While most sophomores in high school are playing video games, learning to shave or discovering the opposite sex, Ernie Terrell was doing something different.

Ernie Terrell was turning pro.

"It wasn't that our family needed money, or that I needed to be the man of the household. Sure, money was tight, but we had a large, close-knit family with five brothers and four sisters. Economically, we all pitched in."

Terrell, the sixth in a family of 10 children, was born in Inverness, Missippippi, the son of a farmer. As a baby, they moved to the rough South Side of Chicago, where fighting was commonplace.

Terrell, who still lives on The South Side with his wife, said over the phone, "Boxing just grabbed me. The day I walked into The Midwest Gym in Chicago, I looked at the heavy bags and realized--Hey, I could do this! I was big for my age, pretty coordinated, and pretty soon I got my jab working good.

"The gym was on the 5th floor of the Midwest Hotel, on the corner of Madison Street and Hamilton Avenue. I became the elevator operator, so I didn't have to pay the $3 entry fee," he chuckles, "or the $3 monthly fee."

"At that time, in the mid-1950s, boxing was more popular than basketball. Boxing ruled. Being 6' 3", basketball never grabbed me—but boxing did"

By 17, Ernie got his jab working real good. He was doing his roadwork in Garfield Park with the other fighters, and had already established himself as the back-to-back light heavyweight champion in the Chicago Golden Gloves.

In his sophomore year, in 1957, Ernie turned pro.

"I figured, Why not? The guys I was beating in the amateurs were just as good as the pros."

In Terrell's first three years as a pro, he campaigned around Chicago learning his craft. "I went 13-2. My only losses were to Johnny Gray--split decisions, both in the Chicago Stadium. Gray was a veteran boxer with an influential manager, Frankie Tomaso, but I honestly think I won both fights. In truth," adds Terrell, without a hint of braggadocio or anger, "in my entire career, I feel I, legitimately, lost only 4 fights." His ledger, however, lists nine.

In 1959, Terrell ventured out of Chicago for the first time to cop an easy 8-round decision over tough Tunney Hunsaker in Louisville; the same Tunney Hunsaker selected to meet Cassius Clay in Clay's pro debut.

In 1960, Terrell's boxing career began to gain serious recognition. He ratcheted-up the caliber of his opponents and scored big wins over fellow Chicagoan Joe Hemphill (17-1-0), and Clay Thomas (11-1-1). His only loss came at the hands of rugged Wayne Bethea, from New York. "Well, that was a questionable split-decision," remembers Terrell.

In April, 1962, Terrell and his manager Julie Isaacson decided it was about time to hunt bigger game. Enter "Big Cat" Cleveland Williams. Terrell traveled to Texas for the bout, a fight which handed Terrell his "first legitimate loss."

"Yeah, "The Big Cat" TKOed me in 7. He was the strongest fighter I ever fought." At the time, Williams was 51-4.

But, to Terrell's credit, he climbed back into the ring with Williams and, a year later, avenged his loss, winning a 10-round split-decision.

"After the two Williams' fights," says Sean Curtin, Chicago referee and co-author of "Chicago Boxing" with J. J. Johnson, "Terrell got more cautious. As an amateur, he was an exciting fighter to watch--even as an early pro. But after Williams, Terrell became more of a grabber and jabber."

Boxing is, indeed, a beat-down business.

During the next four years Terrell proved his mettle, and increased his stature, by beating the toughest heavyweights in the division: Amos "Big Train" Lincoln, Zora Folley, and Germany's Gerhard Zech--all by 10-round decisions in New York's famed Madison Square Garden.

"In July, 1964, I knocked out Bob Foster. Our styles were alike, but I was a bit bigger and faster," recalls Terrell, who dropped Foster with a right hand to the chin. When Foster rose groggily, Arthur Mercante, the ref, stopped it in the 7th round. Foster staggered along the ropes and fell to the canvas without being hit. "Foster's a funny guy," recalls Terrell, of the future, great light heavyweight champion. "When I went up to his corner after the fight, he mumbled, 'You ain't done nothin''."

But he had done something.

By the end of 1964, Terrell had cleaned out the entire heavyweight division.

In 1965, Terrell won the vacant WBA title with a hard-fought 15-round decision over Eddie Machen. He defended his title twice with points wins over Toronto's George Chuvalo and rugged Doug Jones.

"All those guys back then were the backbone of the division. Folley, Machen, Williams, Jones. No one wanted to fight them. Folley and Machen were top-shelf material. Only old Archie Moore knew more boxing moves," says Terrell. "Chuvalo was rough, but he was made to order for my jab."

Muhammad Ali was next. In this legendary, yet ugly, heavyweight title unification match, Ali from the start, taunted and jeered Terrell stating time and time again, “What’s my name?”

“Clay!”

“What’s my name?”

“Clay!”

In the second round Ali thumbed Terrell’s left eye. “The muscles that turn my eye got hung up,” recalls Terrell. “He pushed the bone in my eye, and the soft tissue and the bone behind the eye became damaged. My eye muscles jammed.”

From the second round on, Terrell was seeing two Muhammad Alis--or two Cassius Clays--or one Cassius Clay and one Muhammad Ali.

“My left eye wasn’t moving the same as the right,” he recalls. “I was expecting it would go away, but it never did. What I shoulda done was close one eye. But that’s hindsight.”

To make matters worse, during the fight, Ali was criminal by grabbing Terrell in a headlock and rubbing his injured eye against the top rope. He continued to use his thumbs in round six and choked Terrell in the clinches. Ali also spat at Terrell’s feet and sneered at him.

“Clay sure fights dirty,” said Terrell.

Ali seemed to be writing his own rules as referee Harry Kessler, the so-called ‘millionaire referee’ watched, and let the humiliation and pitiless taunting continue.

In the 13th round Ali landed 30 unanswered punches, but Kessler, amazingly, stood back. Ali’s nonstop combinations backed up a battered Terrell, who finished with both eyes virtually swollen shut and a long cut over his right eye. He was immediately examined by a Houston eye specialist and flown to a Philadelphia hospital.

“Today, the eye is good—about 98%. Only problem I have is looking up,” he says.

Six months later, Terrell, astonishingly, was back in the ring with Thad Spencer. It was part of a heavyweight elimination tournament for the WBA title. (The other fighters vying for the crown were Jimmy Ellis/Leotis Martin; Oscar Bonavena/Karl Mildenberger and Jerry Quarry/Floyd Patterson.)

He lost a unanimous 12-round decision. Spencer knocked him down in the second round. “Yeah, I might’ve lost that fight,” concedes Terrell.

After a “questionable” loss to Manuel Ramos two months later at the Aztec Stadium in Mexico City, Terrell hung up the gloves.

Terrell, unlike many fighters re-invented himself. In 1973, he toured with his

R&B band, Ernie Terrell & the Heavyweights.

"At that point, I was more interested in writing songs, playing guitar with my brothers J.C. and Leonard, and singing with my sister, Jean (who later replaced Diana Ross of The Supremes.) We played Las Vegas, Miami, toured Canada, and sang for the US troops in Greenland." Terrell laughs, "Lord have mercy! Greenland! It's twenty four hours daylight in Greenland. You wouldn't think that would bother you, but it does."

Terrell discovered that singing on a stage with his family was infinitely more rewarding than getting punched in the eye in the ring, alone. Their R&B music was released on Chess, Argo and Calla labels.

After three years, however, Terrell needed to step back into the ring. He was 31.

Why? Did he miss the roar of the crowd? Was it money?

"No. I wanted another crack at Ali. I wanted to fight him differently. I had a plan."

He racked up seven straight wins. His comeback was climaxed by a sixth-round KO over Venezuela's Jose Luis Garcia, the number three heavyweight contender. Terrell knocked Garcia out of the ring in the 6th but the Venezuelan came back fighting after taking a nine count, only to fall to the canvas seconds later.

The victory garnered Terrell Ring magazine's "Fighter of the Month" award.

But that was as close to Ali Terrell would get.

Ernie lost a flagrant hometown decision to Chuck Wepner at the Convention Hall in Atlantic City. Sam Solomon, Terrell's trainer screamed, "Willie Gilzenberg, (the promoter), was telling Harold Valen, (the referee and sole judge) change this round, change that round. When I asked Gilzenberg what was going on, he said, 'This guy doesn't know how to add'."

The press corps unanimously scored the fight for Terrell, with some giving him as many as 10 of the rounds. Ring magazine's scorecard was 9-3 Terrell.

"As long as you have people who are cheap in their moral dignity and code of ethics, you will have something like this," mused Terrell.

Then came lanky Jeff "Candy Slim" Merritt, a murderous punching heavyweight, who is probably best known for being the very first fighter that Don King took under his wing. He was also known as one of hardest punchers from that era, comparable to Shavers and Foreman.

Ernie was knocked out in round one.

Ernie called it quits.

Once again, in 1977, Terrell re-invented himself. This time as a successful boxing promoter. “Some of my Chicago-based fighters were James “Quick” Tillis, Alonzo Ratliff, Leroy Murphy, Johnny Collins, Lenny La Paglia and Renaldo Snipes.”

Tillis and Ratliff became champs and Snipes fought for the heavyweight championship of the world under Terrell.

By most measures, Terrell’s promoting career was a success. “My fighters made some good money. Me? I broke even,” he says, laughing.

Curtin, with a grin, says, “Ernie, as a promoter, was clever with a buck. He learned from his own manager—Julie Isaacson.”

When asked about Terrell, Bill Carlin, his publicist and good friend says, “I can’t think of a better representative for the sport of boxing than Ernie Terrell. The man’s always a gentleman. Nothing is ever off color. He’s never negative. Some people are always fighting the fight they lost. Not Ernie. He let’s it go. I never heard Ernie moan. After a fight, one fighter’s hand is raised and that’s it. That’s what Ernie says.

“Try and dig up some dirt on Ernie. You can’t. Ernie’s never been a drinker or smoker. He’s religious. He’s a vegetarian. You can’t come up with anything bad on Ernie.

“Ernie is part of the forgotten era of heavyweights,” says Carlin. “Ernie traveled with Sonny Liston and sparred over 100 rounds with him.

“Ernie once told me: ‘Liston paid me my biggest compliment. Sonny was talking about me and didn’t know I was listening. He asked his trainer, ‘Am I sparring Terrell today? Man, I gotta duck down to his knees not to get hit.’

“Ernie Terrell is a historical link to boxing’s colorful past,” says Carlin. “Joe Louis, the great heavyweight champ, was in Ernie’s corner when he won the WBA title and Ezzard Charles, another heavyweight champ, worked with Ernie in the gym plenty of times.”

After promoting fights for 20 years, Ernie re-invented himself a third time.

In 1990, he created Ernie Terrell Inc., a lucrative janitorial company which developed long-standing contracts with the Chicago Public Schools, and the police and fire departments. His company employed, depending upon the time of year, 375 to 800 people. “It was rated tops in Chicago’s Better Business Bureau,” says Bill Carlin.

Today, Terrell is at peace with his accomplishments, as well as his defeats. His eye might be 98%, but his soul is 100%.

And he has absolutely no problem looking up.

Today, Ernie Terrell remains fast on his feet: Boxing:…Music…Promotion…Business.

“Yup, that’s Ernie Terrell,” says Carlin, “our Chicago Heavyweight Champion--and as unpretentious as they come.”

That’s Ernie Terrell--a Chicago success story.

(Peter Wood is the author of “Confessions of a Fighter” and "A Clenched Fist –The Making of a Golden Gloves Champion," uplifting memoirs about boxing, both published by Ringside Books. Wood was a 1971 NYC Middleweight Golden Gloves Finalist.)

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