After winning a gold medal in the middleweight division at the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, Michael Spinks returned to the housing project from whence he came in St. Louis, Missouri.

The tall and lanky Michael could not have been more different than his brother Leon, who also won Olympic gold the same year, in the light heavyweight division.

While the fun-loving Leon always had aspirations of turning pro, the more thoughtful and introspective Michael was sick and tired of the vagaries and politics of boxing. He had planned on hanging up the gloves for good and took a job as a graveyard shift janitor at a local factory.

“Boxing was such a dirty game, I didn’t want to lose my mind,” said Spinks, who is now an extremely fit 51 years old, and one of the greatest success stories that the sport of boxing has ever known.

One night while he was supposed to be cleaning toilets, Spinks fell asleep in the women’s restroom. He wound up getting cursed out by his boss, who didn’t give a damn that he was a boxer, much less the winner of Olympic gold.

“I told him that I was going to do him and I a favor and resign,” said the normally mild-mannered Spinks. “I told him that I didn’t want to do something that we would both regret for the rest of our lives.”

Spinks wound up turning professional as a light heavyweight. Brother Leon became a professional heavyweight, and dethroned Muhammad Ali for the title in just his eighth pro fight.

Spinks was matched tough early on in his career, beating such tough customers as Tom Bethea, Ramon Ranquello, Murray Sutherland and Alvaro “Yaqui” Lopez.

His one-punch knockout of former champion Marvin Johnson was one of the best of the past few decades. Even Spinks, who is not prone to bombast, was impressed.

“I saw the picture-perfect left hook and then I took it,” said Spinks, who ironically was best known for his vaunted right hand, which was nicknamed the Spinks Jinx. “I don’t think anybody could throw a better left hook. If he got up from that, then I would have quit.”

Johnson was counted out and in Spinks’ very next fight, in July 1981, he beat Eddie Mustafa Muhammad by unanimous decision to win the WBA light heavyweight title.

He would go on to make 10 defenses, and along the way also picked up the WBC and IBF crowns from Dwight Muhammad Qawi and Eddie Davis respectively.

Spinks was undefeated in 27 fights when he and his promoter Butch Lewis decided to go after

the heavyweight crown, which was then held by Larry Holmes. When Holmes, the IBF champion who was 48-0 at the time, selected Spinks as the opponent for his 49th fight, he was widely criticized for choosing such an easy foe.

If he won, which was generally regarded as a given, he would have tied Rocky Marciano's monumental record of 49-0.

It seemed that the only people who believed in Spinks becoming the first light heavyweight champ to win the heavyweight title was Mackie Shilstone, who was brought in to devise a scientific regimen to add muscle and flexibility, and promoter Butch Lewis, who Spinks is still tight with to this day.

"If anyone could beat Holmes, it was Slim," said Lewis, who has called Spinks by that nickname for years. "He was a tremendous fighter who could do anything. I never had any doubt he would beat Holmes, no matter what the press was saying."

Lewis initially wanted to give Spinks a year to prepare for Holmes, who had already stopped Leon Spinks in a title defense, but Shilstone insisted he could have him ready much sooner.

"Mackie had me ready in eight weeks," said Spinks. "I started training at about 200 pounds, but he got me down to 185 of lean muscle mass. Then he built me back up."

Spinks would eventually weigh 199 3⁄4 pounds against Holmes for their first fight, while Holmes weighed in at 221 1⁄2.

Although Spinks kept much of his feelings to himself, he admits to having no shortage of trepidation in the weeks leading up to the Holmes fight.

"I'd be in my bed at night, and I couldn't get any sleep," said Spinks. "My nerves were shot."

Finally the strong-minded Spinks managed to find a way to co-exist with his negative feelings in more positive ways.

"I would say that Larry is not just getting in the ring with any light heavyweight, he's getting in the ring with me," said Spinks. "I told myself that one thing I was really good at was not letting someone else get the best of me, so I was determined that Larry wasn't going to do that."

By fight night, Spinks had more confidence than he could have ever imagined. He put on a masterful performance, outhustled Holmes, and denied him the tie with Marciano's record by winning a unanimous decision. RING magazine called it the Upset of the Year.

Because Spinks seems like a somewhat sensitive soul, I asked him if he ever felt bad for denying Holmes, who was a great champion, the record he worked so hard to attain.

"Just the opposite," said Spinks. "He had beaten my brother and he had beaten Ali. He liked to hurt guys. It was a gratifying feeling to beat him, to not have gotten my ass whooped. He didn't

get the best of me, and when I saw him up close I wasn't afraid of him."

Spinks was thrilled to make history and, perhaps more importantly, he finally felt comfortable fighting as a heavyweight. He beat Holmes by decision in a rematch, and then defended the title against Norwegian Steffen Tangstad, who he stopped in four rounds.

He and Lewis then made a decision to relinquish the IBF title rather than defend it against Tony Tucker for a mere $750,000 in an HBO sponsored tournament whose ultimate goal was to crown the then rampaging Mike Tyson as the world's best heavyweight.

Spinks and Lewis opted to fight the hard-punching Gerry Cooney, who towered over Spinks, with no title on the line. Lewis, who put his money where his mouth was by promoting the bout, believed that not only would Spinks beat Cooney, but that a victory would result in an even greater purse for the eventual bout against Tyson.

Many experts believed that Cooney was too big and strong for the much smaller Spinks. Spinks, however, was a lot less concerned with Cooney than he had been with Holmes.

"Gerry had never been in the ring with someone like me," said Spinks. "If I didn't let him hit me, he couldn't hurt me."

Utilizing the herky-jerky style that he employed against Holmes, Spinks stopped Cooney in five rounds. A year later, his fight against Tyson for three versions of the heavyweight title would gross him more than $13 million.

Spinks admits to being concerned with the ferocity of Tyson during that era.

"I looked at him sideways and he was this wide," he said as he extended his arms. "I knew I had my hands full with him. He was hard and fast puncher. When I fought Mike, I think he was at his best."

Spinks was never in the fight against Tyson, and was stopped in just 91 seconds. He never fought again, which is a decision he does not regret. His final ring ledger was 31-1 (21 KOS).

As good as he was a fighter, he said that what he remembers most fondly, besides the paydays, are the training camps and all the laughs he had with Lewis, as well as sparring partners such as Elijah Tillery, Eddie Gonzalez and Al Evans.

"I really enjoyed the camaraderie," said Spinks. "My sparring partners were all great guys and we had lots of fun together."

Spinks, who was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame, isn't all that involved in boxing these days. But he is still closely associated with Lewis, who is always promoting something. He and Lewis attended a WBCares event in New York last month.

Michael is happy to see the success that his nephew Cory, who is Leon's son, has had in the

ring, and does not believe the criticism of Cory for being a safety-first fighter is warranted.

“He’s keeping the Spinks name alive, and he has us looking good,” said Michael. “And he beat that tough dude, (Ricardo) Mayorga. He (Mayorga) is a tiger.”

Michael does not welcome the comparisons to his brother, whom it is obvious he still loves, but says they are completely different people who took divergent paths in life. While Michael looks, talks and acts like an urban professional without an iota of pretense, Leon, who seems to have found inner peace, shows no signs of the outward success that his kid brother does.

“Leon’s a big boy,” said Michael. “He chose his route and I chose mine.”

Asked how he wiles away his days, Michael says that he sees his 26-year-old daughter as much as possible and hangs with Lewis often.

Other than that, he says, “I do a lot of lying around.”