Cocoa Kid and manager. **“JUST WATCH MAH SMOKE,”**
Part 3: The Great Informer

Jimmy Leto took a decision over Cocoa Kid in 1933. The fight was close. The correspondent for the *Hartford Courant* saw it even, though his eyebrow was raised before Leto’s hand was.

Here’s why: In the eighth round, Cocoa Kid threw a wide right that landed on Leto’s chin, turning him completely around. Leto stood dazed in the middle of the ring, but “instead of rushing in ‘for the kill,’” the correspondent watched as Cocoa Kid “stood off and sparred around long enough to allow Leto to come out of the fog.”

That “wide right” may have been an accident.

Paul Gallico was a sports writer during this era who retired early due to his disgust with what he uncovered. In *Farewell to Sport* (1938) he insisted that in eight out of ten professional boxing matches between a black man and a white man, “the dice were loaded.” Black fighters, he said, often agreed beforehand to either lose or “carry” their white opponents. In other words, the black man was “handcuffed.” What’s worse, he claimed that these directives were typically handed down by their own managers. Gallico also said that even without handcuffs on, black fighters could not expect to win close ones. Looking good and winning most of the rounds weren’t enough -they had to dominate in hopes of getting a fair shake.

This looks like undue cynicism. Perhaps it was. A page later, Gallico predicted that because white people grow weary of “seeing a Negro triumph too often,” Joe Louis would not hold the title for long. He held it for almost twelve years.

Then again, perhaps his cynicism was not so far off. Cocoa Kid’s record is a convincing Exhibit A.

It is standard these days for highly skilled fighters to coast through a round or two when fighting an easy mark. Cocoa Kid either didn’t have that option or didn’t believe that he had that option –the number of decisions wins where he won every single round is startling. A “shut-out” served two purposes for a black boxer. First, it made it harder for judges to rob him of a victory. Split decisions and close fights frequently went against him, especially when his opponent was white. This accounts for many of Cocoa Kid’s 56 losses. Robbing an African American of his rightful win had to be done with some caution because even white crowds hoping to see white arms raised by referees did not tolerate fictions. Secondly, a shut-out wasn’t a knockout. By agreeing to allow a white fighter to go the distance, an ambitious black boxer proved cooperative with managers. Cooperative fighters got fights and with a little luck and the right connections, perhaps even a title shot. Handcuffs served as a happy medium -no one took a dive and no one got hurt.

Was Cocoa Kid handcuffed? That first fight with Jimmy Leto suggests that he was. The rematch points toward something worse.

April 26th 1935, New Haven. Over a thousand outraged spectators rose as one in the New Haven Arena when Leto was announced the winner after his rematch against Cocoa Kid. They jeered for three minutes. As Cocoa Kid made his way out of the ring, the sports editor for the Hartford Courant reported that an approving roar followed him to the dressing room.

The next day, Cocoa Kid’s wife went straight to matchmaker Al Caroly’s office and dropped a bombshell. Two nights before the fight, she claimed, Leto’s manager offered her husband a $100 bribe to intentionally lose. Caroly later spoke to Cocoa Kid directly. The fighter confirmed it and later made a signed statement confirming it again.

Twenty-five-year-old Lou Viscusi, called “Big Lou” at the time, was Leto’s manager. He responded to the accusation by stating that he was “misunderstood” and then let fly a number of counter-accusations. He said that Cocoa Kid “pestered him for months” to take over as his manager, and that he begged for a fight against the popular Leto “saying he needed the purse badly.” Cocoa Kid’s manager, Viscusi said, had made a suspicious midnight call offering Leto a larger percentage of the gate than usual.

One of the flailing shots he threw had mustard. He said that Cocoa Kid planned to come in over the contracted weight to gain an advantage, and that the scales were rigged at the New Haven Arena to cover it up. Before the official weigh-in, he said that he brought Leto to a non-affiliated state office, where he weighed just under 140 lbs. At the arena, he weighed under 139 lbs. Viscusi’s suspicions supposedly compelled him to investigate further. He said that he scraped away paint from the drill holes on the weights and extracted lead filling. Viscusi did nothing about it at the time. He claimed that he was too disgusted.

A public hearing was held on May 2nd to investigate the bribery charge leveled against Viscusi. Cocoa Kid’s testimony was considered very credible. He said that Viscusi had pretended to be an auto salesman to gain access into his house and then asked him if he’d like to “make some money.” He replied that he would. Then, the fighter recalled, Viscusi offered him $100 to lose to Leto and said that he could take that money and wager it on Leto on Cocoa Kid’s behalf. Cocoa Kid also said Viscusi tried to sweeten the deal by offering to slide lucrative out-of-state bouts his way in the future.

Cocoa Kid declined. He told Viscusi that “he would enter the ring to give his best.”

Word on the street was that Viscusi feared that “his best” would sideswipe Leto’s chances for a May date with welterweight champion Jimmy McLarnin.

Under questioning, Viscusi admitted that he drove to Cocoa Kid’s house in New Haven two nights before the Leto fight. He said that he did so because he wanted to speak to Cocoa Kid about whether or not he would be able to make the contracted weight. In the car with him were heavyweight boxer Nathan Mann (nee Natale Menchetti) and “another fellow.” Viscusi said that Mann was only there to show him where Cocoa Kid lived, and that they found the house “with the help of a policeman.” Cocoa Kid emerged from the house and got into the car while Mann and the other individual, who evidently just came along for the ride, “went off to get a glass of beer.”

Viscusi testified that Cocoa Kid asked him if he would pocket the $100 forfeit for non-appearance if he couldn’t make weight and the match was called off. “I tried to explain to him,” said Viscusi, “that he would not get the forfeit and also told him that Jimmy [Leto] would beat him badly if he was at weight.”

Let’s examine the undisputed facts: Two days before a boxing match, the manager of one of the boxers gets into a car accompanied by a heavyweight under his control and another unnamed individual. They drive forty miles from Hartford to New Haven to speak to the opponent in the upcoming match. They do this at night. The opponent is black and twenty-years old. His own manager is not present. Two days later, the opponent loses the bout and half the arena erupts in protest of what they see as a terrible decision. The next day, the opponent comes forward with the claim that he was, at the time of the confirmed visit before the fight, offered a bribe.

Viscusi brought what clearly seems to be “muscle” with him on that nighttime ride. Knowing what it looked like under official scrutiny, he included details, but the details only make it appear even more suspicious. “I took Nathan Mann along with me,” he said, “to show me where Cocoa Kid lived.” Just in case that wasn’t enough to take the edge off, he added another detail: a “policeman” showed them where Cocoa Kid lived. The problem here is that the introduction of the policeman into his account disables the stated reason why Mann came along in the first place. Viscusi also felt it necessary to place both of his companions out of the car when Cocoa Kid emerges from the house and gets into the car. He seemed to be straining to minimize what looks like intimidation.

It gets better. Recall Viscusi’s most serious counter-accusation -his insistence to the press that the scale was rigged for the official weigh-in. He changed his tune at the hearing. After the commissioner and deputy commissioner testified that they had personally inspected the weights and found them in working order, Viscusi admitted “that he was satisfied the weights were all right” despite what he said earlier. This does not reflect well on his honesty. None of it does. He had ample motive to deny and distort the truth. Cocoa Kid, by contrast, took a risk by coming forward. He’s lucky he didn’t end up in the Mill River.

The incident affords us a glimpse into the personality of Cocoa Kid. It is clear that he had courage. Senator Harry Durant might have called it ‘a lotta’ -something else. Durant had severed his association with the fighter seven months before this incident, complaining that he got “hard to handle” once the money started rolling in. When Durant left, he took his considerable clout with him and Cocoa Kid was left unprotected. Did the sharks start to circle? There is evidence that he soon moved to Cos Cob, a secluded little harbor village on the southwest corner of Connecticut.

The incident affords us something else as well. We may have uncovered a partial explanation as to why Cocoa Kid never got a world title shot; after all, he did what few fighters of his era would dare to do –he reported a bribe.

Was he lying?

The State Athletic Commissioner of Connecticut didn’t think so. He suspended Viscusi. “There was an unsavory air to the entire episode,” he said, and the conduct of the accused was “reprehensible at least.” Viscusi resigned as Leto’s manager and told the press that he would not dispute the ruling. Twenty-five years later, his name was brought up in the Kefauver Subcommittee Hearings on Antitrust and Monopoly. It was alleged that he was among those boxing promoters and managers who were either “very close to” or “controlled” by gangster Frankie Carbo.

In 2004, Lou Viscusi was enshrined in the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

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Check back soon for part 4 of 8.

Information for this essay was derived from the *West Palm Beach Post* and the *Hartford Courant*. Cocoa Kid’s moving to Cos Cob is found in Albert W. Keane’s column of the Hartford Courant, dated 12/21/1936.

The Lou Viscusi incident is covered in the *Hartford Courant* 4/27/35, 4/28/35, 5/3/35, 5/5/35, and 12/21/36, and in the *Holyoke Daily Transcript and Telegram* 4/30/35. See also *Sports Illustrated*, 12/19/60, “Norris’s Last Stand.”

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Comment on this article

Radam G says:

The masterweaving just keep getting better. Ya Da MAN, Springs To. But that photo looks like it is from the 1960s or 70s, or it is just that somebody of the sex-revolution era lied to me. Every hippy and flowerchild told me that afros and long straight hair were in then, not before. Great thing about the great investigative work of Springs To, is that one sees the real deal out of actual archives, thus not having to put up with misinformation from nostalgic bullspitters saying how neatly cut was hair in back in da day. Too many old farts lie about the past at a drop of a hat. When I get AARP and above, I gonna to keep it real. Holla!