

## “JUST WATCH MAH SMOKE,” PART 6: TOP CONTENDER, ADRIFT

Written by Springs Toledo  
Thursday, 21 April 2011 13:31

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On a September day in 1935, Cocoa Kid's manager sat down and wrote out a check for \$2500. He filed it at the New York State Athletic Commission for his fighter to meet world champion Barney Ross. In October he threw up his hands. "We can't get a title shot at Ross," he said, "because they duck us, saying the negro won't draw, is too tall, and other things." Ross's manager offered Cocoa Kid a non-title shot in November, which meant that he would have to come in over the 147 pound weight limit so Ross's welterweight title would not be at stake. Cocoa Kid's manager was willing: "I told the promoter we would take anything he gave us just to get Ross in the ring with Cocoa." It didn't happen.

In early 1937, Cocoa Kid defeated Jack Portney and knocked out Andrea Jessurun. Promoter

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Lou Fisher offered Ross \$3,000 to fight Cocoa Kid in Baltimore but the telegram was never answered.

On June 11th two boxers considered by the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* to be “the best negro welterweights in years” were prominently mentioned for a St. Louis bout in July with the champion. That night Cocoa Kid whipped Holman Williams for the third time and took a title no one cared about –the so-called colored welterweight championship. He followed it up with two knockouts and a decision win, and July went by without a phone call. In August, Ross outpointed Al Manfredo, a loser in his previous six bouts, and then defeated Ceferino Garcia for the third time in two years.

In May 1938, Ross was blown off his throne by the Category 5 hurricane that was Henry Armstrong. The new world welterweight champion began an impressive reign, but maintained the status quo. Among the sixteen men who got title shots were Ceferino Garcia and Al Manfredo –twice. Cocoa Kid was dutifully avoided.

As Cocoa Kid entered his peak in 1940, efforts were renewed to get the streaking top contender a title shot against Armstrong. New York’s *Ringside Weekly* joined New England and waved a flag for such a “natural” match-up. “Every fight fan who has seen the Cocoa Kid in action,” it proclaimed, “invariably walks away asking himself this question: ‘Why don’t they match this great fighter with champion Henry Armstrong?’” Meanwhile, promoter Lou Fisher offered \$5,000 to Armstrong’s manager for a non-title bout in Baltimore. Armstrong’s manager refused, citing his obligations to the New York State Athletic Commission. In Washington D.C., a promoter offered Armstrong \$10,000 in June and a matchmaker offered him \$15,000 in July to fight Cocoa Kid, but nothing came of either. The National Boxing Association (NBA) announced its intention that summer to force Armstrong to face the winner of the Cocoa Kid–Phil Furr bout or risk losing his title. Cocoa Kid beat Furr to a pulp, the NBA backed off, and who got the next title shot? Phil Furr.

October came and Armstrong faced third-ranked Fritzie Zivic despite the fact that Cocoa Kid had been ranked number one since April.

The Maryland Boxing Commission was disgusted enough to withdraw recognition of Armstrong as champion. “If Armstrong intends to limit his fights to second and third raters,” the chairman declared, “there is no reason for Maryland to recognize him.” In a gesture that combined goodwill and absurdity, they declared their intention to crown the winner of the upcoming Cocoa Kid–Izzy Jannazzo bout as the “World Welterweight Champion” ...of Maryland.

### SMOKE AND MIRRORS

He had to sweat off two pounds on the afternoon of the fight but Cocoa Kid walked into the ring a 9-5 favorite over Jannazzo anyway. He was in for a surprise. Jannazzo, either concerned or slighted by the laurels around Cocoa Kid’s famous jab, elected to jab with him. It was a wise move.

The chief priests of pugilism have long since traded in white tunics for moth-eaten sweaters and incense for cheap cigars, but their maxims remain constant. “Never hook with a hooker,” warns

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a gravelly voice, “–but jab with a jabber.” Like many tactics of the sweet science, such instructions make sense only after explanation. A properly thrown hook is the most physically complicated punch in the boxing textbook. It can also be the most lethal. Its circular trajectory comes in from the periphery, and is therefore harder to see than a straight punch. When it lands, the brain twists on its stem and crashes against the jagged inner part of the human skull. That kind of trauma can kill a man.

The jab is to the hook what a bean shooter is to a military flail, but what it lacks in power it makes up for in utility. In fact, it’s a multi-purpose tool. It allows the boxer to judge distance and set up more powerful blows. It expends the least amount of energy of any punch and buys crucial moments to rest and regroup after a rough exchange. It is positioned closest to the target and can be snapped out quickly to keep opponents at bay, thus forcing the less cerebral to think twice before barreling in.

If you are on the receiving end of a jab now and then, it isn’t so bad. The price is often no more than a sore sniffer and bleary eyes. “Jabbing with a jabber” is a relatively safe option, and there’s a considerable payoff. Boxers, like anyone else, are prone to crystallize habits over time. They may take tea in the afternoon, watch the news at 6, and rely almost exclusively on their jab in sparring. Sometimes they develop a neurotic reliance on it. If their opponent can defuse it by countering it into extinction or by turning the tables and out-jabbing him, a funny thing happens –the boxer often abandons it. Once the boxer is so disabused he will have trouble finding his rhythm and range, and he won’t be able to sneak in those little rests. All of these comforts are snatched away like a pillow from a sibling.

Jannazzo played it cool, reported *The Sun*, “–coolly and confidently,” as he stabbed Cocoa Kid with his own sword. But Cocoa Kid had answers. He began countering his mirror-image with a “wicked right” that sailed over the top of the incoming jab. In the ninth, Jannazzo landed his own right cross and Cocoa Kid exploded with a combination to the head and body. Both threw caution to the wind and fought on even terms in the last three rounds.

The decision was split. The two judges disagreed on the winner so the deciding vote was cast by the referee –no less an icon than Jack Dempsey himself. Dempsey (who was rebuked by trainer Ray Arcel in 1952 for inexplicably deciding in favor of a good white fighter over a great black fighter) chose the white fighter. The decision was greeted by cheers and boos. *The Sun* had Cocoa Kid way ahead –seven rounds to four with four even. The Associated Press agreed that Cocoa Kid took seven rounds with Jannazzo taking five and three even. Cocoa Kid’s manager was outraged enough to appeal to the people: “What does a fighter have to do to win?” he squawked, “There is no question that my fighter made all the fight.”

## SMOKE ON THE WATER

When the United States entered World War II, four thousand American boxers heard the bugle call. Five world champions were among them and their thrones were kept on ice while they marched. Jack Dempsey, too old to join the Army or Navy, was permitted to join the Coast Guard. Barney Ross asked for combat duty and saw action as a Marine at Guadalcanal. It turned his hair white. Sugar Ray Robinson and Joe Louis enlisted in the Army. After boot camp, Louis defended the heavyweight crown against the hapless Abe Simon in March 1942 and

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donated his entire purse to the Army Emergency Relief Organization. He boxed over 96 exhibitions for two million troops before he was discharged. The Secretary of War praised him for his patriotism.

None of this escaped Cocoa Kid, who fought on the undercard of Louis-Simon at Madison Square Garden. On October 29th 1943, three weeks after winning every round against Jimmy McDaniels in Hollywood, he voluntarily enlisted into the Naval Reserve and became a patriot. He swore an oath of allegiance to his country and promised to serve honestly and faithfully for two years.

The Navy wasn't so enthusiastic about having him. Jim Crow wore a pea coat.

This period of American naval history is shameful. For years, the brass strongly resisted expanding the role of black Americans to anything outside of swab work. Under pressure from the White House (itself under pressure from the NAACP), they cited the white man's rejection of the black man as an equal to justify their resistance. They didn't see it in terms of fairness or utilization of manpower because of a preoccupation with upholding the black man's traditional subservient role; anything more, they argued, would "lead to disruptive and undermining conditions." The Chief of Naval Operations offered to include construction, general labor, and yard craft as possible assignments, but also requested "that men of the colored race, other than those for the messman branch, be not assigned to ships or shore stations."

Despite the efforts of Navy brass, African Americans were finally allowed to enlist for general service in the Navy as well as messmen in 1942. By the end of the war about 123,000 had served overseas, though they continued to be segregated from white crew members and any who achieved the rank of petty officer could only command black subordinates.

Cocoa Kid reported to the Navy Recruiting Station in Los Angeles to begin active duty at 9am on November 5th 1943. His motivation to join this branch of the military may have been sentimental. At the height of World War I, his father's footsteps led to the sea –the angry sea that swallowed steamships whole and never spat back a scrap of metal or a sailor's cap. In 1943, messmen were re-designated "steward's mates" and it was in that capacity that Cocoa Kid would serve his country. He became a steward's mate –a messman, third class– just like dad.

He received orders to report to the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in Washington for duty and almost immediately applied for a life insurance policy. He named his wife Maria and infant son Carlos as beneficiaries. At the end of December he was reassigned and sent to the U.S. Naval Station in Astoria, Oregon.

There was something wrong. On January 14th 1944 he was placed aboard a train back to Washington to a naval hospital "for treatment." He was there for a month and was then sent back to Astoria. Soon he was walking up the plank of the escort carrier U.S.S. Marcus Island, sea bag over a shoulder. The former top contender donned the messman's bow tie to set tables and serve white officers their meals. It didn't last. Five days after boarding the ship in Washington, Cocoa Kid was back ashore in a naval hospital in California. He would be

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hospitalized for the remainder of his term.

Cocoa Kid failed to serve out his two-year commitment as expected. He was given an honorable service lapel button and mustered out on June 12th 1944 –only seven months after enlisting. (Oddly, the length of time between his father’s enlistment and the disappearance of the U.S.S. Cyclops was also seven months.)

He was “not recommended for reenlistment.” What happened? A Board of Medical Survey examined the case and the patient appeared before it in May. They determined that he suffered from a permanent disability “not due to own misconduct” and their recommendation that he be discharged was approved by the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery in Washington D.C. The specifics were never publicized and it is unlikely that Cocoa Kid ever shared what they told him with anyone.

A typed page in his service record reveals his secret. It glares ominously even now:  
“DIAGNOSIS: DEMENTIA PUGILISTICA.”

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CHECK BACK SOON FOR PART 7 OF 8.

"Boxing Ring" oil on canvas by Joe Concra.

Accounts of challenges made to sitting champions found in *Holyoke Daily Transcript and Telegram*, *Times-Picayune*, *The Sun*, *The Afro American*, and the *Washington Post*.

*The New York Times* was also consulted. An invaluable resource was “The Negro in the Navy: First Draft Narrative” prepared by the Historical Section of Naval Personnel, and *Black Submariners in the United States Navy, 1940-1975* by Glenn A. Knoblock. Michael E. Ruane’s interview of Lanier W. Phillips in the *Washington Post*, 9/20/10 accurately depicts the Navy’s treatment of African American messmen during World War II. Information regarding the U.S.S. Marcus Island found on [www.navysite.de](http://www.navysite.de).

The military service record of Luis Humberto Harwick/Cocoa Kid was obtained from the National Personnel Records Center, Military Personnel Records, in St. Louis, MO through the Freedom of Information Act.

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**Radam G says:**

Mountains of sweet knowledge that one would not know if it were not for the great digging and investigative work of Springs T. That is a nice, haunting photo of a lonely, empty boxing ring. Holla!