

Gridiron Greatness No Sure Path To Gloved Glory

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Thursday, 31 January 2013 10:16



Ex footballer Mitchell (left) learned against Banks what others, like Too Tall Jones, and Mark Gastineau, quickly figured out...the learning curve in boxing is quite steep. (Hogan Photos)

Try to imagine Mike Tyson or Joe Frazier as Pro Bowl football players, or even holding end-of-the-bench roster spots with an NFL team.

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Isn't easy, is it?

Now try to imagine actual All-Pro defensive ends Ed "Too Tall" Jones and Mark Gastineau as heavyweight champions of the world.

That's even a more difficult concept to accept, yet there are dreamers – past, present and probably future – who dare to believe that superior athletic ability in one sport is easily transferable to another. It is a fallacy that has been proved wrong any number of times with football players trying to make the extremely difficult crossover into boxing, but there is always someone who thinks he'll be the one to cash that lottery ticket.

Perhaps the exception to the rule will be former Michigan State University linebacker Seth Mitchell. Decide for yourself whether Mitchell's second-round stoppage at the hands of Johnathon Banks on Nov. 17 – a devastating defeat that either exposed the ex-Spartan as another overhyped gridiron-to-ring wannabe or, in his words, as a "learning experience" that ultimately will make him a better fighter – will be reversed or reprised in a Feb. 16 rematch in Atlantic City's Boardwalk Hall.

"It was a tough defeat for me," said Mitchell (25-1-1, 19 KOs) of his come-uppance from Banks (29-1-1, 19 KOs), a longtime disciple of the late Hall of Fame trainer, Emanuel Steward, who now doubles as active boxer and chief second for heavyweight champion Wladimir Klitschko. "Just experiencing that first loss was a tough pill to swallow, but I tell people it's a gift.

"(Jan. 12) actually was six years altogether in boxing (in boxing) for me, amateur and pro, so I'm learning on the job. But I'm a quick learner and I definitely learned a lot from that fight. This is the classroom that I want to be in, and I understand that I'm young in the game and learning. But I've got to learn and win at the same time."

Mitchell, truth be told, isn't as young as he'd like the public or himself to believe. He's 30, clearly unschooled in the subtle nuances that Banks, also 30, picked up during his many years of instruction from Steward, and another loss could forever delete his vision of multimillion-dollar purses and a bejeweled world title belt cinched around his waist. If the confused Mitchell who

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was floored three times by Banks in the second round three months ago shows up again, the likelihood is that people will be lumping him with the inept Gastineau more than with the heavyweight legends he aspires to join.

“He never saw my left hook,” Banks said after his first meeting with the spectacularly muscled Mitchell, which also was staged in Boardwalk Hall. “He was not experienced enough to know what to do when he got in trouble, to hold on or grab me. I was able to keep punching him. He’s a big, tough guy, but he couldn’t handle me.”

The decision to immediately enforce a rematch clause that was included in the contract for the original fight constitutes something of a gamble for Golden Boy Promotions, which sees Mitchell as a potential high-rewards entry into the heavyweight division, and for HBO, which has been yearning for a genuinely skilled and marketable American big man since Tyson, Evander Holyfield and Riddick Bowe retired or became too old to continue trading on past glories. But going all in on a relative neophyte like Mitchell calls to mind one of the more memorable sayings of Spanish-born philosopher George Santayana: “Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

The suits at HBO especially should be aware of the potential pitfalls of the football-to-fisticuffs path the premium-cable giant has traveled in the past. Cases in point: Jimmy Ellis (no, not the former WBA heavyweight champ and Muhammad Ali stablemate) and Michael Grant.

On Dec. 7, 1991, in Reno, Nev., HBO paid former (and future) heavyweight champion George Foreman \$4.95 million for a bout with the other Jimmy Ellis, who had been a player with the Los Angeles Raiders’ replacement team during the 1987 strike-shortened season. The 228-pound Ellis wasn’t appreciably better than some of the cupcakes the then-42-year-old Foreman had been beating up for \$40,000 paydays since resuming his career in the spring of 1987, but George’s bouts again were becoming must-see events and HBO promos played up Ellis’ football background as proof that he somehow was not just another designated victim.

Foreman relentlessly battered the game but woefully overmatched Ellis until referee Richard Steele mercifully halted the slaughter in the third round.

“This was not a fight to be proud of,” then-HBO Sports executive Ross Greenburg said of

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Foreman's obliteration of Ellis. "HBO should have taken more time checking out Ellis' background."

To a lesser degree, the same might be said of HBO's temporary fascination with Grant, whose imposing 6-7, 250-pound physique caused the imagination of many to run wild.

"He has the potential to be the greatest heavyweight of all time," Grant's veteran trainer, Don Turner, gushed in May 1998.

Lou DiBella, then a senior vice president of HBO Sports, chimed in around the same time with the opinion that "Michael Grant, without question, is the best of the young heavyweights. He's the guy who's going to lead the way into the next millennium."

But Grant, a former defensive end at two California junior colleges who had bragged that he "could have been a Pro Bowl football player," was taken to hell and back in rallying for a 10th-round stoppage of Andrew Golota on Nov. 20, 1999, after he twice had been floored in the first round. Grant rightly was hailed for his tenacity and heart, and the HBO-televised victory earned him a shot at champion Lennox Lewis five months later, but not everyone was quite so eager to climb onto the Grant bandwagon.

"Grant has stamina and a good right hand, but beyond that I don't see much," said Steward, Lewis' trainer, who was at ringside that night. "He's not a real solid fighter. He's just fortunate to be here now, when the heavyweight division is weak. He's an athlete who treats boxing like it's another sport."

Those comments eerily sound like what some skeptics are saying about Mitchell right now. Hey, what goes around eventually comes around, right?

Despite his failure to fulfill the most optimistic projections for him, Grant (48-4, 36 KOs) – who was knocked out in two one-sided rounds by Lewis and in one round by Jameel McCline in the bout after that – just might be one of the two most accomplished former football players to dive into the shark-infested waters of professional boxing, the other being Charlie Powell.

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Powell's record (25-11-3, 17 KOs) might not look all that impressive these days, but the NFL veteran – five seasons with the San Francisco 49ers, two with the Oakland Raiders – was the No. 2-ranked heavyweight in the world at one point in the late 1950s. Although Powell never played college football, he was a superb athlete in high school who once ran a 9.6-second 100-yard dash and posted a 57-9¼-foot toss in the shotput. He matched punches with some of the best fighters on the planet, losing to Muhammad Ali, Floyd Patterson and someone named John Riggins, who is not to be confused with the former Super Bowl-winning running back for the Washington Redskins.

It is almost understandable why some football players, and those willing to back them, cling to the notion that someone who excels while wearing a helmet and shoulder pads can do so when stripped down to a pair of satin trunks. After his retirement from the ring, the legendary Rocky Marciano and his pal, Lou Duva, decided they would hang around NFL camps in the hope of identifying the next great heavyweight. The person or persons of their choosing would, of course, be big, strong, fast and susceptible to the notion of a career change. But Marciano died in a tragic plane crash and the plan was never put into effect. Then again, perhaps it was doomed from the outset.

Which is not to say the Marciano/Duva blueprint periodically hasn't risen again, like Count Dracula at sunset. One of the more ambitious such undertakings was launched by Michael King, who made his fortune as CEO of King World Productions. An avid boxing buff, King founded All-American Heavyweights in 2008 with the goal of producing Olympic medalists who, presumably, would use that platform to go on to professional superstardom.

"A great athlete in any sport can pick up any sport faster than most people," King reasoned. "It really all stems from a lack of talent and lack of apprenticeship for trainers. The pipeline is dead ... (Boxing is) not an NCAA sport, so it's typically dependent on the Olympic program, and that NGB (USA Boxing is its national governing board) does not have a lot of resources.

"Instead of getting some thug off the street, why not tap into the greatest talent pool in the United States? You're talking about elite athletes who are in great shape, who are really big, who are unbelievably coordinated, and they are articulate college graduates."

America's super-heavyweight representative to the 2012 London Olympics was Dominic

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Brezeale, a 6-6, 260-pound former quarterback at Northern Colorado. Despite his obvious physical tools, Brezeale lost a 19-8, electronically scored decision to Russia's Magomed Omarov in the first round and was quickly eliminated from medal consideration.

"It's like night and day, man," Brezeale said of being in there with an opponent with vastly more ring experience. "With football you get an off-season, in boxing you don't. In football, you can play it. In boxing, you've got to live it. And when you're in the ring, there's no blaming anyone else."

Angelo Dundee, the late, great trainer of 15 world champions, including Ali and Sugar Ray Leonard, warned against the notion that accomplishments on the football field were a natural precursor to similar success inside the ropes. Responding to a question from a *Los Angeles Times* reporter in 1989 about the feasibility of the Green Bay Packers' No. 1 draft choice, tackle Tony Mandarich, fighting Mike Tyson for the heavyweight championship of the world despite never having boxed before, Dundee said the idea was beyond preposterous.

"Athletically, boxing is the toughest profession in the world," Dundee said. "Just because you're big and strong and great in football or basketball shape has nothing to do with it. I've seen it many times over the years, football players walking into gyms, asking me to turn them into boxers. It never works.

"I always try to talk them out of it, but they never take 'no' for an answer. About 15 years ago a lineman from the University of Miami, a 6-foot-4, 250-pound guy, wanted me to turn him into a pro. I tried to talk him out of it, to get him to start in the amateurs, but he wouldn't listen. In a few weeks, I got him in decent boxing shape and put him in the ring against a very ordinary guy, who tapped him on the noggin and knocked him cold.

"The qualities that a boxer has to have to be really good are different than in any other sports. It's a special kind of balance, a special feeling in there."

Exhibits A and B in the argument that boxing is no more difficult to master than football are Jones and Gastineau, who soon discovered otherwise. Although their records have a glittery veneer – Jones' one-year sabbatical from the Dallas Cowboys yielded six victories, five of which were inside the distance, while Gastineau was 15-2, with 15 knockout wins – they were fed a

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steady stream of cupcakes, fall-down guys selected solely for their likelihood to make the NFL stars look more formidable than they really were.

Jones, who boxed a bit as a kid, might have become something legitimate had he taken up the sport exclusively and stuck with it. But he was 28 when he tried his ring thing, far too late to make up ground on short notice. “‘Too Tall’ was a very good athlete, an exceptionally strong guy, and he gave it a real shot,” Dundee said. “He went in the gym with real trainers and really worked hard. And he still couldn’t do it. Now if he had gone into boxing when he was a teenager, in the amateurs, instead of football, maybe it would’ve turned out OK.”

Armed with a CBS contract and a spotlight on him that made it impossible to develop at his own pace, Jones could not possibly live up to all those wildly inflated expectations. In his pro debut on Nov. 3, 1979, a six-round majority decision over journeyman Abraham Yaqui Meneses, Jones was floored in the sixth round and was the beneficiary of what seemingly was the world’s longest standing-eight count. His final bout, in that boxing hotbed, Jackson, Miss., is more notable for the fact that Jones was in the main event and a lightweight you might have heard of, Ray “Boom Boom” Mancini, on the undercard. The guy Jones blew out in the first round, a flabby Rocky Gonzalez, fought just that one time and looked like someone randomly picked out of the audience.

It was Gastineau, however, that gave boxers who had been football players a bad name. Gastineau had 51 sacks between 1981 and ’84, terrorizing quarterbacks throughout the NFL. Facing guys not protected by blockers, flak jackets and face masks, he was less frightening. After beating a steady stream of setups, he was 11-0 and reportedly in line for a million-dollar purse to fight George Foreman were he to get past a competent trial horse, Tim “Doc” Anderson, on June 9, 1992. But Anderson outpointed Gastineau and the proposed Foreman fight went up in flames, no doubt in part because the folks at HBO did not want a repeat of Foreman-Ellis.

Gastineau did “avenge” that loss by knocking out Anderson in six rounds on Dec. 3, 1992, but Anderson later claimed he had been drugged after he refused to go into the tank, making him a defenseless target for Gastineau’s ponderous bombs. Anderson later was convicted of murdering his corrupt manager, Rick “Elvis” Parker, the alleged architect of the proposed dive.

Subtract the records of Anderson (27-16-1, 13 KOs) and another former NFL player, Alonzo Highsmith (27-1-2, 23 KOs), who stopped Gastineau in one round in his final fight, on Nov. 3,

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1996, in Tokyo, and the cumulative record of Gastineau's opponents is horrible: 5-91-3 with two knockout victories, and 77 losses by KO.

But still some football guys dare to believe that they can do what none of their predecessors did. Jim Brown, widely hailed as the greatest running back of all time, suggested he fight Ali for the heavyweight title until "The Greatest" brought Brown back to reality by landing a couple of open-handed slaps to the Cleveland Browns superstar's face even after he had been forewarned what was coming.

There is a current NFL player, Indianapolis Colts safety Tommy Zbikowski, who might have amounted to something as a professional boxer had he chosen what he describes as his "first love" in sports. Zbikowski, a former Chicago Golden Gloves fighter who posted a 75-15 record, is 4-0 with three KOs as a pro, those bouts taking place as a Notre Dame undergraduate and during NFL off-seasons and work stoppages.

"I think eventually I'll be judged as a fighter, not as someone trying to fight who played football at Notre Dame or in the NFL," Zbikowski said after his pro debut, a one-round stoppage of Robert Bell on June 10, 2006, in Madison Square Garden. "It's not going to happen right away, but it will. I'll make sure of that. To tell the truth, I never thought I'd go as far as I have in football. I thought I'd be in boxing a long time ago.

"Growing up, whatever sport I was doing, I loved. But I always missed what I wasn't doing. When I was boxing, I missed football. Once you get to college and the NFL, though, football takes up so much of your time you have to choose."

Even Steward, so critical of most football players' boxing designs, praised what Zbikowski, a cruiserweight, could have been had he not become an All-America at Notre Dame Irish, for whom he intercepted five passes, returning two for touchdowns, and scored two more TDs on punt returns in helping the Fighting Irish to the Fiesta Bowl that capped the 2006 season.

"He has such beautiful balance," Manny said of Zbikowski. "He has great natural rhythm, and he's always in position when he is punching. He doesn't box like a football player. He boxes like a boxer."

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Mitchell, alas, boxed too much like a football player in his first matchup with Banks. It remains to be seen whether he can correct his flaws and do what no former football player of any consequence has done: become a world champion. It wasn't his first goal as an athlete, or even the second, but it is what he is striving toward now because, well, what other choice does he have?

"I never put myself in that category," Mitchell, when advised of the abysmal history of football players trying their hand at boxing, said before his third-round stoppage of Chazz Witherspoon on April 28, 2012. "I always wanted to be a basketball player. I wear a size 16 shoe. I thought I'd be 6-6, 6-7. (He is 6-2.) When I played basketball, I didn't judge myself on the college aspect. I was thinking NBA.

"And when I played football, my mindset was making it to the NFL. But I had seven surgeries on my left knee. Other than to take some Motrin and to ice it down, I'm good to go in boxing, whereas in football I had 100 cc's drained out of the knee at one time. I've had cortisone shots until football wasn't fun anymore.

"But listen, I'm not saying football is harder than boxing. Boxing is a tough, lonely sport. You can be a beast on the football field and a pussycat in the ring."

[Comment on this article](#)

dino da vinci says:

"...and was the beneficiary of what seemingly was the world's longest standing-eight count." You gotta love boxing, you got to love Bernard Fernandez. Great, great read.

I'll be back in a bit with a story or two touched on within this article.

deepwater says:

Football players = terrible boxers. Mark gasteneuve shadow boxing at ballys Rockville center punched the mirror , the mirror hit him back and he was out for the 10 count .

Radam G says:

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Awesome, righteous copy. And true dat 99 percent. The game of boxing is an intensed mental sport. The weak game of American football is an on-the-field physical team sport.

One has to have a solitude mindset for that squared jungle. For footballers it is herd jive. The two does not mix. The very rare who made it coming from football to boxing were in the wrong sport from the jump. They had difficulties with herd mentality. And had to be a lone star. So the solitude mindset of being a lone star in boxing fit amazingly. Those ex-footballers who made it besides Mr. Powell, have been Bruce Seldon, James "Bonecrusher" Smith and Kenny "The Black Superman/Mandingo Warrior/Jaw Breaker" Norton.

Herd mentality will get you killed in dat squared jungle. I'm glad this story was written, because an ex-footballer with herd mentality is challenging me. Dude doesn't know the thrashing that he will get. And the mental illnesses and post tramatic stress syndrome that he will have to live with for the rest of his life. Seth Mitchell is going to get whup again. He will develop extreme mental problems after he leaves boxing. The mental illnesses that boxing has caused a ton of footballers should be scribbled about. Holla!

Radam G says:

Hehehe! Good one, Deepwater! Holla!

BoxeoMichoacan says:

[QUOTE=Radam G;25214]Awesome, righteous copy. And true dat 99 percent. The game of boxing is an intensed mental sport. The weak game of American football is an on-the-field physical team sport.

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@radam

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"The two does not mix" radam are you seriously that illiterate. Put down your sticky keyboard and coconut _____ and get to nursing school so you learn proper English.

Bernie Campbell says:

Football players have a different demeanor than boxers, It is a complete different emotional profile from the day they play their first pee wee football game. There are the alliances, the false adulation of the wanna bees, the Girls, the school's advocacy. The Peck order in camp! The stripping of oneself down and the building up! The false pride! The covering of ones ***, the priveleges! The body building! Compromised natural strength! The Popularity contest. The hairdos! If I didnt know better I may be talking about a Greenwich Village Bath house! Except for the girls!

And then the Boxer, Its only him and his opponent! No bullsh! To inflict a score as well as to avoid one! Just him and his opponent!

dino da vinci says:

[QUOTE=Bernie Campbell;25246]Football players have a different demeanor than boxers, It is a complete different emotional profile from the day they play their first pee wee football game. There are the alliances, the false adulation of the wanna bees, the Girls, the school's advocacy. The Peck order in camp! The stripping of oneself down and the building up! The false pride! The covering of ones ***, the priveleges! The body building! Compromised natural strength! The Popularity contest. The hairdos! If I didnt know better I may be talking about a Greenwich Village Bath house! Except for the girls!

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And Bernie don't forget to mention that most football plays last just a handful of seconds whereas most boxing 'plays' last, on average, three minutes.

the Roast says:

Nice read, good history lesson. I don't have a good feeling about Seth Mitchell's chances in the future.

brownsugar says:

Me neither but it's not a far fetched proposition for Mitchell to catch the weak chinned Banks with something solid. Banks will have to change his "low activity" wait-for-it offense to beat Mitchell this time... Banks may even be out hustled.

But if Banks is aggressive and starts off by dlligently headhunting early... he may bewilder Mitchell and blast him out of there again....bottom line Banks is just as vulnerable as Mitchell.

the Roast says:

I don't know if it's fair to call Banks weak chinned B-Sug, he was only KOed that one time but I

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know what you are saying. Mitchell may get his revenge and beat Banks or maybe not but after reading the above article its clear that the majority of football players go splat on the canvas.

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Without a doubt Roast....

brownsugar says:

Speaking of Gridirons GO RAVENS GO!!!!!!!!!!

brownsugar says:

Speaking of Gridirons GO RAVENS GO!!!!!!!!!!

Bernie Campbell says:

Speaking of Ravens, they eat worms and sh.. all over the place!

brownsugar says:

Thanks for your astute opinion BC.

Congratulations to the 2012 SUPERBOWL CHAMPS.

Great game.....Great victory. Great Show. And I'm not even a football fan.

I only get to watch 3 or 4 games a year.

After the power outage I thought the 49'ERS had become rejuvenated.

Good effort to turn the tide but not quite good enough.

Radam G says:

Danggit! The Voodoo chick didn't put enough whammy on the Ravens in the second half. Her aim was bad, and put out the darn lights. She need to give me a refund. Hehehe!

I shoulda had a Pinay wukwuk to have done the hex. And San Fran woulda, coulda, shoulda won, and I would be sitting on a ton. Now I'm gonna have to go to my piggybank to makes ends

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meet for a bit. NYET! I'm just full of s***! Hahahaha! Holla!

brownsugar says:

Lol...