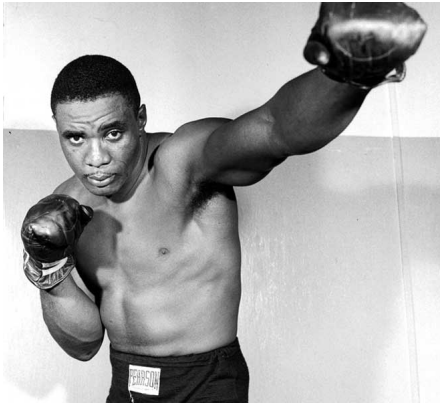


## What If Clay Quit Against Liston 50 Years Ago Today?

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Tuesday, 25 February 2014 11:55

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On February 25th 1964, undisputed heavyweight champion Charles "Sonny" Liston boasted a 35-1 (28) record. Liston was 218 pounds of tempered steel packaged into a large boned frame that stood a little over 6'1". For the previous five years, three of those before he knocked out former champ Floyd Patterson in September of 1962 to win the title, Liston was a human wrecking machine. Yes, he was the baddest man on the planet.

In the early sixties it wasn't uncommon to hear it said by many boxing aficionados that Sonny was the most formidable heavyweight champion in history and perhaps even greater than Joe Louis. From 1958-1963 Liston won 20 consecutive fights and only two fighters, Bert Whitehurst (who was out on his feet and saved by the final bell) and Eddie Machen went the distance with him. Both fighters received ovations for lasting the limit with Sonny, but that's about the best that can be said on their behalf because they never really were in the fight nor did they present much of a threat to Liston over the course of the 22 rounds they spent in the ring with him.

It was understood at the time that Liston was taking apart all of the top contenders that Cus D'Amato, heavyweight champ Floyd Patterson's manager/trainer, refused to let Floyd defend the title against. Contenders such as Mike DeJohn, Cleveland Williams (who Liston stopped twice) Zora Folley and Eddie Machen.

Liston, 31, was seen as the future of the heavyweight division. He was a fundamentally sound boxer who possessed the best left jab in heavyweight history at the time, something that probably still holds true today with only the likes of Muhammad Ali, Larry Holmes and Lennox Lewis having a case to be made for theirs in the post Liston era. Sonny was a natural at boxing and carried dynamite in both hands. He was strong as an ox and had a great chin. One doesn't

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need more than a few fingers to count the times Liston was hurt or shook over his 54 fight professional career.

Enter Cassius Clay 19-0 (15), who would challenge Liston for the title on the night of February 25th 1964 at the Miami Beach Convention Center.

At the time Clay, who would change his name to Cassius X three days later and then to Muhammad Ali shortly after that, was not thought to be the greatest by anyone other than himself. He was an Olympic light heavyweight gold medalist with hand and foot speed never seen before in a heavyweight. That aside, he was still between a 7 or 8 to 1 underdog against Liston. In his previous bout before challenging Liston, he was dropped and almost stopped by Henry Cooper in London, England. This was the same Henry Cooper whose managerial team wouldn't even let him campaign for a fight with Liston because they knew it would end quickly and painfully, and not because Sonny would be hurting himself.

As history would see it, Clay was too fast and swift of foot for Liston that night. Everyone knew Sonny didn't think much of Clay as a fighter prior to their fight and was certain that because of his foot speed, Clay might last a round longer than Patterson managed to do in two fights with him. In other words, Liston was planning on working about five minutes versus Clay at the most, something he figured he could do in his sleep, and often joked about during his training leading up to the fight. When they met in the ring Clay didn't back down from Liston and by the middle of the first round his confidence was escalating. Sonny and Cassius traded rounds and after four rounds, despite Liston being cut and a little swollen around the eyes, the fight was even.

In between the fourth and fifth rounds, Liston's corner-man Joe Pollino tended to Sonny's eyes. The solution used on Liston's cuts somehow got into Clay's eyes during the fifth round. By the middle of the round Liston was knocking Clay all over the ring without much resistance from Cassius, who was blinking and squinting profusely. Sonny used a lot of himself up trying to get Clay out during the fifth round, but due to Clay's good legs and unknown at the time physical strength and durability, Clay survived the round.

However, Clay must not have felt that he was out of danger and was imploring his trainer Angelo Dundee to cut off his gloves before the start of the sixth round so he could show the world that Liston was cheating. Remember, years later as Muhammad Ali he would admit that Liston was the only fighter he ever faced who really scared him. So it's not out of the question with Liston having his best round of the fight that the young Clay's confidence was waning. In

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the corner Clay and Dundee were going back and forth as Dundee was imploring Clay that with the title being on the line, nobody was cutting the boxing gloves off of him. Luckily for Clay, Dundee kept the ref occupied and Barney Felix never got to ask Clay if he wanted to continue or not.

Dundee managed to push Clay out for the sixth round and it changed the course of both boxing and heavyweight history. Clay's eyes cleared during the round and he began peppering a tired Liston, whose confidence and will were slowly being sapped from him. As fate would have it, Liston wouldn't come out for the seventh round, claiming he dislocated his left shoulder while throwing his vaunted left hook at Clay as he was moving away from him. With Liston sitting on his stool, Cassius Clay became the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world at age 22.

As Muhammad Ali, the former Cassius Clay would win the title two more times. In the interim, Ali was drafted to by the army to fight in the Vietnam war and was exiled from boxing for nearly three and a half years due to his refusal to do so. As a contender and champion Muhammad Ali fought a who's-who list of outstanding/hall of fame heavyweights and also stopped two all-time greats, in George Foreman and Joe Frazier, to win and retain the undisputed heavyweight title in 1974 and 1975.

Ali was much more than an athlete or fighter, he also stimulated talk and debate on segregation, race, religion, politics, human rights and a plethora of other topics. He was a true pioneer and paved the way for the Sugar Ray Leonards, Mike Tysons, Oscar De La Hoya and Michael Jordans of the world. Without Muhammad Ali before them, they wouldn't have become superstars who accumulated fortunes as both sports and cultural icons.

Yet if the result of the Liston-Clay fight ended with Liston as the winner, the legend and legacy of Muhammad Ali would've died before it ever was born in the Miami Beach Convention Center 50 years ago today.

What if referee Barney Felix sees the confusion in Clay's corner before the bell rings for the sixth round and asks Cassius if he wants to continue, and Clay, blinded and panicking, indicates that he can't? The fight is stopped and as expected Liston retains the title. The fact that Clay wanted the gloves cut off to show that Liston was cheating and that the mob/establishment was against him because he was a known member of the Nation of Islam, wouldn't have held a drop of water or changed the public's perception of him a bit. With Liston being seen as such a prohibitive favorite and Clay as a quitter, it's unlikely there would've been a rematch. Most

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would've would figured that Sonny would get in shape the next time and massacre the loudmouth and heartless Clay. Of course Clay/Ali would've wound up becoming champion--he was clearly the best heavyweight of the emerging era-- but his aura would be gone. Liston probably would've kept the title for a few more years and Ali would probably beat the guy who eventually beat the declining Liston. But he'd have represented something completely different: he would have just been another fighter. But the magic wouldn't be there since he would have suffered an early kayo where he quit. To have been undefeated and seemingly untouchable before his exile is what in the first stage of his career defined him. And he would have always had that stigma of having quit when trying for the heavyweight title.

In real life, Ali had to take some beatings and come back to gain mainstream respect as a fighter. If he'd quit in the Liston fight, it would have been just the opposite. To regain his respect, he would've had to have been pretty much untouchable for the rest of his career. Yes, when it comes to Muhammad Ali, the heavyweight division could be riddled with a ton of what ifs if Muhammad didn't answer the bell every time he fought.

What if Ali had his way and his first fight with Sonny Liston ended with him sitting on his stool instead of the opposite? The twists and turns that heavyweight history may have taken are endless. Who knows, maybe Joe Frazier never wins the title because Liston is the defending champion and Sonny would be a terrible matchup for Joe. Maybe the once beaten Ali and Frazier meet around 1967/68 in an elimination bout and their historic rivalry never comes to fruition. It's great to venture into the 'what if' possibilities and they're endless if you change a result here or there regarding Ali's fighting career.

So let's finish with what we know. Ali did fight the sixth round with Liston and resumed command of the fight. He captured the title and beat Liston in a rematch via a controversial first round knockout, in a fight that saw Liston on his feet fighting Ali when referee "Jersey" Joe Walcott stopped the fight. Thus Ali eliminated Liston for Joe Frazier and then himself was exiled from boxing three years later and paved the way for Frazier to flower and emerge as the best heavyweight in the world by the late sixties and early seventies.

Interesting if you think about it - if Ali loses the first fight against Liston, his legacy dies and boxing is cheated out of a generation of great heavyweight fights and Muhammad Ali may not be, as he is today, regarded as the greatest overall heavyweight champion in boxing history. In real life, Ali defeats Liston and his legacy is hatched. And as a result of Ali ridding Liston from Frazier's path along with his exile, the seed of Frazier's legacy is planted.

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Is it really possible that had Cassius Clay refused to come out for the sixth round against Sonny Liston 50 years ago today, the Ali-Frazier rivalry and both of their legacies also would've been buried alive before they were even born?

Yes, it's very plausible that's how things may have unfolded.

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### **tlig says:**

I've always maintained that Angelo Dundee didn't care about Muhammad Ali as much as he's been given credit for and this fight is one of the reasons. Granted, his decision to ignore Ali's calls to pull him out when blinded (by Liston's liniment, poison or whatever) led to Ali's historic triumph but if he cared enough shouldn't have not sent him out there blinded? He ignored Ali's pleas to cut off his gloves when exhausted in withering heat after the 14th round against Joe Frazier (whose compassionate corner would reject his pleas to continue during the same interval). He saw nothing wrong in following Ali to the ring when shot-to-bits and clearly showing signs of brain damage to take more punishment in bouts with Larry Holmes and Trevor Berbick (when asked about this he would claim it was not his position to tell a man what to do with his life).

And [B]contrary[/B] to belief it was Ali's manager who instructed him to stop the Holmes fight. And that's because he didn't care enough about the guy; probably saw him as nothing but a piece of meat.

### **gibola says:**

Clay quits and doesn't fight again? Let me see... Liston would have stayed champ for another few years (beating Chuvalo, Folley, Terrell, Mathis) and would have had a helluva shot at overpowering the young Frazier in 67/8 in his last hurrah. If Leotis Martin doesn't knock Liston out to win the crown, we'll say Liston retires and Frazier beats Jimmy Ellis for the vacant crown and everything is back in alignment.

### **brownsugar says:**

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Ali would have recognised that he'd lost due to cheater tactics.. And talked up the rematch and controversy to the point where the rematch would have been mandatory.

Since he was already twice the boxer Liston was... He would repay Liston with a frightful beating...and had more appreciation for his health and career...retiring before the Spinks and Holmes due to a greater sense of self respect.

He still gets Parkinson's.... But the effects are not nearly as profound and its progress not nearly as fast... Ali retains his outspoken ways until late in his sixties.

He becomes a two term Governor of Kentucky and marries Gabrielle Union, and Halle Berry, for a brief time.

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### **Radam G says:**

@Tlig, the trainer's job is to get the fighter through adversity. The great, late GBTOAT Angie Dundee was the GOAT in during that. The squared jungle is pure hell and scary. The young fighter's mind plays tricks on the fighter, and the fighter will quit for the mildest situation if you let him. [Buddy Mcgirt is your type of trainer. He will stop the bout quickest if you have too much sweat on your balls.]

A young hand-full-of-fights Money May once wanted to quit and get a different pair trunks, because he was having problems with the pair that he had on. His pops -- just outta jail -- calm him down just as the GBTOAT AD did the young Clay.

BTW, don't believe the jive. The GBTOAT AD did indeed STOP the Ali's bout against Holmes. People are always changing history with conspiracy syet.

The referee and the other seconds even verbally fought with the GBTOAT AD while he was halting the fight. But nobody bossed Angie around when it came to the safety of his fighters.

The fudging Hubert Muhammad -- on-paper manager of GOAT Ali -- didn't give a d@mn about GOAT Ali. Angie DID! The myth that Hubert Muhammad sent word to the corner to halt the bout is "Black Muslim Mythology." And the Nation of Islam didn't mess with Angie.

Matter of fact, many of the NOI fanfaronades and groupies of GOAT Ali believed that the GBTOAT AD was a half-crazed Italian who had powerful mafia connections and that they would

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get fudged up for ever messing with the GBTOAT AD. Holla!

### **Radam G says:**

Hehehehe! That's how a young boxer's mind rolls. Young Clay wanted the gloves cut off. Young "Pretty Boy" Floyd wanted the trunks cut off. And trainer Buddy McGirt would have been: "That's it, babeee! I'm stoppin' it!"

Give me a GBTOAT Angie Dundee anything over a Buddy McGirt. Geeeee! Holla!

### **Radam G says:**

WOW! Now CNN has reported how the FBI was all up in the young Clay/Ali's grill with investigations of a FIX in beating down "Night Train" Liston, just as I said a few years ago, causing clones, haters, posers, faders and know-nothing weasels to lose their pea minds and bumrush me.

The law-enforcing powers that be have always fudged with boxers, managers, advisers and promoters and set them up for all type of \_\_\_\_\_! So nobody and dey \_\_\_\_\_ should ever be hating on deepwater or deepwater2. He might not always have Forum decorum, but he has the TRUTH about the crooks in boxing and the U.S. gov to the holy core.

He knows his syet. And how the U.S. gov's criminals get down. And on boxers, citizens and none citizens set 'em up and straight clown.

Not just boxing, but much of the whole darn world is: "The theatre of the unexpected," and don't give a darn about fooling and screwing know nothings, who are faking about being in the loop, when they are just full of poop. Hehehe! Holla!

### **Carmine Cas says:**

Very interesting story, especially when you factor in all the hypothetical situations

### **amayseng says:**

[QUOTE=brownsugar;44455]Ali.would have recognised that he'd lost due to cheater tactics.. And talked up the rematch and controversy to the point where the rematch would have been mandatory.

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You have great taste my friend.....

**brownsugar says:**

Amayseng ... You caught that!.... Lol

**amayseng says:**

Yep, those are two of my favorites...