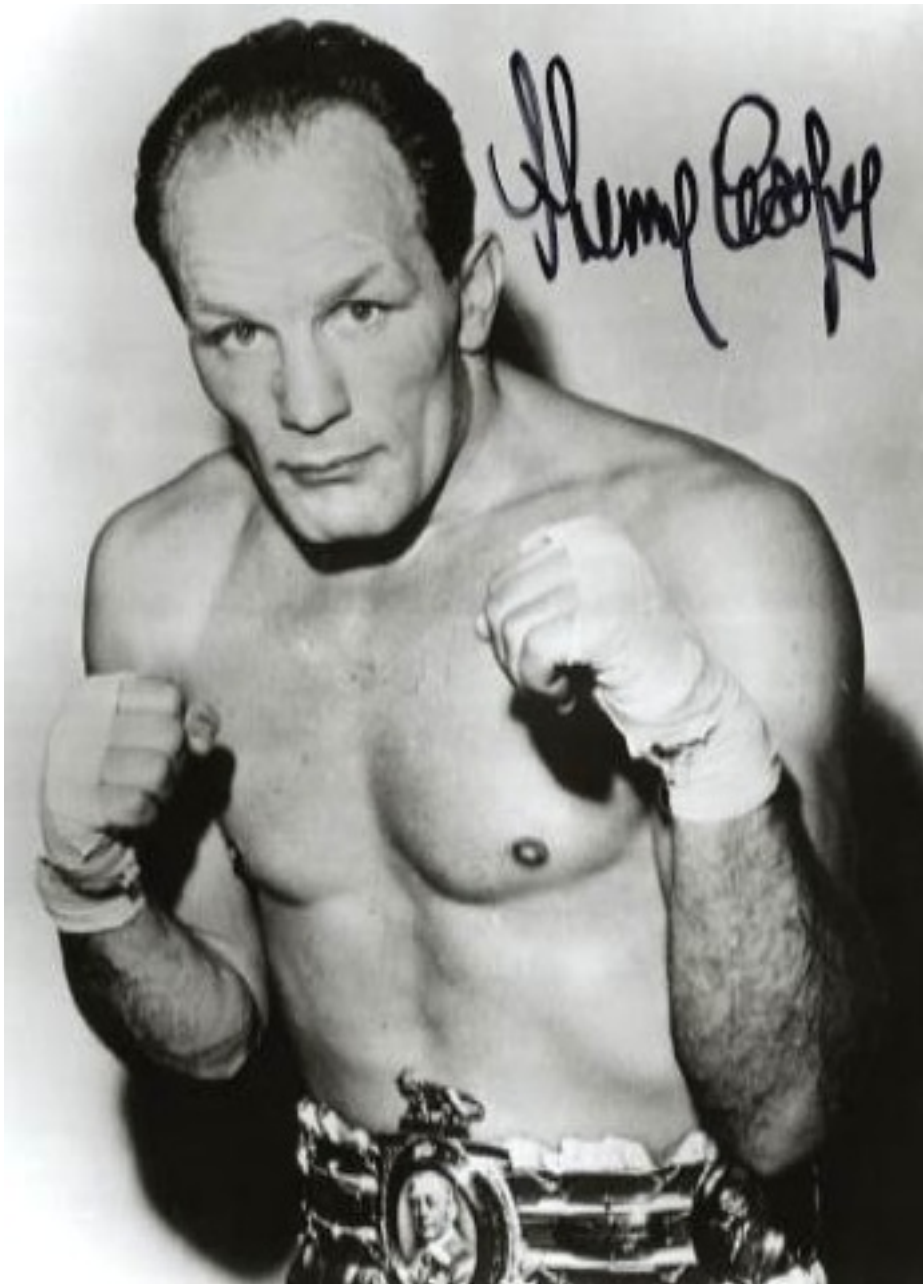


Rest In Peace, Sir 'enry....HAUSER

Written by Thomas Hauser
Monday, 02 May 2011 10:16



I met Henry Cooper in 1991. The relationship began as an outgrowth of my work with Muhammad Ali. Later, it developed a life of its own.

The profile below (written in 2001) is one of the first articles that I wrote for the Internet. Sir Henry (he'd been knighted in 2000) and I spent several hours over tea in London. Part of his charm was that there was a welcoming quality about him. In the United States, he's viewed as part of the Muhammad Ali legend. For many in England, it's the other way around. During our conversation that day, numerous admirers came over to pay their respects. Sir Henry had a kind word for each of them.

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Henry Cooper died on May 1st, two days shy of his seventy-seventh birthday. He was a credit to boxing in and out of the ring and a gentleman in every sense of the word.

* * *

It's a moment frozen in time, fixed in the collective consciousness of a nation. A memory that has been conjured up, told, and retold so many times that, for many in England, it has become the equivalent of religious lore.

In one corner, a brash young American named Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr. The 21-year-old Clay had won a gold medal at the 1960 Olympics in Rome and was undefeated in eighteen professional fights with fourteen knockouts. He was loud, cocky, and beginning to irritate people as much as he charmed them.

And in the other corner, Henry Cooper; the patron saint of modern British heavyweights. The 29-year-old Cooper had been born in Bellingham, Kent, and been fighting professionally since 1954. He'd won the British and Commonwealth heavyweight titles in 1959 and would hold them for a record ten years.

The date was June 18, 1963. Clay entered the ring wearing a crown embedded with imitation precious stones and a red robe emblazoned with the words "Cassius the Greatest." Prior to the bout, he'd predicted that he would knock Cooper out in round five,. Fifty-five thousand fans had jammed into Wembley Stadium to see if "Our 'Enry" could make the American eat his words.

For three rounds, two minutes, and 55 seconds, everything went as Clay had planned. From round one on, he was in control. By round three, Cooper was bleeding badly and it appeared as though the bout would end whenever Cassius wanted it to. But instead of taking care of business, Clay seemed intent on prolonging the Englishman's agony and making good on his prediction of a fifth round knockout.

Then THE PUNCH landed. "'Enry's Hammer," the British called it.

"It came from a long way back," one ringside observer later wrote, "with Cooper lunging forward as hard as he could. It caught Clay on the side of the jaw, and Cassius went over backwards through the ropes. He rolled back into the ring and got dazedly to his feet, gazing off into the distance, starry-eyed. He wobbled forward, gloves low, and started to fall, but his handlers caught him. Wembley Stadium was in an uproar."

But the round was over. And for British fans, a tale of woe followed. Earlier in the fight, Clay's trainer, Angelo Dundee, had noticed a split on one of Clay's gloves on the seam near the thumb. Now, with his fighter in desperate straits, Dundee, in his own words, "helped the split a little, pulled it to the side, and made the referee aware that there was a torn glove. I don't know how much time that got us," Dundee later reminisced. "Maybe a minute, but it was enough. If we hadn't gotten the extra time, I don't know what would have happened."

But Clay did have the extra time. And in round five, a barrage of punches ripped open the skin

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around Cooper's eyes, causing a torrential flow of blood. The fight was over, as Clay had predicted, on a fifth-round knockout.

Henry Cooper is now 66 years old. He retired from boxing in 1970 with a record of 40 wins, 14 losses, and 1 draw. He's still a hero in England; the most beloved fighter in the history of British boxing. Last year, he served as national spokesman for a campaign encouraging people age 65 and older to get flu shots. Cooper's message -- "Get your jab in now!" -- was in print ads and on television for weeks on end. Health care personnel later reported that many citizens coming into clinics said simply, "I want a Henry Cooper."

Cooper is also Chairman of the Executive Committee of The Variety Club in London. Last year, in that capacity, he supervised thirty golf tournaments that raised more than one million pounds for charity. He does extensive fundraising to support a school for mentally handicapped children. And in perhaps the ultimate tribute, he has been knighted by Queen Elizabeth.

Cooper still cuts a striking figure, with rugged features and an aura of honesty and decency about him. He and his wife, Albina, have been married for forty years. One of their sons operates a charter boat. The other is a chef in an Italian restaurant. They have two grandchildren -- Henry James, age six; and Lilly Maria, who's two years old. With his boxing days far behind him, Cooper plays golf with an eleven handicap. "I shoot my 85s," he says. "Take eleven off, and I'm all right."

As for boxing, Cooper has a lot to say about the sweet science today. "It's killing itself," he says with dismay. "You're supposed to learn your basic defensive moves as a kid. But trainers today don't know their trade, and fighters aren't being properly schooled as amateurs or professionals. They're not learning defensive skills anymore. And there are too many one-sided fights. You have all this hype for thirty minutes. Searchlights, posing in front of the searchlights, lasers, dancing, bands. Then the fight lasts a minute-and-a-half. In the old days, there were one-round fights, but people didn't know which ones they'd be in advance.

Cooper supported the decision of the British Home Office to allow Mike Tyson to fight in England. "Tyson's done three years in prison," he said at the time. "How long does he have to keep paying for it? We know he's a bit of a nutcase. But what's the worst crime? It not rape; it's murder. Don King killed two men that we know of. Don King served time in prison [for manslaughter]. Yet we allow Don King to come here and promote fights. Why should Tyson be any different?"

And who does Cooper think would win a bout between Lennox Lewis and Tyson?

"Tyson was a great fighter for the first few years of his career," he answers. "He's still dangerous. The last thing a puncher loses is his punch. But Tyson has lost it mentally and physically since then. There's no movement; he's getting hit. I think Lennox will stop him."

"You have to measure fighters by the standards of their era," Cooper continues. "Jack Johnson, Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano, Muhammad Ali, and Larry Holmes all had great talent and a great fighting brain. In my view, they were the greatest heavyweights ever. Lennox

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Lewis is in the next group. He's a good fighter and he dodges no one."

Meanwhile, Cooper's own place in British boxing history is secure despite his "Achilles heel" -- the tendency to cut.

"If you gave Henry a rough towel, you needed a basin to catch the blood," says Hugh McIlvanney, England's foremost sports journalist. "When he fought the serious Americans, you wouldn't have bet him. But he was a good boxer. For a man of his weight, he was a wonderful puncher. He fought to the limit of his powers and never let anyone down. He was a marvelous presence for the game."

And McIlvanney's American counterpart, Jerry Izenberg, adds, "If Henry Cooper had a different facial bone structure, he would have been heavyweight champion of the world. He could punch; he could box; he came to fight; he always gave people trouble. But at the end of almost every fight, he was red with his own blood because those jagged edges betrayed him."

Cooper himself prefers not to dwell on the cuts. He has a different memory to look back on. Round four on the night of June 18, 1963. "The greatest heavyweight ever," he says. "And I had him on his bum. It's still vivid in my mind. I remember everything."

"I was confident going into the fight," Cooper continues. "Clay, which was his name then, had looked good against big guys, but small quick fighters like Doug Jones had given him trouble. And he was a novice inside fighter. He hadn't learned how to defend himself in close. I only weighed thirteen-and-a-half stone [190 pounds], but I was messing him up inside. Then I knocked him down. And when I looked in his eyes, I knew he was gone. The eyes register everything. There's no way he would have come around in one minute. But Angelo saw that the stitching on the glove had ripped a bit. That's what you pay top trainers for."

Hugh McIlvanney says simply, "If Ali had gone out with only one-minute's rest, it might have been over." That conforms to the view of BBC boxing commentator Harry Carpenter, who viewed Clay between rounds and later reported, "His eyeballs were still rolling in their sockets."

"But there's nothing I can do about it now," says Cooper. "And you know the rest. I was a bleeder. I'd come to expect cuts. They were part of every fight for me. It's a shame, really. If I'd had flatter rounder features, who knows. But the worst cut I ever had was against Cassius Clay. I could feel the warm blood dripping on my chest. Of course, I think about the torn glove and the extra time it brought. There's no bitterness; I'm content with the way my life has worked out. Still, I have to say, you expect to be disadvantaged like that when you're abroad. I had a fight in Germany when I knocked my opponent down in the second round and they rang the bell a minute early. Then, when I knocked him out in the next round, I was disqualified. If Clay had been fighting a German in Germany, they would have let the fourth round go another ten seconds in the pandemonium after the knockdown and he would have been knocked out. I never asked for that. All I wanted was a level playing field. And to have it happen the way it happened in England was a bit hard."

There was a second fight between the two men in 1966. But it was little more than a postscript

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to the first. Cassius Clay had become Muhammad Ali. He was heavyweight champion of the world by then and well-respected as a boxer with an aura of menace about him.

"Ali was a quick learner," Cooper remembers. "By the second time we fought, he'd learned how to defend himself inside. Whenever I got near him, he'd clamp down on me like I was in a vice, hold on until the referee made us break, and step back out of harm's way."

Cooper fought valiantly, as he had three years earlier. But this time, there was no left hook. Otherwise, things were pretty much the same. Ali stopped him on cuts in round six.

And as for what might have been had Cooper won the first fight --

"Probably I would have fought Sonny Liston next," Cooper acknowledges. "I always thought the press built Liston up more than he deserved until Ali exposed him. If you were a mover and a good boxer and could punch a little, you could beat Liston, so I would have been confident going in. As for Ali, even if I'd beaten him in our first fight, someday he still would have become heavyweight champion. Joe Louis lost before he won the title. Jack Dempsey lost before he won the title. Ali was such a brilliant boxer, he was destined to become heavyweight champion of the world."

Cooper, of course, would have his own destiny. "You think you've got all the honors you're going to get," he says with pride. "And then this letter arrived in the mail. I saw the return address, Ten Downing Street, which is the office of the Prime Minister. I opened it up, and the letter said, 'You are under consideration for knighthood. Will you accept?' I showed the missus. She couldn't believe it. We were sworn to secrecy for seven weeks. Then we went for the big event. You're allowed to bring three guests, so I took my wife, my youngest son, and my grandson, which was what my older son wanted. It was at Buckingham Palace, and no one does ceremony like the British. They tell you the etiquette before you go. You kneel before the Queen, and she touches you with a sword on your shoulder. There's a bit of small talk. The Queen said to me, 'You had a long career, didn't you, Mr. Cooper?' I told her, 'I did, ma'am; seventeen years.' Then she shook hands with me. And according to the etiquette, when the Queen shakes hands with you, you know it's over. You don't keep talking to her."

So there it is. Lennox Lewis might be "The King." Naseem Hamed might be "The Prince." But Henry Cooper is a knight. That much is clear when an admirer approaches and asks Cooper if she can have his autograph. He signs with a flourish:

Best Wishes,
Sir Henry Cooper

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