

The Liston Chronicles, Part 1: Rising Sonny

Written by Springs Toledo
Thursday, 28 May 2009 19:00

“An’ the dawn comes up like thunder...”

~ Rudyard Kipling

Dick the Bruiser was built like the Hoover Dam. A former lineman for the Green Bay Packers, a professional wrestler, and an icon from the 1950s right through the 1980s, he stood 6’1 and weighed 265 lbs. When he offered his opinion, people listened. In 1962, he had some choice words about what he saw as the sorry state of the heavyweight division. Charles “Sonny” Liston was king at this point. Legend has it that Sonny got wind of what the Bruiser said and caught up with him out front of the Thunderbird Hotel in Vegas. In broad daylight, Sonny beat him into a corner and slapped him repeatedly until Dick the Bruiser cowered on the sidewalk. Heralded as “The Most Dangerous Man Alive”, Dick was overheard whimpering, “I just wanna go home now”.

Legends spring up like black daisies on the road on which history’s tough guys swagger. Be they Goliath, Richard Coeur de Lion, or Frederick Barbarossa, the truth is often embellished until it reaches the outer limits of credibility.

Despite expectations, most of the black daisies at Sonny Liston’s feet are credible. He lived up to a fearsome reputation that probably began when he was thirteen years old and in the first grade. (And that’s not a misprint.) He was illiterate, had a juvenile record that was about as long as his wingspan, became a union strike breaker for wiseguys, and served two stints in Missouri for armed robbery and for assaulting a police officer. That last conviction raised eyebrows: The cop in question pulled his gun on Liston but Liston snatched it away and then did worse. Witnesses heard a voice saying “don’t hurt me” from the alley where Liston had carried the cop. The cop needed seven stitches over his eye and suffered a broken knee. Liston walked out of the alley wearing the cop’s hat and carrying his gun.

This cost him seven months in an eight-by-nine; but no sooner was he released that he got pinched again. This time it was for resisting arrest. Liston had deposited an officer upside down in a trash can.

In “The Devil and Sonny Liston”, author Nick Tosches goes on to quote Captain John Doherty about Liston’s struggles with the St. Louis Police Department and the St. Louis Police Department’s struggles with Liston: “Five coppers tried to lock Sonny. This ain’t no b.s. story. They broke hickory nightsticks over his head. They couldn’t get his hands cuffed. He was a monster.”

He was banned from fighting in several states, including New York and California, and if a man is to be judged by the company he keeps, they weren’t wrong. There is no doubt that Liston was connected with if not outright “owned” by underworld figures operating out of St. Louis. However, the trajectory of his career does not suggest that he was given soft opposition, even given his crooked associations. Only two of his first forty opponents had losing records. In his

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sixth fight, a still green Liston faced Johnny Summerlin, 19-1, who would crack the top ten within the year. Liston beat him twice in a row.

In 1954, he fought an unorthodox light heavyweight named Marty Marshall. Marshall had a style that recalled the pivoting, herky-jerky, watch-me-ruin-your-timing style of Jersey Joe Walcott. He could switch from an orthodox to a southpaw stance on a dime. Liston, who fought like a night train ever-rolling into KO station, had trouble with a man who refused to stay on the tracks. Liston claimed that Marshall ran around the ring whooping like such a clown that he couldn't help but laugh –and summarily got his jaw broken. He couldn't close it. In the sixth round, another shot fractured it again. Liston fought on anyway and dropped a split decision. "I walked the streets all night," he remembered, "it hurt so bad." The loss was twice avenged.

The third time Liston and Marshall met was in March 1956. Marshall entered the ring as a replacement for Hall of Famer Harold Johnson, a supreme technician. Johnson had to back out of the bout after injuring his shoulder in training. At that juncture, Johnson's 55-8 record sparkled with wins over Jimmy Bivins, Bert Lytell, Archie Moore, Clarence Henry, and Ezzard Charles. The surprise is the confidence that Liston's management must have had to take such a risk.

In May, Liston broke the aforementioned cop's knee in the alley, cooled his heels in the clink, and didn't return to the ring until 1958. But by November of that year ringside observers said that he barely broke a sweat in eight victories. They would also agree that Sonny Liston was at his rampaging peak in 1959-1960.

The iron-jawed George Chuvalo was asked in an interview who hit him the hardest. Mike DeJohn, "a real good whacker" was at the top of the list, although DeJohn was spent by the time Chuvalo faced him. Liston fought DeJohn in 1959 when he was ranked #8 by Ring Magazine. According to the New York Times, Liston's jab made a mess of his nose and DeJohn went down twice from body shots during the six round slugfest. Two months later Liston faced the widely avoided Cleveland "Big Cat" Williams –another banger. Liston stopped him in three rounds. He stopped him again a year later and a round sooner. (Williams, incidentally, wouldn't be stopped again until he met Ali in 1966, and by then Williams was shot –figuratively and literally.) By the end of 1960, Liston demolished Nino Valdes, bounced number two contender Roy Harris off the canvas three times before stopping him in the first round, and looked very strong against the number one contender Zora Folley. Master boxer Eddie Machen, ranked third, went the distance but mistook the ring for a race track. He ran as if his trunks were on fire. Liston swung and missed and didn't look so formidable, but took a decision, despite a three point deduction for low blows.

Five of these six men were in their prime. Only Valdes was fading, though still dangerous.

According to Ring Magazine, Liston was the number one contender since at least July 1960 when he beat Zora Folley. The highly respected editor, Nat Fleischer himself was demanding that Liston be given a shot at Floyd Patterson's title as soon as possible. Cus D'Amato, Patterson's manager, was in no rush to sign Valdes, Folley, or Machen... although the complicated shadow of Sonny Liston gave him real shivers. D'Amato avoided them all with

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loose and limber reasoning: He lamented about the cheap prospective gate in a Machen fight, yet became a moralist when it came to Liston.

Liston did two things of note during this time. The first is that he stayed active –even to the point of accepting the short money to fight Harris, Williams, and Zora Folley (he took \$25,000 to Zora's \$40,000, despite the fact that Liston was on an eight fight KO streak and hadn't lost in seven years. Zora had lost less than two years earlier and had just earned a snoozer decision against a fighter who lost twice as much as he won). Tosches tells the story of Sonny's surprise visit to Cus D'Amato's office where he asked a menacing question: "Is you or is you ain't going to give me a title shot?" Cus presumably came out from under the desk and told Sonny to give him a list of managers and Cus would choose one for Sonny himself. Sonny, who was smarter than the average bear, said, "Ain't that nice. What you mean is that you want to control me."

By the time Sonny fought Albert Westphal in December of 1961, he was fed up.

At the weigh-in on the day of the fight, Westphal was feeling the glare of the brooding behemoth. "You can talk to me. I'm your friend. Why are you so angry?" Westphal asked him. "You'll find out tonight," snapped Sonny. The German looked like an erratic kernel of popcorn until the roof fell in on him. The fight was over in two minutes.

Meanwhile, the popular champion Floyd Patterson was wrestling with his conscience: "One night in bed, I made up my mind. I knew if I wanted to sleep comfortably, I'd have to take on Liston." So, Floyd defied Cus D'Amato's safety-first policy of title reigns, waved away the fears of the NAACP, and overruled the pleadings of no less than President John F. Kennedy himself. A quivering hand signed to fight Liston and Floyd bravely met his fate.

It surprised no one, though there was a collective gasp, when Sonny Liston became heavyweight champion on September 25, 1962 at Chicago's Comiskey Park. He rolled over Patterson to take the title in 2:05 of the first round (it would take him only four more seconds to do the same in the rematch). "It was", wrote Arthur Daley of the New York Times, "a bull elephant matched against a frail deer and then felling him with a disdainful swipe of his ponderous trunk."

The "bad guy" won, just like Sonny had promised. The armed robber, labor goon, cop-fighting ex-con ...the big, black menace... was king. Jim Murray wrote that the world of sports had to reconcile itself with the fact that it was stuck with Liston –indefinitely. It was analogous to "finding a live bat on a string under your Christmas tree."

In the post-fight chaos that erupted, Cassius Marcellus Clay hastily dashed down some verse and became a voice crying out in the wilderness:

And as the people left the park

You could hear them say

Liston will stay king

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Until he meets that Clay...

George Chuvalo's interview was conducted by Barry Lindenmen and published in Propane Canada, May/June 2004. Information for this article was derived from contemporary editions of the New York Times. Special thanks to Nick Gamble for his assistance with The Ring ratings. Gregory Toledo can be contacted at scalinatella@hotmail.com .