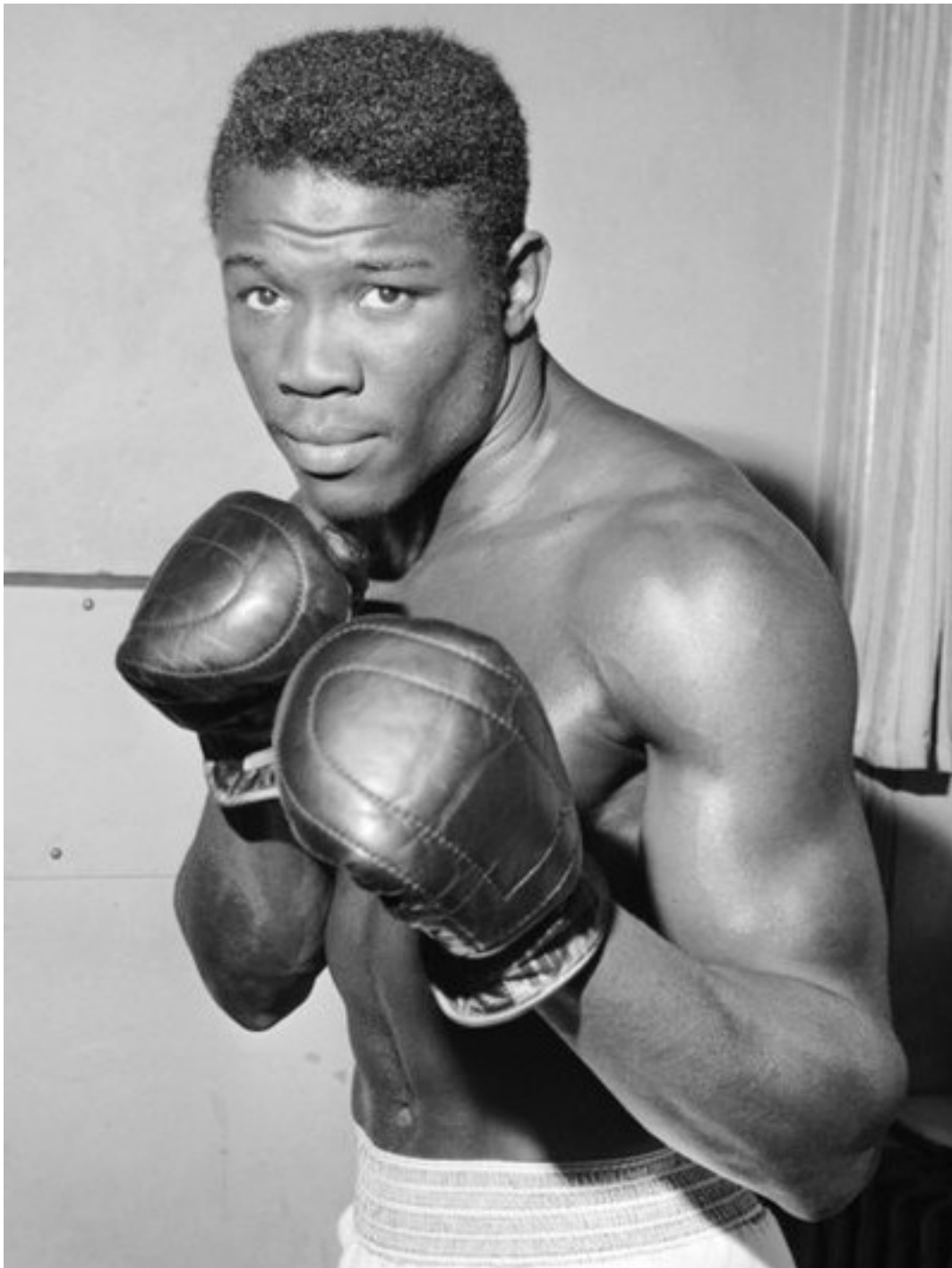


Emile Griffith: The Gentle Champion

Written by Randy Gordon, SPECIAL TO TSS
Tuesday, 23 July 2013 16:04



When I heard Tuesday morning that Emile Griffith had passed away, I was both sad and happy, but not shocked. I was sad because we in boxing were losing a great individual. Yes, GREAT. In every way he was great. He was a great friend...A great person...A great trainer...A great fighter...A great ambassador for the sport of boxing. I was happy because he is now free from the pain, the discomfort, the disorientation and the loneliness he was in for much of the past few years.

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I first saw Emile on March 11, 1960. It was also the first time I saw his opponent, Denny Moyer. That's because it was the first time I watched boxing. Griffith was fighting Moyer on TV's "Friday Night Fights." Emile was 22. Moyer was 20. Each had lost only one fight going into the bout. After 10 rounds, Griffith had picked up a split decision. Boxing had picked up a new fan.

I followed Emile from that moment. I was "in his corner" through title wins and his title losses. I was "in his corner" that fateful night against Benny "Kid" Paret and I was "in his corner" as a fan for the rest of his career. Never did I imagine how much Emile and his manager/trainer—Gil Clancy—would be in my corner—as close friends—just a few years down the road.

Griffith was the first big-name fighter I met—and interviewed—when first became a boxing writer. When I walked into Clancy's gym and saw the 34-year-old, still chiseled former champion, I was nervous. Even "The Giller," who would become my guru, my teacher, made me nervous.

When I was introduced to Emile, I shook his hand. Surprisingly, he didn't grab my hand in a vice-like grip and try to crush it, as I had imagined. It was quite the opposite. And his mannerisms and demeanor were far from the fighting machine I had watched so many times on television.

As we began the interview, I admitted to him that I was nervous. He laughed.

"Why are you laughing?" I asked him.

"I'm nervous, too," he said.

"Why would you be nervous?" I wanted to know. "You have fought some legendary fighters in front of tens of thousands of people and in front of millions watching on television. Why would an interview with me make you nervous?"

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“Because I sometimes talk very fast,” Emile said, “and with my accent—I am from the Virgin Islands as you might know—it sometimes is hard for people to understand me.”

Then he asked, “Why are you nervous?”

“I just started working for a publisher who has been around boxing forever. He hung around with Henry Armstrong, Sugar Ray Robinson, Willie Pep, Rocky Marciano, Archie Moore and a whole lot more. My future as a boxing writer just may rest on how good my interview with you is.”

“Well, then,” said Emile. “Let’s both relax and have a great time.”

We did. And from that moment, we were friends. Obviously, the interview went very well.

In 1983, I was now the Editor-in-Chief of The Ring and the boxing analyst for the USA Network. After receiving a call from two friends who had just signed a 6’4”, 235-pound heavyweight from North Carolina who needed a trainer, I called Emile. He had been retired from competitive action for around five years, but was working with lots of fighters in the gym. I asked if he’d take a look at the heavyweight, who had a 6-1 record.

“Sure, Randy, I’ll do that. But tell your friends I won’t promise them anything. If I think he can’t fight, I will say so.”

A few days later, we walked through the door of the gym in the late morning. The sun was shining on the heavyweight like a spotlight. Emile was standing near the door when we walked in. He looked at me, then he gazed up at the heavyweight.

“Oh my sweet Lord! Look what you’ve brought to me!” exclaimed Emile. “I didn’t expect anything like this.”

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“What did you expect?” I asked him.

“Not this!” he said. He walked up to the heavyweight and introduced himself, extending his hand.

“Hello, I’m Emile Griffith,” said the former welterweight, junior middleweight and middleweight titleholder.

“Hello, I’m James Smith,” said the future heavyweight champion of the world, his hand engulfing Emile’s, who looked down to see if his right hand was still there.

“He’s called ‘Bonecrusher,’” I told Emile.

“I can see why!” said Emile.

Then he looked up at “Bonecrusher” and asked, “Did you bring your gear? Are you ready to work, big fella’?”

“I did, and I am,” Smith told him.

After working out Smith for a little under one hour, Emile walked over to me and said, “He can be heavyweight champion if he is dedicated. He punches harder than anybody I have ever held mitts for.”

A little over three-and-one-half years later, Emile was holding the mitts for Smith in a dressing room at Madison Square Garden. Two weeks earlier, he was called by promoter Don King to sub for injured Tony Tubbs as the challenger to WBA Heavyweight Champion Tim Witherspoon. Emile had trained and guided Smith to three victories in a row that year—against Mike Weaver,

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Jesse Ferguson and David Bey—and now it was time to live up to the name “Bonecrusher.”

In the dressing room, I watched as Emile put on the punch mitts and got his fighter warmed up. Soon, as the pair were still working on the mitts, a member of the New York State Athletic Commission entered the dressing room, along with an MSG official and someone from HBO. It was time to enter the ring. Emile held the mitts up one more time.

“Who are you gonna’ be tonight?” asked Emile. “ Are you gonna’ be James Smith or are you going to be ‘Bonecrusher?’”

“Tonight I am ‘Bonecrusher,’” said the challenger.

“I don’t hear you!” shouted Emile. “Who are you?”

“BONECRUSHER!”

“Show me!” snapped Emile. He held his right mitt up.

With his hands held high, Smith launched a straight right, thrown from the side of his cheek, turning the punch over, palm down, as he did so. The punch traveled only the length of Smith’s muscular right arm. It slammed into the heavily padded punch mitt. The force of the blow not only knocked Emile backwards, but sent him crashing into a wall. Years later, Emile told me it was the hardest punch he had ever seen or felt.

That night, Emile became the trainer of the heavyweight champion of the world. “Bonecrusher” Smith, in his greatest victory, knocked out defending champion Tim Witherspoon in the first round.

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“I think about that fight, I think about that night a lot,” Emile said when I took him out to eat with referee Wayne Kelly, in 2011, only a few months before Kelly’s untimely death from a stroke. “I loved training those guys.”

Through his fighting days, right up until he was hospitalized a few years ago, Emile attended dinners and charity functions on a regular basis. He endlessly signed books, autographs, gloves and photos, never asking to be paid, when he could have and should have. He took photo after photo, always with a smile.

For Emile, the beginning of the end came about 20 years ago, when he was mugged and beaten senseless by a group of thugs after leaving a bar. The beating left him first, in a coma, then in a trance-like state.

Through the efforts of his adoptive son, Luis Rodrigo Griffith and Ring 8, Emile was placed in a medical center in Hempstead, Long Island, New York,, where he lived for the last few years. On Monday night, July 22, 2013, Emile Griffith left us.

As he hits those Pearly Gates, he is going to see so many friends. I’m sure his mom will be there to greet him, as will Wayne Kelly, Luis Rodriguez, co-manager Howie Albert, cutman Bernard Forbes, Syd Martin, John F.X. Condon, Don Dunphy, Nat Fleischer, Bert Sugar, Dick Young, Red Smith, Johnny Addie, Bob Waters, Al Gavin, Carlos Monzon and Bennie Briscoe. Irving Rudd will be there to handle his publicity. No doubt Benny “Kid” Paret will also be there, embracing him, telling him there’s no hard feelings.

And there’s “The Giller,” with that raspy voice, yelling at him, “Emile, come on, we’ve got work to do. Henry Armstrong has challenged you.”

The late, great sportswriter, Jimmy Cannon, once wrote these words about Joe Louis. I feel it appropriate to use them now and change the name. I’m sure Cannon and Louis will smile down and appreciate who they are being used for:

“Emile Griffith was a credit to his race—the human race.”

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[Comment on this article](#)

Radam G says:

Nice work! Wonderful copy. I'm sure Emile is enjoying it while on that angelic lift to those Pearl Gates. May he be rewarded with all the goodies of the afterlife. Until at the crossroad, much luv! Holla!

ali says:

Rest in peace champ

Carmine Cas says:

Another great piece, may rest in peace Emile

dino da vinci says:

As always, great work by Randy Gordon. Randy has always been one of my favorite writers, and he may be the only boxing writer who's never not had me smiling at the end of an article.

First off, this is because Randy is of boxing. A lot of people who pretend to be or truly believe that they are of boxing, are not. You get to be 'of boxing' by wearing a lot of hats in the fight game and by knowing what you are looking at. And that is either from having an innate sense of what's right or by having great mentors. In Randy's case, I believe it's a combination of both.

One of the things that sickens me is people trying to pass themselves off as so called boxing experts. While this is a topic by itself that could be discussed for days and weeks, you could chop boxing up into a lot of categories and find extremely knowledgeable people in any one category. Historians, for example, would fail miserably in some of boxing's other categories. But the sport is a lot deeper than jabs, hooks and uppercuts. And I assure you, most wannabes would be exposed in a short period of time.

Back to Randy Gordon. The last time I saw Randy was on the East Coast many years ago. He was at his boxing gym. He wasn't Commissioner Gordon of Gotham City (although he's been that), he wasn't editor of a major boxing publication (although he's been that), and he wasn't broadcasting a fight (although he's done that). He was at ground zero of the fight game, wearing pads (focus mitts).

Randy Gordon is of boxing.

And Randy gets away with something that is extremely difficult to do. He litters his stories with locations and people of the fight game that others attempting the same maneuver would come up way short. And the reason for this is Randy Gordon knows what names and locations

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press the readers' buttons, where others attempting the same thing are like an insane chimp behind a dashboard panel blindly stabbing at buttons.

That's because Randy Gordon has lived boxing. Not only does he know the task....how it needs to be completed, he's probably done it. Of course, when you've spent as much time around legends as Randy has, it makes the job a lot easier.

brownsugar says:

[QUOTE=dino da vinci;34056]As always, great work by Randy Gordon. Randy has always been one of my favorite writers, and he may be the only boxing writer who's never not had me smiling at the end of an article.

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Nice words... in fact the most words I've ever seen come from the keyboard DDV in a long time...which says a lot about Gordon .