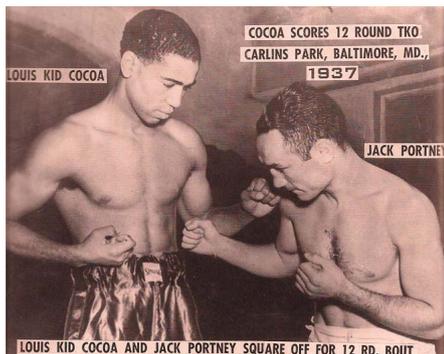


“JUST WATCH MAH SMOKE” Part 4: “Knock the Eight Ball Out!”

Written by Springs Toledo
Monday, 28 March 2011 16:52



Baltimore's Boxing Legacy, 1893-2003 by Thomas Scharf “**JUST WATCH MAH SMOKE,**”
Part 4: “Knock the Eight Ball Out!”

Just a few weeks after the bribery hearing, Cocoa Kid snatched a pair of New England championship titles from Frankie Britt.

“With marvelous control over a marvelous body,” reported the *Boston Globe*, Cocoa Kid opened the argument by “planting three sharp lefts to Britt’s probiscus.” Britt got physical and threw the challenger off balance but agility kicked in and the challenger landed damaging punches anyway. And he landed often. Usually hard to hit, Britt “was seeing the world through rose-colored gloves.”

In 1939, Cocoa Kid was nearing his peak and yet lost the rematch to Britt. It took place in Britt’s hometown of Fall River, Massachusetts. Not even the local paper agreed with the decision. Cocoa Kid’s manager was appalled -“I don’t think it’s fair to any fighter to be the victim of such a decision,” he said. They met for the third time six months later and Britt didn’t see round eight.

Andrea Jessurun, a South American Dutchman turned New Yorker, faced Cocoa Kid four times. Jessurun won a decision in a main event that prompted one reporter to assert that Cocoa Kid fought “as if he didn’t care whether or not school kept.” The reporter had heard that Cocoa Kid’s training was delayed because of marital difficulties and there was talk that he may have attempted to postpone the bout. After losing a close one in Holyoke, he knocked the Dutchman out in Baltimore and then took a decision in Washington. The Baltimore bout was a brutal one. Jessurun’s nose and mouth were crimson smears when he came out for the eleventh round. A left hook and right cross crashed on his jaw and when he fell to the canvas he bounced. No count was necessary. As his seconds ran out and carried Jessurun back to his corner, Cocoa Kid walked across the ring grimacing with pain and rubbing his right glove with his left. The force of the knockout blow jammed two small bones in his hand out of joint.

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The only time Johnny Lucas beat him was after the referee deducted two points for low blows. In their first bout, Lucas survived the ten rounds (or was *allowed* to survive the ten rounds), and revealed nothing, said the *Holyoke Daily Transcript and Telegram*, “save a pair of new shoes with pretty white laces.”

Cocoa Kid’s trainer once said that he fought “to the caliber of his opponent.” In other words, “he looks like a world-beater against top notch foes and like a second-rater when in there against mediocre mittmen.” There could be more to it than that. Hot and cold performances against the same opponent in different fights are curious, particularly if the fighter is a widely-heralded talent and his opponent is white. Britt, Jessurun, and Lucas were white. Temperament may explain the variation, but then, so wouldn’t handcuffs.

Andy Callahan gave us a good snapshot of Cocoa Kid’s capability when sharp and uncuffed. Callahan trained in Boston and sparred with Honey Melody and former world welterweight champion Lou Brouillard. “I never had any trouble fighting tall fellows like Cocoa Kid,” he told reporters in Holyoke, “and after taking the right hand smashes of Brouillard all week, I guess I can stand anything the Cocoa Kid has to offer.” In the second round, chief second Brouillard watched Callahan’s right eye swell up to grapefruit proportions. The man who did it may have recalled hearing the hype that said Callahan had been routinely beating black fighters. Cocoa Kid popped that grapefruit in the tenth round. Callahan was blinded by his own blood and rescued by the referee.

The popular southpaw Jack Portney was defeated in Connecticut, and then pushed for a rematch at home in Baltimore. Both Portney and Cocoa Kid were ranked in the top ten for the November 1936 rematch and the event was portrayed as a true-blue battle between near-equals. Portney, up against a jab “that travels with the speed of light” wisely tried to make a brawl of it. Cocoa Kid obliged him by refusing to concede space and landing more punches overall. Portney’s nose was split and so wasn’t the decision. This time, Cocoa Kid was on the winning end despite his complexion; perhaps the sobering presence of the mayor at ringside was enough to leave this one on the up-and-up.

Cocoa Kid-Jack Portney III was an event that serves as a reminder of why many boxing matches were also profiles in courage. Ollie Stewart of *The Afro-American* saw the mixed-race event as only a black reporter could. “It’s both amusing and ironic,” he wrote, “Baltimore pays heavily to satisfy a longing to see Cocoa plastered to a fare-thee-well. They let him fight here as

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a Puerto Rican –but the cash customers call him another name when he’s in the ring. Most of the names are well known fighting words.”

Stewart quoted what they said. With his help, we can move closer to the action. We can move even closer than Stewart, closer than ringside, and experience this event from the vantage point of Cocoa Kid himself.

The official result of the match is ‘Cocoa Kid W TKO12 Jack Portney March 1st 1937.’

Now look again.

You’re a bilingual black man in a desegregated boxing ring of the segregated south. Jim Crow made sure you arrived here in a separate railroad car. Only an hour ago you came in through the back entrance of Carlin’s Arena while Jack Portney came in through the front like a star. You changed your clothes in a separate dressing room and that water fountain you walked by had a sign on it that said “WHITE” -that meant you couldn’t bend down to take a sip. They don’t want you drinking their water. They don’t want you near them. If you fall in battle tonight and get buried here, they’ll stick you in a separate graveyard across the freeway from theirs.

You peer out over the top rope and scan the crowd for a black face. You won’t find any because they’re up on the balcony. The faces in the front rows looking up at you aren’t friendly –they simmer with the hostility and glee of racial supremacy, a supremacy they hope to see proven tonight. You’ve seen those faces before, but never so many. You’re surrounded by a rolling, broiling leviathan that laughs and curses with five thousand faces; that was what the promoter said –five thousand with cash-in-hand, Baltimore’s largest gate in years!

And they’re all here to see you lose.

You stand under the lights feeling uncomfortable in your own skin. Don’t think about it, just limber up and get the juices flowing -that’ll help the shivers.

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There's the bell.

Someone yells “knock the eight ball out!”

Portney charges forward to get inside your long arms. You let him. He punches like a man accustomed to working over heavy bags. You instinctively block most of them, and then come around with hooks to his flanks, though they're not hard yet. You can't get much leverage because nerves are messing with your legs. Suddenly, your foot slips and you sit down in the ring with a thump. The crowd screams with delight; some of them are hollering “black nigger!” as you get to your feet.

Take a deep breath and tuck your chin in, because here he comes.

He comes in stupid –his right elbow is out like a chicken wing. You see the opening and throw a left hook that bends his ribs. He groans. You feel better.

Settling down now, finding your rhythm, you notice something -Portney is sucking wind already, working too hard, wild. The crowd has gone to his head. He thinks he's Jim Jeffries battling for the white man's dignity. Let him, he's bound to buckle under all that heady nonsense. You fight for yourself.

Round three ends and the crowd is on its feet cheering because your nose is bleeding. Portney is ahead on points and your nose is bleeding.

Someone yells “sissy!” Another one calls you something worse.

Your corner tells you to step back, adjust the range, and let loose that lightning jab. It's time to dash all that hope and nonsense.

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The next four rounds are yours –and you did it with one hand. Portney is no slouch, he takes the eighth. You decide that’s all he’s gonna take and turn up the heat. He’s beginning to wilt. In the tenth round, you steal a look into his eyes and they’re wide. His confidence is peeling away and he’s desperate. Then he looks into yours. A glove whistles around and you don’t see it in time to get under it. Pain shoots through your right eye to the back of your head. The swelling starts and you curse your luck.

Revenge comes midway through the twelfth round. You measure the hometown hero for a straight right and a bolt shoots up your forearm at impact. It splits the thin flesh over his eye and he’s bleeding down face and chest. The crowd turns menacingly quiet as the round ends and the referee bounds over to Portney’s corner to examine the wound. Portney, brave and game, tries to wave him off. The referee calls in the ringside physician who takes one look and stops the fight.

You feel relief first –and it’s a good feeling. The robe your corner man just draped around your shoulders feels like a warm blanket on a cold night. Your chest fills with exhilaration, but you don’t want to celebrate too much in that blood-drenched ring. It’s hard to celebrate alone, and that’s a white man’s blood you spilled.

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Check back soon for part 5 of 8.

The photograph opening this article is from *Baltimore’s Boxing Legacy, 1893-2003* by Thomas Scharf -a highly recommended book.

The *Boston Globe* 5/28/35, Connecticut’s *Wallingford Edition* 4/26/35, *Fall River Herald and News* 1/26/39, 1/27/39,
the *Holyoke Daily Transcript and Telegram*

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5/1/34,
9/9/35, 9/10/35, 11/25/36, 11/26/35

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6/1/36, 6/2/36,
Baltimore's
The Sun
8/8/36, 11/7/36, 11/9/36, 11/10/36, 3/1/37, 4/6/37, and
The Afro American
, 4/10/37

were used as sources for this essay. The second person narrative depicting Cocoa Kid-Jack Portney III is fact-based. It was derived from accounts in Baltimore newspapers

The Sun
3/2/37 and
The Afro American
3/6/37.

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[Comment on this article](#)

Bobby C says:

I'm sure Portney had plenty of drama in his head during the bout too. His poor nose! I hope he could breathe out of that thing during his declining years.

Radam G says:

Nice, nice, nice investigative work, Masterscribe Springs T. You are really schoolin' -- not an ounce of foolin.' Just imagine some of these ear-witnesses -- not doing those days' eye-witnesses -- try to convince me that Baltimore is and was not the South, so all was peaceful. WTF! I don't understand how and why older American people pretend that their younger days were a time of equality and stability and peace. But now everything is all messed up "because of those foreigners."

Kid Cocoa, the Cocoa Kid, whichever one you like, was an amazing in every way. What else is there to say. Other than thanks to Springs T, the authenticity real can seen through words, even if there may not be a single film reel. Holla!