

AMATEUR CAREER

► BY NATHAN LEE ADAMUS

Contrary to popular belief, Clay didn't just step in a ring and start knocking out opponents. According to Joe Martin, Clay's first "trainer" when he was 12, the youngster didn't come out of the gates running. "I guess I've taught a thousand boys to box, or at least tried to teach them," said Martin. "Cassius Clay, when he first began coming around, looked no better or worse than the majority. If boxers were paid bonuses on their potential like ballplayers are, I don't know if he would have received one. He was just ordinary, and I doubt whether any scout would have thought much of him in his first year."

Of course Clay built a career on a landscape of hard work, fighting in more than 100 amateur bouts. Depending on the research, some boxing enthusiasts have reported his overall amateur record as high as 161-6.

Early Rounds

In 1954, Clay stepped foot in the ring for the first time against amateur opponent Ronnie O'Keefe. Clay defeated Ronnie in a three-round bout by unanimous decision. In 1955, Clay suffered his first loss to James Davis in the Louisville Novice Golden Gloves Tournament.

Between 1955 and 1956, Clay burned through George Wheeler, John Bobbitt, Rudolph Baker (second-round knockout), Roy Dudley, James Fluorney, Bill Wikstrom and William F. May. During the 1957 Louisville Novice Golden Gloves Tournament, Clay took home the Bob Colglazier Trophy for Most Aggressive Boxer in Tournament, defeating his new sparring partner and friend Jimmy Ellis. Later that year, Ellis would turn the tables on Clay, winning a split decision.

In 1958, Clay faced off against another future professional, Kent Green, in the Chicago Tournament of Champions. Green (who retired in 1969 with a record of 13-2) may have won that fight, but Clay proved to have the brighter professional career.

The final year of the '50s, was monumental for the

amateur. Clay won the Chicago Golden Gloves Tournament of Champions Light Heavyweight title, the Intercity Golden Gloves Light Heavyweight championship and the National AAU Light Heavyweight crown. He was also a finalist at the U.S. Pan American Games, where a loss to yet another future pro, Amos Johnson, kept him from the title.

Clay followed up his epic year with an even more impressive outing in 1960. He captured the Chicago Golden Gloves Tournament of Champions Heavyweight title, the Intercity Golden Gloves Light Heavyweight championship and the National AAU Light Heavyweight championship enroute to an Olympic gold medal in Rome.

"In the world of heavyweights, I have always thought that Jimmy was one of the best."

- Muhammad Ali

KEYSTONE/GETTY IMAGES



During the last four years of his amateur career, Clay was trained by future World Boxing Hall of Fame inductee Vasil "Chuck" Bodak. Bodak trained more than 50 world champions including Rocky Marciano, Tommy Hearns, Julio Cesar Chavez, Evander Holyfield and Oscar De La Hoya.

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Jimmy Ellis

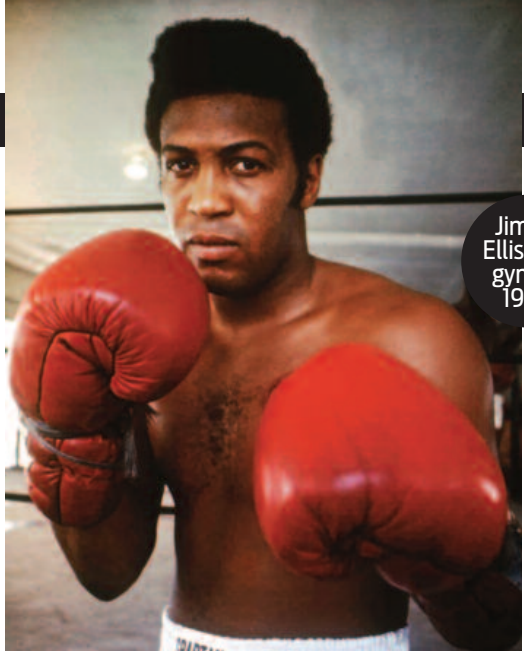
February 24, 1940 – May 6, 2014

Pro Boxing Record: 40-12-1 (24 by KO)

Ellis met Clay when he was about 14. "I saw him fight on television against a friend of mine, and he beat my friend," Ellis noted. "I said, 'I can beat this guy,' so I started going to the gym. That's what got me into boxing. We fought twice against each other in the amateurs. I was older, by two years, but he was bigger than me even then. The first time we fought, he won. It was close, but he got the decision, and it was the first time I ever got beat in a fight. Then we fought again. It was close, and I won.... After that, we became friends."

Jimmy turned pro in 1961 under the tutelage of Bud Bruner. The duo was 15-5 (six KOs), but three losses in late 1964 forced Ellis to leave Bruner. Ellis subsequently reached out to Clay's trainer, Angelo Dundee. Dundee became Ellis's manager and trainer, and Clay often used him as a sparring partner.

In 1966, after Clay was stripped of his World Boxing Association (WBA) title for refusing to enter the military, the WBA designed an eight-man tournament to decide the new heavyweight champion. A panel chose the best eight contestants, and eighth-ranked Ellis landed the final tournament spot. Although he may have benefited from an absent Joe Frazier (who instead attended the New York State Athletic Commission [NYSAC] World Heavyweight Championship, knocking out Buster Mathis in the



Jimmy Ellis at a gym in 1972.

"I was a smaller heavy-weight, but I could fight the big guys. I'm proud of what I did, but all I ever wanted was to be a good fighter and a good person."

– Jimmy Ellis

11th round), Ellis won the tournament to claim the WBA Heavyweight Championship title, defeating Leotis Martin, Oscar Bonavena and Jerry Quarry in the final. Ellis went on to defend his title against two-time champ Floyd Patterson. Ironically, Ellis would relinquish the title to Frazier in 1970.

After losing to pal Clay on July 26, 1971, Ellis caught fire, winning eight consecutive fights by knockout. His streak would end on June 18, 1973, when the hard-hitting Earnie Shavers knocked him out cold with 21 seconds left in the first round. He never recovered, losing four of his next five fights with one draw. Ellis won his final bout in 1975 against Carl Baker, finishing him off in the first round with a vicious knockout. An injury to his left eye, which occurred during a sparring session, sent Ellis into retirement.

Ellis was plagued by dementia in his later life and he died of related causes in May 2014. After Ellis's death, Ali released a statement saying, "I had a kinship with Jimmy and felt like he and I were of the same cloth. He was a great athlete and a caring man. Great competitors who happen to be great friends are rare. Jimmy Ellis was that to me, and I will miss him."

■ May, 11 1966: World heavyweight boxing champion Cassius Clay (left), spars with American boxer Jimmy Ellis at the Royal Artillery Gymnasium in London. He was in training for his upcoming fight with British champion Henry Cooper, against whom he defended his title.

Clay vs. Ellis

A Battle Over a Decade in the Making July 26, 1971

After a brutal lashing inflicted by Frazier, Ellis met his old friend and training partner Cassius Clay on July 26, 1971. In a bizarre twist, Angelo Dundee was forced to choose between the two fighters. Dundee trained both Ellis and Clay, but managed only Ellis. Dundee was well aware of the monetary ramifications of his decision and chose to ride Ellis into battle as it would yield the largest purse.

The commotion prior to the highly anticipated bout proved more exciting than the actual fight. Even though the two were good friends, it didn't stop Clay from digging into his opponent. "James Ellis is one of the best fighters in the world," he said in a *NY Times* interview. "To be my sparring partner, you got to be good." The circus continued when Ali showed up at the Houston Astrodome without his prized trunks. Not to say he wasn't wearing pants, he just couldn't find the trunks. When the smoke cleared, Clay gave cornerman Drew "Bundini" Brown a verbal lashing for not packing his trunks, and Clay had no choice but to enter the ring wearing borrowed shorts that were two sizes too big.

The fight itself was pretty one-sided as the heavier Clay (221 lbs.) manhandled Ellis (189 lbs.) from the start, blasting with him right hands. Despite the added bulk, Clay was graceful during the bout, prancing around the ring and even pausing to perform his aptly named Double-Clutch Shuffle. Ellis hung in there for the first few rounds, but caught a hard right during the fourth round that left him stunned. He would later say that the right "...hurt me so bad I couldn't really fight my best after that. It ruined me." Clay was criticized for taking it easy on Ellis, particularly in the later rounds. However, in the final round, Clay put his foot on the gas, rocking Ellis with a right jab followed by a left uppercut that sent his boyhood pal to the ropes. Instead of pouncing, Clay stepped away, glancing at referee Jay Edson as if to say, "Is that enough?" Edson put a stop to the fight with less than a minute left to go in the 12th round.

Several days after the fight, Howard Cosell questioned Clay on why he eased up on Ellis during the fight. Clay responded, "Well, firstly he's a friend of mine who has a wife and family who love him like mine loves me. His eyes were rolling into the back of his head and I'm not going to purposefully kill a man to satisfy a bloodthirsty crowd."

■ Cassius Clay trains for an upcoming fight with Jimmy Ellis at his training camp in Deer Lake, Pennsylvania.

Amateur Career Highlights

• Overall Record (varies): 99-8, 100-5, 127-5, 134-7, 137-7, 161-6
• Six-time Kentucky State Golden Gloves Champion

1954

• Ronnie O'Keefe W 3

1955

• James Davis L 3
• John Hampton W 3
• John Hampton L 3

1957

• Donnie Hall W 3
• Donnie Hall L 3
• Donnie Hall W 3
• Jimmy Ellis W 3
• Terry Hodge (stopped for injury) by 1
• Donnie Hall W 3
• Jimmy Ellis L 3
• Donnie Hall W 3

1958

• Chicago Golden Gloves Tournament of Champions Light Heavyweight Quarterfinalist
• Alex Watt W 3
• Francis Turley W 3
• Kent Green KO by 2

1959

• Chicago Golden Gloves Tournament of Champions Light Heavyweight Champion
• Junie Hall KO 2

• Willie McMilan W 3
• Cliff Murkey W 3
• Jeff Davis W 3
• Intercity Golden Gloves Light Heavyweight Champion
• Tony Madigan W 3 (unanimous)
• National AAU Light Heavyweight Champion
• Reginald Brown KO 3
• Art Toombs W 3
• Lindy Lindmoser W 3
• Johnny Powell W 3
• U.S. Pan American Games Trials Finalist
• Leroy Boger KO 2
• James Jackson W 3
• Amos Johnson L 3

1960

• Chicago Golden Gloves Tournament of Champions Heavyweight Champion
• John Wilson KO 1
• Henry Harris Jr. KO 3
• Bill Nielsen W 3
• Al Jenkins W 3
• Jimmy Jones W 3
• Intercity Golden Gloves Heavyweight Champion
• Gary Jawish W 3
• National AAU Light Heavyweight Champion
• Johnny Monahue W 3
• Joe Reynolds W 3
• Ray Whetstone KO 2
• Billy Joiner W 3
• Jeff Davis KO 2
• Percy Price L 3 **MA**

