



The passage of 40 years can dim the recollections of even the sharpest minds, and Joe Hand Sr., now 74, admits to being a bit fuzzy about some details of his everyday life in 1971.

But there is one charmed evening from that year that is forever branded into Hand's memory, like a hot iron applied to the backside of a steer. That is an appropriate analogy given the former occupation of another determined guy named Joe, the one who came north from Beaufort, S.C., to Philadelphia a dozen years earlier and for a time worked in a slaughterhouse until he found a more profitable way to earn a living.

One Joe's Helping Hand To Another.....FERNANDEZ

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Monday, 07 March 2011 22:33

It was exactly 40 years ago today, on March 8, 1971, that Smokin' Joe Frazier floored Muhammad Ali with his trademark left hook in the 15th and final round of what arguably was the most anticipated boxing match of all time. A tuxedoed Joe Hand was there at ringside in Madison Square Garden, beaming with pride in anticipation of the monumental victory his friend soon would be accorded by unanimous decision. It was that single punch, one of the most memorable in boxing history, that served as an exclamation point to a night that even now, so many years later, remains as indelible a moment as the sweet science has known.

"Yank Durham's wife was with us, and she passed out," Hand said of the sequence in which Frazier's thunderous hook sent Ali crashing to the canvas as if he'd been pole-axed. "She actually fainted when Ali went down. Me, I was shocked that he could even get up.

"Joe's feet were probably three inches off the ground when he connected with that hook. I have a picture of it in my office. It wasn't as if his feet were planted or anything like that; it was a leaping punch. Joe hurled himself at Ali and down he went."

Less than seven years earlier, Joe Hand Sr. was a Philadelphia police officer whose interest in boxing was negligible almost to the point of being non-existent. He'd never seen a fight in person and felt no particular need to rectify that situation. But when patriotism, civic pride and a desire to rub shoulders with some of the city's social elite merged, Hand took steps to become one of the original investors in Cloverlay, the consortium of Philly businessmen that financially backed Frazier, who had won the heavyweight gold medal at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

In its own way, the \$250 that Hand plunked down, much of which he had to borrow, served as an entry into a sport that ultimately would yield nearly as much to him as it did to Joe Frazier, the 13th and final child of Rubin and Dolly Frazier's 13 children, a child field laborer whose work ethic was baked and hardened under an unforgiving Southern sun.

"If it wasn't for Joe, I might still be in the subway," Hand, now the well-to-do president of Joe Hand Promotions and the proprietor of the Joe Hand Boxing Gym, said in recalling his days stationed on a subway platform Philly. "I would give whatever I have to him if he needed it. I love the guy."

Hand is one of the few surviving members of Cloverlay, and the last one who was so active in its operation that he was involved in nearly every detail from its start-up to its dissolution in 1973, after Frazier lost his title on a second-round stoppage by George Foreman in Kingston, Jamaica. It is a remarkable tale of fortuitous developments, both for the fighter and his backers, that came together in such a manner that almost defies description. Certainly, given the economics of boxing today, in which premier performers like Manny Pacquiao and Floyd Mayweather Jr. can earn upwards of \$20 million for a single evening's work, there is no chance that a reigning Olympic gold medalist could return home without a megabucks offer to turn pro under a well-connected promoter.

Frazier's Cinderella fitting of his figurative glass slipper came even before he defeated Germany's Hans Huber to become America's only Olympic gold medalist in boxing in Tokyo. Were it not for an injury sustained by Buster Mathis, who would have represented the United

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States in the heavyweight division, Frazier, an alternate, wouldn't even have made the Olympic team.

But instead of returning home to a hero's welcome, Frazier arrived in Philadelphia alone and seemingly unappreciated. He also had a broken thumb, which clouded his possibility of even pursuing a professional career in the ring.

"He couldn't even work at a regular job," said Hand, noting that Frazier still was bothered by the injury some months later, as the Christmas season approached.

"Joe had children – I don't recall how many it was then, maybe just Jacqui and Marvis – and he couldn't afford to buy them presents," Hand said. "There was a politician in Philadelphia named Thatcher Longstreth who came up with the idea of getting people together and forming a company to support Joe. Thatcher went to some of his rich friends and asked them to donate something to Joe for his kids for Christmas."

From such humble origins did Cloverlay – the name was an amalgamation of "clover," meaning good luck, and "overlay," a British term for a good bed – come into existence. But even Longstreth, a tall, bespectacled patrician known for his elegant manners and ever-present bow tie, had no inkling that the enterprise would advance as far as it did.

"Most of the original 14 members of Cloverlay were members of the exclusive Union League in Philadelphia," Hand noted. "Dr. Bruce Baldwin was named the president of the corporation. The stock issued was called 'cocktail' stock, because those gentlemen, all of whom had a lot of money, would go to cocktail parties and say, 'Oh, I own a fighter.' It was kind of a prestige thing.

"The only stipulation for becoming a member of Cloverlay was that you had to be a Pennsylvanian to own stock. You were ineligible to buy in even if you lived in south Jersey."

That was a stroke of luck for Hand, and even more so that he resided on Jackson Street.

"A couple of guys bought two shares at \$250 a share," Hand said. "Really, nobody thought that they would ever make any money. And the \$250 I put in was a pretty steep buy-in, considering that police officers were making something like \$3,500 a year at the time. That was nothing to some of the other investors, but it was to me.

"Like a lot of people, I read about this local kid coming out of the Olympics who had won a gold medal for his country. I was not a boxing fan. But when I found out about some of the people who were backing Joe, I recognized that they were among the city's foremost movers and shakers. There was Harold Wessel, who was a senior vice president of Ernst & Ernst, which is now Ernst & Young, a large national accounting firm. Bob Wilder was the president of Lewis & Gilman, probably the largest public-relations company in Philadelphia. One of the fellows who bought stock was Jack Kelly, Grace Kelly's brother.

So, how did a cop on a budget join the rich-guys Cloverlay club?

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"I wrote a letter to Dr. Baldwin and let him know I wanted to buy a share of Cloverlay stock, if I could," Hand recalled. "As it turned out, I lived on Jackson Street, where Dr. Baldwin had lived as a kid. He wrote me back and told me he'd be glad to sell me a share of his stock. I guess he had two shares at the time. He said, 'If I can't help a Jackson Streeter, I can't help anybody.'"

So Hand was in, and it turned out to be one helluva ride to the top with Frazier. It was an interesting trip for the Cloverlay investors, too, one of whom – Larry Merchant, then the sports editor of the Philadelphia Daily News, now the veteran boxing color analyst for HBO – was obliged to sell his share because his editors deemed it to be a conflict of interest.

"Joe got 70 percent of his purses and the investors got 30 percent," Hand said. "He didn't have a regular contract filed with the Pennsylvania State Athletic Commission, but a personal-services contract with Cloverlay. We were responsible for seeing that he arrived for his fights at a designated time and date."

Hand said he first believed Smokin' Joe was destined for great things when, after a tough start, he rallied to beat rawhide-tough Canadian George Chuvalo, a victory that brought him increasing national interest.

But the highlight of Frazier's career came on March 8, 1971, when he and Ali squared off in a showdown of undefeated champions, the biggest boxing match since the Joe Louis-Max Schmeling rematch.

"That was, and still is, the biggest sporting event of all time," Hand said. "There's nothing that compares to the drama and the excitement of that night. The Philadelphia Daily News had at least a column, and sometimes an entire page, on the fighting beginning 21 days out. Burt Lancaster, the movie star, was a color announcer for the telecast. Frank Sinatra was taking photos for Time-Life. To get a ringside seat – and there were no exceptions – you had to wear formal attire, a tuxedo or an evening gown.

"The day of the fight, I ran the train from Philadelphia to New York. We had eight cars and sold them out (500 tickets at \$25 each). There also were some very wealthy people who had private cars that attached our train. We had two policemen who collected the tickets and provided security."

And while Ali had many supporters in the Garden, throughout the nation and around the world, the Cloverlay people were convinced that "The Greatest" was in for a smoking.

"There was never a doubt in any of our minds that Joe would win," Hand said. "For him to lose, you'd have had to stab him or shoot him ... all that anger he'd built up from Ali's insults. Ali might have been the best fighter, but Joe had the biggest heart."

That heart, as much or more as that sledgehammer left hook, carried Frazier to the greatest victory of his career. Using the archaic scoring system then in place in New York, judges Bill Rcht and Artie Aidala had Frazier winning 11 rounds to four and 9-6, respectively, with referee Arthur Mercante Sr. submitting a card that had the Philadelphia ahead, 8-6-1.

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“When it was all over, back in Joe’s dressing room, two guys came in and took everything Joe had worn, the green-and-gold robe, the boxing trunks, the gloves,” Hand said. “Left him with a jockstrap and socks. I don’t know what happened to all that gear.”

What Hand does know is that both winner and loser that night paid a high price for taking each other to the limit in the first fight of their magnificent three-bout trilogy, against which all other boxing rivalries are measured.

“Joe went home, checked into St. Luke’s hospital,” Hand said. “His blood pressure was sky-high. If it got any higher, they said it would cause a stroke.

“I stayed with him through the night. Yank Durham (Frazier’s trainer) went off on a trip to Europe. Bruce Wright, the attorney, he had someplace to go. I was the only one. He was my friend. It hurt to see him so beat up.

“Both fighters were never the same after that night.”

Hand said the then-record \$2.5 million purse paid to each fighter could have been larger, had they accepted an offer from Sonny Werblin, then the owner of the New York Jets.

“Madison Square Garden wasn’t the only venue we considered,” Hand said. “There was a guy hooked up with Sonny Werblein. We – meaning the Cloverlay guys – went up there to meet with Werblein, in his penthouse overlooking the East river. It was around the same time the World’s Fair was being held. There was an open building called Schaefer Center. They were going to put an inflatable room on it. We could have gotten maybe another \$2 million for the fight if we had put it in there, but we were so afraid the roof wouldn’t stay up, so we declined the bid This past football season, when I saw that the inflatable room collapsed under the weight of snow in Minneapolis, I thought, ‘Holy cow, that could have happened to us.’”

Fortunately for Hand, Ali-Frazier I was televised via closed-circuit and someone with Cloverlay needed to learn the whys and wherefores of the new technology. Hand volunteered for the assignment.

“Bruce Wright, the attorney, said, ‘Find out everything you can about it.’ I did. And when Cloverlay dissolved, there was a question as to who was going to wind up with that part of it. Nobody else wanted it, so I said I’d take it. That’s how Joe Hand Promotions came to be.”

After Frazier defeated Ali, Hand traveled to Smokin’ Joe’s birth city of Beaufort to represent Cloverlay, which wanted to build a playground there to honor Joe. But the city fathers were only willing to go so far to recognize the signal accomplishments of a native son.

“I talked to the mayor, told him what we had in mind, flew down there,” Hand said. “I call the mayor, they tell me he’ll meet me at Howard Johnson’s. He walks in, walks out. I was sitting there with two of Joe’s sisters and I figure out later he did not want to sit in a restaurant with two black people.

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“The playground never got built.”

Fast-forward 39 years and the landscape had changed, in its own way as dramatically as the moment that Smokin' Joe uncorked that spectacular left hook that, for a time, changed the face of boxing. On Sept. 25, 2010, the then-66-year-old Frazier returned to Beaufort to accept the Palmetto Award, the highest distinction a South Carolinian can receive, from Gov. Mark Sanford. Frazier's lone surviving sibling, sister Maizie, could not attend because of age and infirmity, nor could she be there later that evening with her famous brother was feted in Columbia, the state capital.

Times had changed in Philadelphia, too. Joe Frazier's gym closed in 2010, as had his restaurant, the site of a triple killing, years earlier. Bit by bit, his fortune melted away. His primary source of income now is paid appearances at card shows and the like, where he cashes in on, well, being Joe Frazier.

“I talk to his family,” Hand said. “Joe, I don't speak to. There's not a reason for it. There's no animosity, certainly not on my part. I call Joe every year on his birthday and leave a message on his voice mail. I say, 'Joe, happy birthday. I'm thinking of you. Why don't we get together and have lunch or dinner? You know how to get a hold of me. Give me a call.' But I don't hear from him.”

Hand tries to pay homage to that other Joe whenever and however he can. He has his gym in the Northern Liberties section, where Bernard Hopkins trains when he's in town, and he has a promotional interest in rising welterweight contender Mike Jones. He's hosted a number of Philadelphia Golden Gloves tournaments.

“Boxing has been very good to me and my family, and we try to give back to it,” Hand said. “But none of it could have happened without Cloverlay and Joe Frazier.”

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the Roast says:

Great story from boxings glory days. I wish the sport could get back to that status where the whole world stops to watch a must see fight. I know that the writers and readers of TSS will never give up. I was 4 years old in '71 so I missed out on this fight. I hope some of the older readers will tell their tales from the biggest boxing match of all time.

Radam G says:

DANG, the Roast! By the time I was 4-year-old, I had already had 40 fights against my fellow toddlers, punched my pre-school principal in the nose, and/or pissed in the beds and laps of about 40 champions and contenders, including at the head of the list, GOAT Ali, Ken Norton, Archie 'The Old Mongoose' Moore, Willie Pep, Carmen Basilio, Willie Pastano, Sandy Saddler,

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Flash Florde, Rev. (Big) George Foreman and the very great amateur Jessie Valdez. I even got my peepee on the late, great Howard Cosell. Instead of saying, "Down goes Frazer!" He was saying, "You pissy little, rascal, you!" Hehehehehe! I didn't dare peepee on Sugar Ray Robinson. God Bless his soul! He was so punch drunk when I met him, that he thought that I was his "Indian [Native American] grandchild." He woulda whupped my arse for ding-dong leakage. Hehehehehehe!

You would not even imagine what Richard Pryor said when his daughter and I got on our peepee at the same time, while playing together as tiny toddlers. But James Browns's daughter started singing, "It'sssss uh man's WORLD! But it would nothin' without a woman or girl." Holla!

brownsugar says:

don't get him started Roast.

the Roast says:

Damn Radam, that's a lot of celebrity urination! Next time you get to Chicago we gotta have a drink together! Then hit the urinals.