

Oliver McCall Tells It Like He Thinks It Was

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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Jockey Calvin Borel, who jumped off his Kentucky Derby-winning horse, Mine That Bird, for the mount on Preakness winner Rachel Alexandra, isn't the only sports figure to quit a champion in mid-stream, or mid-track as it were. That switch had already been made in 1994, when trainer Emanuel Steward left Oliver McCall, whom he had just helped to win the WBC heavyweight championship on a second-round stoppage of Lennox Lewis, for Lewis.

No one can say for sure if Mine That Bird understood the ramifications of suddenly having a different rider, or if the colt cared one way or the other, but it would seem that McCall might be just a tad bitter about being suddenly abandoned by the man who had helped prepare him for the greatest success of his 24-year professional boxing career.

But McCall, now 44 and still fighting despite having been written off more times than a stack of bad debts, isn't angry about Steward's change of allegiance. In fact, he believes he might have remained heavyweight champion of the world to this very day had Steward not been forced from his corner by promoter Don King, one of several shadowy presences he blames for many of the woes that ultimately befell him.

That revelation, and others, suggest that McCall is more into conspiracy theories than that other Oliver, movie director Oliver Stone. It is the recitation of those seemingly bizarre theories, more so than his Friday night bout with Australia's John "Hoppa" Hoptate (11-2, 11 KOs) for the minor-league IBA Intercontinental heavyweight belt, that continue to certify McCall (51-9, 36 KOs) as one of the more interesting and perplexing characters to have floated upon the boxing scene over the past quarter-century.

Heightening interest in the elder McCall's comeback – this is his first ring appearance since he lost a unanimous, 12-round decision to Juan Carlos Gomez on Oct. 19, 2007 – is the fact that his 21-year-old son, Elijah McCall (2-0-1, 2 KOs), is on the same card at The Orleans in Las Vegas. McCall the younger swaps punches with Chad Davis (1-2) in a scheduled four-rounder.

Asked what connotations go with carrying the McCall name, Elijah figured the positives outweigh the negatives.

"It's more of a blessing than a curse," Elijah said. "Everyone knows that my dad is Oliver McCall. They know about all the great things he's done in this business. They know all the bad things, too. I'm thankful for the opportunity to show the talents and skills I got from my father, but I want to show that I'm my own man.

An understandable reaction, given that Oliver McCall, who began experimenting with drugs at 13 and since that time has been a troubled spirit toting more baggage than Elizabeth Taylor on an around-the-world trip, has negated nearly every worthy accomplishment with some act of irrational behavior. He is forever an enigma wrapped in a riddle, a perpetual question mark of a human being for whom there never has seemed to be a satisfactory answer.

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The mysterious McCall opened up to The Sweet Science and provided some of those answers. And if some of them bespeak a mindset that only he can decipher, well, Freud probably encountered patients who also presented challenges.

Take McCall's split with Steward, for instance.

"I just talked to Emanuel Steward on the 9th of this month at the Dawson-Tarver rematch," McCall noted. "That was the first time I really had a chance to talk to him since I knocked out Lennox Lewis in 1994.

"After I beat Lewis, Emanuel and me parted ways, but it wasn't my idea. It wasn't his, either. He said, 'You know, Oliver, that wasn't me. That was Don King.' And it was Don King that forced me and Emanuel to split up.

"It's too bad because I really believe that if Emanuel Steward had stayed my trainer, I'd still be heavyweight champion. I was a good fighter then and I'm still a good fighter, but Emanuel helped make me the best that I could be."

Steward, who is in Germany helping IBF/WBO heavyweight champion Wladimir Klitschko prepare for his June 20 defense against England's David Haye, was not immediately available for comment. As for King, his standard response to any and all charges of wrongdoing is that he never has been guilty of anything except helping make fighters rich. If wayward members of the flock choose to be ungrateful or misinterpret his good intentions, well, that's on them.

McCall, a two-time Chicago Golden Gloves champion, was known mainly for being one of Mike Tyson's sparring partners until he got his big chance for a breakthrough on April 18, 1991. Going into the Atlantic City backyard of then-undefeated contender Bruce Seldon and trailing on the scorecards through eight rounds of a scheduled 10-rounder, McCall floored an exhausted Seldon three times in the ninth round to win by technical knockout. He left the ring with a 16-4 record that includes 10 victories inside the distance, but the Seldon fight stamped him as potentially being something more than a really tough gym fighter.

"Since that time I've been ranked in the top 10 by some organization until this year, and this year ain't over with," McCall said. "God willing, I'll be ranked again before the year is over with."

But talent isn't always enough, as McCall was to discover. Talent can be detoured by drugs, and booze, and women. Even as he continued to rise in prominence, McCall frequently followed his instincts for getting high and getting laid.

Asked if he has finally cleaned up his act, McCall said, "For today, yes. I'm clean and sober. But when it comes to drugs and alcohol, you're never completely past it. You know when it'll be completely past for me? When I'm laid to rest.

"People who have been drug-free for 10 or 20 years, if they get high once, it's relapse time, baby. It's something I have to work at daily, just like anything. You got to work at not giving in to the drugs, to the booze, to fornication. You ain't never past it. You just got to keep running to

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stay ahead of it.”

Steward was a godsend to McCall not only because he knows his stuff, but because he invited the wild child into his home and more or less adopted him. In addition to spotting the chink in Lewis’ armor – a lazy jab that the champion drew back slowly, leaving him open for the overhand right that McCall detonated upon Lewis’ chin in the second round of their Sept. 24, 1994, title bout in London’s Wembley Arena – Steward cooked for McCall, encouraged him, kept him away from the vices and temptations that forever threatened to send him tumbling into the abyss.

One-time aide-de-camp Bruce Blair, recalling the time when McCall served as a sparring partner for Ray Mercer, said McCall would “toss down shots and beers for three or four hours, leave at midnight with a couple of babes in tow, roll in at 4 a.m. and give Mercer hell in sparring at noon. I always said that if the guy ever harnessed all that physical ability, he could be something special.”

Toward that end, King opted to sequester McCall in various out-of-the-way sites during his preparations for the Lewis fight. McCall’s training base was Henlow Grange Health Farm, a luxurious spa 60 miles from the glitz and glitter of downtown London.

“You look out the window and see lambs in the field!” King said excitedly of the rural setting. “Little sheep! You got streams and brooks and meadows! This is a wonderful place!”

In terrific shape and perhaps just a bit irritable at being around four-legged lambs instead of two-legged honeys, McCall, well prepared by Steward and assistant trainer Greg Page, waited for the moment when Lewis would flick a lazy jab and attempt to follow it with his favorite punch – a big, telegraphed right hand.

He didn’t have to wait long. Lewis gave McCall the opening he was anticipating and Double-L went crashing, face first, to the canvas after catching a thunderous right to the jaw early in the second round. Lewis beat the count, barely, but he was wobbling and glassy-eyed as he lurched into the arms of Mexican referee Lupe Garcia. Garcia did the right thing by signaling the fight to an end.

McCall was on the top of the boxing world, but the euphoria proved to be short-lived. Steward left him for Lewis, removing the safety net that had kept McCall from falling. McCall defended the title once, outpointing 45-year-old Larry Holmes, but relinquished the title to England’s Frank Bruno on Sept. 2, 1995, in Wembley Stadium.

“That was a great time in my life,” McCall said of his brief, emotional roller-coaster title reign. “But when you become heavyweight champion, it comes with expectations. There were things I really wasn’t prepared to deal with.

“I should have enjoyed it more. People would come up to me and say, ‘What’s up, Champ?’ I’d say, ‘I ain’t the champ. I’m just Oliver.’ But being champ is special. It’s a gift from God. I give Him all the praise and glory for allowing me to have that gift.”

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There would be a rematch with Lewis, of course, but that bout – for the vacant WBC championship on Feb. 7, 1997, at the Las Vegas Hilton – would become infamous for McCall's crying jag, one of the most curious endings to a boxing match since ... well, forever.

McCall had again strayed from the straight and narrow, or maybe he hadn't actually been on it since he and Steward had their professional divorce. Six weeks before the fight, McCall picked up a 20-foot Christmas tree in the lobby of a Nashville hotel and hurled it in drunken rage. So concerned was Dino Duva, Lewis' American co-promoter, that he pleaded with King to replace McCall with a more emotionally stable challenger. King insisted McCall would be ready to go on fight night, a promise that looked like it might be kept when a drug test administered by the Nevada State Athletic Commission came back negative.

But, emotionally, McCall was like an unraveling spool of thread. Demons were dancing around in his head, raising doubts and fears that manifested itself when referee Mills Lane stepped in and waved off the tearful non-action 55 seconds into the fifth round.

"It was almost as if he wanted to get knocked out," Lane said at the time. "He didn't put up any semblance of defending himself so I figured, that's enough. Something's wrong. I thought, 'This boy needs medical help.'"

So what really happened that night? McCall's explanation is stranger than what most people saw with their own eyes, if that's possible.

"I was going through a situation," McCall said. "I felt I wasn't being treated fairly, and I wasn't able to handle the unfairness by certain people that were around me.

"I got kicked out of one gym because I complained that a stripper was coming in and watching me train. Guess what they done? They didn't kick the stripper out, they kicked me out.

"So I went a couple of days without training while I looked for a new gym. Just a lot of things going on. Bottom line, a lot of those things I brought on myself. The situation I was in, I wasn't capable of mentally sustaining the repercussions of everything that was happening."

If it sounds as if McCall needed psychological help, he had already sought it and was, in fact, undergoing treatment.

"I told the psychologist, 'I can't handle this. I need to get out of here. If I'm crazy, please let me know. People are playing games with me, real wicked games.

"The psychologist said, 'No, you're not crazy. But you got to learn to get past this. You got to be strong.' I told him if they kept playing those games with me, there would come a time in the fight when I'd stop fighting and not throw no punches."

Exactly what sort of mind games the alleged conspirators were playing with McCall weren't exactly spelled out, but he said members of his family were used as leverage against him.

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“I made arrangements for my mother and my brother to come to the fight,” he said. “They (and he doesn’t list who ‘they’ were, although the inference is that King was involved) said, ‘Oliver, if your mama and brother come to the fight, you going to jail.’ That was the last straw. I told my wife and kids, ‘Don’t look at this fight. Something bad is going to happen.’”

“It’s documented, really. I had already told my psychologist I was going to do what I did. He knew. My family knew.”

“I was mad. Upset. My life had been messed with too much. I basically said, ‘All right. If you’re going to play games with me, I got something for y’all.’ In the third round, Lennox hit me with a punch. I went to the ropes and looked at his mama rooting him on. I thought about my mama and I thought, ‘OK, you can have this now.’”

“It hurted me. It made me cry.”

The fallout was immediate and severe. McCall was nuts. He was finished. He’d never be a serious factor in the heavyweight division again. He probably couldn’t even get a bout.

“People said all kind of bad things about me, but I took it,” McCall said. “I swallowed it. All the commentators said, ‘He’s through. He’ll never fight again.’ But here I am, 14 years later, and I’m fighting for another title. I’ve been blessed.”

“If my career had started with that second fight with Lennox Lewis, I can say I accomplished more than 95 percent of all the boxers in the world.”

Prior to his loss to Gomez, McCall had gone 22-1, with two no-decisions, the only defeat to DaVarryl Williamson, when Williamson still was regarded as a major prospect. Off drugs and dedicated to the proposition of regaining at least a sliver of the title for the United States, McCall believes he can be the man to restore America to heavyweight relevance, just as he did when he took out Lewis in 1994.

“The heavyweight division ain’t as wide-open as some people think,” he said. “They say it’s wide-open because the United States has fallen so far behind in the sport of boxing. The Klitschkos, they can fight a little bit. It ain’t like the fighters of old, but they’ve had some pretty good, exciting fights.”

“Back when I won the heavyweight title, I got it back after it had left the United States for the first time in, like, a hundred years. I can do it again. I know it.”

McCall’s draping of himself in Old Glory is historically inaccurate; before Lewis, non-Americans Primo Carnera (Italy) and Ingemar Johansson (Sweden) had seized the heavyweight championship. But his return to the ring does raise one legitimate question.

If Bernard Hopkins is still a world-class fighter at 44, can Oliver McCall, Mr. Conspiracy Theory himself, again ascend to the throne?