother, who also won a gold medal at the 1976 Olympics, and scored a startling upset over Muhammad Ali in just his eighth pro fight to win the heavyweight crown in February 1978.

"There was no other team like us in boxing, ever," proclaimed Lewis. "Not only did two brothers I handled win the heavyweight title, but Michael was the first light heavyweight champion to ever successfully fight for the heavyweight title. I'm very proud of that."

Lewis and Michael are still tight. They recently attended a WBCares function together in Manhattan.

"Me and Slim (Michael), we're like family," said the 60-year-old Lewis. "He hasn't thrown a punch in 20 years, but we are still the best of friends."

Unfortunately, Lewis is not as friendly with Leon, who was as wild and unmanageable as Michael was thoughtful and introspective. He seems genuinely saddened when discussing Leon's meteoric ascension and equally cataclysmic downfall.

"Leon was a challenge to manage, but he was not a mean, vicious person," said Lewis. "He did things to hurt his career, but he would never hurt you, me or anyone else. He still pulled off one of the greatest upsets of all time when he beat Muhammad Ali. No one can ever take that away from him."

Lewis loves both brothers, but says they are like night and day. "They are both great people," he said. "They just had completely different personalities."

TSS Where Are They Now: Butch Lewis

Written by Robert Mladinich
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Over the years, Lewis also managed or promoted Bernard Hopkins, long before anyone knew who the future middleweight champion was. But their relationship ended contentiously when Hopkins hurled a lot of ugly accusations at Lewis, none of which were ever proven.

“Nobody even knew Bernard’s name when I had him,” said Lewis. “He came to me after five pro fights, out of prison and totally broke. I took him to two shots at a title before he won one. Networks didn’t want to put him on TV because of his style, so I took money out of my pocket to put him on BET. I made him a commodity, and then he ditched me.”

(In Hopkins’s first shot at the vacant IBF middleweight title, he lost a unanimous decision to Roy Jones Jr. in May 1993. In his second attempt for the same vacant title, he was dropped twice and held to a draw by Segundo Mercado in December 1994. Four months later he stopped Mercado in the seventh round to win the crown).

At the time Lewis was part owner of the Black Entertainment Network (BET), which was later sold to Viacom. It was just one of many deals that helped Lewis amass his current fortune.

When Hopkins first went public with allegations, Lewis said he was brought to tears. “I took that mother to the top,” said Lewis. “And then I got the shaft.”

As the years passed, Lewis felt more and more vindicated as Hopkins accused nearly every promoter he ever dealt with of similar transgressions. Lou DiBella even won a hefty award after defending himself against allegations of dishonesty by Hopkins.

“Other people saw Bernard’s character down the line,” said Lewis. “People always accuse promoters of being greedy, but I didn’t put in eight years with him to not reap the benefits at the end.”

While much of Lewis’s relationship with Hopkins has been forgotten, his masterful handling of Michael Spinks’s career is a prototype for excellence. Although Michael defended the IBF title he won from Holmes twice (once against Holmes), he relinquished it rather than battle Tony Tucker for a \$750,000 purse in an HBO heavyweight tournament.

Lewis opted to promote a bout himself between Michael and Gerry Cooney, which garnered millions for both participants. Not only did Lewis believe Michael would beat the much bigger Cooney, he knew that a victory would increase the value of a future fight between him and the then rampaging Mike Tyson.

“Boxing is a risk business, so we put our own money up for the Cooney fight,” explained Lewis. “Nothing was guaranteed. I had to talk like I walk, so Slim and I went on our own. After we beat Cooney, the floodgates opened for the Tyson fight. Everyone wanted to see it.”

In a pay-per-view extravaganza, Spinks stopped Cooney in five rounds, then fought Tyson for the unified titles, was stopped in one round, and never fought again.

Even though Spinks did not beat the mighty Tyson, Lewis still thinks his fighter went out on top.

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His purse was so hefty, the sensible Spinks could conceivably be living off the interest of that payday alone today.

“Look at Slim today,” said Lewis. “He’s sharp (mentally) and he’s happy. All he does is go to the bank and count his money everyday.”

Lewis currently handles Faruq “The Dream” Saleem, a 33-year-old heavyweight with a 37-0 (32 KOS) record. At 6’7”, Saleem is a physical specimen, but whether or not Lewis can make a champion out of him is yet to be seen.

Regardless of what happens in his future, Lewis, a onetime car dealer extraordinaire, is a content man.

“I’m a deal maker,” he said. “I’m in the people business. Selling cars is a people business. Boxing is a people business. All sports is a people business. I represent a lot of people and I do a lot of deals.”

Doing deals is what keeps the immensely likeable Lewis going. It is what nurtures him and keeps him so youthful.

“People tell me I work hard, but I don’t feel like I work at all,” said Lewis, the father of four children and grandfather of five. “I don’t have to work hard to keep in shape because I have so much energy. I’m always running, but I’m doing what I love. When you do what you love, it’s not work.”

When asked if retirement is in his future, he looked at me incredulously.

“I’ll never retire,” he asserted. “I’ll be making deals and raising hell for a long time to come.”