

"JUST WATCH MAH SMOKE" Part 5: Holman Williams

Written by Springs Toledo
Monday, 04 April 2011 15:51



Another uncrowned king surveys the field.

Cocoa Kid wasn't the only African American spoiling for a fight during those bleak and desperate years of the 1930s.

When he was a child in Detroit, Holman Williams had aspirations no higher than a rotary lift. He wanted to be a skilled auto mechanic. But he had a problem. Holman, like countless other skinny boys then and now from rough neighborhoods, was a target for bullies. Learning how to

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protect himself had become a pressing concern. The newly-built Brewster Recreation Center had a boxing gym in the basement and he started heading down there after school. Monthly dues cost a quarter –and those quarters changed everything; he gained self-confidence, blossomed into a different kind of Motor City mechanic, and became a group leader. His problems with bullies vanished.

One autumn day in 1930, a large, quiet boy wearing bumpkin clothes that didn't fit walked into the Brewster gym. Holman eventually began teaching him the principles of the sweet science. When the boy lost his first amateur bout and wanted to quit the ring for baseball, it was Holman who talked him out of it. The two became friends and competed in the amateur ranks together. Holman won the Detroit Golden Gloves featherweight title and went all the way to the Olympic semi-finals in 1932. The following year five products of the Brewster Gym won the Golden Gloves. One of them was Holman's friend. His name was Joe Louis.

Louis never forgot him. "Holman Williams encouraged me a lot," he remembered, "He was a beautiful boxer."

He was also known to be almost obsessive about the tools of his trade, hand-washing his gym clothes every afternoon following a workout and holding fast to an unwritten rule that his trainers respected. It insisted that no one wrap the hands of Holman Williams except Holman Williams. By 1936, he was in his fourth year as a professional and built a record of 32-1-1 with 18 knockouts. The "Brewster style" got him there, with its emphasis on mobility and educated jabs, right hands, and left hooks. That fussiness about his tools and his technique did wonders on the road and he would display his mastery in five foreign countries and fifteen states before hanging up his gloves.

The first battleground he would conquer was New Orleans. Three stand-out performances at the Coliseum Arena earned him a small army of African American fans down on Rampart Street.

Another road warrior arrived on the scene six months after Holman and Rampart Street started buzzing. This one fought the same opponents and cleared the field "with ridiculous ease." One of those opponents was Wesley Farrell. Farrell was in the gym training a couple of days before the match trying to ignore the presence of a tall, golden-hued fighter standing nearby:

"Did you see his eye?" Cocoa Kid asked his trainer.
"Yeah," said the trainer, "it's got a few cuts around it."
"–I'll have it all the way shut inside of three rounds."

Pete Baird of the *Times-Picayune* soon proclaimed Cocoa Kid as the "the best negro fighter since Holman Williams and possibly better than even Holman." With that, a historic feud between two all-time great welterweights began. Nothing like it had been seen since Jack Britton fought Ted "Kid" Lewis twenty times between 1915 and 1921. Nothing like it has been seen again.

Firing commenced on March 13th 1936.

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Baird sat awestruck watching the hero of Rampart Street fend off the invader's attack in the early rounds. Holman, he wrote, "gave one of the best displays of defensive ability I have ever seen." Taking his time offensively, he used his arms to block shots while keeping a sharp eye on whatever slipped in. He would "shift his head an inch or two and catch the punches on his shoulders or neck, or duck them entirely."

Holman was relying on a set of natural facts. Men get tired from constant physical exertion and throwing punches is far more exhausting than slipping them. Cocoa Kid, "curly-headed, quick-punching, and fast-stepping" seemed erratic compared to the "sullen, gliding" figure moving into him. He also seemed unnatural. As the rounds wore on Cocoa Kid didn't wear out, instead, he accelerated down the stretch, jabbing forward and backward, crossing with his right to the head and kidney, and hooking to the ribs.

When the attack showed no signs of slowing, Holman tried to send over a general anesthetic. More often than not Cocoa Kid saw them coming and either stayed in close, clinched, or moved over. At the end, it was Cocoa Kid who got the gumbo.

The context was close and Holman was unconvinced. So weren't the fans on Rampart Street. They put down enough money to make their man a 9-5 favorite in the April rematch. As hostilities resumed, Holman tried time and again to land his murderous right but Cocoa Kid's jab kept forcing his gaze to the ceiling and his gloves swiped at air. Holman began crowding the taller man and roughhousing but it didn't matter, his foe merely stepped back and measured him with straight shots. In the eighth, Holman landed a right followed by a head butt and Cocoa Kid sagged for a moment. Seeing his chance, he came in swinging but Cocoa Kid ducked and moved and pivoted and jabbed to weather the storm.

"You told me to go out and loaf that round," Cocoa Kid complained during the minute rest. "Yeah," said the second, "—but I didn't tell you to get hit on the chin."

"Holman is a good fighter," Cocoa Kid conceded after the win, "but tonight he was grandstanding." To Baird, the victor not only made Holman look "slow and ineffective," he gave the impression that he could beat him every day of the week and twice on Tuesday.

Things were looking up for Cocoa Kid in the Big Easy. Even celebrities were beginning to notice; the Irish singer Morton Downey was making overtures to buy his contract soon after this performance.

Cocoa Kid publically boasted that no black man had ever defeated him, and Rampart Street got wind of it. They looked to their hero to do something about it, so he did. He fell in with light heavyweight champion John Henry Lewis in Philadelphia and learned new tricks. Then, in March 1937 he faced Cocoa Kid for the third time. This time things were different. Holman, who could switch between several styles on a dime, settled on the right one. To protect against Cocoa Kid's left hook to the ribs, he fought out of a crouch —rolling, weaving, and slipping underneath long jabs to bang the body. Holman staged an upset after twelve rounds by fighting like those Italians who habitually beat his nemesis for years.

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Rampart Street celebrated all night long.

Meanwhile, Cocoa Kid went and made his own adjustments. The fourth match was in June. This one began as a counterpunching contest with Holman the busier until Cocoa Kid took over. As his seconds "whooped it up," he finished just fast enough on the outside to take a decision everyone agreed was close enough to go either way.

Only the crickets were heard on Rampart Street.

Cocoa Kid was ranked number two in the world by *The Ring* in January 1940 when he met Holman for the fifth time. From the opposite corner in a Baltimore ring he saw a cryptic emblem stitched on the front of Holman's white terrycloth robe. When he turned around, Cocoa Kid noticed black letters on the back that read "I WILL." Did he bring some voodoo up from the bayou? He brought something better than that. Joe Louis, the Heavyweight Champion of the World, worked his corner along with trainer Jack Blackburn. But Cocoa Kid was in high-gear. He was too good. No voodoo, no self-affirmation, not even the presence of a world-beater was enough to deny him. Holman lost a wide unanimous decision.

The next eight fights featured a draw and a decision loss that saw the *Baltimore Sun* and spectators dedicate a ditty to Cocoa Kid called 'He Wuz Robbed', a unanimous decision win that saw Holman outboxed and outpunched for 15 rounds, a six round decision win in a fast fight at Madison Square Garden, another clear victory over twelve, a draw that was popular among the fans, and a slow split decision win. Their last bout was in 1945, two weeks after Cocoa Kid's thirty-first birthday. Knowing that his ability to keep a sizzling pace was diminished, he came out strong but faded by round five. Holman, who at 167 lbs was nine pounds heavier than his rival, used the same strategy he tried the first time they collided—he waited for Cocoa Kid to run out of gas. Nine years later it worked.

The record shows that Cocoa Kid defeated Holman eight times, lost three, and scored two draws over their thirteen fight series. Boxing historian Harry Otty has included both of them in the dreaded ranks of Murderers' Row, those great black middleweights first identified by Budd Schulberg who were routinely avoided during the 1940s.

Holman fought seven members of those ranks a total of thirty-six times.

He was mastered by only one.

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In 1967, someone set fire to the Club Wonder in Akron, Ohio. A maintenance man sleeping inside woke up to find the place ablaze and tried to escape. He was overcome by smoke and died where he fell. The charred remains of Holman Williams were exhumed from the rubble. He was fifty-two years old.

After years of neglect, his accomplishments were exhumed and he was voted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 2008.

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Check back soon for part 6 of 8.

The opening photograph appears with the courtesy of Harry Otty.

Books consulted for this essay include Sugar Ray by Sugar Ray Robinson with Dave Anderson, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation* by Lewis A. Erenberg, *Joe Louis: The Great Black Hope* by Richard Bak,

Joe Louis: My Life

by Joe Louis with Edna and Art Rust. "The Brewster style" described by Detroit trainer Walter Smith in Ronald K. Fried's

Corner Men: Great Boxing Trainers

, p. 127. Holman's personal "meticulousness" and ability to switch styles recounted in Allen S. Rosenfeld's

Charley Burley: The Life and Hard Times of an Uncrowned Champion

, p. 430 quoting Will Connelly in the

San Francisco Chronicle

2/23/44. Other contemporary newspapers referenced include the

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1/11/40, 1/12/40, 12/22/41, 12/23/41, 1/19/42, 1/20/42, 3/2/42, 3/3/42, 5/14/45, 5/15/45;

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3/27/42, 3/28/42, 3/20/45, 3/26/45, 3/27/45 and the

Chicago Defender

4/25/36, 1/20/40.

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Radam G says:

Super, super explosive copy. I go coo coo for the cocoa. Dat Kid Cocoa had it going on! I love hearing about the many uncrowned champions from way, way back in da day, who woulda' and coulda' run circles around the many nowadays alphabet-sanctioning organization tomato cans and marshmallows. Master Pugilistic Weaver/Reseacher Springs To, I salute you. the late, great Sugar Ray Robinson was sweet, but by ducking those on the "Black Murder Row," his hype he was able to KEEP! WOW! For gettin' dat truth, da SPRINGS run DEEP! Holla!