

Shadow Boxing at the Golden Gate, Part 1

Written by Springs Toledo
Thursday, 05 July 2012 12:41



“The San Francisco fog has never been sufficiently glorified. The fogs... come in, not an enveloping blanket but a luminous drift, conferring a magic patina on the most commonplace structures, giving them an air of age and mystery.”

—Arnold Genthe, *As I Remember*, 1930.

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San Francisco, California. On the morning of January 26th 1975, a half-blind, fifty-seven-year-old hardware store clerk suffered cardiac arrest and collapsed at home. He died as quietly as he had lived. There were no public vigils, no testimonials about his contributions to society; few outside of family to mourn his loss. The man was also a fighter in the 1930s and 40s and this earned him a brief tribute in the sports section of the San Francisco

Examiner

. For a few aging readers, familiarity with the name may have fluttered in grainy memories before the page was turned. A service was held and the man was buried. Dust and silence descended.

The morning fog lifts like a curtain over the bay as the sun greets the Golden Gate Bridge. Five miles south is the old San Francisco Civic Auditorium, the site of some of the dead man's biggest fights. A young boxing writer known for his cigar and ever-present fedora before Bert Sugar was born was there for all of them.

As it was, the writer never forgot him.

Archie Moore never forgot him either. Counted by many among the top ten greatest boxers who ever lived, the four-decade career of the Mongoose saw him roar through three divisions to become history's king of knockouts with 131. Along the way he faced not one but two legendary heavyweight champions in Rocky Marciano and Muhammad Ali, though his hair was turning gray by the time he did.

This kind of longevity is rare. What allowed him to compete at such a high level for so long? The answer is found in choices made during his prime. Moore was a man who would walk out on Algebra and take Calculus simply to avoid being just another student. He'd face opposition everyone else sidestepped simply to avoid being just another pugilist. Moore earned his Ph.D in hard knocks from several hard men whose yellowed fight reports can still chill the spine. We call them "Murderers' Row."

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Eddie Booker was among them.

“I’ve had some rough fights in my time,” said Moore, “but all things being equal, when I was in my prime, one of my toughest had to have been against Eddie Booker, a fighting machine... who shot out punches with deft precision.” He met Booker three times between 1941 and 1944 and knocked him down three times. Booker returned that favor twice plus one. The “dreaded Eddie Booker,” Moore remembered, “was one of the great fighters of my time. He had me fighting for dear life.”

The *dreaded Eddie Booker of Murderers’ Row*, a man the Mongoose could not beat—and probably the finest contender you’ve never heard of.

Sitting a few rows back from the action at key bouts during his career was Eddie Muller, boxing writer extraordinaire for the San Francisco *Examiner*. No film of Booker exists but this eyewitness also happened to be an expert analyst. Muller is our man on the scene.

On September 28th 1942, Muller pointed his cigar at Lloyd Marshall and proclaimed him the first real middleweight test for Booker. “This fellow,” Muller warned Bay Area boxing fans, “can box or punch. He has more class than all of Booker’s middleweight victims.” That evening he watched the event at the Civic Auditorium and his cigar fell out of his mouth. A fighter forced by color and circumstance to moonlight as a redcap porter over at the depot on Third and Townsend, was launching himself into greatness.

“If there is a middleweight in the world who can beat Eddie Booker, we can’t name him,” Muller wrote. “After the masterful performance he turned in when he decisively outpointed Lloyd Marshall, he would be the odds on choice if he were to fight Tony Zale, division boss.”

Marshall, a 2010 International Boxing Hall of Fame Inductee, recovered from the loss and went on to beat Charley Burley and stop Ezzard Charles to become the number one-ranked contender within twelve months. He was considered by Muller to be about the best puncher in two divisions and the fact that he knocked Burley and Charles down a total of ten times confirmed that notion. It also confirmed that Booker had the kind of chin found in a quarry: Marshall landed three house-wrecking rights in the last round and Booker neither staggered nor blinked. Incredibly, Booker went straight from the auditorium to the sick bed after his victory

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—he had the flu.

And then fate stuck out its foot and tripped him.

In January 1943, he faced unorthodox speedster Jack Chase and was surprisingly outboxed, taking four of fifteen rounds. He was in the hospital for a damaged eye soon afterwards. A previous eye injury had been suffered, though his family believed that foul play was afoot this time. Booker's step-daughter recalled talk of scissors being used to remove stuffing from the offending glove; it was assumed that this happened before the second fight with Archie Moore, but Booker faced Chase only a month after that and he would be the likelier suspect. Chase was a shady character, Archie was not.

Chase spent most of his younger years in an industrial school for boys, a state reformatory, and a penitentiary in Colorado for crimes ranging from assault to vagrancy. Thirty-nine bouts into his professional career he earned a two-year bid for burglary. Two years after his release he shot fellow Murderers' Row member Aaron "Tiger" Wade in a bar on Fillmore Street. They took it to the ring six months later in what must have been 'the grudge match *di tutti* grudge matches.' The end of it raised eyebrows. Chase was hopelessly behind on the cards when Wade was suddenly blinded in the last round, floored, and after informing the referee he couldn't see, the bout was stopped. Chase won on a technical knockout.

Chase's disposition and prior history point toward his being responsible for Booker's eye injury. The timing is right too. However, the real story may be less dramatic—Muller mentioned that Booker sustained the injury on a shipyard job that he had taken to support the war effort.

Whatever the truth is, the fighter languished for twenty-four days in a San Francisco hospital in February 1943. He was faced with a grave decision, though it wouldn't be an uninformed one: Doctors warned that returning to the ring after eye surgery invited blindness. The boxing commission chimed in and said that he would have to submit to an optometrist's exam after every bout.

Eddie Booker made his decision; he would tempt fate and storm the gates.

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The San Francisco Bay Area would be the battleground.

Check back soon for Part 2 of “Shadow Boxing at the Golden Gate.”

Opening graphic (“San Francisco, Golden Gate in fire chamber”) courtesy of Ali Ertürk and artofhdr.com.

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[Comment on this article](#)

deepwater says:

very nice article

Radam G says:

No DOUBT! A very nice, SUPER article. Holla!

brownsugar says:

I love reading these tales about forgotten fighters with preternatural skills and unfathomable durability. I half expected to hear Paul Bunyon's name mentioned as the next opponent. Awesome Stuff!

Eddie Muller II says:

Terrific article, Springs. Glad the old man could be of service, all these years later. That's why we write, huh? Bear the torch.

Eddie M

teaser says:

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Murderers Row..mystic and mysterious...thank you for bringing life back to these mostly unheralded warriors ...and for giving them the recognition they deserve