

“JUST WATCH MAH SMOKE ” Part 2: My Ship Is Coming In

Written by Springs Toledo

Wednesday, 16 March 2011 13:20



S.S. Ponce entering New York Harbor“**JUST WATCH MAH SMOKE,**”
Part 2: My Ship Is Coming In

Harry Durant was an expert angler, a playwright, lawyer, judge, and state legislator in New Haven, Connecticut. He was also a New England snowbird wealthy enough to flee to Florida in wintertime. Snowbirds typically pass their days amid the sun and the green of golf courses. Harry preferred leather and stink.

He would take jaunts to the boxing gyms of West Palm Beach with eyes peeled for talent. One afternoon in 1932 he found it. An underfed teenager was beating the bejeezus out of professionals. It was Lewis Hardwick, trying to make a dollar out of fifty cents. *Fifty cents* -that’s what sparring partners earned in an afternoon. Durant was impressed enough to take Lewis aside and bend his ear. It wouldn’t take much to persuade him to relocate north to New Haven that spring.

Like Lewis, New Haven had its own connections to the sea. The city was built out from a natural harbor and the young boxer need only walk down to the wharves to gaze at schooners and hear the sound of buoy bells and waves lapping the shore. Most new citizens in the area during this time were, fittingly enough, African-American and Puerto Rican. Lewis probably felt right at home. His new sponsor set him up, became his temporary guardian, and brought in seasoned trainers Charley Brown and Al Blondi to continue his education in the fistic arts. They had him sparring with the best around; including future featherweight champion Petey Sarron.

It was around this time, April 1932, that newspapers began calling him “Cocoa Kid.” Lewis said that he chose the nickname as a tribute to the Cuban “Kid Chocolate” –the Jr. lightweight king then taking the northeast by storm. Durant, who also happened to be a manager of stage stars, was probably behind it.

Back in Atlanta, Lewis fought as if he was in a battle royal. He had a crowd-pleasing style that saw him flailing from all sides to force a knockout. Brown and Blondi calmed him down. They taught him to use his nearly six foot frame to control range behind a jab and set up what was becoming a destructive right cross. His combinations became less about nerves and more about placement. They made his mobility more efficient by adding angles and showing him how to maintain distance between himself and his opponent. His defense was also improved; with two lashing long arms and height enough to look down on just about everyone else in his division, there were plenty of good reasons to deliver punches and not one to accept them.

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Lewis was an attentive student –too advanced for Rene Peloquin to make the grade. In the summer of 1932, Peloquin went down five times and ended the fourth round draped over the second rope. Three weeks later “Kid Cocoa” showcased a set of skills that was “a revelation to fans” and a curse on Baby Jack Renault. Renault tried to send over a haymaker for ten rounds, missed, and lost all of them. Cocoa Kid’s Boston debut in July saw jabs and right hands send Pete Herman floundering around the ring like an old salty on a raft.

The new arrival became one of the busier boxers in the racket. Between April and December 1932 he had 17 fights, 21 in 1933, and 24 in 1934.

It was the height of the Depression. Boxers had to accept smaller checks but few talents were standing in bread lines. If attendance levels at events during those years are any indication, America needed her fighters. Martial societies always have. The attraction isn’t mere escapism; at times it’s cathartic and often patriotic. It’s a visual reminder of cultural virility that has persisted on either side of the Roman timeline.

Boxing, like the Roman Empire, like mayhem for that matter, is multi-cultural. After retiring Louis “Kid” Kaplan (a Russian Jew), Cocoa Kid (“that New Haven *smoke*,” according to the Holyoke Daily Transcript and Telegram) faced Irish-American Frankie Carlton in May 1933. He entered the ring a 7-5 underdog. Once he started throwing away Carlton’s signature left hook like yesterday’s news, it became a brutal clinic. In the second round, Cocoa Kid landed a jab that blinded Carlton for a second. The local newspaper puts us at ringside for what happened next:

“And then, pivoting rapidly and sharply he snapped his right hand out and it crashed Carlton just below the left ear... Carlton’s head jerked back, his mouth fell open and the rubber protector for his teeth flashed out and bounded across the ring... A glaze came over Carlton’s eyes but he shook his head and turned to renew hostilities instinctively... the Kid stepped back and then flashed rapidly in with a left and right to the chin... Carlton shook to his heels, halted in his tracks, then slowly crumbled and spread-eagled the canvas... he lay there while the referee counted and until with the assistance of the Kid... his seconds carried him to his corner, where he flopped about lifelessly as they attempted to seat him in his chair. ”

Carlton was out, the report continued, “like many of our bankers.”

Cocoa Kid was on a train to Atlanta the next day to bring Aunt Antonia and his younger brother with him back north. He sought the company of familiar faces like anyone else. He was like anyone else in another way too –he could be thwarted. Harry Emond proved it when he sent him sailing unconscious through the ropes.

Emond, a southpaw out of Taunton, Massachusetts, got lucky. Four sons of Rome didn’t need luck.

Mike Frattini, Luigi Giuseppe d’Ambrosio (that is, Lou Ambers), Battling Battalino, and Saverio Turiello had his number. He fought them a total of seven times and lost six. Before a rematch against Frattini, reporters framed the bout as Cocoa Kid’s attempt to break the “Italian jinx.” When he lost, they said that “this race of boxers” put a hex on him. It was no such thing. These

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shared a common complaint –the sidewalk was built too close to their shoulders. They shared a common style too –they were crowding, aggressive men who slipped jabs and attacked sternums and flanks.

Seasoned trainers know that tall fighters should fight tall. They should keep a shorter opponent at the end of a jab, a bit like holding a wolf by the ears. Short fighters might wear lifts outside the ring but inside they want to create the opposite illusion; they want to look smaller. The smart ones will crouch down and shoot inside long arms to leverage shots into protruding ribs. To the short and ferocious, ribs become ringing chimes.

This is precisely what Frattini was –short enough to get under shots and ferocious enough to “set up a steady bombardment” to his body. At the end of the rematch, Cocoa Kid was a bit mangled but on his feet. When Turiello went underneath Cocoa Kid’s lightning left, the *Baltimore Sun*

said he was “practically on the floor” but he “dodged and ducked and fell in close to deliver plenty of body punishment.” The chunky Ambers, an all-time great who would go on to become the lightweight champion of the world, moved ever-forward and hurt the teenager several times. According to the

Providence Journal

, he met a long jab with short jolting ones. By combining aggression with a versatile attack, Ambers put him down three times in the seventh round. Cocoa Kid’s gallant exertions did not win him the decision. In 1934, Battalino bobbed and weaved around the ring, got close and attacked a weight-drained body. When Cocoa Kid lowered his guard to protect his ribs, Battalino landed four rights to the head and his knees sagged. In the sixth round, a “distressed look” was observed on Cocoa Kid’s face when he was corralled into a corner. After the round he “slumped on his stool” and his chief second signaled the referee to end the fight.

Not all of his losses were so clear. Some had more shadows than a film noir:

When he lost a decision to Frankie Carlton’s brother Harry in 1933, the crowd booed itself hoarse. When Mike Kaplan was awarded a split decision over him in Boston, the *Globe* reported that the pro-Kaplan crowd was “amazed at the verdict for its favorite.” A decision loss in Stamford, Connecticut to Billy Bridges was roundly booed. The matchmaker took a look at the referee’s card and found that scores for two rounds had been altered in favor of Bridges. He was robbed of a victory in New Orleans when his bout against Harvey Massey was scored a draw. The dismayed announcer looked at the tally several times before reading the decision and when he did, the uproar lasted twenty minutes with fans throwing whatever wasn’t nailed down into the ring. The sports department of the

Times-Picayune

took a survey and couldn’t find anyone “who didn’t think Cocoa won as far as you can throw a rock.”

Cocoa Kid fought on. His ship was coming in, but there was fog in the harbor and uncharted dangers ahead.

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CHECK BACK SOON FOR PART 3 OF 8.

Milton James Burns's "S.S. Ponce Entering New York Harbor" opens this essay.

The following periodicals were used in researching this essay: the *Palm Beach Post*, *Meriden Daily Journal*

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Harford Courant

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North Adams Transcript

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Boston Globe

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*Holyoke Daily Transcript
and Telegram*

,
The Sun

,
Providence Journal

, and the
New Orleans Times-Picayune

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Radam G says:

I'm luv'in' it. Springs To got his masterweaving spit on. He's Da Man! Enough said! Holla!

brownsugar says:

sweet!.....