



Some call boxing the “the sweet science,” which conjures images of intricate strategies and balletic movements more reminiscent of a Nuryev or a Baryshnikov than of tough guys punching for pay. And make no mistake, there are fighters whose grace and fluidity of movement hinted at or even screamed that they were actual scientists of pugilism: Willie Pep, Miguel Canto and any number of other stylistic dandies weren’t exactly nerds, but they executed a more physical version of the Big Bang Theory. Imagine, if you can, Dr. Sheldon Cooper with nimble feet, quick reflexes and a snappy jab.

There are those, however, whose claim to fame owed more to indomitable will than to extraordinary skill, to power more than prettiness. The blunt-force trauma guys come forward relentlessly, taking punishment to dish out punishment, their most memorable bouts recalled as bloody wars of attrition that bespeak the beauty that can be found even in the fiercest, most primeval of boxing battles.

Former WBC light heavyweight champion Matthew Saad Muhammad was such an acclaimed warrior, wearing down opponents in two-way action classics that left a deep impression on anyone who saw him dig inside himself to find, time and again, some last ounce of courage which marked the difference between victory and defeat.

Now Saad Muhammad, 59, is gone, having succumbed to the debilitating effects of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, more commonly known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. Saad passed away early Sunday morning in the Intensive Care Unit of Chestnut Hill Hospital, in his hometown of Philadelphia.

SAD FINAL CHAPTER FOR A GREAT ACTION HERO

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Sunday, 25 May 2014 19:44

Funeral arrangements are pending.

“He had been battling the illness for the last couple of years, but then he took a turn for the worse,” said a longtime friend and associate, Mustafa Ameen. “Those of us who knew him will miss him. He was a good man. Sure, he had his ups and downs – a lot of ups, and a lot of downs. But at least now he isn’t suffering any more. Hopefully, he’s in a better place, and I’d like to think that he is.”

Saad Muhammad was a first-ballot inductee into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1998, which tells the story of who and what he was more than his final won-lost record, which is a deceiving 49-16-3, with 35 knockouts. But, like many fighters who hang around too long, he was just 5-7-1 in his final 13 bouts, with four of his eight losses inside the distance coming during that span. He was by then a shell of his former greatness, and he knew it. But what’s a used-up fighter to do when he has made too many wrong choices, financial and otherwise, and has no way to earn a living but to keep putting himself in harm’s way?

“Toward the end I started losing my power,” Saad recalled in 1998, a few days before he was inducted into the IBHOF. “You can’t fight the way I did unless you got something to back it up. I couldn’t back it up any more. But you know what? I have no regrets. I was like Frank Sinatra. I did it my way.”

Well, maybe he did, at least professionally. As far as the rest of it ... well, that’s another matter. Saad – abandoned as a child, homeless as a toddler and later as an adult, his \$4 million fortune eroded to nothing by a profligate lifestyle and leeching entourage – surely would have done some things differently if life had afforded him a couple of discretionary do-overs.

“I was in a state of shock,” he said of the gut-wrenching decision he made in the summer of 2010 to walk into the RHD Ridge Center, Philadelphia’s largest homeless shelter. “I thought to myself, ‘Am I really going to go into this shelter?’ But I had to go somewhere. My money had run out. I was going hotel to hotel, bills piling up. I went into the shelter because I hoped it could help me make a change.”

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It is hardly a unique situation, boxing history liberally dotted with sad stories of the rapid descent of good and even great fighters who treated their ring earnings as they were a permanently sustainable asset, like a backyard fruit tree that periodically renews its natural bounty.

By today's exorbitant standards, Saad's estimated \$4 million fortune was more of a nice-sized molehill than a mountain. Floyd Mayweather Jr. has made 10 times that amount for a single bout. But it was significant swag for the 1970s and '80s, and Saad admitted to living large – too large. He had a Rolls-Royce, a mink coat and a swarm of hangers-on he estimates at up to 60 people.

"I was putting my people up in hotels, buying them cars," he said. "I would be nice to other people, help other people out, give to other people. Never once did I think, 'Who's going to take care of me when I'm broke?' Stupid me."

Perhaps Saad – his birth name was Maxwell Antonio Loach, although he didn't rediscover that until he was an adult, and he won his 175-pound title when he was still known as Matthew Franklin, before his conversion to Islam – would have made more prudent choices had he not endured a childhood as harrowing as anything to be found in the pages of "Oliver Twist." Even though boxing gave him a sense of purpose, he wandered through a lost-and-found life, seemingly a perpetual victim of circumstance.

Saad was introduced to hardship at an early age. Living with an aunt after his mother died, his childhood could have come out of a Charles Dickens novel. He was five years old, he said, the day his aunt told him to go out for a walk with an older brother, who was nearly eight.

"They just didn't have enough money to take care of me, so they got rid of me," Saad said. "I was so scared. Then a policeman found me at night and asked me my name. I said, 'M-m-m-m-m.' I was so scared. I was stuttering."

The frightened child was taken to Catholic Social Services, where the nuns named him Matthew Franklin, after the saint and the thoroughfare (the Benjamin Franklin Parkway) where he had been abandoned.

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“When people ask me to describe the greatest triumph of my career,” he said in 1998, “I tell them it was just surviving what I went through as a kid.”

Having been found, Matthew Franklin soon found ways to become lost again. He got into trouble early and often, some of the arguments ending in fistfights, a means of expression at which he proved to be quite adept. He was sent to reform school, where one of his teachers, whom he knew as “Mr. Carlos,” suggested he channel his pent-up rage into something useful, like boxing.

After compiling a 25-4 record as an amateur, Matt Franklin – his man-strength enhanced through work as a longshoreman before he turned pro in early 1974 – began his pro career in search of a signature style that fit both his temperament and gift for hitting hard. Following a 10-round unanimous-decision loss to Eddie Gregory (now Eddie Mustafa Muhammad) on March 11, 1977, Franklin decided that his most productive course of action was to ditch any notions of stick-and-move. He would stand and slug, and may he who came equipped with more concussive power and a higher threshold of pain have his hand raised at the end.

There have been more gifted fighters, to be sure, but by either of his professional names, Matthew Franklin or Matthew Saad Muhammad, the man would have to rank at or near the top of any list of crowd-pleasing favorites. He was at once an updated Jake La Motta and a precursor to Arturo Gatti. Anyone who purchased a ticket for one of Saad’s fights was sure to get lots of bang for his buck. He won his 175-pound title on an eighth-round stoppage of Marvin Johnson on April 22, 1979, in Market Square Arena in Indianapolis, a virtual replay of his even-more-rousing 12th-round TKO victory over Johnson on July 26, 1977,” in Philly. But if the Johnson bouts represented Saad at his blood-and-guts best, there were other fights that rose to nearly that level, such as his 14th-round TKO of Yaqui Lopez and his fourth-round TKO of John Conteh in their second matchup.

“I was in a lot of wars,” Saad conceded in 1998. “People would see me get hit and not know how I could take the kind of shots that I took. Sometimes I don’t even know how I did it myself. It’s like God told me to get off that canvas and keep going.

“The (first) fight with Marvin Johnson had to be the fight of the century. It was like rock ‘em, sock ‘em robots all the way. Same thing with my fight with Yaqui Lopez and the second fight with John Conteh. It was fights like that that made me who I am.”

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Lou Duva, the legendary manager and trainer who also was inducted into the IBHOF in 1998, said Saad's constantly attacking, never-say-die approach would have made him a difficult opponent for anyone, including the best light heavyweight in the world at that time, Roy Jones Jr.

"Saad Muhammad was an outstanding fighter," Duva said. "He's the one guy who I think, if he were around today, could beat Jones. His style would just wear you down. It wore down a lot of good fighters, and I think it would wear Jones down."

Told what Duva had said, Saad agreed with his assessment. "I think he's right," Saad said. "When I was at my best, I think I would have had a chance to beat any light heavyweight because of the way I fought. I got in trouble sometimes, but I always came right back at you."

Not surprisingly, Saad sought to fill in the blank spaces in his life story with as much determination as he always exhibited inside the ropes. Who was he, really? Why had he been cast aside at such a young age? So he offered a \$10,000 reward to anyone who could offer information as the identities of those who had deemed him expendable.

Perhaps also not surprisingly, stepping forward to put in a claim to the reward money were the aunt who had abandoned him and the older brother who had left alone on the street, crying and frightened.

It might be argued that Saad's plunge from wealthy champion to destitution (at one point he was unemployed and owed \$250,000 to the IRS in back taxes), while self-inflicted, was a desperate bid to buy a form of love to replace the family he didn't have in his formative years, and didn't want him even when he was around. It is a reasonable theory, although he exacerbated that situation by botching his later attempts at being a reasonably good husband and father. He was married and divorced twice, and his relationship with his children has also at times been rocky.

Speaking of rocky, Saad was up for the role of Clubber Lang in "Rocky III," but lost out to a scowling bouncer from Chicago named Lawrence Tero – you now know him as Mr. T – because his vanity would not allow him to shave his head (Saad's version) or because he objected to the

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script calling for him to lose the climactic fight to star Sylvester Stallone's Rocky Balboa character (Ameen's version). So Saad was obliged to sit back and watch as Mr. T became an instantly recognizable figure on the big and little screens.

Nor did a proposed film of Saad's seemingly Hollywood-friendly tale ever gain traction beyond the discussion stage. Polly Wilkinson, who was for a time Saad's business manager, kept pitching his story to the studios, but it never found a buyer. Thus was Saad reduced to working as an itinerant roofer, a sometimes trainer of fighters, and ultimately as a homeless person.

"Anyone can fall down," he said of his difficult decision to admit he had hit bottom. "The important thing is whether you can get back up. You have to make commitments and do the right thing."

If that sounds like a line from a "Rocky" movie, well, so be it. It wouldn't be the first time life has imitated art. Or is that the other way around?

Rest in peace, Saad. You fought like a man possessed every time you stepped inside the ring, and the guess here is that you left this earth the same way.

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Radam G says:

My greatest condolences. Holla!

dino da vinci says:

Rest up, champ.

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the Roast says:

Sorry to read about the passing of Saad. One of the top action fighters of all time no doubt. Saad was a staple of network TV weekend afternoon boxing that I grew up on. Truly an unforgettable warrior. Like a more skilled Gatti for you youngsters out there. Rest in Peace Matthew.

Skibbz says:

Deepest condolences to his family. He was a great champion, worthy of the title and loved by his fellow fighters and fans.

The Commish says:

I wish I knew how to put photos on here, but I don't. Maybe one of you gents can talk me through the process. That's because if I knew how, I'd put up a photo of the July 1981 Ring Magazine Bert Sugar & I put out in. It featured Matthew Saad Muhammad on the cover. It was, next to the record-selling Ring, with Thomas Hearns holding a "Tommy Gun," my favorite Ring ever.

We used an all-white background to help bring out Saad's handsome features and lean, hard body. In addition, he wore white shoes, white socks, white trunks and white handwraps. We also used dry ice to create a mist-like aura. It was simply a great cover.

We laughed, joked and talked our way through several hours of setting up, posing him and shooting. He could not have been a more gracious subject.

Much of our talk was on his fight the previous Summer against Yaqui Lopez. Held at the Playboy Club in McAfee, NJ, it was a wild fight, one of the most savage I have ever seen. It was a back-and-forth, light heavyweight version of a Micky Ward-Arturo Gatti fight. It was the only time I have ever seen veteran writers either standing and cheering or calling for the fight to be stopped. Finally, at 2:03 of the 14th round, referee Waldemar Schmidt did exactly that, putting an end to one of the most brutal title fights ever and giving Saad Muhammad the victory.

Bert Sugar & I named this as 1980's "Fight of the Year."

Somebody teach me how to put up a photo. This amazing cover with this amazing, incredible man deserves to be seen.

R.I.P., Champion. I am honored you touched my life.

-Randy G.

DaveB says:

Sorry to hear of his passing. Gave too much of himself in the ring.

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amayseng says:

Sad on so many levels.

Nice to read that story Commish, despite many difficulties it is pleasant to read Saad was humble and gracious to get the Ring cover.

Froggy says:

R.I.P. Champ, I never seen him in a fight that was not at the very least entertaining ! A real warrior !

dino da vinci says:

[QUOTE=Skibbz;53607]Deepest condolences to his family. He was a great champion, worthy of the title and loved by his fellow fighters and fans.[/QUOTE]

@Skibbz. But that's the thing. He was loved by boxing's family, not so much by his own. Every story I ever heard about Saad ends the same way; With him as a tremendously classy man and in heartbreak. (Come from behind ring victories not included.)

Radam G says:

[QUOTE=dino da vinci;53621]@Skibbz. But that's the thing. He was loved by boxing's family, not so much by his own. Every story I ever heard about Saad ends the same way; With him as a tremendously classy man and in heartbreak. (Come from behind ring victories not included.)[/QUOTE]

WOW, DDV! I didn't want to go there. Tiny toddler me remember being at Matthew Saad Muhammad's bout against Mottie Mwali in San Diego in the 1980s.

After he had kayoed Mwali, and was leaving the ring, I shouted "cham-pee-on, champ-pee-on!" He took me out of my mom's arms, raised me above his head, and hollered: "Little champion, little champion!" The exiting crowd went wild.

Years later, when I was in Jesuit boarding school in Hong Kong, a vacationing MSM hooked up a visit to my [jailhouse] boarding school to calm my then rebellious, wild, teenage arse down. He told me his experience with nuns. Man, I loved that guy. You are so right. He was not so much loved by his own blood family.

Wow! [url]http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ek3XHVj6uh4. Holla!

teaser says:

[ATTACH=CONFIG]110[/ATTACH] here is the coverclick for larger version ?

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teaser says:

click on the icon for insert image (second row of icons) then click on "from computer "if image is on your comp ...then click "uploader" just outside that box and go to where you have the image stored on your comphope that helps ...it's how i did it ...took a while to figure it out !!

amayseng says:

[QUOTE=teaser;53628][ATTACH=CONFIG]110[/ATTACH] here is the coverclick for larger version ?[/QUOTE]

Nice work Teaser...

excellent cover photo.

teaser says:

well I tried...came out ok on preview but now i see it only works in the forum after you log insorry

Radam G says:

[QUOTE=teaser;53634]well I tried...came out ok on preview but now i see it only works in the forum after you log insorry[/QUOTE]

It is coming out fine for me every single time that I click on that photograph. Holla!

brownsugar says:

I remember watching Saad battle his way back from the brink on many occasions. He was a regular fixture on network television during a time when boxers tested each other for 15 grueling 15 rounds (if it went the distance) in contests that pushed the human body, mind and soul to its mortal limitations in thrilling matches that fight fans talked about for weeks afterwards.

I can still see the series between the diligent and honorable Yaqui Lopez and the relentless Matthew Saad Mohamad. Yaqui always got off to a fast start. Yaqui easily threw 80 to 100 a round behind a steady non stop jab.

Those of you who saw Postol unleash a non stop barrage against Selcuk, try to imagine Yaqui doing that for 13 rounds only throwing many more punches per round.

Matthew would occasionally appear to be out on his feet but he never seemed to get truly warmed up and into the fight until after the seventh round.

After soaking up enough punishment in one fight to use in three installments of the Rocky series, Mathew began to surge.

Incredibly.....

He'd get more than just a second wind... He became totally rejuvenated and began applying

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heavy punches behind his Joe Frazier-like stamina until he wore his opponent down until they could no longer continue.

Matthew was as invincible as its humanly possible to be during his reign.

Rest in peace Sir.

And thank you for all of the memories.

The Commish says:

Thanks, Teaser. I will try it with another photo and see if it works. Hey, getting this dinosaur to use a computer years ago was a tough enough task. Now inserting pix.

I'm up for the battle!

-Randy G.