

Memories With Mladinich: Johnny Warr

Written by Robert Mladinich
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There is no shortage of journeyman fighters who assert that their nominal records are the result of bad officiating. But after careful examination of the ledger of heavyweight Johnny Warr, you realize his admonitions might just have some merit.

Fighting between 1976 and 1983, Warr amassed a record of 6-21-1 (2 KOS). Although he fought world champions Pinklon Thomas and Trevor Berbick, as well as title challenger Renaldo Snipes and previously undefeated fighters such as Greg Sorrentino, Marvin Stinson, Wendell Bailey, Marty Capasso and Floyd "Jumbo" Cummings, he was never stopped.

"Pinklon could punch, but he didn't have real good combinations," said Warr. "He hit hard, but he wasn't as determined as Berbick."

The decision that Warr lost to Cummings, 11-0, in Cummings' hometown of Chicago, was split. So was the decision to Berbick, 13-1-1, in Berbick's hometown of Halifax, Canada.

He also battled to a draw with the 6'6" inmate Art Tucker, who was making his pro debut inside the walls of Rahway prison in New Jersey.

"We were in jail, but they stuck me up," said the 5'11" Warr.

The now 52-year-old Warr, who is New York City school safety officer at the Fred R. Moore Elementary School, which is also known as Public School 133 in Harlem, New York, is too spiritual to be bitter or resentful about what might have been.

"I was a cruiserweight fighting as a heavyweight," said the immensely likeable Warr, who fought at around 195 pounds but now weighs in at about 250. "I lost a lot of hometown decisions."

Warr says that a he was announced as the winner of a September 1977 fight in New York against C.J. Bar Brown, only to see the verdict reversed minutes later.

There were other fights that he says had strange circumstances. "Marvin Stinson wanted to stop fighting, but Joe Frazier (Stinson's manager) had to force him out for one more round."

Cummings, a behemoth ex-convict whose jail yard muscles were addled with more muscles, picked him up and attempted to throw him out of the ring. Not surprisingly, he was not disqualified.

"He didn't win that fight at all," said Warr.

Because Warr regularly sparred with such tough prospects as Gerry Cooney and James Broad, he says he rarely encountered any surprises in the ring. He said Snipes "was real wild, but had no real combinations."

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At one point, however, Warr said he hit Snipes with a left hook and Snipes “turned around and ran.” But Snipes did manage to bang Warr in the ear with a left hook that resulted in Warr receiving 12 stitches.

The toughest fight of Warr’s career was against a New England heavyweight named Ron Drinkwater. Warr fought him twice, and says both were battles of attrition.

“He was the hardest punching guy I fought,” said Warr. “Nobody remembers him, but he could fight. Oh boy, could he punch! He had small hands, but big arms. Before the second fight with him was the only time I didn’t pray. And I felt like I was hit by a truck.”

Between 1976 and 1978, Drinkwater, of Malden, Massachusetts, compiled a 17-1 (13 KOS) fighting throughout the Boston area. He was stopped in one round by Peter McNeeley during an ill-fated 1993 comeback and never fought again.

Although Warr’s career was somewhat disappointing from a statistical and financial standpoint, he said his whole life has been one miracle after another.

He was born with a lazy right eye, for which he was supposed to wear an eye patch on his left eye to make it stronger.

As a child he was picked on constantly, but says he never started a fight but grew adept at finishing them.

“I was chubby and I had a lazy eye,” said Warr. “I was a target.”

But Warr was blessed with very quick hands, which he learned to use well on the streets of Harlem, where he grew up and still resides with his wife Carol and three children, who range in age from 20 to 10.

After dropping out of high school, he began boxing more for fun than anything else. In the 1976 New York City Golden Gloves tournament, he dropped a decision to Cooney, the eventual champion, in the semi-finals. Later that year he turned pro.

He now realizes that his manager, John Bowman, “had no political clout.” In Warr’s first three bouts, all of which were on the road, he lost two decisions to the undefeated Sorrentino, who was a slickster, and the hard-punching Drinkwater.

Still, Warr retained the unrealistic belief that one big win could turn his career around. Unfortunately for him, that big victory never materialized although he came awfully close on several occasions.

“I’m still a miracle,” said Warr. “I dropped out of high school and failed my GED twice. I had a lot of bootleg jobs, but I’ve been married for 25 years and I’ve been a minister for 24 years. I’m not wanting for anything.”

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As a fighter, Warr says his paydays were as nominal as his record. While he earned a career high \$2,000 against Berbick, his average take ranged from “a few hundred to a thousand,” which he says “wasn’t bad money in the seventies.”

In the big picture, boxing has played a small part in Warr’s eventful life. Besides being a pastor at Harlem’s Reach Out and Touch Ministry, where he sermonizes about salvation, he has had a religious themed public access television for the past 10 years.

In addition, he has written a book and a play about the importance of religious convictions, for himself as well as others.

He also takes his job as a school safety officer very seriously. On the morning of our meeting in early May, he stood at the school’s entrance greeting parents and students alike with high-fives and handshakes. More than a few were offered a pearl of wisdom as they entered and exited.

Warr is obviously a people person. He seems to like people as much as they like him. Watching how naturally and effortlessly he mingles with the public makes it clear that he clearly understands his role as a public servant. He is much too decent and dedicated of a man to take it for granted.

“A lot of these kids remind me of myself when I was their age,” he said. “I was lucky because I had a grandmother, Marie Mouzon, who taught me the power of prayer. Some of these kids don’t have anyone giving them anything. I show the kids lots of love, especially the ones that don’t know how to deal with their circumstances.

“I take them to the side and talk to them,” he continued. “Most little kids don’t want to listen. But I give them a hug and say, ‘tell me what happened, what’s on your mind?’ Hopefully in the back of their head, they’ll know someone cares. Sometimes that’s all a kid needs to know to do the right thing.”