

TSS Where Are They Now: MARVIN JOHNSON

Written by Shawn Murphy
Monday, 24 August 2009 19:00

Fighting out of Indianapolis, southpaw Marvin Johnson fought in the light-heavyweight division when it was highly competitive. Names like Spinks, Galindez, Saad Muhammad and Mustafa Muhammad faced off with each other in a true Golden Age for the division. As a three time champion, Johnson's boxing skills were evident. Johnson would win titles against Mate Parlov, Victor Galindez and Leslie Stewart, and retired after a 1987 title loss with a final record of 43-6. Although the International Boxing Hall of Fame has not called, Johnson was inducted into the World Boxing Hall of Fame in 2008.

SM: Mr. Johnson, a pleasure to talk to you.

MJ: Shawn, nice to finally talk to you too.

SM: You went into the World Boxing Hall of Fame last year didn't you?

MJ: Yeah, that was quite an accomplishment for sure. There are some people who say that I should be in the International Hall of Fame. But the way it is, you just don't go in because you want to, they have to invite you. But I'll tell you I have gotten a lot of letters from the International Boxing Hall of Fame but not an invitation to go in.

SM: I loved the light heavyweight division when you fought and boxing in general. That's why I only interview retired fighters.

MJ: Why is that Shawn?

SM: Because when you fought you always knew who the best fighters were and who the real champions were. With guys like Spinks, Mustafa Muhammad, Parlov, Galindez and Saad Muhammad, come on, how exciting is that era compared to today?

MJ: Shawn I'll tell you, when I was coming up the ranks, they said the same things. They would tell us how good boxing was before our era. I look back now and I see that it's just not the same. My era was just better and maybe that's why I don't watch a lot of boxing today. I just kind of left it behind when I quit.

SM: After you did retire were you involved in any way with the sport?

MJ: I just left it behind and went to work because I wasn't financially well off. I took a job down at the Marion County (Indianapolis) Sheriff's Department and I've been there about twenty-five years now.

SM: From a lot I've read about you there was some bitterness about boxing?

MJ: I was pretty disappointed financially . I became champion of the world three times and as

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champion you kind of envision those million dollar paydays. My biggest purse was \$265,000 and that didn't come until I was champion the third time. I was disappointed because I sacrificed a lot of things, as did my wife, and she always supported me all the way. I gave it my total effort, everything for the game, and boxing was the most important thing in my life. So the final aspect was not what thought it would be.

SM: How much more were the other champions in that division making?

MJ: Every champion was making a million dollars per fight and I was struggling for the \$100,000 payday. Maybe it was because I didn't hold onto the title for awhile, while some of the other guys did. But I'm happy for the guys today. They don't even have to be a champion to make six figures. When I was in boxing I wasn't into the fame aspect, I wanted the money. Because of my upbringing I was more concerned for those who had less and didn't think of myself as high and mighty. I just wasn't raised that way.

SM: Any thoughts of a comeback after you retired?

MJ: I did think about coming back one time, for about thirty seconds. It wasn't something I dwelled on because I knew I was at the end of the road. I felt like God gave me everything he had for me in boxing.

SM: So how did you get involved in boxing?

MJ: Actually I was so young I don't even know when it was but I can tell you how it happened. My oldest brother was six years older than me when he got involved in boxing. He used to make me fight him. He had to get down on his knees to fight me but that's how it started. When he got older he would take me with him down to the gym. He then went into the military and while he was away I really turned to boxing so I could impress him when he got out. When he got out he took me to a gym where the trainer was a former third ranked contender in the Joe Louis era. I have to credit him for everything, for all my success. We called him Champ Chaney. He taught me a lot about boxing and about respect for others. Unfortunately he died before I went into the Hall of Fame but he did live to see me win the title three times.

SM: Why was Saad Muhammad such a tough fighter for you, losing twice, in 1977 and 1979?

MJ: I'll be honest with you, he is the only fighter who took every punch I threw at him. I was in great shape and I thought that if I hit him time after time that he wouldn't be able to take it. But he took it and fought back and just refused to fall. He was my toughest opponent by far.

SM: Let me ask you about some of your opponents. Victor Galindez in 1979?

MJ: He was the smartest opponent I fought, a very sneaky fighter. He always tried to sucker me in and counter-punch me. He could counter so fast with those punches.

SM: Mate Parlov in 1978?

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MJ: That was the moment I said I did it! That I accomplished my goal and all my problems were over. I thought my prayers had been answered. I jumped right into the Saad Muhammad fight and couldn't get more than fifty or sixty thousand for the fight. That's when I realized that my financial problems weren't over yet. You can only count on about half of the purse after everything comes out.

SM: Michael Spinks?

MJ: I was ready for that fight. I was controlling the fight and winning each round. But I slipped up and got hit with an uppercut and a left. I just didn't see it. When you don't see the punch you usually get knocked out and the lights went out on me. If not for that punch it would have been a different fight.

SM: It was five years after the Spinks loss before you got another title fight.

How confident were you against Leslie Stewart in 1986?

MJ: Very confident. My mind-set was that I wanted to win it one more time. As you said it was five years to get that shot but I wasn't complaining. Besides I had been out of the game awhile too.

SM: As champion why did you then go over to his backyard so to speak and fight him in 1987? Why not take some easy fights here in the United States?

MJ: Money. My hometown offered \$75,000 for me to defend here, Stewart's bid \$265,000. I wanted to defend in Indianapolis but it was the money. That was the one fight I knew I wasn't going to win. I trained too hard. I just ran and ran. I sparred too much also. I just worked too hard and by fight time I felt weak in my body. I told my wife prior to the fight that I just couldn't win. That was not a Marvin Johnson fight, it just wasn't me. What convinced me to quit was that fight. I was getting old too. I was just tired and ready to quit. My mind was made up before that fight that it would be my last. They even talked about me and Sugar Ray Leonard fighting, which would have made some serious money for me. But after the loss to Stewart I knew it was over.

SM: Marvin, any final words/thoughts for the fans out there?

MJ: I'm just thankful for my health and that God has blessed me because I did not come out of the game punch drunk. I still walk without stumbling so everything is good. This is a dangerous game and there's a lot of fighters who come out of the game that can't talk right or walk without stumbling and who lose a lot of their facilities. It's a blessing for me to be able to say thank you to God that I'm not like that. I may have suffered some damage out there but it could have been a lot worse. My wife has been super and so supportive during my career. Thank you Shawn for thinking of me.

SM: Marvin, thanks for all the exciting fights over the years and the best to you.

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Check out Johnson taking out Parlov here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWefzLWLPQ8>